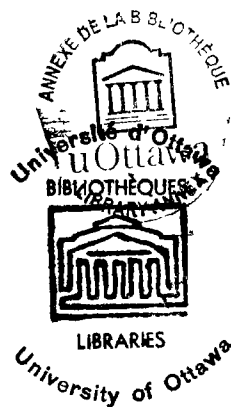


THE FUNCTION OF LIGHT AND SIGHT PATTERNS  
IN THE SERMONS OF JOHN DONNE

by

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of the University of Ottawa, in partial  
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Joseph Penny was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1926. After graduation from the University of Toronto in 1948 he completed his theological studies at St. Basil's Seminary and was ordained to the priesthood in 1953. As a member of the Congregation of St. Basil he teaches English and theology at St. Michael's College School, Toronto.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
An introduction to the nature and form of the thesis.	
CHAPTER ONE: LIGHTS TOWARDS GOD . . . . .	9
The function of the sight and light pattern in John Donne's exposition of ways in which man comes to a knowledge of God.	
1. Reason and Faith . . . . .	10
2. The Church . . . . .	19
3. The Word . . . . .	25
4. Sacraments and Ceremonial . . . . .	34
CHAPTER TWO: THE SERVICE OF THE LIGHT . . . . .	45
The function of the light and sight pattern in the exposition of the Christian and ministerial vocation.	
CHAPTER THREE: THE LIGHT DISTORTED . . . . .	62
The function of the light and sight pattern in Donne's exposition of the problem of Sin.	
CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS THE FULLNESS OF LIGHT . . . . .	78
The function of the light and sight pattern in Donne's presentation of the Christian experience of Death.	

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NATURE AND FORM OF THE THESIS

The observation and the formulation of an image pattern within the sermons of John Donne is in itself fascinating. Such classification becomes critically useful when one examines and illustrates some of the functions of the established pattern of expression. To do this is to focus attention on both content and craft in an important part of Donne's work. An image pattern flows from a deep and enduring mode of thought expressed by a particular bent of imagination and wit. In examining some of the functions of a pattern of light and sight within the sermons one is brought to a deeper understanding of some of Donne's fundamental concerns and to a fuller appreciation of his literary skills in explicating his thought.

Specifically, then, it is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate more fully than has been accomplished in cursory commentaries the fact that significant areas of Donne's thinking in moral and dogmatic theology may be explored by a careful consideration of a particular pattern within the sermons. Our aim is to show that John Donne effectively uses images of light and sight in his exposition of the ways of man's knowledge of God, of the nature of the christian and ministerial

vocation, of the problem of sin and repentance and, finally, of man's life through death and beyond.

Concerned, as it is, with the function of an image pattern, the present thesis is developed at the point where wide-ranging classification ends. The investigation and the thinking upon which it is established were stirred first by an appreciation of the validity of Milton Rugoff's general approach to Donne's poetry and prose through the categorization of imagery,<sup>1</sup> and by the realization that such schema might well guide an interested reader to where Professor Rugoff had neither time nor inclination to lead, to an examination of particular image patterns within the sermons. The reading of the ten volume Potter and Simpson edition of the sermons, with particular attention upon word pictures and illustrations, allows one to feel the creative sources from which they arise and to marvel at the rich variety of their shape and scope. Contracted and extended, images based on scientific lore, on mathematical analysis, on legal procedure, on commercial activity, on domestic life, on disease--all these and more may be readily found and as easily formulated. But none, it seemed, would yield as interesting insights as those concerned with seeing and with light. "Ut vidiam, Domine". Lord that I may see. The prayer of the blind man is the constant plea of one who would be deeply wise and human. It is the plea and the problem of Sophoclean

<sup>1</sup>  
Milton Allan Rugoff, *Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources* (New York, 1962).

and Shakespearean heroes; it is the plea and the problem of man that Donne reflects in many significant passages in his sermons. Through reading and reflection this writer became convinced of the power of the light and sight pattern within the sermons. Images clustered around a central problem of the human situation, expressions generated by Donne's own concern for clarity of vision in an age of increasing confusion, images triggered by the great Biblical symbol of light and by the theological concern for man's proper spiritual vision,--surely a careful consideration of the functions of such images could develop a deeper understanding of Donne's theological thinking and a more full appreciation of his artistry in exposition. This work was completed and it is now offered with the hope that an examination of some of these uses of the sight and light pattern within the sermons may provide some small but worthwhile contribution to Donne scholarship.

Two other considerations have led to the writer's choice of light and sight referents as a means of probing the sermon material. The first is that of the inherent flexibility and fruitfulness of the pattern as a source for analysis. The listing and categorizing of some four hundred and twenty references in the sermons immediately suggested that, considering the power and the range of Donne's wit, the problem of seeing and the images of light and sight were indeed associated with a wide variety of analogues and a rich complexity of theological thought. Donne's concern and

sensitivity are not merely with physical sight and light. The image pattern, then, is one which is extended by Donne's use of light and sight in traditionally analogous and symbolic fashion. In its totality it reaches through the varied exposition of subjects diverse as the terrors of hell and the glories of heaven. And even in the segment of the pattern which the limitations of this work will permit us to explore, we shall see that the imagery is varied in form and in function. We will be involved in a commentary upon a sight and light pattern which will include references to the physical light of sun, moon, stars, fires and tapers, in themselves and as symbols, and to the spiritual lights of grace, faith and reason, in themselves and as they are symbolized. And in all we will be obviously aware of what stands in opposition to light, of "dimness", "shadow", "darkness", and all that these words imaginatively suggest. Images of disguise, of clothing, images of distortion,--these too will concern us, for Donne uses them all in his exposition of man's problem of seeing deeply and correctly into the very nature of reality.

Examination of the functions of "light" and "sight" within the sermons is encouraged not only by the diversity and flexibility of the pattern; it seems worthwhile also as a positive antidote to a tendency to consider the overall tonality of Donnean sermon imagery as pessimistic and morbid. Limited exposure to Donne's sermons in anthologies may well leave one with the impression that Donne's typical concern is

with the putrefaction of sin and the darkness of death. Wider reading will allow one to appreciate the wider ranges of Donne's imagery, even in his considerations of these rather unpleasant topics. Examination of our particular pattern in Donne's expression can perhaps do something to correct an unbalanced impression. It will allow one to observe that Donne's over-riding interest is not in the darkness but in the lights that shine therein, not in blindness of sin and death, but in the full vision to which the Christian is called.

A thesis designed only to demonstrate the effective use of a given pattern of expression within the sermons may be developed with varied commentary upon the diverse purposes achieved through the pattern. The nature of the thesis does not in itself demand a rigid structure for its development. In point of fact, however, the present discussion does proceed along a path chosen with some concern for appropriate selection and order. For purposes of detailed commentary the complete pattern of light and sight found in the more than four hundred passages in the sermons proved to be too vast. Accordingly, the writer has chosen to treat of the functions of the pattern as these may be discerned in a manageable but representative range of Donne's theological concern. Excursion is made into the use of the pattern in Donne's explication of the role of reason and faith in the Christian life, in his discussion of the Church and its sacraments and ceremonials, in his presentation of the Christian

and the ministerial vocation, in his treatment of sin, and, finally, in his exposition of the process of death leading to the eternal light of glory. The pattern of light and sight is thus established to be effectively functional in presentation ranging from fundamental dogmatics, to ecclesiology, to sacramental and moral theology. In terms of a possible parallel with the scriptural presentation of the problems of light and sight, the ordering of discussion may be seen to tripartate. Chapters one and two will be concerned with the light that shines in the darkness of this world; chapter three, dealing with the problem of sin, will show how it is that man fails to comprehend the light; the final chapter of the thesis will again trace the power of God's grace as it leads man through death to the eternal light of the New Jerusalem.

Within each of the chapters the general method of development will be that of explication and illustration designed to support our contention that Donne effectively uses a pattern of light and sight in the presentation of significant theological thought. To illustrate a variety of functions for the imagery each chapter will establish its own particular predications for its use in a specific area of Donnean exposition. For example, the first chapter is designed to show first that Donne uses images of light and sight in illustration of the harmony between reason and faith and ways of knowing God. Other functions of the pattern in Donne's theological explications are similarly

established. The analysis of supportive textual excerpts is shaped so as to allow critical thrust into both the content of the imagery, and its significance in the presentation of a particular line of theological thought. Contextual information, whenever it is valuable, is given in the form of an occasional brief statement upon the historical or theological position from which Donne is writing. Again, for an example from chapter one, brief mention of the Anglican aim to remain in "via media" may well help us to understand the particular purpose and appropriateness of the imagery being discussed. Whenever the observation of a critic will provide similar enlightenment upon the effective functioning of the image pattern, this too will be included in our commentary. For example, Professor Joan Webber's concept of a Donne sermon as a "spiritual literary adventure" provides a lead which we follow in commenting upon passages in the sermons in which the sight pattern is used to provide guiding directives through the text. In every way, through explication, with supportive material both theological and literary, effort is made to continually prove a central truth: Donne did indeed effectively use a pattern of light and sight in the exposition of significant theological thought.

No work on the sermons of John Donne, even one as limited in scope as this, can stand apart from critical texts and varied and valuable commentaries. Evelyn M. Simpson's monumental edition of the Sermons has provided the source for all excerpts from the Donnean texts and helpful information

on the circumstances in which they were delivered. The full theses, and indeed the passing remarks of many contemporary scholars, notably William R. Mueller, Joan Webber and Charles M. Coffin, have provided direction and stimulation for the writer's own thinking. From Donne himself, and from Donnean scholarship, the writer has received much light; for this he is grateful.

## CHAPTER I

How does man come to a knowledge of the truth? From the time of St. Paul's admonition to the Romans<sup>1</sup> and the writing of the Johannine prologue,<sup>2</sup> the Christian answer to the problem has been presented in terms of man being able to "see", through reason and faith, the light of God as it shines in the darkness of this world. In his sermons John Donne imaginatively expands upon the traditional analogues of sight and light to make purposeful commentary upon the two ways by which man come to know God. The first portion of this chapter will show that Donne effectively uses images of sight and light to suggest the harmony he perceives in the duality of reason and faith as ways of reaching for God in the darkness. The second, third and fourth sections will treat of Donne's play upon the pattern in his discussion of the varied "lights" by which the Christian may know God in faith. Donne uses images of light and sight to define the quality and the varied modality of the light possessed by the Christian Church. He also shapes and modifies images of seeing to suggest the nature of the illuminating experience offered by the Scriptures, faithfully preached, and again to describe the function of sacrament and ceremonial in

<sup>1</sup>  
Romans 1: 18-20

<sup>2</sup>  
John 1: 8-10

making present God's light to the world. With theological verve and the ingenuity of native wit, Donne manipulates a pattern of light and sight in the exposition of ways by which man may even now come to a true knowledge of God.

1.

Man may indeed become aware of God through reason and through faith. Donne is certain of the dimensions of power possessed in both modes of knowing and he appreciates the harmony which exists between them. Donne would have in the minds of his congregations no fear of cold speculative distinction between the roles of reason and of faith, but only a warm understanding of the process through which both powers together may lead man to God. A constant development of analogues of light and sight allows him always to recognize the differences between reason and faith, but at the same time to make his hearers conscious of the rich interweaving he perceives in their operation.

For Donne there can be no doubt that man, by the grace of God, does possess positive powers of knowing Him. The very invitation to look for God guarantees bountiful light to those who seek to follow it. Only bad will can extinguish the light within:

... God by calling us up to Behold, gives us a light whereby wee may doe so, and may discern our way: whomsoever God calls, to him hee affords so much light, as that, if he proceed not by that light, hee himselve hath winked at that light, or blown out that light, or suffered that

light to wast, and goe out, by his long  
negligence<sup>3</sup>

If man does not consciously smother the light within him he has the ability to "behold", to look up and to discern his way to God.

The evolution of this spiritual awareness begins with light from nature stirring reason to a consideration of effect and cause. The dynamism of the creative act of God is implicit in the very existence of things. Small or great, all creatures point back to God as the source of their being. Donne makes his clearest statement of this fact with philosophical precision and imaginative power:

The Cedar is no better a glasse to see God  
in, then the Hyssope upon the wall; all things  
that are, are equally removed from being nothing;  
and whatsoever hath any beeing, is by that  
very beeing, a glasse in which we see God,  
who is the roote and fountaine of all beeing.  
The whole frame of nature is the Theatre, the  
whole Volume of creatures is the glasse, and  
the light of nature, reason, is our light....  
(P.S.VIII-9-224)

Donne suggests that the whole world is a place wherein one may discern the drama of God's presence. The book of creatures is as the medium, the glass, through which the perception of Divinity is clarified. Reading and seeing this book, (as one would a medieval manuscript), a reasonable man is brought to an awareness of the implications of creation, to a vision of the transcendent God.

<sup>3</sup>The Sermons of John Donne, George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, editors (Berkeley, University of California 1953-62) Vol. VI, Sermon 6, page 140. Hereafter all references to the sermons will be abbreviated in the following form: (P.S. VI-6-140).

The power of reason exercised in the reading of the "Booke of Creatures", in the observation of nature, possesses only faint intensity, but Donne says that "there is light enough in this dawning of the day" and such admirable order and a correspondence of various parts in creation that the intellect of the natural man, unaided by God's word, can yet discern Him in nature:

The correspondence and relation of all parts of Nature to one Author, the concinnity and dependance of every piece and joynt of this frame of the world, the admirable order, the immutable succession, the lively and certain generation, and birth of effects from their Parents, the causes: in all of these, though there be no sound, no voice, yet we may even see that it is an excellent song, an admirable piece of musick and harmony; and that God does (as it were) play upon this Organ in his administration and providence by naturall means and instruments; and so there is some kind of creation in us, some knowledge of God imprinted, sine sermone, without any relation to his world (P.S.I-8-289-290).

But Donne uses imagery to make it clear that this knowledge of God "sine sermone", this knowledge of God obtained through natural reason, is in itself faint and uncertain. It may be the beginning of a process of enlightenment but it possesses no distinct clarity in itself. It may be best understood as the prelude to the illumination and order which comes with the first laylight of faith:

But this is a Creation as of heaven and earth, which were dark and empty, and without form, till the Spirit of God moved, and till God spoke: Till there came the Spirit, the breath of Gods mouth, the word of God, it is but a faint twilight, it is but an uncertain glimmering which we have of God in the creature... (P.S.I-8-290).

In this passage, as in others in the sermons, Donne draws parallels between the origins of created lights and the genesis of man's knowledge of God. As it was in the dramatic story of creation, so it is, metaphorically, in the development of the lights by which man may see God through reason and faith. This particular formulation of the light pattern allows Donne to evaluate the functions of reason and faith, and to distinguish between them, while recognizing their dynamic harmony in the development of a man's knowledge of God:

Before the sunne was made, there was a light which did that office of distinguishing night and day; but when the sunne was created, that did all the offices of the former light, and more. Reason is that first, and primogeniall light, and goes no farther in a naturall man; but in a man regenerate by faith, that light does all that reason did, and more; and all his Morall and Civill and Domestique, and indifferent actions, (though they be never done without Reason) yet their principall scope, and marke is the glory of God, and though they seeme but Morall, or Civill, or domestique, yet they have a deeper tincture, a heavenly nature, a relation to God, in them (P.S.III-17-362).

