John Donne Journal
Vol. 11, Nos. 1 & 2 (1992)

A Matter of Interpretation: Example and Donne's Role as Preacher and as Poet

Noralyn Masselink

When lovers of Donne's poetry first turn to his sermons, I suspect that most are seeking more of what attracted them to his poetry: the shocking metaphysical conceits, word play, and paradoxes; the varied voices; the skeptical, independent mind; even perhaps a mingling of the sacred and profane. Though these elements all appear in the sermons, they are muted and occur with less frequency. What does appear as centrally in the sermons as in the poetry is Donne's reliance on examples (concrete images or models) to illustrate rules (abstract universals). In fact, Donne's reliance on teaching doctrine by example in the sermons far surpasses the conventional rhetorical use of examples found in the sermons of his contemporaries, as has been adequately demonstrated by William R. Mueller, Joan Webber, Winfried Schleiner, and others.[1] But while the example-to-rule correspondence is central to both poetry and sermon, Donne often uses the correspondence for strikingly different ends in the two media.

Whereas Donne the poet creates examples to promote singularity, innovation, and change, Donne the preacher relies on example to denounce the very qualities he lauds in the poems. In the poetry, Donne's private voice can create its own universe with its own set of laws and then dismiss the uninitiated, the doltish, the earthbound. And I dare say that such dismissal of the misguided is part of the attraction readers of Donne find in his poetry. We align ourselves with Donne's elitist speaker and espouse his innovative breaks with tradition. But as preacher, Donne is necessarily much more constrained by his position, by the fact that his is now a public voice. He cannot so glibly dismiss the misguided for he is morally obligated to make at least some attempt to save them from their folly. And yet, even in the sermons, where Donne makes a conscious effort to woo his audience, echoes of the independent, elitist poet can be heard. The public and the private voices do converge, for in both forums, the pulpit and the manuscript written for a coterie, Donne assumes the role of arbiter of truth. Both as poet and as

preacher, *he* determines which examples point to moral laws peculiar to a specific occasion and which we may embrace as precedents having universal application and significance. Furthermore, in both the poems and the sermons, Donne concerns himself with just how various examples can and/or should be applied.

The examples we will be concerned with may be either invented fictions (i.e., the flea or a name engraved on a window) or biblical events and figures whom Donne's audience would have accepted as historically real (i.e., Samson's suicide or the thief on the cross), but all represent some underlying truth or reality. As mentioned above, Donne makes clear that some examples are to be understood as guidelines only for particular situations rather than being applicable to all people through all ages. A select few examples, however, are what Donne calls "precedents," precedent in the legal sense of making or influencing law. Precedents exemplify the incomprehensible universals of God's decrees. These rules *are* applicable to all though how they are to be applied may be problematic. One of Donne's primary tasks as preacher is to distinguish between the two types of examples. As such, his task falls to a certain extent within the realm of casuistry, though perhaps more precisely what he engages in is casuistry in reverse. While Donne does join the casuists in applying moral laws to particular cases as both Jeanne Shami and Camille Slights have demonstrated,[2] he also seems at times, particularly in the poetry, to derive or inductively discover universal truths from particular cases.

"ALL WAYES of teaching, are Rule and Example" (9: 274).[3] With this assertion, Donne begins one of his undated sermons on the Penitential Psalms. In the sermon, he thoroughly examines the relationship between rule and example and the efficacy of teaching one by means of the other. He follows his initial claim with a physiological explanation of how examples assist men to an understanding of rules:

> And though ordinarily the Rule be first placed, yet the Rule it selfe is made of Examples: And when a Rule would be of hard digestion to weake understandings, Example concocts it, and makes it easie: for, Example in matter of Doctrine, is as Assimilation in matter of Nourishment; The Example makes that that is proposed for our learning and farther instruction, like something which we knew before, as Assimilation makes that meat, which we have received, and digested, like those parts, which are in our bodies before. (9: 274)

