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Author

Sloane, Thomas O.

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THOMAS O. SLOANE

The Poetry in Donne's Sermons

Abstract: The poetry in Donne's sermons is not to be found in sudden flashes of heightened imagery, conspicuous patterns of sound, or unique turns of phrase, qualities often featured when "selected passages" from the sermons are published. It is to be found, rather, in the use Donne made of homiletic form, with an effect the poet-priest himself associated with harmony and beaten gold. The act of achieving this effect, moreover, is not inconsistent with Donne's stated beliefs concerning God's creativity.

Keywords: John Donne, sermons, homiletic form

I n a sermon "Preached at S. Pauls upon Christmas day, 1626," John Donne disparages those among his listeners who, by paying attention to marginal ("collaterall") interests, fail to hear "the Sermon of the Sermon" and so fail to receive "the blessing of Gods ordinance."¹ As clarified in other sermons, "Gods ordinance" is a Scriptural text that is so "dilated, diffused into a Sermon" (V.56), that it makes God's "will *acceptable* to you, by his word" (X.148). As Donne well knew, dilating and diffusing a Scriptural passage into a sermon had centuries of homiletic prac-

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¹*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Mary Simpson (10 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), VII.293. The collection is hereinafter cited as *Sermons*. Individual sermons are cited by volume number (upper-case roman) and sermon number (lower-case roman); particular passages are cited by volume number (upper-case roman) and page number (arabic numeral). Hence II.iv refers to volume two, sermon four; II.4 refers to volume two, page four.

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tice behind it, but with the rise of Protestantism there was renewed emphasis placed on the inherent power of Scripture, God's word, to reach the soul. His argument on Christmas day, 1626, is that in order to hear this "Sermon of the Sermon" one must put aside attending to such marginal interests as "the Logique, or the Retorique, or the Ethique, or the poetry of the Sermon" (VII.293). One must put aside, that is, any attention to the sermonizer's reasoning, eloquence (persuasiveness), moral advice, or "poetry." Yet for almost four centuries those interests have been the major, and for some of us the only, qualities whereby we determine which among Donne's sermons are worth reading. And of them the last seems most relevant to Donne's life-long vocation. At least, I shall argue, it can become most relevant when "poetry" is allowed to mean something of what it meant to the poet-priest himself—which, as we shall see, mainly involves giving form to inchoate matter.²

When Donne became an Anglican³ priest in 1615 at the age of nearly 43, he turned his back on his family's Roman Catholicism, on his hopes for a different kind of preferment at Court, and on much of his skepticism including some of his contrarian attitudes, to enter a calling in which he would center his mind on "the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation," the Scriptures in the Protestant view as the source of essential doctrine.⁴ But he did not abandon—because he could not, so deeply embedded was it in his character, background, and training—his life as a certain kind of poet, one who reveled in perverse and shocking forms of reasoning ("Nor ever chast, except thou ravish mee"), in verbal echoes and allusiveness ("Per fretum febris, by these streights to die"), in a lawyerly love of debating and argument ("This beauteous forme assures a piteous minde"), and above all in the power of a vision that is whole, coherent, and sustainable when embodied in words. These qualities

²Noralyn Masselink, "A Matter of Interpretation: Example and Donne's Role as Preacher and Poet," *John Donne Journal* 2 (1992): 84–98, takes a different approach to the poetry in Donne's sermons: she looks for differences in his use of example in the two genres and shows that within limitation we can find in his sermons that independent spirit we so admire in his poems.

³My use of the term "Anglican" is somewhat anachronistic, since the term did not become meaningful until after Donne's death; see Daniel W. Doerksen, "Polemist or Pastor? Donne and Moderate Calvinist Conformity," in *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives*, ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 12–34.

⁴Cf. Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles (1571); see also Daniel W. Doerksen, *Conforming to the Word: Herbert, Donne, and the English Church before Laud* (Lewistown and London: Bucknell University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 71–75.

suffuse even the so-called "divine" poems, three of which were just quoted, most of which were composed after he took Holy Orders. These qualities are also found in his prose, including occasionally his sermons. In the latter body of work his remarks about poetry—particularly when combined with his remarks about rhetoric—reveal some of his mature thinking about poetry's nature, however marginal he believed either art should become to his audience's center of attention.

Rhetoric, he said on Easter 1622, "will make absent and remote things present to your understanding," whereas poetry "is a counterfeit creation and makes things that are not, as though they were" (IV.87). These are not definitions exactly. And they appear to have only the most tenuous relations to Donne's own writings—or, for that matter, to those biblical writings he said he preferred, the epistles of St. Paul and the psalms of David (II.49). Teaching, rather than pleasing or moving, seems to be the function of rhetoric, and what he says about poetry seems better suited to the art of drama. But—and this is a feature that makes Donne's sermons difficult to track as theology—these remarks about rhetoric and poetry are designed, like many of the preacher's statements, to fit the argument at hand.⁵ Removing almost any single statement from one of his sermons—whether about God's ordinances, sermonizing, rhetoric, or poetry—must be done with some tentativeness. What he said on Easter 1622, for example, about rhetoric and poetry (as well as in the same passage about arithmetic) is fashioned to prove his point that humane learning, however ostensibly powerful, is "infirm" and "impotent" in its attempt to express "Eternity." There and elsewhere his remarks are selective and rhetorical, that is, they are meant to serve a purpose and are considerate of his audience. They are thus partial though not necessarily unstable.⁶

Donne's rhetorical skill as a sermonizer was widely recognized in his own time. But for us the full rhetoric of his sermons is at best only sketchily observable. All the elements of a rhetorical situation—such

⁵"Donne's concern is not to be theologically precise so much as to move his congregation in devotion." Brent Nelson, *Holy Ambition: Rhetoric, Courtship, and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 5.

⁶Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge, Eng.: D. S. Brewer, 1999), searches the sermons for Donne's theology, especially his Trinitarianism. Although I believe Donne was more rhetorician than theologian (cf. Nelson in preceding note), my protocol is not radically different from Johnson's: reading in context, matching statement with statement.

as delivery, occasion, audience response—are no longer available. The text of a sermon is only part of its rhetorical performance, offering at best an abstraction of the rhetorical event.⁷ Further, what texts we have were written down often upon request and usually well after the event. When they were gathered the manuscripts were intended to become a legacy for Donne's son and heir, predicated on the preacher's apparently secure reputation among his contemporaries.⁸ But, as noted, it is the rare oration of any sort that can survive its performance for long. This would seem particularly true in Donne's case, for much of his real power and popularity as a sermonizer most likely lay in his dramatic delivery.⁹ Those readers beyond his century who have commented favorably on his sermons responded largely to the eloquence in published "selections," while those who have attempted to read whole sermons have sometimes found them less than inspiring.¹⁰ Even the editors of the modern collection, spurred in part by renewed interest in Donne's poetry in the 1950s, have admitted that the sermons are uneven in quality and at least one of them is, flatly, "dull."¹¹ But if there are any that are perhaps inspiring and not dull, or perhaps simply still worth reading, something other than rhetoric must be at work.