Thus Donne considers natural reason and supernatural faith as playing concomitant parts in the one providential creative process through which God illumines the mind of man. The comparison of the dynamics of Christian enlightenment to the development of the first light of creation is rich in significance. Man's reason is "primogeniall", bathing his world in the first dim light of meaning, just as the first created light showed forth the general contours of the cosmos. Faith in Christ does not extinguish this light but changes it,

widening its scope and allowing man to move through the world aware of God and related to Him in all his actions. In terms of the image pattern, the light of human reason and knowledge is as the dawning prelude to the process of faith. Just as the creation of the sun sweeps up in brightness the lesser primordial light, so the power of faith harmoniously blends and intensifies all of the functions of reason into a new and greater light.

But it is not only to the "primogeniall light" and the full sun of the Genesis story to which Donne turns for illustration of the harmonious relationship between reason and faith. In the same Christmas sermon of 1621 from which the above excerpts have been taken, Donne, characteristically, is able to develop a more homely light image to achieve the same purpose. Reason can lead a man to God,

...if thou canst take this light of reason that is in thee, this poor snuffe, that is almost out in thee, thy faint and dimme knowledge of God, that riseth out of this light of nature, if thou canst in those embers, those cold ashes, finde out one small coale,<sup>4</sup> and wilt take the paines to kneell downe, and blow that coale with thy devout Prayers, and light thee a little candle, (a desire to reade that Booke, which they call the Scriptures, and the Gospell, and the Word of God;) If with that little candle thou canst... finde thy Saviour in a Manger... thou shalt never envy the lustre and glory of the great lights of wordly men... (P.S.III-17-360-61).

<sup>4</sup>  
Cf. John Donne Devotions I for the use of the image in a slightly different context: "God who as He is immortal himselfe, had put a coale, a beame of immortalitie into us, which we might have blown into a flame, but blew it out, by our first sinne".

The warm domestic scene within which Donne's basic metaphors of fire and light are here developed is both appropriate to the Nativity Feast and capable of providing emotional response to the thought expressed. The natural faculties of man are as embers and cold ashes, but in an attitude of humility one may bend down in prayer and, even at the cold hearth of reason, light a candle of faith. And with this light the Saviour may be found in the reading of Scriptures. Donne uses the imagery to suggest both the epistemological and the theological dynamic of man's approach to God. The light of reason precedes the light of faith. It lies faint and dim but capable of being stirred to new warmth and power of illumination. The virtue of humility precedes the functioning of faith. It initiates the discovery of deeper truth and, creeping "humbly low", leads man to the paradox of a saviour in the straw. In this and many similar passages of the light pattern in the sermons, Donne simultaneously develops an exposition of doctrine and suggests a moral approach towards it.

Certainly Donne, in his presentation of the saving process by which man comes to know God, is conscious of a delicate balance that must be preserved within the play of reason and faith in man's life. If the light of reason may be properly stirred to enkindle and support the flame of faith, it may nevertheless sometimes become a threat to the fullness of that virtue. In his "Litanie VII" Donne had written a prayer which recognized this danger:

Let not my minde be blinder by more light 5  
Nor, Faith, by reason added, lose her sight.

In this Christmas sermon which we have been considering, he speaks of interesting contemporary examples "in some casuall openings of ancient vaults, of finding such lights kindled, (as it appeared by their inscriptions) fifteen or sixteen hundred years before; but, as soon as that light comes to our light it vanishes." <sup>6</sup> The point made in the illustration is clear:

This eternall and this supernaturall light, Christ and faith, enlightens, warmes, purges, and does all the profitable offices of fire, and light, if we keep it in the right spheare, in the proper place, (that is, if we consist in points necessary to salvation, and revealed in Scripture) but when we bring this light to the common light of reason, to our inferences, and consequences, it may be in danger to vanish it selfe, and perchance extinguish our reason too; we may search so far, and reason so long of faith and grace, as that we may lose not onely them, but even our reason too, and sooner become mad then good (P.S.III-17-357).

Donne may be remembering in this remark some of the troubled anguish of his earlier years when "the new philosophy" held all in doubt. Certainly he is recognizing the fact that, paradoxically, reason may snuff out the flame of faith, which it had supported, if it is brought too closely to bear upon revealed truths. What is needed is a clear

<sup>5</sup>  
Donne's Poetical Works, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford, 1912) Vol. 1, p.340.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Ibid., p.140. In his "Epithalamion XI" Donne writes: "Now, as in Jullias tombe, one lamp burnt cleare, unchanged for fifteen hundred years."

acceptance of limitations of natural light of reason as an illumination of the way to God. Again Donne uses the imagery of light to probe the paradox:

In all Philosophy there is not so darke a thing as light; As the sunne, which is fons lucis naturalis, the beginning of naturall light, is the most evident thing to bee seen, and yet the hardest to be looked upon, so is naturall light to our reason and understanding. Nothing clearer, for it is clearnesse it selfe, nothing darker, it is enwrapped in so many scruples (P.S.III-17-356).

The imagery that we have been considering suggests that ultimately both the light of reason and the light of faith are necessary for man's knowledge of God. In a very real way they are related, for reason lies at the beginning of the search for truth and, when properly regulated, burns steadily throughout, even within the brighter flame which faith enkindles. There is not opposition but harmony and a type of existential union between reason and faith in everyday life. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between the two lights must be made not so much with respect to their nature as in the range and power of their operation:

Divers men may walke by the Sea side, and the same beames of the Sunne giving light to them all, one gathereth by the benefit of that light pebles, or speckled shells, for curious vanitie, and another gathers precious Pearle, or medicinall Ambar, by the same light. So the common light of reason illumines us all; but one imployes this light upon the searching of impertinent vanities, another by a better use of the same light, finds out the Mysteries of Religion; and when he hath found them, loves them, not for the lights sake, but for the naturall and true worth of the thing it selfe (P.S.III-17-359).

Donne, while he seems to be sensitive to the dangers of the shoals of rationalism upon which the Deists of the 18th Century were to founder, implicitly recognizes reason and faith as being harmoniously related in the process of reaching for reality. Reason is the common light by which all men scrape and search on the shore of life. But faith is the power both to use and transcend reason. It employs the light not in the search for "impertinent Vanities", but in the probing of the mysteries of religion, which it then embraces not through logic but through love.

Professor C. M. Coffin in the final chapter of his book on John Donne and the New Philosophy has noted that "no more perplexing problem than the relation of faith and reason troubled the schools, for it involved the important questions of how and to what extent man may know God, and the relation of divinity and philosophy."<sup>7</sup> Our brief investigation of one facet of light and sight imagery within the sermons suggests that the very nature and function of fire, light and sight which Donne constantly uses as analogues in his discussion of reason and faith has allowed him to develop a balanced exposition of these modes of knowing God. There are rich interconnections between varied fires, lights and ways of seeing. So are there between reason and faith. In his "Verse Epistle to the Countess of Bedford" Donne has written,

<sup>7</sup>  
The Humanities Press (New York, 1958) p.280ff.

Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right,  
By these we reach divinity... .

In his sermons the interplay between left hand and right has been well expressed in the light and sight pattern.

2.

Donne effectively develops images which define the quality of light possessed by the Christian Church in his time.

If the relationship between reason and faith presented a problem to the theologians of John Donne's age, so too did the question of the nature and function of the Christian Church as a light to the world. Amid the turbulence of Reformation controversy, the Divines, especially those of the Anglican persuasion, endeavoured to shape and to teach an ecclesiology which would preserve essential doctrine while yet permitting structural reorganization. Donne uses images of sight and light in his sermons to make some contribution to this task. Through such illustrations he is able to provide his auditors with reassuring affirmation of the continuous presence of God within the Church, even though it be subject to outward change. While recognizing the diverse modes by which the light of God may be exhibited and the obstacles which may obscure it, Donne is always certain that the strongest illumination of God's presence in the darkness of this world is to be found in the Christian Church.

For the most part, then, Donne refuses to allow his

thought to be narrowed by merely partisan prejudice or by polemic expression. His appreciation of the function of witness to which the whole Church is called leads him rather to dwell imaginatively upon the "Light" which is the common heritage of all Christians. There is, generally speaking, a visible Church which is "Christian", and it is this Church which in God's providential plan for Salvation possesses a light and warmth above that of logic or law. An appropriate illustrative parallel is found in the dynamics of seasonal light:

The Sun was up betimes, in the light of nature, but then the Sun moved but in the winter Tropick, short and cold, dark and cloudy dayes;... a Dawning and a Twilight, a little Traditionall knowledge for the past, and a little Conjecturall knowledge for the future, made up their day. The Sunne was advanced higher to the Jewes in the Law, But then the Sunne was but in Libra; as much day as night ....The law was their Equinoctiall, in which they might see both the Type, and that which was figured in the Type: But in the Christian Church the Sun is in a perpetuall Summer Solstice; which are high degrees, and yet there is a higher, the Sun is in a perpetuall Meridian and Noon, in that Summer solstice. There is not onely a Surge Sol, but a siste sol: God hath brought the Sunne to the height, and fixed the Sun in that height in the Christian Church; where he in his own Sonne by his Spirit hath promised to dwell, usque ad consummationem, til the end of the world (P.S.VII-14-349-50).

In this, as in his explication of reason and faith, we are conscious of Donne's ability to use patterns of light to suggest succinctly process and development. The whole Christian Church is the light of God brought to its highest intensity; to a fullness and stability which does not deny the existence of the previous lights of pagan reasoning and

Jewish faith but, rather, lies beyond them as the final gift of the Sonne, forever with the Church, forever on high. The sweep of Salvation history is compressed within the brief analogy to the seasons and, as we have felt before, emotional involvement in the exposition is encouraged. The doctrine of the gradual growth of light in the world reaching to the height and fullness of the Divine presence in the Church is clearly explicated, and Donne's congregation, cold in the February drafts of Whitehall, is undoubtedly made to feel the comfort and warmth of the summer like light as being far superior to that of the "short and cold, dark and cloudy days" in which men previously groped for God.

Donne believed that it was important that men realize that this "summer light" is the common heritage of all apostolic denominations which propose fundamental doctrines. The whole Christian Church enjoys Christ's presence, the power of the "Sonne." All Christian denominations are virtual "beams" of this one light of God. In the application of the light within the darkness of the world it is not the structural center of a confessional organization which is important, but the moral attitudes of the human heart. As early as 1609 Donne had written:

You know I never fettered nor imprisoned the word religion, nor straightening it friarly, ad religiones factitios (as the Roman call well their orders of Religion), nor immuring it in a Rome or a Wittenberg or a Geneva; they are all virtual beams of one sun, and wheresoever they find clay hearts, they harden them and moulder

them into dust; and they intender and mollify waxen.<sup>8</sup>

Donne in the pulpit of St. Paul's could not afford to be so openly ecumenical as he was in this private letter, but he could with similar light imagery assure his congregation that the dynamic nature of God's light in the world guaranteed that it could be shared more widely than the adherents to Rome believed possible. God's guiding light is given to a pilgrim people, a people often in a state of flux and confusion like that of the Israelites of old. It is not a source of guidance which is experienced in only one modality and, most important, it is not a light which is fixed in one particular place. Donne uses an expansion of Exodus imagery to illustrate his point:

But yet the Church is neither an equall pillar, alwaies fire, but sometimes cloud too; The Church is more and lesse visible, sometimes in splendor, sometimes in an eclipse; neither is it so a fixt Pillar, as that it is not in divers places. The Church is not so fixed to Rome, as that it is not communicated to other Nations, nor so limited in it selfe, as that it may not admit changes, in those things that appertain to Order, and Discipline (P.S.IX-16-363).

The Church is not a pillar of fire forever fixed in Rome. God's light is given to a people "on the way", through a Christian Church which like fire itself is subject to change in shape and forms which are not fundamental.

What is important then is not the physical center of an organized church but the quality of the witness it

8

Life and Letters of John Donne, ed. Edmund Gosse (London, 1899; reprinted, Gloucester, Mass., 1959) Vol. I, p. 226.

exhibits. Donne's Anglican congregations are encouraged not to trouble to know "the formes and fashions of forraine particular churches; neither a Church in the Lake (Geneva), nor a Church upon seven hills" (Rome), but to remember that "the whole of the true Church is a Hill", and that it is naturally conspicuous. (P.S.V-13-251).

For Donne the natural conspicuousness of the Church and the light and direction it provides are to be found not in its external structure but in its function as a bearer of the light. Within the sight pattern Donne often uses the image of the lantern to suggest that the organizational Church is but a receptacle for a light which is always the presence of God within. "The word is the light, but the Church is but the Lanthorne, it presents and preserves that light unto you" (P.S.I-3-205). It is service to the light of God which defines the function of the Christian Church.

Because he was convinced of this fact, Donne's insistence on the preservation of essential truth is constant. He is often concerned with the problem of "seasonal" and "meridional" divinity within the Church by which the light of God may be distorted by circumstances of time and by the power of persons. Certainly in a time of shift and change the true Church of God has need of the continual assistance of the spirit of God:

... For other Traditionall, and Conditionall ... points, for Alamanack Divinity, that changes with the season, with the time, and Meridionall Divinity, calculated to the heighth of such a place, and Lunary Divinity, that ebbes and

flowes, and State Divinity, that obeyes affect-ions of persons....the true Church of God had need of a continuall succession of light, a continuall assistance of the Spirit of God, and of her own industry, to know those things which belong to her peace (P.S.IV-14-349).

The Church has need of the spirit of God and "of her own industry". While he uses light imagery to assure his hearers that God is indeed with his Church, Donne would have them know also that the Church, her ministers and her head, have a heavy responsibility in protecting the clear flame of doctrine even if ecclesiastical organization and practice change. Preaching to the "King's Majestie" at Whitehall, 24 February, 1625, Dr. Donne reminds James and his courtiers of the importance of maintaining in the Church "the true spirit of Holy Fire, the Zeale of exaltation of God's glory." Referring to Apocalypse 2:5, he plays again upon the likeness of the Church to a holder of light. There is danger in the removal of one candlestick of doctrinal truth. There is tragedy in the deeper darkness that may ensue:

There is a Curse in remooving but the Candlestick; That the Light shall not bee in that eminency, and evidence, that becomes it, but that some faint shadowes, some Corner Disguises, some Temporizings, some Modifications must be admitted. There is a heavier Curse, in weakening the Eye of the beholder when .... God shall make hearts fatt, and ears deafe and eyes blinde; There shall bee Light but you shall not see by it .... But the greatest Curse of all is in putting out the Light, when God blinds the Teachers themselves: For, If the light that is in thee bee darkenesse, how great is that darkenesse? This is that Potestas tenebrarum, when power is put into their hands, who are possest with this darkenesse .... The Storm of darkenesse, the blackenesse of darkenesse (as we translate it) when Darkenes and power and passion meete in one Man (P.S.VII-2-84).