In this passage, the intellectual distance Donne sees between himself and those with "weake understandings" is implicit, for as preacher *he* is the presenter and interpreter of examples (if not always their creator as in the poems); *he* is the one who offers them to his congregation in order to make "that that is proposed for [their] learning and farther instruction, like something which [they] knew before." The paternalism of this passage is parallelled in many of the poems. For example, the speaker of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" patiently instructs and comforts his lady by explaining how the examples of "gold to ayery thinnesse beate" (24)[4] and "stiffe twin compasses" (26) resemble the parting of those "by'a love, so much refin'd" (17). In the same manner though with different intent, the speaker of "A Valediction: of My Name in the Window" attempts—by means of his name engraved in a window—to inculcate faithfulness to one he fears may betray his memory. And, more perversely, the man who teaches his lady the significance (or insignificance, as the case may be) of sexual indulgence through the example of a flea operates under the preacher's assumption that the "Example concocts it, and makes it easie."

In the sermon on Penitential Psalm 32, Donne acknowledges the ultimate inscrutability of God's Rules. At the same time, however, he solemnly warns against trying to establish anything *without* reference to examples: "Beleeve nothing for which thou hast not a Rule; Doe nothing for which thou hast not an Example; for there is not a more dangerous distemper in either Beliefe or Practise, then singularity" (9: 277-78). He illustrates his pronouncement with several examples including the following:

> If thou have a tentation to withdraw thy selfe from the Discipline of that Church, in which God hath given thee thy Baptisme, finde an Example, to satisfie thy Conscience, and Gods people, in what age, in what place, there was any such Church instituted, or any such Discipline practised, as thou hast fancied to thy selfe. (9: 277)

Donne here insists that without examples our own "rules" lack validity. Though his contextual purpose is to establish the validating power of precedent examples, he is also quite obviously using the powerful example-to-rule correspondence to preserve the Church from the vagaries of individual dissenters. And though in this undateable sermon the particular sect and leaders against whom Donne speaks remain unnamed, clearly he has in mind those Puritans who, in arguing for the primacy of the individual conscience

in matters of interpreting Scriptures, might reject any argument based on precedent or church tradition.

He manipulates the example-to-rule correspondence in much the same way in "Goe and catche a falling star"; in this instance, the speaker's failure to find even a single example of a beautiful and faithful woman (or at least of one who can remain so longer than a few brief moments) leads him to "sweare" that "No where / Lives a woman true, and fair" (15-17). Similarly, the speaker of "Loves Alchymie" dismisses other lovers' claims as "imposture" (6), arguing "should I love, get, tell, till I were old, / I should not finde that hidden mysterie" (4-5), presumably because he will never find a woman with a mind. In the absence of even one woman who can be more than mere "Sweetnesse, and wit" (24), the speaker concludes that there can be no substance to love.

If the absence of any examples should cause us to question the validity of a rule, a single example should be approached with caution as well, claims Donne the preacher. In "Donne's Protestant Casuistry: Cases of Conscience in the *Sermons*," Shami notes Donne's "tendency to doubt the exemplary value of those cases that, whatever other merit they may have, are too singular to be generally applicable," and thus "cannot evoke a general rule" (57). For example, with reference to the singular salvation experience of the thief on the cross and the extraordinary conversion of St. Paul, Donne goes to great lengths in a sermon preached at Saint Pauls [1624/25] both to comfort and warn his audience:

> It is not safe concluding out of single Instances. . . .One instance to the contrary destroys any peremptory Rule, no man must say, God never doth it; He did it to *Saul* here, He did it to the Theife upon the Crosse. But to that presumptuous sinner, who sins on, because God shewed mercy to One at last, we must say, a miserable Comforter is that Rule, that affords but one example. (6: 208)

Donne even proceeds to question the validity of accepting these as examples of late repentance, asking "is there any such thing?" (6: 208). His answer, in essence, is no, that if there seems to be an exception to one of God's laws, the rule has not been abrogated; it is simply that man's understanding of the rule, or rather his perception of the example signifying that rule, is inadequate. God's rule cannot be inconsistent. Thus, in the case of the thief on the cross, he reminds his listeners that the man's repentance came as soon as salvation was offered to him.