As we know, rhetoric, logic, and grammar, from antiquity the three great arts of discourse, were distinguishable partly by audience considerations. Rhetoric, with its major genre of oratory, was an art of persuasion for an audience mixed with experts and laymen. Logic, or dialectic, was a more sophisticated type of argument mainly for experts: it "demonstrates and proves" (Donne says, V.104) with little

⁷This was emphasized in Donne studies by William R. Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), see esp. p. 191.

⁸Donne himself may have realized early in his priesthood that "his sermons might have a future life in print." See Simpson's introduction to *Sermons* IV.36.

⁹"A preacher in earnest," Isaac Walton calls him in *Life of Dr. John Donne* (1675), sending some in raptures, "enticing" and courting others; see also the "Elegies Upon the Author" which Herbert J. C. Grierson included in his famous edition of Donne's poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), I. 371–95.

¹⁰See for example Virginia Woolf's response to the publication of certain passages from Donne's sermons, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1986), III.171. Woolf was reviewing *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, ed. Logan Pearsall Smith (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1919). An earlier reader of the sermons, a nineteenth century Dean of St. Paul's (himself a poet) found it "astonishing" that Donne held "a London congregation enthralled" with sermons that are "interminable disquisitions ... teeming with laboured obscurity"; Henry Hart Milman, *Annals of S. Paul's Cathedral* (London: John Murray, 1868), 328.

¹¹Simpson and Potter throughout their introductions to the ten volumes describe several sermons as uneven in quality. They call VII.xviii "dull" (p. 48).

or no consideration of the needs of the non-expert. Donne opens one of his sermons (IX.xv) with the traditional metaphors for the nature of the two arts: the open hand for rhetoric, the closed fist for logic. Grammar as a means of correctness and interpretation was useful to both arts, both kinds of speaking situations, and with rhetoric and logic formed the three arts of discourse known as the trivium of an idealized liberal arts curriculum. Poetry, not formally one of the liberal arts, nonetheless spanned the trivium "as part of the communicative structure of the Renaissance world."¹² When Donne in his sermons mentions rhetoric or poetry, invariably the faculty of understanding is central to the former, the creative faculty of imagination, or "fancy," to the latter.

As Donne claims in other sermons, although rhetoric may be aimed at the understanding, it does more than simply make absent and remote things present to that faculty. True, that characterization does express some of rhetoric's power, in this case its power to convey information, and thus it fits well the argument in which it appears. And, it also seems to fit the preacher's adherence to his church's doctrine about the sufficiency of the Scriptures for salvation: making them "present to the understanding" would seem to fulfill the preacher's main task. On the other hand, the characterization hardly encompasses the full nature of what Donne's says in another sermon about rhetorical strategies or about God's own rhetoric. "The way of Rhetorique," he says in a 1619 sermon

in working upon weake men [like those Christ sought out as Apostles], is first to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgement, to smother and bury in it, or to empty it of former apprehensions and opinions, and to shake that beliefe, with which it had possessed it self before, and then when it is thus melted, to powre it into new molds, when it is thus mollified, to stamp and imprint new formes, new images, new opinions in it. (II.282)

But all Christ had to do to persuade Peter and Andrew was simply to say "*Sequere me, Follow me, and they followed.*" God, he argues, did not send "Orators, Rhetoricians, strong or faire-spoken men" but ordinary men whose very weaknesses would underscore for others the presence of God's strength within them (II.274–75). True, God uses certain tactics—by being all things to all men, presenting

¹²Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 5. Howell employs the metaphors of open hand and closed fist for the arts of rhetoric and logic throughout his masterful study; for a brief summary of audience distinctions, see pp. 3–4.

heaven as "all joy" to the mirthful man, "all glory" to the ambitious (II.304–05). And God may even work upon our senses, but always he proceeds logically and gives us "a reason, an assurance" (V. 103–04). Rhetoric of the sort called for in working upon weak men was useful to the Fathers when they sought to "exalt the devotions, and to stir up the affections of their auditory" (VII.203). But it is only "secondary" to the minister's calling (VI.103) and, as noted, ancillary to the "Sermon of the Sermon."

If none of these remarks, however much they serve their purposes within various sermons, serves as a full or coherent treatment of the subject, nonetheless certain qualities adhere to Donne's expressed ideas about rhetoric generally: it is necessitated by our human condition, our weaknesses, it capitalizes on the senses, above all it is aimed at the understanding. Among the faculties of the soul in Donne's day the understanding was principal, our very means of reasoning within our immortal soul. The "degrees of dignity in the creature," Donne says, "are *esse vivere*, and *intelligere*: to be a *being*, to have *life*, and to have *understanding*" (II.34; see also IX.82). The understanding, along with memory and will, comprised the triune faculties of one's rational soul (a soul that has within it the earlier vegetable and animal souls; VII.426, VIII.221). In the sermon to be read shortly Donne argues that memory is an entrance to our understanding, and it is the instruction of one's understanding which causes our will to act in sanctified ("rectified") ways. However much he seeks to marginalize it as an interest in attending to the "Sermon of the Sermon," in targeting the understanding rhetoric necessarily plays a role in almost any manner of public discourse, including homiletics and, for that matter, poetry.

But poetry is unique and its uniqueness arises from the act of creation. That characterization is more succinct and far less variable than Donne's characterizations of rhetoric. Rhetoric is more "invented" than created; it is composed of argumentative materials derived from the analysis of someone's life, action, policy, or doctrine. The poet, on the other hand, is a maker, or so the Greeks said. And Donne calls what the poet makes a "counterfeit creation." The argument I shall pursue is that what Donne says about God's creative work applies *mutatis mutandis* to the creation of poetry: since God creates "being" by giving "form" to "nothing," so must the poet follow something of that procedure in his work. Throughout Donne's sermons, the concept of "form" is continually attached to Creation, God's creative act—that act which the poet counterfeits—and because form is the very ground of being, the concept has a complexity that goes beyond simply the outward shape of things, as seen for instance in the link

it has with sermonizing: "The matter, that is, the doctrine that we preach, is the forme, that is, the Soule, the *Essence*; the language and words we preach in, is but the Body, but the *existence*" (X.112). Here Donne seems to revisit his argument about "the Sermon of the Sermon." The *Essence* may be all that truly matters but it is "conveyed" to others only through bodies.¹³ The sermonizer's work makes that "forme," or "Soule," apprehensible by bringing it into "*existence*." The conceptual model of creation, counterfeit or otherwise, is thus soul-body, essence-existence, or form-words. I shall recur to this crucial point, for my thesis is, in short, that to realize the poetry in Donne's sermons is to realize their form.