Earlier in this section we have seen how Donne is able to expand imagery which portrays the providential development of God's light in the world. In the above passage we feel his power in presenting an antithetical movement, possible even within the Church, that of the diminution of light from the faint shadows which come through modifications of the truth to the depth of night, when the centering Sonne of the Church is replaced by the power and the passion of those who are possessed with darkness.

Through the use of the varied imagery we have been examining, Donne's auditors are both comforted and warned. They are reassured by the knowledge that the whole Christian Church is rich in the full possession of God's light and that this may indeed shine through different confessional denominations. But they are made to feel also the dangers and the difficulties which the Church faces in the service of the light. In all, Donne's use of the image pattern of light helps him to maintain balance in his exposition, and to make a significant contribution to the problem of explaining the function of a Church caught up in the swirl of Reformation change.

### 3.

One of the important ways in which the Church functions in God's service lies in the exposure of her members to the guiding light of the Scriptures. John Donne shapes

and modifies images of sight to suggest the nature of the illuminating experience provided by contact with God's word.

For Donne the words uttered in the Holy Scriptures possess a reality beyond that of ordinary representational language. They are words substantially changed by a presence within them, the revelatory presence of the Holy Ghost and of Jesus Christ. The enlightening Spirit of God is made present to the apostles in the Pentecostal gift of tongues, and this light is also operative in the written Word, the Scriptures. And the Son of God is the Word made Flesh, as it were, twice over: in the Incarnation and in the Scriptures:

Christ was the Word; not onely the Essentiall Word, which was alwayes with God, but the very written word too; Christ was the Scripture, and therefore, when he refers them (the Apostles) to himselfe, he refers them to the Scriptures... for it is Videte; See what you hear (P.S.VII-16-400).

There can be no real difference then between the power and the purpose of the Scripture and that of Jesus Christ himself. That is why Donne realizes that the images of light which are traditionally associated with the Divine Persons are also readily applied to Holy Writ. The Holy Spirit is fire and flame; Jesus is the guiding light of the world. So too is the Word made Book.

In the New Testament Jesus speaks of himself both as "the light" and as "the way". More than any other, this combination of images seems to have served Donne's imagination in his exposition of the Christian's experience with

Holy Scripture. Here too is a "light" and a "way". Meditation upon the Word of God will involve, therefore a process of following the Spirit along a path marked out through the scriptural text under consideration. The work of the preacher is to serve by providing guidance from illuminating word to illuminating word.

In Donne's exposition of these ideas, images of seeing and of light are, therefore, naturally blended with those associated with movement and with the development of a sense of place. Professor Joan Webber has commented that the scriptural meditation of the sermon in John Donne's hands becomes a "spiritual literary adventure".<sup>9</sup> In proem and sermon division, a special effort is made to provide the listener with a kind of doorway. By means of symbol and metaphor, the text and the sermon itself are presented as a penetrable thing. Donne uses analogues of light and sight at the "doorway" of a sermon to invite his listeners to enter into and move about the text in an experience of exploratory seeing.

Such is the Dean's method in a sermon preached "at St. Paul's Crosse" on May 6, 1627, wherein Donne opens his discourse with an arresting comparison in which he likens the text to one of those quaint and elaborate maps in which the people of the seventeenth century delighted. Jesus is "the way" and "the light" and so is the Scripture. The consideration of the scriptural text is to be for this congregation a

<sup>9</sup>Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne (Madison, Wisconsin, 1963), p.148.

voyage following a carefully charted course which will allow them to see the mercies of God. The varied words of the text will provide a series of vantage points from which they may see these mercies:

Some cosmographers have said, That there is no land so placed in the world, but from that land, a man may see other land. I dispute it not, I defend it not; I accept it, and I apply it; there is scarce any mercy expressed in Scriptures, but that from that mercy you may see another mercy ... For this discovery let this text be our Mappe. First we see land, we see mercy in that gracious compellation, Children ... Then we see sea, then comes a Commination, a Judgement that shall last some time ... But there they may see land too, another mercy ... Then the text opens into a deep Ocean, a spreading Sea ... But even from this Sea, this vast Sea, this Sea of devastation we see land; for in the next verse follows another mercy ... And beyond this land, there is no more Sea; beyond this mercy, no more judgement ... (P.S.VII-17-415).

The text of scripture is like a map, it is substantial and visual.<sup>10</sup> Every word is a position from which one may be guided to a knowledge of the goodness of God. The figure of the map is interwoven with the sight pattern to such an extent that the listener's perspective is established within the text, and he is encouraged to perceive the play of light and guidance from its every part.

John Donne was aware of the particular luminous power of those parts of scripture which were metaphorical in

<sup>10</sup>In this and other examples of Donne's use of visual symbols in the proem and divisio of his sermons it is interesting to note the probable influence of Emblem Books on his technique. See Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (New York, 1966), especially Chapter 4. See also Joan Webber, op.cit., pp. 81-82; 128-133; 166-67.

expression. These became for him emblems and signs, the visible shaping of the truth and reality of divinity:

... As God hath spangled the firmament with starres, so hath he his Scriptures with names, and Metaphors, and denotations of power. Sometimes he shines out in the name of a Sword, and of a Target, and of a Wall, and of a Tower, and of a Rocke, and of a Hill; And sometimes in that glorious and manifold constellation of all together, Dominus exercituum, The Lord of Hosts (P.S.VII-1-65).

During the "spiritual literary adventure" of the sermon, during their movement from word to word in the Scriptures, Donne asks his listeners to become particularly aware of the lights which emanate from such symbols marking the way.

At times he believes it necessary to point out the implication and the scope of these symbols and to state directly that they provide illumination from God. Typical of this is his introductory commentary upon the text of Exodus 12:30, in a sermon preached at St. Dunstan's January 15, 1625, at a time when his parish was recovering from a slaughterous visitation of the plague. Donne considers the words of the text: "For there was not a house where there was not one dead." Immediately he establishes the notion of "house" as a symbol and widens the range of the word to make it apply to the House of Israel, the London House of every listener, the temple house of the Christian's body, and the church house of St. Dunstan's itself. There is not one of these houses wherein there is not one dead. Having applied the image and suggested a fourpart division for the meditative process, Donne again invites his listeners into the text,

promising to guide them through the full significance of the various symbols. Each will be as a window wherefrom one may perceive light from God:

That therefore we may take in light at all these windows that God opens for us, that we may lay hold upon God by all these handles which he puts out to us, we shall make a brief survey of these four Houses ... (P.S.VI-18-351).

Again the text is suggested as providing both "way" and "light". Surveying movement within "the houses" will allow Donne's auditors to see the light of God as from varied windows. The sight pattern is aligned with the metaphorical expression in such a way as to suggest that the scriptural text and the sermon itself are a real place in which one may move and, in moving, see the light of God.

Often the image pattern supports this impression beyond the area of the sermon's introduction. Typical is the way in which Donne begins the second part of his sermon on the text of Isaias 63:20, "For the child shall die a hundred years old; but the sinner, being a hundred years old, shall be accursed." He has spoken in the first part of the sermon about the "primogeniture" of God's mercy. Now, well within the sermon, the word "primogeniture" is apparently enough to bring his imagination to the imagery of Genesis, to the dynamism of light, and thus to the notion that, in one's consideration of varied parts of the text, the sermon experience is analogous to that of a man walking in areas of varied light:

So then we have brought our Sunne to his Meridianall height, to a full Noon, in which all shadows are removed: for even the shadow of death, death it self is a blessing and in the number of his Mercies. But the Afternoon shadows break out upon us, in our second part of the Text. And as afternoon shadowes do, these in our text do also; they grow greater and greater upon us, till they end in night, in everlasting night,<sup>11</sup> the sinner being a hundred yeeres old shall be accursed ... (P.S.VII-14-360).

The listener who has followed Donne through the first part of the sermon has enjoyed with him warmth and light from consideration of God's blessings upon the righteous. Now in the "afternoon" of the second part he will walk through the "shadows", reflections upon the plight of the sinner. Again the pattern of light and sight creates the impression of movement, within meditations upon a text, and within the varied shades of light which come from the different words of Holy Scripture.

Donne also uses isolated images which remind us that for him scriptural meditations are walkways to God: "I will but paraphrase the words of the Text, and so leave you in that, which, I hope, is your gallery to heaven, your own meditations" (P.S.VI-7-165). Wandering in such a gallery, one has the opportunity of reaching for reality with a composite vision which is wide and true: "Things in other stories we do but hear; things in The Scriptures we see: The Scriptures

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Sermons, P.S.II-11-139; V-14-293; VI-1-61; VIII-1-53, 8-207, 9-225. Donne made extensive use of "night" and "midnight" in his sermons to suggest time of trial and crisis.

as/  
are a room wainscotted with looking glass, we see all at once' (P.S.III-1-57). Donne explains, for example, that there are actions recorded in the scriptures in which by God's subsequent punishment "there appears sin to have been committed, and yet to have considered the action alone, without the testimony of God's displeasure upon it, a natural man would not easily find out a sin" (Ibid). The vision of God which is provided within the scriptures is integral because it allows one to see, as in a room with mirrors on all sides, every angle and aspect of religious truth.

Although he preached upon particular texts, Donne was aware of the dangers of fragmenting the Scriptures into parts too small as to prevent one from seeing the complete reflection of such truth. The full perception of truth will come only with a full view of all the mirrors on the wall: "As the Essentiall word, the Son of God is Light of light, So the written Word of God is light of light too, one place of Scripture takes light of another ... (P.S.V-1-39). One may, in his superficiality and prejudices, believe that light comes to him through a quick selection of parts: "If a man read the Scriptures a little, superficially, perfunctorily, his eyes seem straightwaies enlightned, and he thinks he sees everything that he had preconceived, and foreimagined in himselfe, as cleare as the sun" (Ibid). But Donne sees such light as mere deception: "The Scriptures are meant to agree with one another but not to agree to thy particular tast and humour" (Ibid).

Like many of the luminary ways to God that we have been examining, the lights within the Holy Scripture are interrelated. They both demand and stimulate integral vision.

In theory and practice too Donne agreed with the notion of the Bible suggested by his friend and fellow Divine, George Herbert. In his second sonnet on the Holy Scriptures, in The Temple, Herbert writes:

Oh that I knew all thy lights combine,  
 and the configurations of their glories!  
 Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,  
 But all the constellations of the storie.  
 This verse marks that, and both do make a motion  
 Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:  
 Then as dispersed herbs to watch a potion,  
 These three make up some Christian's destinie:  
 Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,  
 And comments on thee: for in everything  
 thy words do finde me out, and parallels  
 bring,  
 And in another make me understood.

The poem makes convenient summary of many of the points we have been concerned with in Donne's exposition of the scripture in terms of light and sight. Like Jesus himself, Scriptures are for him "the way, the truth" and "the light." They invite the Christian to follow a guiding motion forward through a meditative process<sup>12</sup> which is strongly pictorial. They point constantly to illuminating parallels and

<sup>12</sup>One particular purpose of the meditative process which Donne was involved in through the contemplation of scripture was naturally served by the use of light and sight images. Donne agreed with St. Augustine that such considerations are designed above all to stir the memory, to help a man see in the past, picture proofs of the goodness of God. For examples of imagery shaped by this conviction see: Sermons, P.S.II-11-236 ff; VIII-1-85 ff. 11-261.

symbols and, at the end of it all, bring deep and illuminating understanding:<sup>13</sup>

This is our way; To behold, that is, to depart from our own blindness and to behold a way, that is shewed us; but shewed us in the word, and in the word of God, and in that word of God, preached by man (P.S.VI-6-134).

4.

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church speak of the necessity of reaching for God through the word properly preached and sacraments duly administered. The final use of the light and sight pattern which we shall consider in Donne's exposition of the ways in which one comes now to see God within the Church is to be found in his treatment of sacraments and ceremonial. Because traditional theology considers these rites of religion as having unique powers of signification, we should not be surprised at the close affinity between the doctrine which Donne preaches and the imagery he uses in its explication. To understand and appreciate the image patterns he uses is to understand and appreciate the truth he teaches.

<sup>13</sup>See Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the 17th Century, (New Haven and London, 1954), especially Chapter 2, in which the author discusses the influence of the Ignatian method upon the literature of the time: "It is in the Jesuit art of meditating on the life of Christ that efforts to fuse understanding and will, theology and emotion, abstract and concrete, divine and human, reach a climax of intensity and intricacy" pp. 77-78.

It is again that of the Anglican via media. In steering the middle course between Puritanism and Romanism, the Elizabethan Church Settlement attempted to sail on the even keel of compromise. This procedure often demanded that the Anglican theologian maintain a firm grasp of the traditions of the past without becoming too embroiled in the turbulence produced by exact definitions. It would seem that for Donne this mode of doctrinal exposition was often well served through the appropriate use of general images of light and sight.

On June 16, 1619, on the eve of his departure to Germany, "commanded by the king to wait upon the Lord Doncaster in his Embassaye", Donne preached a sermon which most fully illustrates the value he saw in the sacraments as the visible signs of God's grace. His text is that of Romans 13:11: "for now is our salvation nearer than we believed." The central and most impressive passages of the sermon are those in which Donne uses allusions to visibility, perspective, light and sight, in his discussion of the superiority of Christian sacraments over those of the old law.<sup>14</sup> The examples are drawn from common visual experiences of man:

... the more beautiful, and better proportioned a body is, the more it draws the eye to look upon

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Sermons, P.S.II-12-260: the general advantage of the Christian sacraments over the Jewish ritual practices is, for Donne, based upon the Christian's superiority in a mode of seeing: "The blessedness of the Patriarchs was a seeing with the eye of faith which discovers future things, but Christ prefers the blessedness of the disciples because they saw things present and already done."

it; ... and so the more evidence and light and luster they have in themselves, the easier things are discerned, ... because they are more visible (P.S.II-12-255).

Now this is especially true of the workings of God's grace in the sacraments:

... grace is such a light, such a torch, such a beacon, as where it is, it is easily seen. As there is lustre in a precious stone, which no mans eye or finger can limit to a certain place or point in that stone, so though we do not assign in the sacrament, where, that is, in what circumstances or part of that holy action grace is; or when or how it enters, ... yet whosoever receives the sacrament worthily, sees evidently an entrance, and a growth of grace in himself (P.S.II-12-258).