Nevertheless, the validity or invalidity of singular examples as precedent is rarely so easily determined, and Donne takes seriously his role as interpreter; in different circumstances, he is willing to read the example of the thief on the cross in another light. For instance, in a sermon thought to have been preached at Saint Dunstan's, he handles the case of the repentant thief quite differently, though this sermon was preached within a month of the one at Saint Paul's. In this instance, he actually acknowledges the case of the thief as a valid example of "late Repenters." Nevertheless, here too, he downplays the significance of this example as a precedent formulating a general rule applicable to all men. Indeed, he damns it with a witty turn by remarking, "It is true, we have the example of the *Crucified Thiefe*, but it is but a hard case, when a *Thiefe* must guide us and be our Example" (6: 203). Since late repentance is not at the heart of this sermon (as it was in the later sermon on Paul's conversion), Donne's briefer, tongue-in-cheek response here is appropriate. Donne's employment of such situational interpretation is even more pronounced in "Confined Love" and the elegy "Oh let me not serve so," where he uses similar examples from nature, alternately, to argue opposite positions. Though the examples in these two poems are not identical, as is the case in the sermons on the crucified thief, the "rule" represented by both sets of examples—changefulness—*is*, and, thus, we might expect the examples to illustrate the same lesson. But such is not the case. Whereas in "Confined Love" the speaker defends promiscuity for himself on the basis of examples from nature (i.e., the "Sunne, Moone, or Starres" (8), "birds" (10), and "Beasts" (12) whose "love" is unfettered by laws), in the elegy, he attempts to win the lady's love for himself alone (in effect, to confine her love), by employing an example of promiscuity from nature—a stream which "flouts the channell" (33)—to decry the lady's changefulness. Thus, both as poet and as preacher Donne uses similar (even identical) examples in different contexts to argue contrary ends.

Despite his willingness to propose *possible* "rules" suggested by the singular example of the crucified thief, however, Donne the preacher insists on the dangers of relying on such examples as precedents. In a sermon of 1618 preached at Lincoln's Inn, Donne addresses Rome proclaiming, "Good ways, and good ends are in the *plurall*, and have many examples; else they are not good; but sins are in the *singular*" (2: 103). He proceeds to defend the established church against "our adversaries at Rome" this time remarking,

> *By the Fathers*, the Fathers in the *plurall*, when those Fathers unanimely deliver any thing dogmatically, for matter of faith, we are

> content to be tried by the Fathers, the Fathers in that plurall. But by that *one Father*, who begets his children, not upon the true mother, *the Church*, but upon the *Court*, and so produces articles of faith, . . .by that *father* we must refuse to be tried. (2: 103)

Clearly, the "*one Father*" is Pope Paul V who, not content to rule in matters of faith, encroaches upon "the *Court*" as well. Donne must certainly be alluding here to papal pressure regarding such matters as the Spanish Match and England's potential role in the Thirty Years War which was just getting under way. The general point he makes is that even if an example does exist, and even if, as in this case, the example claims to represent a rule, by itself a singular example does not "prove" a rule. Thus, Donne argues the need for multiple examples both to disparage the singularity of the Roman church *and* to condemn the individualism of extremist Protestants (the dissenters and sectarians alluded to in the sermon on the Penitential Psalm). But what is remarkable about Donne's argument from precedent is that it has elements which both Protestants and Catholics would subscribe to; the appeal from the precedent of church tradition itself is strongly Roman Catholic in nature, but the fact that his precedents are drawn primarily from Scripture rather than tradition is Protestant.[5] So the effect, or perhaps even the function, of this argument is to draw together people of diverse orientations.