But some further distinctions may be noted at the outset, based on other sermonizing statements Donne makes about the nature of poetry. In one passage "form" in the Psalms seems to refer simply to meter ("all the words are numbred, and measured, and weighed") but Donne's point here is discipline and propriety, which should form our speech in addressing God (II.50). In a later sermon he distinguishes between poetry and "Metricall compositions": "the whole forme of the Poem," he says in that sermon, virtually echoing one of his own, "is a beating out of a piece of gold" (VI.41).¹⁴ Creating a sermon or poem involves giving form to "doctrine" in the former, "gold" in the latter. Nor does he hesitate to put down poetry if it must be contrasted with Scriptural authority: the Catholics, he charges, "recreate the world with Poeticall divinity" (VII.131).

The appeal of poetry, as noted, is less to the understanding than to the imagination, the "fancy," "the theatre of dreames," and the "vaine" misreading of sacred poetry keeps it in that realm.¹⁵ If the function of rhetoric in attempting to reach the understanding

¹³Donne makes a similar point in his poem "The Extasie."

¹⁴By "Metricall compositions" Donne refers to verse although the rhythms of his prose would seem to fall within the genre or close to it; see George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 162–63; also *Sermons* VI.15, 41. Thomas De Quincey, arguing that "*Rhetorical*" is a better term than "*Metaphysical*" for Donne's poetry, points out that "Meter is open to any form of composition, provided that it will aid the expression of the thoughts...."; *Historical and Critical Essays*, (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1873), II. 229–30. Donne's distinction remains: it is not meter which makes poetry. Indeed, Donne's distinctions between rhetoric and poetry, for all their variance, seem more stable than those filtered through Romantic sensibilities.

¹⁵VIII.327; see also IX.252. I do not mean to discount the importance of the imagination in rhetoric. As Paul W. Harland, "Imagination and Affections in John Donne's Preaching," *John Donne Journal* 6 (1987): 33–50, has shown, Donne's "homiletic per-

is persuasion, that of poetry as a counterfeit creation is harmony, "sweetnesse of composition" (IV.167). Like rhetoric, poetry too is a way of teaching (IX.274). Whether secular or sacred, poetry must have value among human affairs—and that is the function of a poem's conclusion, which is what "makes it currant" (VI.41), not unlike the sermon's conclusion, its "application" part, as we shall see. But it is through harmony or contemplation that poetry achieves its goal, unlike rhetoric's procedures which can often trouble the understanding.

Certainly form inheres in rhetorical principles as well. From antiquity rhetorical *dispositio* virtually set the rules for arranging material in various kinds of orations. The sermon eventually became one of these, a kind of Christianized oration. Taking its name from the Latin word for conversation or dialogue, the sermon involved essentially Scriptural interpretation—the levels of meaning (literal or historical, allegorical, anagogical or mystical, and moral)¹⁶ of this or that Scriptural passage dilated and diffused into a discourse. To use Donne's metaphor, the doctrine which becomes the form, or soul, of the sermon is the interpretation of Scripture.

By the time of Donne the tradition of homiletics, the art of preaching (*ars praedicandi* or *concionandi*), had more or less solidified into a traditional *dispositio*, consisting of certain steps: in his sermon's introduction the preacher was to read and interpret the Scriptural passage assigned or selected for the day and divide the matter into parts, usually three—often signaled in the margins of Donne's printed sermons by the word *divisio*; in the body of the sermon he was meant to develop these parts further by illustrating them with examples from other passages, from the writings of the Fathers, or from the lives of the saints, while making them relevant to the congregation before him; finally, his peroration was not merely to summarize the entire argument but to make it into a clear lesson for his hearers—a conclusion Donne describes as not unlike the conclusion of a poem, something which puts the argument into "practice" (I.294), making it as we noted earlier about poetry "currant." In short, sermons

suation" depended upon an active use of the imagination and emotions to achieve a "redintegration" (III.112) of body and soul.

¹⁶A succinct review of these traditional levels of meaning is offered pp. 486–87 of the "Essays" appendix to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 3rd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Donne's Sermons II.97, 137, and X.141–42.

in Donne's day gave material invented in this manner a schematic shape: "text-doctrine-application."¹⁷

Form in rhetoric, including homiletics, is of necessity obvious, formulaic and conventional. For like everything rhetorical, it is designed to engage an audience. In this case the homiletic creative act turns a Scriptural passage into a recognizable sermon. But Donne claims more for poetic form. By counterfeiting Creation poetic form would apparently invest something—which might be nothing or an inchoate, antecedent matter—with "being," with a new life if not a new identity. Since he compares that form to harmony (which we might experience) and beaten gold (which we might contemplate), these qualities and actions are central to my thesis, that to realize the poetry in Donne's sermons is to realize their *essential* form. The "application" of my thesis is that among Donne's sermons those that we are apt to find most readable or take most pleasure in reading reveal the poet's touch in his use of traditional homiletic *dispositio*. The following is, I believe, one of those sermons.

On 18 April 1619, Donne delivered a sermon in anticipation of his forthcoming travels, poignantly entitled "A Sermon of Valediction" (II.xi). Departures and valedictions always stirred Donne's most complicated, often most morose feelings. For the actions seemed death-like.¹⁸ Four of his "Songs and Sonets" bear "Valediction" in their titles and many more deal with "farewells." The theme reaches

¹⁷See Gregory Kneidel, "Homiletics" in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 347–50. See also Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (New York and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 95–97.

¹⁸Many readers have found him obsessed by death and in continual fear of it. He was a "disciple of death and a voluptuary of decay," Peter Ackroyd says, perhaps a little too colorfully, in *Albion* (London and New York: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 66. A more measured judgment though no less colorful is John Carey's "Death was an insult to his ego.... He could tolerate any form of death, so long as it allowed him to remain alive": *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 230. It was the annihilation of self, Robert N. Watson has observed, which Donne's "intense, brittle egotism" could not bear: *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 157. See also Felecia Wright McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then: Body as Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne* (New York and London: Continuum, 2005), 51–52. Ramie Targoff, "Facing Death," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Gibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 217–32, offers perhaps the best, most incisive summary of judgment about Donne's obsession with and fear of death: "nothing could approximate the horror of losing himself within the collective mass of the dead" (p. 228).

into his divine poems, which often center upon or skirt the subject of death. And in Donne's disputatious mind death seems always to provoke thoughts of its opposites, life, beginnings, Creation.