The imagery here is imaginatively designed to illustrate significant aspects in Donne's understanding of the sacraments as sources of the light of grace. The traditional symbol of the torch as a source of light and guidance makes his fundamental point: the sacraments give God's help to man. The more unusual simile of the lustre from the precious stone allows him to stir a general appreciation of the value of the sacraments without going into theological arguments as to the precise place and source of this light in the ritual form.

This method is at work particularly in Donne's exposition of the sacrament of the altar. Like other Anglican

Divines, Andrewes<sup>15</sup> and Laud,<sup>16</sup> the Dean of St. Paul's refused to define the manner of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, for he held that his mystery was not revealed in the scriptures for the guidance of the Church:

But for the manner, how the Body and Bloud of Christ is there, wait his leisure, if he have not yet manifested that to thee: Grieve not at that, wonder not at that, presse not for that; for hee hath not manifested that, not the way, not the manner of his presence in the sacrament, to the Church (P.S.VII-11-290-291).

But Donne could and did use illustrations to suggest that, although it be not readily defined, the power of the sacrament is to be found not in the change in the substance but in the very action of eating: the light of that moment is the light of faith, to be appreciated without the subtleties of theological analysis:

When thou comest to this seale of thy peace, the Sacrament, pray that God will give thee that light, that may direct and establish thee in necessary and fundamentall things; that is the light of faith to see, that the Body and Bloud of Christ, is applied to thee, in that action...(P.S.VII-11-290).

If some illustration is to be made of the mode of Christ's presence in the sacrament, perhaps that of light is

<sup>15</sup>Works (Anglo-Catholic Library), Vol.III,p.262: "But neither do we deny in this matter the prepositions Trans; and we allow that the elements are changed (transmutari). But a change in substances we look for, and we find it nowhere ....

<sup>16</sup>Works (Anglo-Catholic Library), Vol. II, p.306: Transsubstantiation was never heard of in the Primitive Church, nor till the Council of Lateran, nor can it be proved out of Scripture; and, taken properly, cannot stand with the grounds of Christian Religion."

appropriate. It too sometimes belies the senses in its function:

Since Christ forebore not to say, This is my body, when he gave the sign of his body, why should we forebeare to say of that bread, this is Christs body, which is the Sacrament of his body. You would have said at noone, this light is the Sun, and you will say now, this light is the Candle; That light was not the Sun, this light is not the Candle, but it is that portion of aire which the Sun did then, and which the candle doth now enlighten. We say the Sacramentall bread is the body of Christ, because God hath shed his Ordinance upon it, and made it another nature in the use, though not in the substance ... (P.S.VII-11-295-296).

The truth is that Donne, in his quick imagination and in his desire to escape the convolutions of scholastic disputations, turns naturally to such examples and imagery. He believes that in their Trent Canon Roman Catholics are in danger of losing their footing "in departing from their ground, the expresse Scriptures." In another metaphor they are seen as diving in a bottomless sea from which "they poppe sometimes above water to take a breath, and then snatch at a loose preposition, that swims upon the face of the waters." And so they catch a "trans", and others a "con", and a "sub", and an "in" and "vary their poetry into a transubstantiation and a consubstantiation, and the rest, and rhyme themselves beyond reason into absurdities, and heresies ..." (Ibid. p.296). Donne, for himself and for his congregation, is content to rest in the more ambiguous general proposition that Christians do indeed reach toward Christ in the light of a functioning scriptural faith:

We offer to go no farther, then according to his Word; In the Sacrament our eyes see his salvation, according to that, so far, as that hath manifested unto us, and in that light we depart in peace, without scruple in our owne, without offence to other mens consciences (P.S.VII-11-296).

Although they were not as clear a way to the light of God as were "Sacramental Seales", Donne believed that the ceremonials of the Church were ways of relating and responding to his help. If God in some way made himself visible in the light of scripture and sacrament, man must show visible outward response to his presence:

It is not enough for a man to beleeve aright, but he must apply himself to some Church, to some outward form of worshipping God; It is not enough for a Church, to hold no error in doctrine, but it must have outward assistances for the devotion of her children, and outward decency for the glory of her God (P.S.VII-17-429).

The sight and light pattern, as we have noted, allows Donne to make "open-ended" and appropriate commentary on the Anglican position in sacramental theology. An extension of this pattern, the use of clothes imagery,<sup>17</sup> permits him to present effectively his church's view on proper ceremonial. The phrase "outward decency" in the above remark is a key to the Dean's attitudes towards religious ritual. It provides orientation towards the use of clothes analogues in the expression of these attitudes. Dr. Donne rejected what

17

For further examples of this extension of the sight pattern in other areas of the sermon material see Sermons, P.S.II, p.104: III-66; IV-65, 265:V-134, 154, VI-166-167.

he believed to be a magical identification of ritual and divine reality in the Roman Church, but he did hold always to the principles of proper decorum in the outward show of religion. Illustrations taken from the proper use of clothes allowed him to make clear these principles.

Something of Donne's feelings for proper and ordered decorum in religious ceremonial is suggested in a sermon in which he discusses the plight of the children in Israel abiding many days "without a king, and without a prince, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim" (Hosea 3:4). All of these are, of course, mere externals, but, "though they be not the soule, yet they are the breath of Religion" (P.S.VII-17-431). In a very real way even such trappings as religious vestments and ceremonial are significant signs of a socio-religious reality and are important adjuncts to the socio-religious order:

Christs garment was not divided; nay, the Soldiers were not divided about it, but agreed in one way; And shall wee (the Body of Christ) bee divided about the garment, that is, vary in the garment, by denying a confirmity to that Decency which is prescribed? When Christ devested, or supprest the Majesty of his outward appearance, at his Resurrection, Mary Magdalen took him but for a Gardiner. Ecclesiasticall persons in secular habits, lose their respect. Though the very habit bee but a Ceremony, yet the distinction of habits is rooted in nature, and in morality; And when the particular habit is enjoyned by lawfull Authority, obedience is rooted in nature, and in morality too (P.S.VII-17-430).

Thus without falling into what he claimed to be the error of the Roman Church in holding ceremonies to be effective when they were merely significative, Donne is able to use

the imagery suggested by "garments", and "habits" to indicate that ceremonial rituals are in some way "rooted in nature and morality." The outward appearance has a deep connection with the inner reality, so that one is in danger of a wrong vision of Christ and his ministers if the proper and decorous externals are not obeyed and observed.

As we have noted before, Donne recognizes a certain unity in the ways in which a man comes to see God. Again in his use of clothes imagery in his discussion of ceremonial we mark his ability to perceive interrelationships. One who would reject the value of proper ritual is in danger of rejecting all outward signs which light the way to God. One who would refuse decorous ceremonial is in some way refusing to see God in material things:

He that undervalues outward things in the religious service of God, though he begin at ceremonial and ritual things, will come quickly to call sacraments but outward things, and sermons and Public Prayers but outward things in contempt ... Believe outward things apparel God; and since God was content to take a body, let us not leave him naked or ragged (P.S.VII-17-421).

A church stripped of ceremonial is a church stripped of the garment of light which the Scriptures associate with the majesty of God. The Church is meant to stand out in warm and luminous ceremonial because she is the spouse of God:

God is said in the Scriptures to apparell himself gloriously; (God covers him with light as with a garment) and so of his Spouse the Church it is said, (Her clothing is of wrought gold, and her raiment of needle worke) and, as though nothing in this world were good enough

for her wearing, she is said to be cloathed with the sun... But these outward appearances and acts of greatness are not pride in those persons, to whom there is a reverence due, which reverence is preserved by this outward splendor ... (P.S.II-14-290).

The imagery evident in this passage and in the use of the clothes pattern that we have been briefly considering makes it clear that Donne sees in the outward show of religion not any "ex opere operato" power of ceremonial, but simply that which is appropriate. The notion of decorum as Donne understands it in relation to Church ritual practice suggests "that which is according to nature." External religious rites are not magical but "natural" in that they allow man to see God and to reach for him in a way which is proper to the mode of his self-revelation. If God is described in Scriptures as clothed in a garment of light, then it is right and fitting that man should see him in the brightness and splendor of religious ceremonial. If Christ has revealed himself in the glory of a material body it is appropriate that the Dean's congregations see him now, not in the naked simplicity of puritan practices, but in the traditional riches of Anglican rituals.

Underlying these suppositions are principles that we have been aware of in the four sections of this Chapter on Donne's use of a light and sight pattern in his exposition of the way in which man comes to see God. The passages we have examined show that Donne stands strongly against deviousness. Seeing through faith cannot be entirely separated from

seeing through reason; seeing in faith cannot be conceived apart from the Church, Scriptures, sacrament and ceremonial. Donne's theology of revelation is grounded upon the conviction that God has shown himself in and to the world and that his son Jesus is the light of this world. The imagery that Donne uses in discussing man's experience of light allows him to suggest the unity of its source.

But upon his reader the kaleidoscopic effect remains. Even while we have been aware of Donne's sense of unity and process in the ways in which the Christian comes to know God, we have been sensitive to a flashing variety of images in the light and sight pattern of his exposition. We have felt the uncertain confusion of the "faint twilight" and "the uncertain glimmerings" of reason; we have entered into a humble scene in which humility and prayer blow the cold ashes of reason into a flame of faith. We have been stirred and stimulated by metaphorical embellishments upon the core concept of God's guiding light: the ecclesiastical sun at meridianal height; the pillar of fire moving on; the map of scriptural text; the spangled stars of scriptural symbolism; the lustrous stone of sacramental grace; the golden raiment of ceremonial rite. The vibrant ingenuity with which Donne has manipulated these and other images we have experienced is a testimony to the inherent fruitfulness of the pattern of light and sight which he has used in his explication of fundamental doctrine. It is also a tribute to Donne's wit and imagination. He has worked a single pattern of images into

a varied collage which effectively illustrates a significant portion of his theological thinking.

## CHAPTER II

For John Donne the challenges of responding to the light of God's grace and the duties of seeing the world in its special light were laid upon all Christians. But the role which one played in the mystical body of Christ determined the quality of light received from above and demanded specific orientation in one's outlook. Accordingly the pattern of sight and light in the Sermons takes on a particular coloration as it enters into Donne's consideration of vocation and calling in life.

The notion of one's state and place in life was of particular importance to Renaissance man, especially in the Post-Reformation Era. The concept of society as reflecting, in microcosm, the right and harmonious ordering of the entire universe suggested to Donne, as it did to all men of his time, the importance of recognizing the proper position and function of every class and of every person within that society. A generation before Donne, William Shakespeare in Troilus and Criseyde had written of the chaos which comes when "the speceality of rule hath been neglected". "Take but degree away, untune that string," Ulysses laments, "and hark what discord follows."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>For a full exposition of this concept of order see Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge Mass., 1936).

With the theological writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin new emphasis was placed upon the religious significance of a man's place and role in a society which, broken away from unity with Rome, must now, all the more, preserve structural cohesion by recognizing that it was God's will that princes should rule, preachers should teach, and man should work out his salvation, each in his appointed way. For all, the way was religious, because work in the world was holy and was meant, without any withdrawal into monasteries, to contribute to the praise of the Lord and to the progress of his cause.

For Donne to withdraw in any way from the working order of society was to withdraw from the proper interrelationships of the world itself. One must respond to one's proper calling. "He that undertakes no course", he writes, "no vocation, he is no part, no member, no limbe of the body of this world; no eye, to give light to others; no ear to receive profit by others" (P.S.IV-5-160).

The letters to his friends which are recorded by Edmund Gosse<sup>19</sup> suggest that Donne's abhorrence of living in a social vacuum, without proper calling or preferment, may have had its basis in financial consideration rather than in theological meditation, but there can be no doubt that Donne did emotionally react to the feeling of one's being, as it

<sup>19</sup> Vol. II, pp.20-21, 57-60.

were, adrift, without specific function in society. The reaction seems to have had both psychological and theological implications. Only in being in a particular place, endowed with a particular office, could man fulfill his true being and respond to the workings of grace in his life:

In nature the body makes the place, but in grace, the place makes the body: 'The person must actuate it self, dilate, extend and propagate it self according to the dimensions of the place, by filling it in the execution of the duties of it (P.S.VIII-7-178).

The expansion of one's personal talents and the process of personal fulfillment, Donne believed, were dependent upon a man's active enthusiasm in doing his work in a God-given office. Donne's own career as a preacher provides illustration of the truth of this conviction.

Critics have pointed out that the idea of "nothingness" horrified Donne. Perhaps it was the equation of uselessness with the void of emptiness that terrified him, as he contemplated the thought of a man passing through life without particular purpose, without giving light to others, without meaning in his passage. In a sermon preached on John 1:8, "He was not that light, but was sent to beare witness of that light," Donne considers the tragedy of the man who does not respond to a particular vocation. Remember, he says, that God would have bred a man in his true Church for nothing if

... Thou passest through this world, like a flash, like a lightning, whose beginning or end nobody knowes, like an Ignis fatuus in the aire, which

does not onely not give light for any use, but not so much as portend or signifie any thing; and thou passest out of the world, as thy hand passes out of a basin of water, which may bee somewhat the fouler for thy washing it, but retaines no other impression of thy having been there; and so does the world for thy life in it (P.S.IV-5-149).

The image of the ignis fatuus, of the mysterious ephemeral light of the meteor in the heavens, coming from darkness and leaving empty darkness behind, conveys for Donne the meaninglessness of a life lived without direction in itself and without giving the guidance of steady light and clear signification to others.

Five years later, in February 1627, preaching at Whitehall again on a theme of vocation, Donne used the same metaphor to suggest the revulsion he felt at the thought of life without clearly defined work. At this time his theological argumentation on the subject is more clearly developed. God's creative activity in the world, he explained, is positive; that of the man without special vocation is privative:

God made every thing something, and thou mak'st the best of things, man, nothing; and because thou canst not annihilate the world altogether, as though thou hadst God at an advantage, in having made an abridgment of the world in man, there in that abridgment thou wilt undermine him, and make man, man, as far as thou canst, man in thy self nothing. He that qualifies himself for nothing, does so; He whom we can call nothing is nothing: this whole world is one intire creature, one body; and he that is nothing may be excremental nailes, to scratch and gripe others, he may be excremental hairs for ornament, or pleasurableness of meeting; but he is no limb of this intire body, no part of Gods universal creature, the world (P.S.VIII-7-177).

The function of vocation, Donne suggests in this figurative language, is to make man a part of a created universe, to emesh him in a web of relationships with a world ordained and ordered by God. Vocation then will partake in the general finality of the world; it will properly show forth the glory and the goodness of God. Christian vocation, Christian work, should be active, open and evident. The world was made to bring to light the greatness of divinity; the Christian who is a part of this world, this plan, must participate in its purpose.