Donne's uses of the example-to-rule correspondence are not limited to sermons presented at court or the Inn but appear throughout later sermons preached before lay congregations as well. For example, in a sermon preached at St. Paul's on May 21, 1626, he argues against prayer for the dead, a Catholic practice, pointing out that only a single instance of the practise is recorded in the scriptures. Without additional examples from scripture, Donne insists, this single instance can hardly constitute a general rule. In other words, this single example cannot be reckoned as a precedent determining a universal law applicable to all. Rather, declares Donne, the validity of the example itself should be questioned; in this instance Donne casts a shadow over the reliability of the book in which the practise is reported. After all, he points out, the Book of Maccabees is a book which even the Jews themselves "did not beleeve to be Canonicall" (7: 169). And as Donne makes quite clear elsewhere, though apocryphal books "have alwaies had a favourable aspect, and benigne countenance from the Church of God," they are not to be held "equall to Canonicall Scripture" (7: 402). Indeed, he goes so far as to insist, "It is a more pernicious danger to the Church, to admit a book for *Canonicall*,

which is *not so*, then to reject one that is so" (4: 218). Donne *is* willing to cite the testimony of apocryphal sources when such testimony is supported by Scripture (3: 418-419), but in light of the fact that he handles singular examples from Scripture so very cautiously, it should not be surprising that he dismisses outright examples which are not only singular but apocryphal as well.

By contrast, Donne is willing to cite the authority of a single person, the apostle Paul, as *the* biblical voice that legitimizes the difficult case of Samson as a single example abrogating the "rule" that suicides are condemned. Donne points out that "the *holy Ghost* hath moved S. *Paul* to celebrate *Sampson* in his *great Catalogue*, and so doth all the *Church*" (10: 241). This passage is interesting for several reasons. First of all, Donne rests his argument not only on the basis of Paul's testimony but also on that of "the Church"—something he was unwilling to do in defense of prayer for the dead. Furthermore, in this passage he declares that exceptions to what we believe are God's immutable rules do exist, an indication once again that God's rules are ever beyond man's full understanding. Though Donne does not say so, a primary difference between *this* sole instance and that of the prayer for the dead cited above seems to lie in the Holy Spirit's prompting. Unlike the book of the Maccabees, Paul's letter to the Hebrews with its endorsement of Samson is canonical, the inspired Word or Law of God. Donne thus implies that canonical examples, having received God's seal of approval as it were, must be considered as representatives of Divine Rules. Of course, how we are to interpret such examples (particularly those which are singular) and the extent to which it is possible to determine the rules they represent remain matters of great complexity for Donne, as we have seen. Certainly, Samson, whom Donne identifies in *Biathanatos* as being *"a Type of Christ,"*[6] may be too singular an example to qualify as a precedent warranting general application.

In the *Songs and Sonets*, by contrast, the lone voice needed to establish a singular example as constituting a universal rule is Donne's. Furthermore, in contrast to the denunciation of singularity found in the sermons, in the poems Donne lauds singularity more often than not. In "A nocturnal upon *S. Lucies* day," "The Canonization," and "The Sunne Rising," for instance, he creates singular personae who set themselves apart from the rest of humanity claiming to be examples without precedent, singular examples constituting universal rules. In the sermon on Psalm 32:3-4, Donne insists that to believe something for which we can find no precedent and no rule is to accept that something as miraculous (9: 278). The speakers in many of the

Songs and Sonets present themselves as just that—miracles. "And miracles," writes Donne in his *Essays in Divinity*, "must not be drawne into consequence; ...Miracles are to our apprehension incoherent and independent things with the rest of Nature."[7] That being the case, he argues, we certainly should not plead such examples as precedents: "They seem none of the links of that great chaine of providence, and connexion of causes" (68). And yet, many of Donne's singular personae in the poems *do* propose themselves as models for the rest of the world. For example, the speaker of "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day" certainly sees himself in terms very much like those Donne ascribes to miracles in *The Essays*; having been "re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" (17-18), he is neither man, beast, plant, nor stone. Nevertheless, this singular persona, this extraordinary "nothing," ignores Donne the essayist's injunctions against pleading such examples as precedents; in fact, he directly enjoins his reader, "Study me then, you who shall lovers bee / At the next world" (10-11). Similarly, the "mysterious" lovers of "The Canonization" suggest that "Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above / A patterne of [their] love!" (44-45).