Donne offered his sermonic valediction a month prior to his departure for the continent, when he was to accompany Lord Doncaster on a diplomatic mission to German princes. The anticipated journey also occasioned a metrical composition: "Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany." Although dread pervades both, the "Hymne" makes the emotion intensely personal and tries (with effort) to turn it into an "amorousnesse." In the former, the effort to deal with emotion is somewhat less apparent. Nonetheless, a moroseness and tension mark the tone of both hymn and sermon, perhaps compounded by Donne's continuing grief over the death of his wife in childbirth less than two years earlier. Too, the hazards of travel in Donne's day, particularly sea voyages, were not to be taken lightly. Nor was the Doncaster mission itself without peril, for it involved venturing into the very center of the Thirty Years' War.¹⁹ Regarding the sermon, its setting (its rhetorical situation) may have added to Donne's tension somewhat by forcing him to keep an eye on the line dividing his public role from his private life. For the sermon was delivered at Lincoln's Inn, where Donne had been a student and where he was now reader in divinity; thus, the valedictory sermon was delivered before a congregation some of whose members were Donne's familiars. He capitalizes on the legalistic overtones of "judgment," and although the priest maintains the decorum of his public role, glimpses of Donne's personal involvement are possible, increasingly so toward the conclusion when "valediction" narrows its meaning.

The text for the sermon is Ecclesiastes 12.1: "Remember now thy Creator in the dayes of thy youth." In dilating and diffusing the passage, which appears in the final chapter of Ecclesiastes, Donne as always relies on his congregation's knowledge of the Bible. He does so, moreover, in a way that may have been intended to challenge those who lacked the requisite knowledge or memory. He expects them to have a sense of the entire chapter if not the entire book of Ecclesiastes, for his interpretation embraces its somber warnings: remember while you still can, while your remembrance is effective, and before it's too late.

To his poet's mind the words of the text reverberate: one matter implies another and spurs a search for resemblances, sending forth

¹⁹See P.M. Oliver, *Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion* (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 45–46.

echoes throughout the entire sermon. The text, as he shows when he comes to dividing it into parts, has a kind of circularity, a pattern Donne follows in making his sermon circle back on itself in his conclusion. Initially he finds the text from Ecclesiastes implying the virtues of "Thankfulness" and "Repentance," which, he argues, respectively resemble the metals silver, which must be mined (as the memory must be mined), and gold, which is found "in the washes" (as in the "waters of Tribulation"). Memory and water, not surprisingly, provide respectively the central concept and the recurring image in the sermon. If one could speak of a subtext, it would seem to be the idea of returning, whether in memory or from a sea voyage. In either case, circularity is prominent and becomes ever more so as the sermon progresses.

Traditional homiletic *divisio* is, as noted, tripartite. The custom owes less to Trinitarianism than to ancient and contemporary rhetorical advice.²⁰ Donne not only divides the text into three parts, but further divides the second part into three subparts. The *divisio* is made possible by Donne's rearrangement of elements in the text itself: first, "remember"; second, "now," which is combined with the final phrase and further divided into three subparts: "in the day" (by light), "in the days" (by the several lights God affords), and "in the days of thy youth" (as Donne points out, both the Greek and the Latin versions of the passage mean not simply when you are young but also when you are capable of making a choice, the latter being perhaps the only sense in which "youth" could still apply to his audience); and finally "Creator."

- Introduction ("Text")
- Body ("Doctrine")
 - 1. Remember
 - 2. Now
 - a) In the day
 - b) In the days
 - c) In the days of thy youth
 - 3. Creator
- Conclusion ("Application")

Donne's rearrangement of the text allows him to pull from it three major ideas and give them a climactic order: the primacy of memory, the urgency of recalling, and the inevitability of judgment. In placing

²⁰For example, Cicero *ad Herennium* I.x.17. Three or four or fewer, Thomas Wilson says in his popular *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553)—it all depends on what is best carried in the memories of the audience and of the speaker too (fol. 60r).

"Creator" last Donne has occasion to strike one of the major themes of all his sermons: God made you of nothing, and you can never return to nothing again. Thus, judgment is inevitable, and thus the urgency of remembering. The point, brought up in the introduction, he will return to, powerfully, in the conclusion. I have called the order climactic, and it is, locally. The greater order is circular: the text begins and the sermon ends with remembering the Creator. Returning to points, echoing ideas, allowing arguments and concepts to reverberate, resemble each other, expand carefully, and continue to echo or circle back—these give us a sense of the poetry in the sermon, its harmony, its beaten gold.

Memory, as noted, comes first in the *divisio* and therefore first in the body of the sermon. Memory is a faculty which not unlike rhetoric can make things "present" even when the eyes are focused elsewhere (as in Donne's *Goodfriday*, to be discussed later). Of the three faculties of our rational soul, memory "is the faculty God desires to work upon." ("The art of *salvation*," Donne argues at length in another sermon, echoing but not in this instance crediting St. Augustine, "is but the art of *memory*," II.73.) It is an entrance to our faculty of understanding, whose instruction "rectifies" our will, which is our "untractable, and untameable," our "blindest and boldest faculty." But the memory itself is not blind. Think of it as the "Gallery of the soul, hang'd" with pictures of God's mercies—such as, from the recent past, the steady increase in Protestantism, our deliverance from the Armada or from Guy Fawkes' plot, or if these pictures are too large for you consider what God has done for you individually "even since yesterday." Everyone has a "pocket picture about him, a manuall, a bosome book"; turn over a leaf and you will find "a little branch of that navigable river," a means of sailing "into the great and endless Sea of Gods mercies." Once more images transform and culminate in an image of water. The "Thankfulness" stimulated by these memories will gradually give way to that other matter, "Repentence."

We must remember "now," the second part of the *divisio*. Its urgency is compelled by that "bosome book," which for Donne as for Augustine, consists of our memories of God's presence in history as well as in our individual lives, that "gallery" he mentioned earlier. But it is also the Bible so thoroughly read, understood, and contemplated that it has become interiorized and applicable to our individual lives. The history of the Jews is our pattern for salvation, as in God's demand that the Jews offer three payments of their first fruits: the first "about *Easter*," the second "about *Whitsontide*," and the third "in *Autumn*." The first two were offered "partly to

God, and partly to Man, to the Priest." But God had no part of the third. Creation, growth, and harvesting are the points, reverberating with youth, morning, and life's prime, but the obligatory time is the time before "Autumn," before harvesting. Death emerges from the shadows to become part of our remembrance.

In its first of three subparts—remember "*In Die*, in the day"—Donne's argument is that we must do our work of remembrance when we have most of our faculties about us, unlike our state at night: "To him that travails by night a bush seems a tree, and a tree seems a man, and a man a spirit...."²¹ The thought leads into a vision of horror, a night with "no light but lightnings," a fetching away of the soul to Hell with its "fire without light"—a fear, inevitably, of final judgment when we are caught unaware, when we are broken vessels, unable "to fetch water at the pit, that is, no means in our selves, to derive one drop of Christs blood upon us, nor to wring out one tear of true repentance from us" in the midst of this "dark fire." Donne has circled back on the urgency of our remembrance and struck the continuing theme of repentence.

But then the "circumstance is enlarged; it is not *in die*, but *in diebus*, not in one but in many dayes; for God affords us many dayes, many lights to see and remember him by." In remembering God we are regenerated, we become new creatures, and the pattern whereby we are regenerated is in the days of "the first creation." "Light" recalls, and means, several things: it means that religion is not to be found "blindly"; it signifies the opposite of "darkness," itself rich in meaning; and invariably and ultimately "light" is Christ, the "day spring from on high," the first born of all Creation.