Donne, of course, recognized that there are times when, contrary to the biblical injunction, it is expedient that one hide his light under the proverbial bushel. But in such a situation truly Christian work yet remains open to the sight of God and thereby fruitful. Donne expresses the idea in a rather homely image:

It is a blessed sincerity, to work as the Ant,  
professedly, openly; but because there may be  
cases, when to doe so, would destroy the whole  
worke, though there be a cloud and a curtaine  
betweene thee, and the eyes of men, yet if thou  
doe them clearly in the sight of God, that he  
see his glory advanced by thee, the fruit of  
thy labour shall be Honey. (Such as that pro-  
duced by Bees working within a crust of wax,  
that they might work and not be discerned)  
(P.S.III-10-232).

The short passage suggests much that is typical of Donne's feelings on vocation. As with the work of the ant or the bee, Christian calling brings a man to co-operation within a "commonwealth". Ideally, his work is open to others, but, ultimately, what is most important is that God see his glory

advance in such work.

We have already noted in the texts we have chosen to comment on in this chapter a tendency for Donne to think of vocation in terms of "showing" and at times with symbols of light. Given his general concept of a man's work making him one with a world which is made to show forth the glory of God, it is natural that this should be so. For Donne a Christian's work in the world is somehow considered as a continuation of the light which God established in the first moments of creation, and there is constant analogy between the nature of this vocational function and the physical dimensions of this created light.

The comparison is most carefully developed in a sermon which Donne preached at the Spittle on Easter Monday, 1622. His text was that of Second Corinthians 4:6: "For God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." In his *divisio* Donne clearly indicates the lines of comparison and the association he feels between the origin of created light, its continuation in the works of man, and its fulfillment in glory: "Our parts therefore in these words must necessarily be three; three lights. The first shows us our Creation; the second, our Vocation; the third our Glorification" (P.S.IV-3-92). Throughout the latter part of his sermon Donne develops the parallels he sees between God's "commanding light to shine out of darkness" and God's will

and plan for the Christians' work in the world: "First He made light. There was none before; so first, He shines in our hearts, by his preventing grace." Before the grace-giving light of God there is, in the heart of man, no real source of illumination. God does not "light his light at our candle", but God himself is the source of all grace, of all the light in the Christian heart. And God gives that light so that our actions may be manifested to the world: "As God commanded light (in creation) for the manifestation of his creatures, so he hath shined in our hearts, that our actions might appear by that light". And the parallels continue: God created physical light by his Word; he continues the created light of grace through the word of preaching. God looked upon the light and saw that it was good; God looks upon the true light-giving works of man and considers them good. God separated all darkness from the light; God wishes that man in his work be separated from "the dark inventions and traditions of men" and from sin. (P.S.IV-3-115-117).

Earlier in his consideration of the text, Donne recognizes that the phrase "in our hearts" has particular reference to the ministers of God's Word and Sacraments. For Donne vocation to the priesthood adds a specific modality to the general significance of Christian work in the world. Again he expresses this modality most often by elaborating upon traditional symbols of grace-giving light. If certain men take God's Word into their mouths and pretend a Commis-

sion, a Calling, for the calling of others, they must be sure that God has shined in their hearts. There is a vocatio intentionalis when Parents

in their intention and purpose, dedicate their children to this service of God, the Ministry, even in their cradle; ... and then there is a Vocatio Virtualis, when having assented to that purpose of my Parents, I receive that publick Seal, the Imposition of hands, in the Church of God: but it is Vocatio radicalis, the calling that is the root and foundation of all, that we (ministers) have this light shining in our hearts, the testimony of Gods spirit to our spirit, that we have this calling from above. First then, it must be a light; not a calling taken out of the darkness of melancholy, or darkness of discontent, or darkness of want and poverty, or darkness of a retir'd life, to avoid the mutual duties and offices of society: it must be a light, and a light that shines; it is not enough to have knowledge and learning; it must shine out, and appear in preaching; and it must shine in our hearts, in the private testimony, of the Spirit there: but when it hath so shin'd there, it must not go out there, but shine still as a Candle in a Candle-stick, or the Sun in his sphere; shine so, as it give light to others: so that this light doth not shine in our hearts, except it appear in the tongue, and in the hand too (P.S.IV-3-109).

If it is important that the work of every Christian be evident and open, how much more necessary it is that the witness of the minister be as a light for all. The external, visible signs and seals of the Sacrament of Orders are not enough. And certainly the light must be God-given. The thought is enough to stir in Donne a formal rejection of the notion that any ministerial vocation could be initiated in and through any personal darkness that a man might experience in the vicissitudes of lay life, such, indeed, as Donne had known himself.

Ministerial vocation must be from the light and be itself a light that shines. The comparison between created physical light and that called for in the works of man continues. With St. Ambrose, Donne believed that God would have made physical light to no purpose had he not made creatures to show by that light. So do the lights of grace, of learning, and of other abilities shine to no purpose if a minister does not have good words and works to show, to draw men's eyes upon them. The sixfold repetition and the imperative form of the verb "shine" in the above passage indicate the diffusive overflow of God's light that Donne would demand in the minister's work. The light given in this vocation must not be confined as a private testimony of the spirit

within the heart. "It must shine as a candle in a candle-stick, or the sun in his sphere", giving light to others. Physical light is diffusive; so too is the light of the spirit. It must spread from heart, to tongue, to hand; and in this diffusion, through word and work, it must give light to others.

But the minister of word and sacrament must not only let his light shine that men may see his goodness; he must himself be able to see properly. In a sermon preached at St. Dunstan's, Trinity Sunday, 1627, the symbolism suggested by the imagery of the Book of Revelation in which "the four beasts had each of them six wings about him, and they were full of eyes within," stirs Donne's imagination and allows him to comment vividly upon the scope of vision which is

required of the preacher. Donne follows the regular medieval identification of the four beasts as symbols of the four Evangelists and then extends this symbolism, as later commentators had done, to all the ministers of the gospel:

As the Minister is presented in the notion and quality of an Eagle, we require both an Open eye, and a Piercing eye; First, that he dare looke upon each other mens sins, and be not faine to winke at their faults, because he is guilty of the same himselfe, and so, for feare of a recrimination, incurre a prevarication; And then, that he be not so dim-sighted, that he must be faine to see all through other mens spectacles, and so preach the purposes of great men, in a factious popularity, or the fancies of new men in a Schismaticall singularity; but, with the Eagle be able to looke to the Sun; to look upon the constant truth of God in his Scriptures, through his Church; for this is vis speculatrix, the open and piercing eye of the Eagle (P.S.VIII-1-42).

The metaphorical expression here is typical of Donne's ability to suggest succinctly the various directions which true Christian vision must follow. With full play of wit upon the bare symbol of the eagle, Donne is able to suggest the three ways in which, at once, the minister's gaze must move. He must look truly upon others, upon himself, and upon God. His vision must above all be authentic, without the optical distortions which come with trying to adjust his sight to the outlook and attitudes of the populace. If there is one line of vision which must above all be clear, it is one which looks to the stable sun of God's scriptural truth. Although Donne was constantly aware of his congregation, as the imagery and examples used in the sermons demonstrate, he was a preacher who believed that full and right

vision was first of all the prerogative of the preacher. Such vision came when, unflinchingly, a minister considered at once his own faults, the sins of others, and the wide and constant doctrines of Bible and Church.

Amplification of apocalyptic symbolism which speaks of the beasts "with wings full of eyes" allows Donne to make further observations on the quality of awareness and insight that is proper to God's minister: "He (God) gives them wings, that is, means to doe their office; but eyes too, that is, discretion and religious wisdome how to doe it" (P.S.VIII-1-50). Donne does not believe that the religious commitment of the priest should ever be one of blind or even of implicit obedience. Donne had received boyhood education under the tutelage of the Jesuits, but in his manhood he could not accept these "jesuitical" doctrines. By such concepts of obedience a man might fly but know not wither he flies:

In both these (doctrines) there are wings enow, but there are no eyes: They fly from hence to Rome, and Roman Jurisdiccions, and they fly over hither againe, after Statues, after Proclamations, after Banishments iterated upon them; So there are wings enow but they lack those eyes by which they should discerne between Religion and Rebellion, between a traytor and a martyr (P.S.VIII-1-49).

In this remark there are echoes of the troubled times of Donne's own family when, in the poet's early life, his Jesuit-uncle was executed for treason. Then and throughout Donne's life the problem of seeing correctly in the ambiguous religious atmosphere of Reformation England was really, he felt, the problem of discerning correctly both the

ecclesiastical and social signs of the times. The minister could not be expected to do this while bound by any doctrine of blind acceptance of faith. Such blindness may for a time lead to certain private and mystical exaltation, but it is dangerous, especially for the preacher: "Those birds whose eyes are cieled, and sowed up, fly highest; but they are made a prey" (P.S.VIII-1-50). Although Donne was undoubtedly not thinking of him, the image could easily have applied to a man such as Thomas More, one of the Dean's martyred forebearers.

A baroque tendency to swirl about a central symbol and to keep expanding its significance with imaginative variations upon its theme encourages Donne to illustrate further the fullness and the depth which the minister's vision should have:

They must have eyes in their tongues;  
They must see, that they apply not blindly  
and inconsiderately Gods gracious promises  
to the presumptuous, nor his heavy judge-  
ments to the broken hearted. They must have  
eyes in their ears; They must see that they  
harken neither to a superstitious sense from  
Rome, nor to a seditious sense of Scriptures  
from the Separation. They must have eyes in  
their hands; They must see that they touch  
not upon any such benefits or rewards, as  
might bind them to any other master then to  
God himselfe. They must have eyes in their  
eyes; spirituall eyes in their bodily eyes  
(P.S. VIII-1-50).

We have noted already now Donne's imagination, and the Biblical imagery to which it was responding, saw the light of the minister's vocational grace diffused, as it were,

throughout his body, shining in mouth and hand. The above commentary on the vision proper to preachers exemplifies again Donne's power to feel the full implications of a biblical symbol and to elaborate it even to the point of startling paradox: "They shall have eyes in their eyes." The original incongruity of the eyes in the wings has become magnified by Donne's proclivity for the bizarre; it has become an image both more unusual than that presented by the scriptural symbol and more powerful in presenting a theological concept which is important to Donne: there must be true spiritual insight in the heart of a minister. The swirl of the imagery as it expands the central symbol reaches a high point at precisely the right place, as it puts climactic emphasis upon what is really a summary statement which gathers together the import of the whole passage. Men who are called to the pulpit must have "spiritual eyes in their bodily eyes".

Donne's customary habit of preaching with a slow and deliberate methodology, pausing upon each word of a text, allows him to make fruitful meditation upon appropriate application of every detail in a suggestive scriptural symbol. He notes that in the text he has been considering, Revelation speaks of the beasts as being "full of eyes within", and the one word "within" encourages him to comment upon the inwardness that the preacher's vision should possess. All his wings and all his eyes of circumspection before and behind shall do him no good if he has no prospect inward, no eyes within, no care of his particular and personal salvation.

But the pause upon a word or upon a particular segment of a text does not prevent Donne from allowing the coloration of that word or segment, with the imagery it has stirred, to spread throughout the rest of his commentary. In the sermon that we have been considering, the variations and amplifications of the sight pattern have been made on only one part of the text, that which speaks of "winged eyes". Having his imagination work upon the idea of the preacher's proper vision and of the witness he should give, Donne tends throughout the remainder of the sermon to consider his work in terms of sight and light. "The ministers of God are not so covered, so removed from us, as that we have not means to know them ... his calling is manifest, and his doctrine is open to proffe and tryall" (P.S.VIII-1-46-47). Both evangelists' and the preachers' role is to declare what they have seen, "manifesting their devotion without any disguise, any modification" (P.S.VIII-1-51). Even the depth of any "spiritual night, in the shadow of death, in the midnight of affections and tribulations" should not retard zeal for God's service. Indeed, holy people see God better in the dark than they do in the light; their tribulations bring them nearer to God, and God more clearly manifest to them (P.S.VIII-1-53). Sometimes a minister with his congregation must leave all "natural reason and humane arts at the bottom of the hill and climb up only by the faith of light ..." (P.S.VIII-1-54). The canvass of Donne's sermons is crowded with many colours, many ideas and images, and it is seldom that, having applied a brush at

one time Donne does not in some way continue to work with it through the rest of his allotted hour in the pulpit. Consideration of Donne's presentation of a vocation theme in terms of sight and light indicates that the stimulus to imagination coming from a significant Biblical symbol or image will often flow in some way beyond a single passage to the remainder of the sermon.

At Paul's Cross on the 13th of September, 1622, Dr. Donne preached with the purpose of explaining to the people the meaning of the King's "Directions to Preachers", which had forbidden them to discuss controversial matters in the pulpit. The sermon he produced, the first of his texts to be published, provides further evidence of Donne's ability to enlarge upon a central symbol in illustration of what he believed to be the right role of the preacher in times of some political turbulence. Donne chose as his text words from Judges 5:20: "They fought from Heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." The development of an analogy between the stars of heaven and the preachers of religion came naturally to one who, as we have seen, tended to see the ministerial function as that which gives light and direction.

In his commentary upon the text Donne's purpose is to discuss the role of preachers in carrying on warfare against error. Such warfare can only be successful, Donne believes, if there be order and discipline among those who guide the Church of England. Accordingly, the particular

aspect of the traditional star symbolism which Donne develops is associated with order and stability. Ministers must be as "stars in the courses" to fight well in spiritual warfare. Donne suggests parallels between the ministers' work and the exact positioning and ordered movement of the stars in the heavens: "You sayes Saint Paul, who are Stars in the Church must proceede in your warfare, decently, and in order, for the stars of heaven when they fight for the Lord, they doe their service, manentes in ordine, containing themselves in their Order" (P.S.IV-7-192).

The stars in the heavens are ordered, but they are not all of the same magnitude in light. Donne then can make further comparison between the light and the sense of direction that comes from the differing stars of heaven and that which comes from preachers of various talents. He suggests that as star differs from star in glory but "all conduce to the benefit of man:

So, when you see these Stars, Preachers to differ in gifts; yet, since all their ends are to advance your salvation, encourage the Catechizer, as well as the curious Preacher. Looke so farre towards your way to Heaven, as to the Firmament, and consider there, that that starre by which wee saile, and make great voyages, is none of the starres of the greatest magnitude; but yet is none of the least neither; but a middle starre. Those preachers which must save your soules, are not ignorant, unlearned, extemporall men; but they are not over curious men neither (P.S.IV-7-209).

The imagery reflects Donne's constant ability to adopt the 'via media' position. He would not entirely denounce and damn the "curious preacher", but he does opt for calm and

reasoned steadiness in the preacher's light. The light which Donne judges to be right and constant and safe is the light of the middle magnitude, like that of the North Star. The light of the preacher's talents need not in itself be dazzling, but it should above all be stable.