In light of what Donne says about such miraculous examples in the *Essays* and *Sermons*, are we then to read the directives of singular personae in the poems ironically? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Of such "miracles," the preacher warns, "He which hears them, beleeves them but so far as he beleeves the reporter; and he which sees them, suspects his sense in the apprehending, and his judgment in the inquisition and pursuite of the causes; or goes roundly to work, and imputes it all to the Divell" (*Essays*, 68). The degree to which the speakers of those poems mentioned above gain the reader's trust does, indeed, have direct bearing on whether that reader (or even the listener within the poem) believes the "miracle" being recounted. Indeed, adhering to Donne's advice in the *Essays*, the lady of "The Flea" might well have responded to her wooer's analogy by "imput[ing] it all to the Divell." What is even more interesting, as I have already pointed out, is that in many instances, the speakers of the *Songs and Sonets* deliberately create, or at least perceive, a distance—emotional, intellectual, or both—between themselves and "the rest of the world." Thus, in "The Extasie," the two souls condescend to return to their bodies, in part so that "Weake men on love reveal'd may looke" (70), and both "The Sun Rising" and "The Canonization" begin with derogatory dismissals of those caught up in the mundane events of everyday living. By stark contrast, as William Gifford has amply demonstrated in "Time and Place in Donne's Sermons," Donne works in his sermons to eliminate any such distance between himself and his audience.[8] Furthermore,

for Donne, poetry rather than preaching is the proper forum for calling "Fancie and Imagination, by the name of Reason and Understanding" (7: 263). As a preacher, if his distinctions between singular examples and universal precedents are to carry any weight, his audience must find him thoroughly credible; there can be no doubt (as there so often is in the poetry) that what he offers in the name of reason and understanding is anything other than reason and understanding.

In general, then, (though not always, as we have seen) Donne suggests in his sermons that God's universal laws are not to be determined from singular examples. Despite the difficulty of determining which examples constitute worthy models for us to follow, however, Donne insists that trying to live without such precedents is not only presumptuous, but dangerous as well. When in doubt, he proclaims in a sermon of 1620, take refuge in the example of the church, "the Arke," for "all without the Arke is sea; The bottomless and boundless Sea of Rome will hope to swallow us" (3: 185). Here, though Donne explicitly defines "the enemy" as the Roman Catholic church, he refuses, as he does in the other passages we have considered, to be more explicit in identifying which earthly church he believes to be "the Arke." Some critics, most notably Debora Shuger and Arthur Marotti, read such passages in Donne's sermons as an implicit, assumed defense of the Church of England.[9] But while Donne does, indeed, frequently endorse a "Universall" and "Catholique" church, as we shall see, at the same time, he repeatedly resists overt identification of this church with *any* established religion. For example, in the sermon preached at the Hague in 1619 and revised in 1630, Donne espouses the catholicity, the universality, of the Church:

> Take heed therefore of being seduced to that Church that is in one man; . . .where all infallibility, and assured resolution is in the breast of one man; . . .And since the Church cannot be in one, in an unity, take heed of bringing it too neare that unity, to a paucity, to a few, to a separation, to a Conventicle. The Church loves the name of Catholique; and it is a glorious, and an harmonious name; Love thou those things wherein she is Catholique, . . .Those universall, and fundamentall doctrines, which in all Christian ages, and in all Christian Churches, have beene agreed by all to be necessary to salvation. (2: 280)

As Paul R. Sellin points out with regard to this sermon, however, "Donne's words are not necessarily so 'catholic' nor so *via media* Anglican as outside

the specific context of his preaching at The Hague they may seem."[10] In fact, Sellin argues persuasively that "claims about [Donne's] distinctly 'English' character" are based on evidence that could just as easily be correlated with Continental orthodoxy; for Sellin, Donne's thinking in 1619 and perhaps later as well seems "inclining rather toward Calvinist orthodoxy" than towards Anglican conformism.[11]