The first day was the making of light; and our first day is the knowledge of him, who saies of himself, *ego sum lux mundi*, I am the light of the world, and of whom *St. John* testifies, *Erat lux vera*, he was the true light, that lighteth every man into the world.

God pronounced the light "good" and separated it from "darkness," the beginning of all "great actions" and thus provided the first of "many dayes, many lights to see and remember him by."

²¹ Donne, whose reputation as a frequenter of plays as a young man (and visitor of ladies) drew a contemporary's comment (see R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 72), may have had in memory something of Theseus's speech about the imagination that in the night fearfully mistakes a bush for a bear—not unlike the poet's imagination, which "gives to aery nothing/ A local habitation and name" (*Midsummer Nights Dream*, V.1.2–22).

On the second day, God "made the firmament to divide between the waters above, and the waters below" and thereby created a "*terminus cognoscibilium*." God limited our vision "with a fundiment beset with stars, our eyes can see no farther." He reveals to our understanding of religion only that which is necessary to our faith through the "stars which he hath kindled in his Church, the Fathers and Doctors." In our estate "*Paul plants, and here Apollo[s] waters*"—Donne will return to this image in his conclusion; here it leads to God's work on the third day, when he gathered the waters together—"that is, all the doctrine necessary for the life to come, in his Church." Further, "God makes thee a sea, a collection of the waters" by revealing through the Church what is necessary to your own faith. Again the general leads to the special, the history of the Jews becomes the history of mankind which becomes the life of individual man. The fusion of images connects with the opening images of "washes" in which we find the "gold" of "Repentence," just as it continually calls to mind the blood of Christ—as well as, inevitably, the preacher's forthcoming travel by sea.

Approaching the remaining days, Donne asks his congregation to join him in his imaginative interpretation: "In the fourth daies work, let the making of the Sun to rule the day be the testimony of Gods love to thee" and let the making of the moon be a reminder of his promises' appearance "in the darkness of adversity." Let the fifth day's work, the creation of "creeping things" and "flying things," signify our dual nature: we are made of dust and must therefore be humble but with a divine soul that can be raised. Let the sixth day, the "last day" of Creating, the day on "which both man and beasts were made out of the earth," serve as a remembrance that "this earth which treads upon thee, must return to that earth which thou treadst upon" but the soul will return to God. The seventh, the Sabbath, becomes a remembrance that God has given us a "temporal Sabbath," for he has placed us in a land of peace (unlike the destination of the preacher's forthcoming journey), an "ecclesiastical Sabbath" by placing us in a "Church of peace," and a "spiritual Sabbath," a conscience that can be at peace through recalling the opening verses of Genesis as allegory, masterfully summarized in the following way:

by remembering now thy Creator, at least in one of these daies of the week of thy regeneration, either as thou hast light created in thee, in the first day, that is, thy knowledg of Christ; or as thou hast a firmament created in thee the second day, that is, thy knowledg what to seek concerning Christ, things appertaining to faith and salvation; or as thou hast a sea created in thee the third day, that is, a Church where all the knowledg is reserv'd and presented to thee; or as thou hast a sun and

moon in the fourth day, thankfulness in prosperity, comfort in adversity, or as thou hast *reptilem humilitatem*, or *volatilem fiduciam*, a humiliation in thy self, or an exaltation in Christ in thy fifth day, or as thou hast a contemplation of thy mortality and immortality in the sixth day, or a desire of a spiritual Sabbath in the seventh, In those daies remember thou thy Creator.

Donne's work is a reinvention of St. Augustine's allegorical interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis in *Confessions*, Book XIII. Donne at Lincoln's Inn exhorts; Augustine in addressing God petitions. We hear Donne; we overhear Augustine.

Then the "Now" part of the *divisio* is further expanded through its third and final subpart: remember God not simply "in the day" or "in the days" but above all in the days of thy youth, a phrase which Donne has already expanded to mean in the days "of thy hearts desire," the days when we have a choice and are most subject to sin: "chastity is not chastity in an old man, but a disability to be unchast." Choose God while you still have the power of choice. Characteristically, Donne fuses images: "The Market is open till the bell ring; till thy last bell ring the Church is open, grace is to be had there: but trust not upon that rule, that men buy cheapest at the end of market...." Everything Donne has said about "Now" in all its subparts is summed in his call to remember God "in those thy happy and sun-shine dayes...."

Remember now (Donne repeats as he approaches the final and most dramatic part of his *divisio*) the Creator: "what God hath done for us, is the object of our memory, not what he did before we were." This is also a return or circling back to the beginning of the text and the beginning of the sermon itself as well as an injunction to think of Creation generally. We are enjoined, however, not simply to remember the Creator but also to *remember thy Creator*, our individual creation—which, as Donne will later show, is of two sorts, by God and by man. This somewhat surprising idea, that we have been created by other men (an idea which will be further developed later in the sermon), nonetheless accords with the doubleness that shows up frequently in the sermon, between history on the one hand and individual life on the other. The *greater* point here is that we can never know what we were before our own creation by God, or what God himself was before his act of Creation, for before then we were nothing: "remember him also, with this consideration, that whatsoever thou art now, yet once thou wast nothing."

Death, which had entered the sermon earlier and then seemed to stand aside during Donne's allegorical interpretation of the days of Creation, now returns as a presence deeply involved in the belief

that mankind, as well s individual man, was created from nothing. This—*creatio ex nihilo*—is one of Donne's major sermonizing doctrines, anticipated in the opening of this sermon and repeated here in the final part. It also provides an emotional transition to his conclusion. Exploring that doctrine by the light of Donne's own writing will uncover some of the knowledge the preacher assumed his audience brought to his sermon—an assumption which might have served as admonitory challenges to his audience, about what they should carry in their "bosome book." To return to my own argument, *creatio ex nihilo* is also an important key to Donne's ideas about poetic creation. Creation is a major subject of the sermon itself, and following Donne's own hermeneutic I have sought to draw from his arguments about creativity at least some of those ideas which might pertain to the poetry in his sermons. So far as his sermons are concerned, although the lesson he draws from *creatio ex nihilo* is unvarying (nothing can make thee nothing again), the doctrine itself varies somewhat, rhetorically, in accordance with the argument of the particular sermon in which it appears. In the sermon we have been examining, the point is "remember," linked as it is to valedictions and departures, linked as they are to journeys, distance from God, death, decrepitude, and symbols like the bells in Donne's London. But in whatever sermon, poem, or essay the issue appears, the doctrine has a long tradition that prefigures creativity in other endeavors.