The image of preachers as stars in the firmament provides an appropriate point at which we may summarize some of our observations on Donne's use of terms and analogues of light and of seeing in his discussion of Christian vocation, lay and ministerial, in the world. The use of such comparisons in the presentation of this particular theological concern of Dr. Donne has demonstrated his abhorrence of a man's passing through the world without a specific relationship to society. By grace a man's proper function in the world is to give light to this world, evidently and openly, in a way that is analogous to God's giving physical light in creation. Above other men, ministers of the Word and Sacraments have the obligation to let the lights of God's grace diffuse through their work. They themselves must see clearly, without distortion; freely, without blind obedience; widely, without the limitations of the purely natural outlook. With fullness of light in their works and integrity of vision in their outlook, ministers will indeed stand in full and fruitful harmony with the world. They shall be as stars in their courses, in the right order which must mark every vocational position, and they shall shine as every man must, giving their specific witness to the glory of God.

## CHAPTER III

It is not surprising that commentary on sin should lead Donne to a further extension of the sight and light pattern in the sermons. Although the general supposition that "John Donne as a young man was of a loose moral character, and that his acceptance of ordination was a penitent repudiation of his former way of life" is at least subject to question,<sup>20</sup> there can be no doubt that Donne, when he came to preaching, was acutely conscious of the weakness of human nature and of his own share in sinfulness. The burden, the weight, the disease, the danger of sin provide constant motifs for the sermons, and although Donne did not often emphasize his sense of personal unworthiness he did on some occasions let something of his feeling on this matter slip out. Once in quoting St. Paul's familiar depreciation of himself as chief of sinners,<sup>21</sup> Donne burst out, "when I consider my infirmities (I know I might justly lay a heavier name upon them) I know I am in his other quorum, quorum ego maximus, sent to save sinners, of whom I am the chiefest..."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Frederick A. Rowe, I Launch at Paradise (London, 1964), pp. 22-24.

<sup>21</sup>1 Timothy 1:15.

<sup>22</sup>Sermons, (P.S.II, Appendix B, p.388).

Donne's sensitivity to the problem of evil in the world and to the presence of sin in his own life led him to deep reflection and emotional response. It is little wonder that it stretched his powers of imaginative expression.

The scriptural exposition upon which Donne most often developed his sermons does not always associate the actual words for sin with qualities of light or sight. But there are in the roots of certain Hebrew words used in connection with sin implications that did lead to such imagery. In Old Testament Hebrew the most frequently used terms are hēt' and hattāt', both commonly translated simply as sin but both connected with the verb hātā', which has as its original meaning "to miss the mark, to deviate, to fall". The moral side of sin appears in the term awon, which is derived from a root meaning "to be crooked".<sup>23</sup> It is not difficult to see how such terminology could lead to images which associated the problem of sin with improper moral vision. The New Testament, especially the Johannine writings which made new use of gnostic imagery, spoke of sin as the work of darkness opposing the true light of Christian life. The fathers of the Church, notably St. Gregory, spoke of fallen man losing the four chief marks of his original status: immortality, stability, righteousness and spiritual vision.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Louis F. Hartman, C.S.S.R. and J. Heuschen in Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Bible (New York and London 1963), s.v. "Sin".

<sup>24</sup>This theory is summarized by F. James Dudden, Gregory the Great (London, 1905), II, 380-83.

Nevertheless, it would seem that Donne's illustration of the problem of sin in terms of seeing, perspective, and lighting came as much from his own feelings and world view as it did from traditional analogues. These provided again the stimulus by which the particular Donnean imagery was triggered. The shaping of the pattern was peculiar to his personality and to his particular purposes in the sermons.

Through imagery of light and sight Donne makes appropriate commentary on the dynamism of sin to which he seems to have been most sensitive. Sin, for Donne, arose out of man's bodily lusts, out of a lack of awareness in man's heart; it results in distortion of various kinds; it can be remedied, particularly at the hour of death, only by right vision. After death it demands right judgment. This dynamic of the problem of sin, which Donne felt deeply, elicited in turn a dynamic movement in the sight patterns with which he illustrated it. Thus the sight and light imagery which is descriptive of sin in the sermons is constantly shifting in its perspective and in its source of power. But always the ingenious ability of the imagery to concretize abstraction remains constant.

Donne preaches that the initial impetus to sin comes from man's corruption. He uses the image of shadow and light to suggest this cause of sin in man's life. One cannot well blame God for one's sins:

No man can assigne a reason in the Sun, why  
his body casts a shadow: why all the place around  
about him is illumin'd by the Sun, the

reason is in the Sun; but of his shadow, there is no other reason, but the grossness of his own body: why there is any beam of light, any spark of life, in my soul, he that is the Lord of light and life, and would not have me die in darkness, is the onely cause; but of shadow of death, wherein I sit, there is no cause, but mine own corruption. And this is the cause, why I do sin; but why I should sin, there is none at all (P.S.I-4-226-227).

The imagery here seems to be imprisoned within the precisions of a coldly argumentative style, but it does break through with a certain force of contrast between the sources of light and shadow. Donne holds together light and darkness, God and man's grossness, in one closely drawn comparison. The place, all around illumin'd, and the beam and the spark of light which are proper gifts of the Lord, make more pitiable the shadow of death in which man sits. It is man's "corruption" which, like the grossness of the body in the sunshine, is the cause of shadow--in this case the shadow and darkness of sin.

Because he sees sin as bringing man to shadow and darkness it is not surprising that Donne associates it with the problem of awareness, a psychological abstraction which, of course, Donne can effectively cast into images of sight and light. In a sermon preached early in his career at Lincoln's Inn, Donne chose as his text Psalm 38:4, "For mine iniquities are gone over my head, as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for mee." Donne sees the sinner's habits as "already got above him". His condition suggests the situation of the servant of Elijah, who only after seven warnings

from the prophet can see above him a little cloud like a man's head. But it is a cloud which presages storm. So it is with the sinner who

will see nothing, till he can see nothing  
and, when he sees anything (as to the  
blindest conscience something will appear)  
he thinks it but a little cloud, but a  
melancholique fit, and, in an instant . . .  
his sins are got above him, and his way out is  
stopp'd.

The cause of further sin, the obstacle to reform, lies in man's lack of awareness. The sight pattern continues: "The sun is got over us now, though we saw none of his motions, and so are our sins, though we saw not their steps" (P.S.II-3-108).

In this passage the physical and meteorological references in the light and sight imagery are somewhat lacking in precision. The habit of sin is associated both with a cloud above, smudging the shining clearness of a man's vision, and, at the same time, with the unnoticed movement of the sun, clear in the heavens. But the blurring effect, which is often evident when one steps too close to the sometimes confused details of a Donne image, is corrected when one feels the full and total thrust of the complete paragraph. Sin and habits of sin develop from man's lack of awareness, as he is often unaware of the clouds in the sky and the sun in the heavens. The emphasis in the imagery is really, and rightfully, placed where it should be, on the motion to which man is blind. The habitual sinner is not aware of the movements of his soul towards evil. What should be most clear,

open and obvious is often that of which one is most unaware. So it is with the movements of the heavens; so it is with sin and the habit of sin.

There is a touch of irony and paradox in this situation which is typical of many of the images which Donne uses to illustrate the dynamics of sin:

As the eye sees everything but it selfe, so does sinne, too. It sees Beauty, and Honour, and Riches, but it sees not it selfe, not the sinful coveting, and compassing of all these (P.S.II-4-119).

Donne's feeling for unusual perspective, a feeling probably nourished in his poetic work, allows him to manipulate the sight pattern to achieve an ironic effect. By a singular and clever focus upon one of the elements in the process of seeing, he is able here to point out the seeming contradiction of "an eye" blind to itself, of a sinful attitude which sees the colours of temptation but which is unaware of the quality of its own vision.

On other occasions Donne so molds the sight pattern as to suggest that at least some of man's lack of awareness of sin is derived from the natural "dimness" of the sin itself. Lack of light is characteristic especially of "small sin":

There are sins hard to be seen, out of nature of Man, because man naturally is not watchful upon his particular actions; for if he were so, he would escape great sins, when we see sand, we are not much afraid of a stone; when a Man sees his small sins, there is not so much danger of great. But some sins we see not out of a natural blindness in our selves, some we see

not out of a natural dimness in the sin  
it self (P.S.III-1-57).

The focus of the light pattern has been switched here so that the emphasis is not upon the eye but upon the lighting and visibility of the object of the moral vision. The shadowy insignificance of sinful action is enough to bring a confused failure to see.

But not often is there this "dimness" in the sin.

For Donne there is almost always some clear sign or situation by which one should be aware of sin and the deep evil thereof. In one passage his metaphor for such a "sign" by which a man may become aware of sin is that of the apparatus of alchemy, through which one can surmise the workings of the process within: "Though the sin itself be not so evident, yet the limmes of the sin, and the wayes to the sin, are plain enough" (P.S.V-3-87).

If lack of sensitivity to the full contours of sin is one of the moral abstractions made concrete in the sight imagery of the sermons, so too is the distortion which results from sinfulness illustrated by analogies of sight and light. Man sins through lack of clear vision; his sin in turn muddies and distorts this vision, and indeed, his very life:

The Organ that God hath given the naturall man, is the eye; he sees God in the creature. The organ that God hath given the Christian is the ear; he hears God in his Word. But when we are under water, both senses, both Organs are vitiated and depraved, if not defeated. The

habitually, and manifold sinner, sees nothing aright; He sees a judgement and calls it an accident .... And as under water, everything seems distorted and crooked, to man, so does man himself to God, who sees not his own Image in that man, in that form as He made it (P.S.II-3-114).

The suppositions which underlie the imagery are clear. Man is meant to see God in the creatures around him and to be himself an image of God. It is the analogy of sight under water that brings these suppositions to the surface of the imagination, that makes them real to sense and emotion as well as to intellect. Distortion is seen as the quality both of the sinful man's vision and of his very nature as God sees him beneath the waters of sin. Again we can feel the quick play of Donne's wit. Within the one compact comparison Donne is able to suggest the double tragedy of the sinner's plight. He sees not aright and is seen not as he should be.

Distortion disturbs the process which should lead a man to repentance for sin. Donne fears that the mistaken perspective of the sinner may often blur for him the right outline of the God of mercy. One cannot expect to see clearly the goodness of God only in the punishments he permits: "When we see sin through that spectacle, through an angry God, it appears great, and red, and fearfull unto us..." (P.S.II-4-124). The glasses of true vision for Donne are properly focused only when they allow man to see the God of forgiveness as well as the God of punishment:

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Esay was an Euangelicall

Prophet, a propheticall Euangelist, and he speaks still of the state of the Christian Church. There, by the ordinary means exhibited there, our Scarlet sins are made as white as Snow; And the whiteness of snow, is a whiteness that no art of man can reach to ... (P.S.V-15-314).

If man is to see aright he must be able to see the transforming power of God's light:

Bring thy sinne under Christs feet there, when he walks amongst the Candlesticks, in the light, and power of his Ordinances in the Church, and then, thine absolution will be upon thy head, in those seals which he hath instituted, and ordained there, and thy cry will be silenced (P.S.II-3-113).

But we are running ahead of our theme in suggesting how Donne's imagination associates full repentance for sin with a return to God's light. We have been realizing that Donne's imagination connects the dynamic of sin with problems of seeing and with the vagaries of shifting light. We must now examine evidence of Donne's use of sight and light imagery in his illustration of the corollary of sin's dynamic --the process of repentance.

In the sight pattern, as in other illustration and explication throughout the sermons, Donne maintains the traditional pre-eminence of Divine grace in the calling sinners back to God. The initiative lies with Jesus, and in the terms of images of sight and light, the creative healing gaze comes from him:

And if the Lord will look upon a sinner, and raise that bedrid man; if he will look with that eye, that pierces deeper than the eye of heaven, the Sun, (and yet with a look of that eye, the womb of earth conceives) if he will look with that eye, that conveys more warmth

then the eye of the Ostrich, (and yet with a look of that eye, that Bird is said to hatch her young ones, without sitting) that eye that melted Peter into water, and made him flow towards Christ; and rarified Matthew into air, and made him flee towards Christ; if that eye vouchsafe to look upon a Publican, and redeem a Goshen out of an Egypt, hatch a soul out of a carnal man, produce a saint out of a sinner, shall we marvel at the matter? marvel so, as to doubt Gods power? (P.S.VII-5-152).

The sweep and the range of comparisons used in this sight passage associate the grace of God with a whole montage of marvels of which Donne was aware from his reading of the Scriptures and the pseudo-scientific lore of his time. The power of the passage is to be felt in the ease with which Donne produces this amalgam of analogies to illustrate God's role in calling men to repentance. The comparisons and allusions move swiftly within the scope of one sentence. God's eye pierces, as does the sun, warms as does the eye of the Ostrich, melts and rarifies as it did with the apostles; and "hatches a soul out of a carnal man." The scope and the unusual variety of the comparisons are precisely what is needed to give imaginative expression to the concept emphasized by its climactic position--power. The whole passage provides a catalogue of examples in which Donne's congregation could see concretely the power of light and sight operative in bringing forth life. And in imaginatively exciting terms this is suggestive of the role of God's grace in moving man away from sin.

But if repentance is to be real and fruitful, the

sinner himself must bring his life under the scrutiny of his own eye in conscience. Conscience, of course, in the language of Theology has always been symbolized by light; Donne develops the symbol with a full feeling, first for the paradox of man's experience of conscience, and then for the salvific results of man's bathing sin in its light.

The paradoxical situation is that of the man who is caught up in the syndrome of secretiveness, who is the victim of his own closed and guarded heart:

The light of nature has taught thee to hide thy sinnes from other men, and thou hast been so diligent in that, as that thou hast hidden them from thy self, and canst not finde them in thine owne conscience, if at any time the Spirit of God would burne them up, or the Blood of Christ Jesus wash them out; thou canst not find them out ... (P.S.IV-5-149).

The concreteness of the sight pattern here is presented in terms not of comparison but of existential conflict. The true light of conscience is in conflict with the false light of a weak human nature which would lead a man to hide his sins to the point where they are no longer visible to himself. And this of course will prevent the true light from reaching to the very sins which should be touched by the inflaming and purifying spirit of a forgiving God.

At times the idea of the full functioning of the true light of conscience stirs Donne's imagination to the point where he can see this light as bringing man to the light of God's saving grace:

(Bring sin to the light of conscience and) All thy life thou shalt be preserved, in an Orientall

light, an Easterne light, a rising and a growing light, the light of grace; and at thy death thou shalt be super-illustrated, with a Meridionall light, a South light, the light of glory (P.S.IX-6-172).

The basic metaphor of God's grace as light becomes as expansive and diffusive as the very physical nature of light itself. The light of a true conscience blends with this light of grace, the full life-giving power of which is suggested by the references to the different qualities of the sunlight at various times of the day. Conscience, bathed in the light of grace through this life, is as the sun in the morning, always increasing, growing in itself and bringing the power of growth in its increasing warmth. The light of a right conscience, in grace, at the end of life is as the sun at full noontide, making all things clear. It will bring "super illustration", a plunging into the light of glory.