At any rate, while explicit identification of the "true" church is not manifest, Donne makes eminently clear, both in the sermon preached at the Hague and elsewhere, that extremes are to be avoided. Thus, in the second of his Prebend Sermons, preached at St. Paul's, January 1625/26, he urges reliance on precedent as a stay against "the enemy" of radical Protestantism:

> if I come to extemporall prayer, and extemporall preaching, I shall come to an extemporall faith, and extemporall religion; and then I must looke for an extemporall Heaven, a Heaven to be made for me; for to that Heaven which belongs to the Catholique Church, I shall never come, except I go by the way of the Catholique Church, by former Idea's, former examples, former patterns. (7: 61)

Similarly, in another sermon, Donne pays tribute to Abraham's faith, noting at the same time that "Hee had an outward testimony to proceed by" (7: 263). He explains that true faith requires both a rule and an example:

> as there is a Law of faith, and a practise of faith, a Rule of faith, and an example of faith, apply thy selfe to both; Regulate thy faith by the Rule, that is, the Word, and by Example, that is, Beleeve those things which the Saints of God have constantly and unanimely beleeved to be necessary to salvation: The Word is the Law, and the Rule, The Church is the Practise, and the Precedent that regulates thy faith. (7: 263)

As Simpson and Potter point out in their introduction to this sermon, in this passage (as with the sermon on Samson), "Donne was careful. . .to uphold the practise of the church against those who maintained the supremacy of the private spirit" (7: 21). In urging his listeners to consider both "the Word" and the examples of the Saints of the Church rather than setting their own rules or adopting those of isolated individuals, he clearly mocks those Puritan dissidents who more and more in the early years of Charles I's reign set themselves up as the representatives or interpreters of truth:

> And if thou make imaginary revelations, and inspirations thy Law, or the practise of Sectaries thy Precedent, thou doest but call Fancie and Imagination, by the name of Reason and Understanding, and Opinion by the name of Faith, and Singularity, and Schisme, by the name of Communion of Saints. The Law of thy faith is, That that that thou beleevest, be Universall, Catholique, beleeved by all. (7: 263)

In both sermons cited above, Donne identifies proper faith as being associated with the practices of the "universall," and/or "Catholique" church. Of course, no faith is truly "Universall, Catholique, beleeved by all" as Donne seems to envision here, but his intent is once again to impress upon his listeners the dangers of heeding the call of singular "prophets" claiming new revelations and generating conflict within the church universal.

If we, in the twentieth century, are disappointed that Donne's public words are not the skeptical, independent rejection of tradition found in the *Songs and Sonets*, I think we fail to acknowledge the extent to which Donne perceives himself as a shepherd of those with "weake understandings." As a poet, Donne can confront his intellectual equals with angry, shocking, even dogmatic words even when dealing with matters of religion, but when he is actually responsible for the salvation of souls, he must temper his appeal accordingly. Furthermore, having come from a family that suffered religious persecution, Donne might consciously and actively *resist* the politicizing of religion. Certainly, as a public spokesperson in a time of religio-political unrest, as one whose sermons would be regularly and carefully scrutinized for signs of religious and/or political apostacy, Donne would very quickly have lost his position and quite possibly his life had he used the pulpit as a platform for anything other than what *could* (and probably would) be interpreted as supporting the established church and monarchy. But saying that his sermons *could* be interpreted in this way, does not preclude their being interpreted in other ways as well. What I am suggesting is that in the sermons Donne may actually cloak his own religio-political views in language which is purposely resistant to definitive interpretation. I would also like to suggest in closing, however, that despite stylistic differences, when we compare Donne's orientation in the sermons with what is set forth in two poems directly addressing issues of religion and the church ("Satyre III" and "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear"), we find more similarities than differences.