In the beginning there was nothing. That belief, flat, quaint, curious, or obvious as it may seem to modern eyes, was at the core of a complex set of beliefs about the Creation—in fact, about creativity in general—that John Donne held through his career as poet, essayist, and sermonizer—or, better, poet, poet-essayist, and poet-sermonizer.²² However subtly and rhetorically variable his own use of the argument about nothing may have been, its Christianized lesson, that man's mortality ends not in nothing but in judgment,

²²Terry G. Sherwood calls "the tension between Creation and Nothing ... the foundation of Donne's thought"; *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 133. "Nothing," Arthur F. Marotti says, "is one of Donne's favorite words" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Gibbory, cited in n. 18 above, p. 40. The mystical dimension of the doctrine is also part of Donne's thought, a dimension briefly explained by Karen Armstrong: "The highest form of divinity that the human mind can conceive is equated with nothingness because it bears no comparison with any of the other things in existence. All the other *sefirot*, therefore, emerge from the womb of Nothingness. This is a mystical interpretation of the traditional doctrine of the creation *ex nihilo*"; *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 148.

seldom varied in his own writing. Nor was it a simple doctrine. Nor had it been without controversy *ab initio*.

Ex nihilo nihil fit, or as Lear ominously put it, speaking to Cordelia, "nothing can come of nothing." Schoolboys in Donne's day most likely knew the adage and learned from Marcus Aurelius, Persius, and others that anything once created cannot revert to nothing. If this latter idea spoke ominously to Christians of the inevitability of divine judgment, the former idea, that nothing can be made of nothing, complicated biblical interpretation: what was there before Creation?

When God spoke for the first time, according to "Moses," he created light (Genesis 1.3). Then did he create heaven and earth (Genesis 1.1) without speaking? Did matter pre-exist God's creative work? Or was there an inconceivable (or only mystically conceivable) to us nothing? Or, an idea stemming from Plato, did God create the world out of himself? In 341 the Council of Nicea made *creatio ex nihilo* the official doctrine of Christianity.²³ God through Christ ("the Light") created the world—all things visible and invisible—out of nothing²⁴ and thus Christ is (in Johannine doctrine) the Word of God. By keeping intact the idea of God's omnipotence, the doctrine fit the Christian myth. But it left hanging the question about what this antecedent nothing was.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, which with *The City of God* was among Donne's chief references, the Father grapples at some length with the opening of Genesis and leaves unresolved the mystery of what "Moses" could have meant precisely, trusting in one's heart to demonstrate the passage's truth.²⁵ This was a mode of irresolution which appealed to Donne. "Nothing" for Augustine means "formless matter." Created means having form. As "Moses" said, the world was "without form, and void" thereby designating a kind of nothingness, an inchoate world that had been created by God not out of his

²³ An excellent review of the various arguments and controversies is to be found in Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, tr. A. S. Worrall (London: T&T Clark, 1994).

²⁴ The doctrine leaves hanging the question of the origins of sin: e.g., propagated by the parents or infused when the soul inhabits the body? It is the latter, "infusionism," which Donne says in a letter around 1607 "is the more common opinion" (*Letters to severall Persons of Honour*, ed. with notes by Charles Edmund Merrill, Jr. (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910), p. 15). For a succinct review of these two opinions, including references to this letter, which she brilliantly calls Donne's "own *De Anima*," see Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. p. 11.

²⁵ See Book XI, cited by Donne (esp. Chapter 3) in IX.3.77 and IV.8.184–87.

own substance but of matter unlike himself which he then brought out of nothing like silence brought into noise and then into song.²⁶ Reduced to its simplest version, the most consistent view of Creation for Donne as well as for Augustine is the act of giving this nothing a form.

Nothing was "matter without form," as Donne says in an early sermon (I.viii). God had made this formless matter "*sine sermone*, without speaking." It was thus "heaven without light, earth without any productive virtue or disposition"; therefore our true (and as he later characterizes it, unknowable) genesis was "a beginning of nothing." *Form* is the operative concept, but it was not achieved until God spoke and matter took on "specifique formes" (I.289–90).

Throughout his writing Donne's use of "form" consistently refers to one of the Aristotelian four causes, particularly as Christianized by Augustine and Aquinas: Who made it? What is it made of? What is it? And what is its purpose? These are designated as, respectively, the efficient, material, formal, and final causes of a created work. Christianized, the causes were identified generally in the following way: God was our efficient cause (the prime "mover," *primum mobile*), nothing (formless matter) was the stuff out of which he made the world, our soul is our form, and salvation is our end and purpose. What centers our mind (and Donne's) in assessing the creative act is invariably the formal cause, described by a modern writer as that which "makes an entity essentially what it is. Form is the structure or organization that gives something its specific nature and allows it to fulfill its function."²⁷ Thus the formal cause is never far removed from purpose (final cause) or maker (efficient cause). Our soul is a virtual nexus of causes captured in the Aristotelian metaphor: if the eye were an animal, vision would be its soul. Donne draws the Christian lesson: "though in my matter, the earth, I must die; yet in my forme, in that Image which I am made by, I cannot die" (IX.50).

²⁶*Conf.* XII. Chs. 28–29. Émilie Zum Brunn provides a succinct summary of Augustine's idea: "The form possessed by any changing (that is, created) being keeps it from falling back into nothingness"; thus "death is never more than a partial victory of nothingness over being"; *St. Augustine, Being and Nothingness*, tr. Ruth Namad (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 36 and 49. Originally published as *Le Dilemme de l'Être et du Néant chez saint Augustin* (Paris: Études augustinienes, 1978).

²⁷Stephen Halliwell in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly I (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102. Significantly, Aristotle grouped the causes into two: the matter on the one hand and on the other the efficient, formal, and final; see *Physics* Book 2, 198a33–198a35.

The idea of formal cause was in Donne's hand also an easy argument, often also an easy weapon, whether he considered a love affair or eschatology.²⁸ Think of the love poems. His tears in reflecting her face become emblems of her—an action similar to that whereby a “workeman” produces a globe, beginning with a “round ball,” a “nothing,” and making it “All” (*A Valediction of Weeping*), thereby assigning it a new form and purpose. And the drama of creation is recapitulated, he argued, when one falls in love. In *Aire and Angels*, for example, before he knew “what” she was or “who,” she was to him only a “lovely, glorious nothing,” but then the idealistic male “allow[ed]” his love to “assume” her “body.” Throughout the love poems, “nothing” is the antecedent state of the lovers, and it is the state to which they can revert in their absence from one another. After all, “nothing else is” (*The Sun Rising*). Thus, “thou and I are nothing ... when on divers shore” (*A Valediction of Weeping*). Of all the love poems, *A nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day* is a tour de force of Donne's argument about nothing: with her death he is “re-begot/ Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not” and becomes a veritable “Elixer” of the “first nothing.” One could not become less. Nor could the argument do more to controvert Christian doctrine.