The salvation of the sinner through the workings of conscience is presented throughout the passage by the ingenious expansion and shifting of light and sight imagery.

Donne had a particular sensitivity to the crucial nature of the moment of death in the process of repentance for sin. He believed that conscience, ever susceptible to blindness of varying degrees, was particularly in danger of distortion through the wiles of the devil at that hour.

Again Donne expresses his ideas, and above all his fears, in metaphor:

Will he (God) forgive that dim sight which I  
have of sin now, when sins scarce appeare to  
be sins unto me, and will he forgive that

over-quick sight, when I shall see my sins through Satans multiplying glasse of desperation, when I shall thinke them greater than his mercy, upon my deathbed? (P.S.V-3-81).

The problem at death, as in life, is to maintain perspective, to be aware of sin as it really is, an offence, but one open to the merciful gaze of God. "The multiplying glass of desperation" is the instrument of the devil, and at the time of death it can tragically distort the proper Christian vision. In this whole passage, especially in the metaphor at its center, Donne imaginatively illustrates his psychological response to the thought of the problem of conscience in the face of death.

It is typical of the flexibility of Donne's use of metaphor in the sight pattern, and indeed of his witty manipulation in the whole pattern, that he can in another sermon place "the multiplying glass of desperation" in the hands of God and see it there as assuring the correctness of moral vision at the hour of death:

God cannot be mocked, saith the apostle, nor can God be blinded. He seeth all the way, and at thy last gaspe, he will make thee see too, through the multiplying Glasse, the Spectacle of Desperation. Canst thou hope that that God, that seeth this darke earth through all the vaults and arches of the severall spheres of Heaven, that seeth thy body through all thy stone walls, and seeth thy soul through that which is darker then all those, thy corrupt flesh, canst thou hope that God can be blinded with drawing a curtain between thy sinne and him? when he is all eye, canst thou hope to put out that eye, with putting out a candle? (P.S.IV-5-150).

The presentation here is of an all-seeing God whose power

is to make man see as he does himself, with a kind of "x-ray" vision. The "multiplying glass", properly, of course, the magnifying glass of the new science of optics, becomes in the imagination associated with somewhat wider powers, with the sweeping and the probing powers of God's sight and with man's conscience, gripped in the pathetic fear of death.

The notion of optical power and the manipulation of focus control the movement of the images within the passage. God's probing vision moves from what is great to what is relatively small, from the vaults and arches of heaven to corrupt flesh, to the candle which is man's conscience. The final focus is upon a finely miniaturized scene. Man alone on his curtained deathbed cannot conceal the slightest sin. In the searching vision of God man cannot extinguish the light of conscience as he might snuff out his bedside candle. In the hands of God, then, the "multiplying glass" leads not to distortion but to correct conscience at the time of death.

One thing is certain for Donne: man may never be so positioned by sinfulness or mood that he is not able rightly to see God. The lines of perspective may at times be tangled and confusing, but he has a capability of seeing God which is as certain as the lines of light in the heavens themselves. The structure of perspective in the macrocosm for Donne is an illustration of the fundamentally open moral perspective in the microcosm:

You can place the sphere in no position, in  
no station, in which the earth can eclipse  
the Sun; you can place this clod of earth,

man, in no ignorance, in no melancholy, in no oppression, in no sinne, but that he may, but that he does see God (P.S.IV-6-170).

It is particularly in moments of grace, both in life and at the time of death, that Donne would perceive man's power to see God and thereby to become aware of sins as they really are. There are times of integration, particularly in the hearing of God's word, when a man may hope to dispell the fragmenting effects of unawareness and to bring all sins to a center in which they may all at once be seen and repented for:

Lord put this swiftnesse into our sins, that in this one minute, in which our eyes are open towards thee, and thine ears towards us, our sins, all our sins, even from the impertinent forwardnesse of our childhood to the unsufferable forwardnesse of our age, may meet in our present confessions, and repentances and never appear more (P.S.II-1-70).

Donne was constantly conscious of the way in which man's forgetfulness endangered the integrity of his moral vision. The contraction of all the sins of one's life into a single span of awareness would bring the fragments of the past together under the scrutiny of conscience.

As we have been examining the sight and light pattern as illustrative of the dynamics of sin and repentance, we have been conscious of Donne's desire to work against any lack of integrity in man's moral vision. Donne felt dangers to true sight arising from the shadow of man's corruption, from his lack of awareness, from the distortion arising from sin itself. Donne realized that the remedy of repentance

could be found only in submission to the vision of the Lord --being seen by Him, and seeing, as it were, with His eyes, a right conscience in all moments of grace, and especially at the hour of death.

The peculiar power and variety which we have noted in the shaping of the sight and light passages used to give concrete expression to these convictions arose, it would seem, from Donne's efforts to re-establish within himself and his congregation varied lines of sight and awareness which sin often obliterates.

## CHAPTER IV

Passing mention has been made of the significance of the hour of death in John Donne's exposition of the dynamics of sin and repentance. The maintenance of perspective amid pressures towards distortion is the problem of correct moral vision at this time. But the experience of death meant more to Donne than merely the proper clarification of conscience. In many ways death brought for him the fulfillment of the Christian's life and led to the final depths of the Christian vision. In the Sermons the fullness of this life and vision are presented in patterns of light and sight which effectively maintain shades of optimism in a composition which might otherwise be etched too severely by lines of negation.

Readers who assess John Donne by a quick perusal of selections from anthologies may be inclined to consider that he did indeed incline too easily towards morbidity in his sermons. However, examination of the wider ranges of Donne's preaching will show that Donne's faith and imagination remained constantly open to the joys and the enriching lights of the afterlife.

Three sections of the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas provide a summary of the scriptural and patristic foundations upon which Donne's faith rested, and suggest the theological analogies which stirred his imagination.

Question 12 speaks of the vision which awaits man after death. The blunt statement of St. John expresses the Christian's conviction: "We shall see Him as He is" (I John 2:2). God in himself is supremely knowable, remarks St. Thomas, but what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; "as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess light." Accordingly, it must be said that for the blessed to see the essence of God, there is required some similitude in the visual faculty, namely "the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God, which is spoken of in the Psalm (XXX:10), "in Thy light we shall see light"." Of course the essence of God is not seen in a vision of the imagination, but "the imagination receives some form representing God according to some mode of similitude as in divine scripture divine things are metaphorically described by means of sensible things."<sup>25</sup>

The mode of similitude is certainly so in the theological statements of scripture writers and schoolmen alike, when they speak of the lightsomeness of the body risen after death. It is written (Matthew XXIII:43), "The just shall shine and shall run to and fro like sparks among the reeds." Both body and soul will be bathed in light: in the glorified body the glory of the soul will be known, even as through a

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Pt. 1, Q. 12, Art. 1, 2, 3, 9.

crystal is known the colour of a body contained in the crystal vessel. And such light and clarity will be visible to non-glorified eyes also, for the body will be made like to the body of his glory. Thus it will possess the clarity which Jesus had in the Transfiguration, a clarity seen by the eyes of the disciples. But though the brightness of a glorified body surpasses the clarity of the sun, it does not by its nature disturb the sight but soothes it: wherefore this clarity is compared to the jasper stone (Apoc. XXI-ii).<sup>26</sup>

And the world itself will share in the light of the risen glorified body. Thomas Aquinas brings together the traditional apocalyptic imagery of the scripture writers and the Fathers. He speaks of the new heavens and the new earth when the first heaven and the first earth will be gone and the whole world will be renewed for the better. And "this cannot be unless it shine out with greater brightness: the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold . . . ." <sup>27</sup>

The compilation could continue. Except for a few flashes from the biblical imagery, such theological speculation on the afterlife is inclined to be prosaic and dull in expression. Samples are given here only as a reminder of the light and vision that Donne's Christian faith accepted, and of the traditional analogues which could move his

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Supplement, Q. 83, Art. 2.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., Supplement, A. 91, Art. 3.

imagination as he preached upon the experience of death and the life which follows. Certainly there were enough sunshine colours upon the theological pallet to encourage Donne to balance the somber shades of death with lighter hues. Although there are notable exceptions in his work,<sup>28</sup> for the most part he dipped surely into these colours. In his exposition of the afterlife, Donne did work from a positive pattern of light and sight.

The terrors of death are ultimately tragic only if the grave is the end of all. Donne did not believe that it is; for the man of faith the path leads from the grave to the light of glory. Death, then, is the experience not of deep trauma but of simple transition. On more than one occasion Donne is able to suggest this idea by the dramatic movements of light and sight within his imagery:

Behold thy salvation commeth.... The sun is setting to thee, and that forever; thy houses and furnitures, thy gardens and orchards, thy titles and offices, thy wife and children are departing from thee, and that forever; a cloud of faintness is come over thine eyes, and a cloud of sorrow over all theirs; when his hand that loves thee best hangs tremblingly over thee to close thine eyes ... behold then a new light, thy Saviours hand shall open thine eyes, and in his light thou shalt see light; and thus shalt see, that though in the eyes of men thou lye upon that bed, as a Statue on a Tomb, yet in the eyes of God, thou standest as a Colossus.

<sup>28</sup>Evelyn Simpson comments on the undue influence of such passages of Donne's Sermons in A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1948), pp. 64-65. But see Evelyn Simpson herself on Donne's morbidity in Sermons, III, p.7.

... one foot in one, another in another land; one foot in the grave but the other in heaven ... (P.S.II-12-267).

Admittedly there is a tendency here to pause in the presentation of a tableau representative of the moment of physical death,<sup>29</sup> but we should note as well the emphasis on movement within the scene, a movement towards the fullness of light and sight. The elegaic mood of loss suggested by the setting of the sun upon worldly possessions is counter-balanced by the beholding of new lights of glory; the tender finality of the loved one closing his eyes upon this world is counteracted by the eternal tenderness of one who opens them upon the next. Death is a moment of pause, but only as a step which leads onwards.

The progress of the soul in the experience of death is sometimes illustrated in the sermons as taking place without pause, through the spheres of planetary light in the vastness of the cosmos. When one is tempted to identify Donne's portrayal of death with macabre pictures of putrefaction, worms, and the dissolution of dust, it is well to remember these wider canvasses of light and joy upon which his imagery is more often made:

This Joy shall not be put out in death, and  
a new joy kindled in me in Heaven; But as

<sup>29</sup>See Frances M. Comper, The Book of the Craft of Dying and Other Early English Tracts Concerning Death (London, 1917), and Sister Mary Catherine O'Connor, The Art of Dying Well (New York, 1942), and Joan Webber, Contrary Music (Madison, Wisconsin, 1963), p.111 ff.

my soule, as soone as it is out of my body,  
 is in Heaven, and does not stay for the pos-  
 session of heaven, nor for the fruition of  
 the sight of God, till it be ascended through  
 ayre, and fire, and Moone, and Sun and Planets  
 and Firmament, to that place which we conceive  
 to be heaven, but without the thousandth part  
 of a minutes stop, as soone as it issues, is in  
 a glorious light, which is Heaven ...<sup>30</sup>  
 (P.S.VII-1-70-71).

The precisions of the Doctor's Theology will not really admit of anything but the instantaneous vision of God by the justified soul, but the intuitions of his artistry urge him to associate the attainment of this light with an upward sweep through the spheres. Even though the observations of Copernicus had by 1612 crumbled the base of the Ptolemaic view of the cosmos as a system of concentric circles,<sup>31</sup> Donne can continue to use cosmic imagery as a convenient device for investing a spiritual experience with a semblance of concreteness. With its allusions of space and light, the metaphor allows him to present the passage of death as an experience of expansion and illumination. It is typical of the cosmic imagery which brings to Donne's sermons an effective balance against his images of confining death and darkness.

The power to assimilate and to use not only the Ptolemaic but also the Copernican concepts of stellar

30

In his poem The Second Anniversary Donne had similarly written of the soul set free by death, and ascending to heaven. See Poems, ed. Grierson (New York, 1912) I, 256-257.

31

See Charles M. Coffin, John Donne and the New Philosophy (New York, 1958), p. 64 ff.

relationship for artistic purpose is evident in passages in which Donne reaches beyond the moment of physical death and suggests the renewal which comes to the soul through the glory of God. Again the irradiation of the heavenly bodies provides an effective simile, and one which tends to dispell any impression of gloom that could otherwise be associated with the process of dying:

... As the Sunne by shining upon the Moone makes the Moone a Planet, a Star, as well, as it selfe, which otherwise would be but the thickest, and darkest part of that Spheare, so those beames of Glory which shall issue from my God, and fall on me, shall make me (otherwise a clod of earth, and worse, a darke Soule, a spirit of darknesse) an Angell of Light, a Star of Glory, a something, that I cannot name now ... (P.S.IX-2-89).

The references to thickness and darkness, and to such phrases as "clod of earth" that are the descriptive marks of material death, are rendered connotatively inoperative by the swirl of light imagery which surrounds them.

The light of glory which bathes the transformed soul after its passage through the spheres is seen also in Donne's imagination as analogous to that of the warm light of the nonnday sun. Donne, as we have noted, uses the shifting lights of the seasons and of the day's course to illustrate many theological concepts. In commentary on the Christian experience of death, this light metaphor becomes for him a means of showing again the transitional quality of the Christians' life and of indicating the paradoxical nature of the process of death:

Our West, our declination is in this, that we are but earth; ... Though our Sun set at noon, as the Prophet Amos speakes; though we die in our youth, or fall in our height: yet even in that Sunset we shall have a Noon. For this image of God shall never depart from our soule ... And that's our South, our meridionall height and glory ... When I am gone over this east, and west, and north, and south, here in this world, I should be as sorry as Alexander was, if there were no more worlds. But there is another world ... in which our joy, and our glory shall be, to see that God essentially, and face to face, after whose Image and likeness we were made before (P.S.IX-1-50).

The operative core of the imagery is found in the juxtaposition of "sunset" and "noon". The movement of life may be a decline from the warm physical light of your downwards to the sunset of death, but here, even in the light which seems to be about to disappear, man may actually experience the fullness of sight in face to face meeting with God. The pessimism which might be proper to the notion of life as sinking towards darkness in this world is balanced by the optimism engendered by the promise of light in the next.

For Donne death is transitional because life is continuous. So also is the gift of light for the Christian. Among the Dean's most effective analogies to suggest this continuity are those involving a map or a circle. A flat map, on which East and West are at the greatest possible distance from each other, is like a flat soul, one which is dejected and despairing. The soul may be tempted to see itself lost in the West, symbolizing death, at the greatest

distance from salvation precisely at the moment when it is closest to the light of life, to the East or Christ. But West can be made to touch East by pasting the map on a round body; and the soul in the West of death can reach to its East if it will but "apply its troubles to the body of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>32</sup> The sun setting in this life will then become the sun rising in eternity:

... As in the round frame of the World, the farthest West is East, where the West ends, and the East begins, So in thee (who art a World too) thy West and thy East shall joyne, and when thy Sun, thy soule comes to set in thy deathbed, the Son of Grace shall suck it up into glory (P.S.X-1-52).