In each poem, Donne rejects extremes, both "She, which on the other shore / Goes richly painted" ("Show me" 2-3) as well as she "which rob'd and tore / Laments and mournes in Germany and here" (3-4), but in neither does

he identify any earthly church as housing true religion. His admonition in "Satyre III" to "seeke" truth (74) is paralleled in the figure of the "adventuring knights" of the sonnet who "travaile . . . to seeke and then make love" (9-10). Donne's advice in the satire is "doubt wisely" (77), and his catalog of questions in the sonnet expresses just such doubt as to where the true church is to be found. Furthermore, in the satire, Donne openly condemns rulers who politicize religion (90-91) and men who allow their souls to be "tyed / To mans lawes" (93-94). Explicit in the satire and implicit in the sonnet is Donne's belief that all must one church "and forc'd but one allow; / And the right" (70-71), but in neither poem is that one church identified with any earthly religion. While he is willing to eschew individuals—the Phillips or Gregorys, the Harrys or Martins (96-97)—what he defends remains unspecified. Instead, he champions in these poems that which "is embrac'd and open to most men" (14): the "universall, Catholique" church defended in the sermons.

Now, while few would suggest that Donne the poet is defending the Church of England in these poems, many are quick, it seems, to read Donne the preacher as a stuffy, conservative spokesperson for the establishment. Certainly, Donne's sermons can be read this way, but the parallels between the poems and the sermons may point us to a different conclusion. Though Donne's private voice varies notably from the public voice when he speaks of matters profane, I am suggesting that when it comes to defending the Church, the public and private voices converge. In both the sermons and the religious poems, Donne decries extremes, seeking instead to defend the bride of Christ without explicitly identifying her with any particular earthly church. It is enough for him to warn as he does at the end of "Satyre III,"

> those blest flowers that dwell
> At the rough streames calme head, thrive and do well,
> But having left their roots, and themselves given
> To the streames tyrannous rage, alas are driven
> Through mills, and rockes, and woods, and at last, almost
> Consum'd in going, in the sea are lost. (103-108)

Not only does this passage echo the claim in the sermon of 1620 that "all without the Arke [of the church] is sea" (3: 524), it also sounds very much like Donne's warning in one of the first sermons he preached: "the Devil labours to Devoure. . .Those who are without the pale, without the Church, and those that are Rebellious and refractary within it, these he may devoure without any

resistance" (1: 165). As I have attempted to show in this paper, Donne clearly *is* willing in both the sermons and at least two poems to say what the church is *not*. By embracing his role as interpreter of examples and by refusing to identify "the Church" in more specific religio-political terms, Donne the preacher maintains his independence, the character trait we find so attractive in Donne the poet.

SUNY College at Cortland

Notes

[1] See William R. Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); and Winfried Schleiner, *The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970).

[2] See Jeanne Shami, "Donne's Protestant Casuistry: Cases of Conscience in the *Sermons*," *Studies in Philology* 80 (1983): 53-66; and Camille Slights, *The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[3] All passages from the sermons will be taken from *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62) and will be referred to by volume and page number parenthetically within the text.

[4] All poetry selections are taken from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross, (New York: New York University Press, 1966). Further references to the poems will be made parenthetically by line number within the text.

[5] In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), John Calvin decries the "Romanist" reliance on "innumerable human traditions" as "so many nets to ensnare miserable souls" (4.10.1). He argues that "to trace the origins of these traditions. . .back to the apostles [the Catholic church's argument from precedent] is pure deceit" (4.10.18). In place of such faulty reliance on the "customary practise" of the church, Calvin admonishes, "They should acknowledge one King, their deliverer Christ, and should be governed by one law of freedom, the holy Word of the gospel" (4.10.1). At the same time, Calvin, like Donne, warns against the fanatical "appeal to the Holy Spirit" by "those who, having forsaken Scripture, imagine some way or other of reaching God" (1.9.1).

[6] Reprint of the First Edition [1646] (New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1930), Part 3, Dist. 5, Sect. 4.

[7] Ed. Evelyn Simpson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 68. All passages from the *Essays* are taken from this edition. Further references will be made parenthetically by page number within the text.

[8] *PMLA* 82 (1967): 388-98.

[9] Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

[10] *'So Doth, So Is Religion': John Donne and Diplomatic Contexts in the Reformed Netherlands, 1619-1620* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), p. 124.

[11] Sellin, pp. 178-179.