For the Christian, as noted, reversion to any sort of nothing is impossible. The reversion does not appear, even as a conceit, in Donne's divine poems. Between his love poems and his divine poems, he penned a commemorative work, *The first Anniversary*, into which he inserted a certain Jeremiad, anticipating his use of “nothing” in his sermons:

Wee seeme ambitious, Gods whole worke t'undoe;
Of nothing he made us, and we strive too,
To bring ourselves to nothing backe; and wee
Doe what we can to do't so soone as hee.

ll. 155–58

Death wish, a modern Freudian might call it—less clearly so for Donne, of course, than chastising our desire to escape the burden God put on us to lead a righteous life. Three years later Donne took Anglican orders. And then the very impossibility of reverting to any sort of nothing, of undoing God's work became consistently the lesson that we must fear God's judgment.

²⁸Or friendship. “Creating friendship is a godly act ... a creation from nothing,” Terry G. Sherwood, “‘Ego Videbo’: Donne and the Vocational Self,” *John Donne Journal* 16 (1997): 59–114 (p. 86).

Before he took orders, Donne wrote several prose pieces, highly argumentative in nature and controversial.²⁹ Of these, one of the most sustained discussions of the doctrine of nothing appears in *Essays in Divinity*, unpublished in Donne's lifetime and probably composed between 1611 and 1615 (when he entered holy orders).³⁰ The "nothing" of which Donne believes Genesis speaks is absolute, older than darkness, light, confusion, order, even time itself (p. 19). Creation is defined, he claims as "a *Making of Nothing*," but he further claims that both the Hebrew and the Greek versions tend to use the term "indifferently"—for example, sometimes creation was of pre-existent matter, like the creation of Man from Earth, Woman from Man (p. 27). *Ex nihilo fecit omnia Deus*—we can English well as "of things which were not," but the concept defies our reason (p. 28). Nonetheless, let those who cannot reasonably "confess" the concept say what it is out of which God created. If out of himself, then creation is itself God and thus eternal (p. 29). Most importantly, let man grapple with the true import of the *ex nihilo* concept by considering "by how few descents" he is derived from nothing as the child of the "lust and Excrements" of parents themselves the "Children of Adam, the child of durt, the child of Nothing."³¹ In sum, this primordial nothing may be "incomprehensible" but Donne does not

²⁹The intention of *Biathanatos*, written in 1608, some seven years before Donne took Anglican orders, is a contrarian one, to show dogmatics that suicide is not always sin. Donne calls the book a "paradox," which in its literal seventeenth-century meaning (*para doxa*) signaled a work contrary to received opinion. *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), Donne's first major published work, responded to current controversies concerning the Oath of Allegiance, in particular James's *Triplici Nodo, Triplex Cuneus* (1608), and it is offered ostensibly in the voice of one versed in common law. It is a convoluted, and perhaps self-promoting, argument. The Jesuits are a prominent target in the book, and they became the sole target of his satirical work *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611). At that time, or perhaps earlier, Donne had completed a *jeu d'esprit* in manuscript, entitled *Catalogus librorum aulicorum*, a jibe at his contemporary intellectuals, statesmen, and divines.

³⁰*Essays in Divinity* by John Donne, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952).

³¹The reasoning brings Donne to one of his rarely eloquent passages in the book: "And of whole man compounded of Body and Soul, the best, and most spirituall and delicate parts, which are Honour and Pleasure, have such a neighbourhood and alliance with Nothing, that they lately were Nothing, and even now when they are, they are Nothing, or at least shall quickly become Nothing: which, even at the last great fire, shall not befall the most wretched worme, nor most abject grain of dust: for that fire shall be a purifier, not consumer to nothing. For to be Nothing, is so deep a curse, and high degree of punishment, that Hell and the prisoners there, not only have it not, but cannot wish so great a loss to themselves, nor such a frustrating of Gods purposes" (p. 30).

exactly throw up his hands at this point. He appeals, Augustine-like, to the heart's resolution, and continues to argue that "nothingness," whatever it is, is a state back into which anything created obviously cannot return "since God ... cannot reduce yesterday" (p. 32). The lesson Donne draws is double: man cannot, nor should he desire to, will himself to return to nothing; and our souls have a "dependancy" (p. 76) on God, without whom we do indeed run the risk of reversion. The apparent controversion or inconsistency becomes a warning, a weapon to hand, which reappears in the sermons: who would dare be without God? And who would deny the responsibility we have in fulfilling our Creator's purpose, our final cause?

To return to the conclusion of Donne's sermon, he hangs his most powerful argument on the point that we must remember God for he gave us "a being," our form, in bringing us "*ex nihilo*," from nothing. The argument is at once "matter of exaltation" and "of humiliation," not unlike the dual "Thankfulness" and "Repentance" with which the sermon began. Although he reiterates the lesson that "that being which we have from God shall not return to nothing," once more he expands the circumstance anticipated earlier: "nor the being which we have from men neither." Dualities, including opposites, run throughout the sermon. This duality, however, our Creation by God and our creation by other men (such as the identity bestowed upon, or eventually to be bestowed upon, the congregation at Lincoln's Inn) expands the concept of creativity. It accords with Donne's hermeneutic. God in the Bible, and in our "bosome book," showed us the way.

The latter kind of being, the one we have from men, was anticipated by the "degrees or titles" in what Donne had earlier said about precedence, offered with an eye on his learned, lawyerly, and ecclesiastical audience,³² and by the doubleness of "Remember then the Creator, and *remember thy Creator*." For "[t]hat soul that descends to hell" carries both images with it—the image of God and the image we have received "from men, from nature, from the world" such as "Lord ... Counsailor ... Bishop, all shall burn in Hell, and never burn out." We have been formed by men as well as by God, and neither being will return to nothing; both are "everlasting" Here, as suggested earlier, decorum begins to become transparent, and it is the familiar John Donne who stands before friends and acquaintances. And he

³²Moreover, Donne in all his sermons seemed always most conscious of men of the upper classes.

stands before us fully as a poet for whom words like “creator” have deep resonance.

In closing Donne moves “to make up a circle, by returning to our first word, remember.” Coming so soon after his striking argument about our Creator and creators, the concluding passage could conceivably place Donne and his “Apostleship” among those who gave his audience form. Recalling, somewhat ironically, the emotions of exaltation and humiliation, he cites Paul’s letters in order to refer to himself as “the least of them that have been sent” as well as “the greatest” of sinners. But sent he has been, and the suggestion is unavoidable that he too is a kind of creator. That circle-closing word “remember” is now part of the valediction: let us remember each other and, in all humility, “remember me.” As someone who has sought to give—or at least facilitate giving—each member of his audience the form of Christian, he is a creator, in the terms just enunciated.³³ Remember me as I travel, as I shall remember you. Thereby we in effect join and meet, every morning looking at the sun or every evening at the moon—which may, for some, recall the gold and the silver metaphors with which the sermon began or Donne’s interpretation of the fourth day of Creation, with its lights of “thankfulness in prosperity, comfort in adversity.”