The linking of the imagery of Christian life and light with the pattern of the circle associates it with the life and light of God in eternity.<sup>33</sup> If light be thus continuous, where then is the darkness of death?

The continuity of life and light which allows man to defy death can best be charted with reference to Christ. In terms of the circular movement which makes death transition rather than terminus, Christ is our "Zodiake," he in whom all progression must take place:

Then, (sayes our Blessed Saviour, speaking of the Resurrection) then, shall the righteous shine forth as the Sun; And wheresoever we are called the Sun, compared, assimilated to the Sun, Christ is our Zodiake; In him we move, from the beginning to the end of our Circle.

<sup>32</sup> Sermons, P.S.X-1-51.

<sup>33</sup> For circles, see Sermons, P.S.VI-11-277; X-2-79; II-9-200; IV-2-68.

And therefore, as the last point of our Circle, our resurrection determines in him, in Christ; so, the first point of our Circle, our first adoption began in him, in Christ too (P.S.IV-2-68).

When the soul then comes to set as a sun in a deathbed, it does so in harmony with the Son who is the light of God himself. Therefore, in faith one can be sure that the east point, resurrection after death, is as certain and determined as that of Jesus. Despite death the movement through the circle to the new sunrise is made sure because the soul's progress is patterned upon Jesus.

In the examples we have been discussing, Donne's ability to use the circular rhythms of cosmic and seasonal light as analogies for the process of death and resurrection is fortuitous for more than purposes of precise theological explication. Such metaphors and comparisons also tend to contribute to a general impression of light in many areas of the sermons and, what is more, to stir deep feelings of harmony between man's fate and the natural rhythms and cycles of all creation. Donne's imagination revels in the complexities of such imagery not only because it demands wit and intellectual agility but, more so, because it expresses for him the wonderful web of relationships<sup>34</sup> among all movements of light and life. As such the use of the

34

See Sermons, P.S.VII, p.44, for Evelyn Simpson's comment on this aspect of Donne thought: "The sense of unity in diversity of the harmony of all creation is one of the deepest notes of Donne's thought...!"

imagery is firmly optimistic. It associates the condition of the individual man and his progress through death with the continuing progressions of all nature.

For Donne the web of relationship reaches from earth to highest heaven. "God is the Father of lights, of all lights," physical and spiritual; so is he too the Father of the Sonne who is Jesus Christ, the light of the world. By implication we have already suggested the depth of theological meaning and the stimulus to imagination that opens to Donne through the association of "Sonné" and "Sunne." It is word play which is born of more than the good Dean's proclivity for punning. It arises rather from his firm conviction that Jesus Christ is the cause and the guarantor of continuing light for the Christian, even when he is surrounded by the darkness of death. "I shall rise from the dead, from the darke station, from the prostration, from the prosternation of death, and never miss the sunne, which shall be put out, for I shall see the Sonne of God, the Sunne of Glory, and shine myself, as that sun shines."<sup>35</sup> The play upon the words is an expression of confidence that the prayer he had made in his Hymn to God the Father will be answered: "But sweare by thyselfe, that at my death, thy sonne/ Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore."

The association here, and elsewhere in the sermons, of Jesus with the sun, the source of light and illumination,

<sup>35</sup> Sermons, P.S.IV-5-162.

brings rich interplay between Donne's Christology and the imagery he uses to illustrate the various lights by which the Christian lives. In the present context, that of the continuing function of light after death, it is an association which allows Donne to make men realize the fullness of integration and vision that awaits those who die in the Lord.

The sun brings together that which was dispersed. It sucks up the raindrops and the varied vapours from the earth and brings them together in clouds. The Son of God in the miracle of resurrection after death brings together that which has been scattered by the decay of the grave. Some of the most morbid passages in Donne's meditations on death are those in which his imagination dwells upon the dismemberment of the body and the dispersion of the dust of the grave.<sup>36</sup> But despite such harrowing descriptions one should remember the equally strong Donnean conviction that all the righteous shall find an integrity of new life in the Son:

Rapiemur, We shall be caught up. This is a true Rapture, in which we do nothing of ourselves. Our last act towards Christ is as our first; in the first act of conversion we do nothing; nothing in this last act, our Resurrection, but Rapimur, we are caught ... We can tell, that this Rapture of ours, shall be in body and soule, in the whole man. Man is but a vapour; but a glorious, and a blessed vapour, when he is attracted, and caught up by this Sun, the Son of Man, the Son of God.

We take a star to be the thickest, and so the impurest and ignoblest part of that sphear;

<sup>36</sup>See "Death's Duell," Sermons, P.S.X-11-239.

and yet, by the illustration of the Sun, it becomes a glorious star. Clouds are but the beds, and wombs of distempered and malignant impressions, of vapours, and exhalations, and the furnaces of Lightnings and of Thunder; yet by the presence of Christ, and his employment, these clouds are made glorious Chariots to bring him and his Saints together (P.S.IV-2-82-83).

Here the light pattern in the sermon is in close affinity with that Donnean Resurrection imagery which is designed to illustrate reintegration. Joan Webber has shown how the sermons are marked by metaphors which often suggest the dislocation, separation and spread of that which should be together.<sup>37</sup> But there is always an antithetical movement suggested: again, that which is fragmented must be unified. Donne's imagination may on occasion see the dust of men swept out of the churchyard into the street, blown into the river, tumbled into the sea, washed to the four corners of the earth. But in the above passage his concept of resurrection in Jesus illustrates the power of God's Son to unite that which is separated in death. "Body and soule, the whole man", shall be caught up in the resurrection experience. Christ is as the Sun, first attracting and then bringing together the varied and vaporous particles of man dissolved in death. He and his saints shall be together.

Admittedly this is a rather specialized variation upon the analogy between the work of Jesus and the function of the sun. Far more common in the sermons is Donne's more general use of the light pattern to illustrate the nature of

<sup>37</sup>Contrary Music, pp. 83-84.

the spiritual experience that awaits man after death. Just as Donne was able to use analogues of light and sight to make it clear that death was transitional rather than terminal, so he is able to embellish the traditional biblical symbols in such a way as to effectively concretize the life of vision and illumination to which a good death leads. Thus Donne pictures the very life of glory as well as the process that leads to it. In doing so he again provides counteracting balance against man's temptation to see shade and darkness as his lot after death.

In her notes on the biographical contexts of the sermons,<sup>38</sup> Evelyn Simpson indicates that in the period from the Spring of 1627 to the month of March following, Donne passed through months of intense depression occasioned by the death of three particular friends-- Lucy, Countess of Bedford, on May 31st, 1627, Lady Danvers (formerly Magdalen Herbert) in early June, 1627, and Sir Henry Goodyer on March 18, 1628. From the sermons of that period we can learn how deeply he suffered and how much his mind was clouded by melancholy. All the more remarkable, then, and typical of Donne's ability to maintain a balance in his pulpit expression, is the sermon he preached at St. Paul's for Easter-day 1628. The cloud of spiritual darkness has lifted from Donne's soul. "The word light with its derivatives enlighten and "enlightened" occurs seventy-one times in this Easter sermon, whereas in the Christmas sermon which

<sup>38</sup>Sermons, P.S.VIII, Introduction, p.20.

preceded it, we have found it used only twice. This is all the more striking because the word does not occur in Donne's Text: For now we see through a glass darkley, but then face to face; now I am known in part, but then I shall know even as I am knowne. The idea, however, of the Beatific Vision is implicit in the Text and this is Donne's theme."<sup>39</sup> As noted too, in the first chapter of our commentary, in this world we know God first by the light of nature, and then by the light of grace. Now Donne makes it clear that both these lights are imperfect. "Faith itself is but darkness in respect to the vision of God in heaven":

God made light first, and three dayes after,  
that light became a Sun, a more glorious  
Light: God gave me the light of nature,  
when I quickened in my mothers wombe by  
receiving a reasonable soule, and God gave  
me the light of faith, when I quickned in my  
second mothers womb, the Church, by receiving  
my baptisme; but in my third day, when my  
mortality shall put on immortality, he shall  
give me the light of glory, by which I shall  
see himself. To this light of glory, the light  
of honour is but a glow-worm; and majesty  
it self but a twilight; The Cherubims and the  
Seraphims are but Candles; and that Gospel it  
self, which the apostle calls the glorious  
Gospel, but a Star of the least magnitude.  
And if I cannot tell, what to call this light,  
by which I shall see it, what shall I call  
that which I shall see by it, the Essence of  
God himself? (P.S.VIII-9-232-233).

In passages such as this Donne approached the light of Glory with suitable wonder and awe. It is illumination which comes as the climax of God's munificence to man; its power is so great that it can only be indicated by poetic contrasts and the halting inadequacies of a question in the

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

face of mystery. But reverence is stirred and imagination stretched by this word-probing for the light which is God, the light in comparison with which honour is a twilight and seraphim but a candle. Control and reserve work their effect. Donne's description begins to concretize the light of glory without defining and edging its limits. It is precisely this kind of "open-endedness" in his light imagery which allows him in his sermons to picture most effectively the free and wondrous play of light after death.

The Dean of St. Paul's is, of course, able to work with the precision of a scholastic theologian in his presentation of the various modes in which the righteous shall see God. Thus in the sermon under consideration Donne can provide tight epigrammatical summary of traditional doctrine: "God himself is the peace, we see Him in him; God is our medium, we see Him by him; God is our light, not a light which is His, but a light which is He..." (P.S.VIII-9-220). But the most powerful countering influence against passages in the sermons which picture the confining darkness of death is to be found in those descriptions of open light which suggest the glory of life hereafter without ever being able to define it:

... God is still where he was before the world was made. And in that place, where there are more Suns than there are Stars in the Firmament, (for all the Saints are Suns) And more light in another Sun, the Sun of righteousness, the Son of Glory, the Son of God, then in all them, in that illustration, that emanation, that effusion of beams of glory, which began not to shine 6000. years ago, but 6000 Millions of Millions

ago, had been 6000. Millions of millions before that, in those eternall, in those uncreated heavens, shall we see God (P.S.VIII-9-231).

In the midst of the mystery of light and the mathematics of eternity lies the uncontroverted fact that after death "we shall see God." On many occasions Donne makes it clear that this vision in God provides the remedy for all the problems of seeing which confront man in life and at the hour of death. All fragmented sight, all distortion, all darkness shall disappear in the true seeing of God. Donne, as we have noted before, was often conscious of the "squint eyes" of this life, the squint eyes which looke sidelong upon riches and honour and mamon, avoiding always the direct look to God.<sup>40</sup> But in his meditations upon the light of glory hereafter, he realizes the fullness of vision and exclaims upon the strength of those spiritual eyes which shall eliminate every squint:

In seeing God, we shall see all that concernes us, and see it alwayes; No night to determine that day, no cloud to overcast it ...Glorious God, what kinde of eyes shall they be! ...How bright eyes, and how well set! ... How strong eyes, and how durable! ...What quality, what value, what name shall we give to those eyes? (P.S.VII-13-348).

In the context of our claim that the light and sight pattern provides a counterbalance to the deprivations of death suggested in the sermons, it is important to stress that Donne believed that these eyes of the afterlife shall actually be those of the flesh: "In my flesh I shall see

<sup>40</sup>See Sermons, P.S.III-10-229.

God!" According to Donne this shall be so because in the resurrection a process of assimilation will completely counteract the disintegration of the grave. "As my meat is assimilated to my flesh, and made one flesh with it; as my soule is assimilated to my God, and made partaker of the divine nature, and Idem Spiritus, the same spirit with it; so there my flesh shall be assimilated to the flesh of my saviour, and made the same flesh with him too." And that is why "after my skinne worms shall destroy my body, I shall see God, I shall see him in my flesh, which shall be mine as inseparably ... as the Hypostaticall union of God, and man, in Christ, makes our nature and the Godhead, one person in him.<sup>41</sup>

"In my flesh I shall see God!" It is fitting that in this conclusion of our commentary we should hear these words on the lips of John Donne. Throughout our observations on the sermons we have been aware of Donne's firm convictions that man may, indeed, in the flesh, reach towards the Father of lights. Through the blend and the interweave of natural and supernatural refractions of this light, man begins even in this life to move towards its source. In vocational commitment he is called to strive ever to witness to its truth. Despite the distortions of sin man may find again the integrity of right vision forward. Finally, despite the disintegration of death, in the flesh, in Jesus, body and soul, man may rest in that fullness of light which is God.

<sup>41</sup>Sermons, P.S. III-3-112-113.

Donne effectively expressed these convictions through the image patterns we have discussed. It is good to realize as well that they were firm in his heart at the end of his own life. His final hope was in the vision that overcomes darkness; his final faith was in the light which rises after the night. "During his last illness he composed his own epitaph, of which the concluding lines were:

HIC LICET IN OCCIDUO CINERE ASPICIT EUM  
CUIUS NOMEN EST ORIENS.

These were translated by Archdeacon Wrangham thus: 'And here, though set in dust, he beholdeth Him, whose name is rising.'

Donne's effigy still stands in St. Paul's with this inscription."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup>

Sermons, P.S. X, Introduction, p.38.

## ABSTRACT

Examination of an image pattern of light and sight within the Sermons of John Donne permits penetration into an effective explication of such theological concerns as the ways of knowing God, the nature of vocation, the problem of sin, of repentance and of the life after death. Theological substance and illustrative images are seen as essentially interrelated throughout the sermons. Donne was able to manipulate bare philosophical and theological concepts and to embellish the metaphorical core of their expression in such a way as to illustrate significant areas of his thinking. Donne's use of light and sight images suggests that there is exciting process rather than divisive activity involved in the dynamics of reason and faith as ways of knowing God. Similarly, Donne portrays the evolutionary upward spiral of God's light in the world through a Christian Church meant to be one in witness. Within this church, Scriptures are substantial configurations of light from God inviting the Christian to follow a guiding motion forward through a meditative process which is strongly visual. Images illustrative of sacrament and ceremonial allow Donne to avoid theological controversy and to suggest simply that these are further ways by which the incarnate God shows himself. In his explication of the nature of vocation Donne again uses

the pattern of light and sight, this time to indicate the necessity of the Christian minister's holding God's light for the world, seeing clearly, freely and widely, in the harmonious order of creation. The problem of sin is presented principally as one of distortion in vision, the dynamics of repentance as the reintegration of moral awareness. In the sermons, faith and hope counteract any tendency to morbidity in the face of death. Donne is shown as able to use analogues of light and sight to make it clear that death is transitional rather than terminal and to embellish the traditional Biblical symbols in such a way as to effectively concretize the life of vision and illumination to which a good death leads. Here, as throughout the perusal of the single pattern of imagery in the sermons, Donne's skill in interrelating theological thought and imaginative expression becomes evident.

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