The climax of the valediction is approached as Donne returns to a passage in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and uses it to shape an apothegm that embodies his humility as creator: “Paul plants and Apollos waters”—Paul plants the seed which the Alexandrian Apollos even in his mistaken doctrines may water—but Donne’s prayer is that while he is absent, perhaps forever, “what *Paul* soever plant amongst you, or what *Apollos* soever water, God himself will give the increase.” Donne mentioned the actions of Paul and Apollos earlier in the sermon in recounting the seven days of Creation: on the second day, when God “made the firmament to divide the waters above, and the waters below” and where we find a recurring image which with death is never far from the departing preacher’s mind.

Should I not return, Donne prays, may I meet “my Saviour and your Saviour” and say, as he did, “*Of those whom thou hast given me, have I not lost one.*” You remain here behind in a “Kingdome of peace” while I journey to warring kingdoms. But each of us must pass though a sea of Christ’s blood to reach our ultimate destination

³³But, again, in all humility, a stance that assigns the power of persuasion not to rhetoric but to the presence of God’s “ordinance” in him (see VII.95). This public ethos contradicts that egotism readers find in Donne (see n. 18 above).

Where all Clients shall retain but one Counsellor, our Advocate Christ Jesus, nor present him any other fee but his own blood, and yet every Client have a Judgment on his side, not only in a not guilty, in the remission of his sins, but in a *Venite benedicti*, in being called to the participation of an immortal Crown of glory: where there shall be no difference in affection, nor in mind, but we shall agree as fully and perfectly in our *Allelujah*, and *gloria in excelsis*, as God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost agreed in the *faciamus hominem* at first; where we shall end, and yet begin but then; where we shall have continuall rest, and yet never grow lazie; where we shall be stronger to resist, and yet have no enemy; where we shall live and never die, where we shall meet and never part. (II.249)

As I have attempted to argue, Donne's own hermeneutic warrants our search for his ideas about creativity: the story of Creation is the story of creation. It is form which gives being to nothing, reveals purpose, and shows the Creator's and the creator's hand. Through a pattern of association in this sermon Donne makes us aware of a high level of discursive coherence and, ultimately, the wholeness of the poet-preacher's vision. Whether we seek the harmonious connections between ideas and images or contemplate the total work as if it were a piece of beaten gold, it is the working of Donne's imagination that we admire and the way it informs our own. Versified, these qualities give us the poetry in his "Metricall compositions," like the following, dated two years before he took Holy Orders.

*Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward.*³⁴

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this	
The intelligence that moves, devotion is,	
And as the other Spheares, by being growne	
Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne,	
And being by others hurried every day,	5
Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:	
Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit	
For their first mover, and are whirld by it.	
Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West	
This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.	10
There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,	
And by that setting endlesse day beget;	
But that Christ on this Crosse did rise and fall,	
Sinne had eternally benighted all.	
Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see	15
That spectacle of too much weight for mee.	

³⁴Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne*, cited in n. 9 above, I.336–37

Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
 What a death were it then to see God dye?
 It made his own Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
 It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke. 20
 Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
 And turne all speares at once peirc'd with those holes?
 Could I behold that endlesse height which is
 Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
 Humbled below us? Or that blood which is 25
 The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
 Made durst of dust, or that flesh which was worne
 By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?
 If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
 Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye, 30
 Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
 Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?
 Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
 They're present yet unto my memory,
 For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards mee, 35
 O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
 I turne my back to thee, but to receive
 Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
 O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
 Burne off my rusts, and my deformity, 40
 Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
 That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

The first ten lines ask us to imagine the Ptolemaic model of the universe, in which an angel ("The intelligence") guides the motion of each of the ten spheres. So imagined, each sphere's "naturall forme" (soul) is a motion imparted by "the first mover," the *primum mobile*, God. Imagine, too, Donne says, that my own soul is like that sphere. Thus it appears that I have usurped the natural inclination of my soul, its motion, by attending to business or pleasure.³⁵ For I travel this day of all days toward the West (the actual direction of his journey as well as, metaphorically, our journey toward death) when his "Soules forme [devotion] bends toward the East" (metaphorically the desire for a new life, the promise of which began literally in the East with, paradoxically, a brutal death). If the suppositions about the universe in these opening ten lines serve as a kind of text, then by the time we reach the tenth line the interpretation of the text has already been accomplished, with the poet characteristically mixing the literal and the metaphorical.

³⁵Which may be allied with "nothing"; see the passage cited in n. 31 above.

The mixture continues through the next lines, with a pun on "Sunne"/Son and the paradox of rising by setting. More than in the sermon, however, more than in almost any of his sermons, but resembling his actions in the "Hymne," Donne heightens the personalism and makes us aware of the conflict in the speaker's soul. In this poem, the middle 23 lines express the speaker's fear of death, initially his horror at the death of God, whose hands "turne all spheares," that is, gave the soul its natural motion, its purpose or final cause, which the speaker has willfully controverted. The original Good Friday scene has been so vividly reconstructed that once we move into the conclusion we are convinced that "these things ... are present yet unto my memory."

Again in the final ten lines, the compounding of the literal and the metaphorical becomes prominent: the speaker faces westward—his literal and metaphorical direction—while his "memory," a faculty of the soul which Renaissance learning placed in the hindermost part of the brain, literally and metaphorically looks toward the East. The memory faces the East and thus continually (in both Donne and Augustine) prompts the soul to obey its natural motion. God created man in his own image; that is, Christ, by whom according to the Nicean Creed "all things were made," formed man's soul, which in the speaker's case has fallen into "deformity." Again, Donne turns his situation into a moral lesson: as in the hymn he claims to travel away from his duties and friends to see God more clearly, so in the poem he turns his back on Christ to receive "Corrections," which Christ's own "mercies" may bid him, Christ, to grant, thus restoring God's image and natural motion to the speaker's own soul.

Certain resemblances between this poem and the sermon are easily come by. Both concern travel, creation, responsibility. Both have, or can be viewed as having, the homiletic outward form of text-doctrine-application. But the more significant inward form of both lies in something not unlike that "soul" which gives a created object its being. The extraordinary wholeness of vision in each is revealed in the motion whereby image leads to image in that "beating out of a piece of gold." When the reader's mind is stimulated to follow that motion, to converse with it, the process takes on a kind of life. The discourse becomes, as it were, "re-animated."³⁶

Any interest most of us now might take in reading Donne's sermons depends upon finding in those sermons the same formal qualities we treasure in what we think of as his poems. Such I have

³⁶This is Isaac Walton's final word, in his life of Donne, his confidence that in the afterlife he shall see that dust re-animated.

attempted to do in reading the present sermon, which his modern editors have judged "by no means one of Donne's best. He was too tired and harassed to reach the heights to which he was later to ascend" (II.35). But "heights," I would counter, are usually the stuff of "selections," which offer momentary pleasure but none of the qualities Donne associated with form: life, soul; harmony, beaten gold—of these is the poetry in his sermons.