The Concept of *Sermo* in Donne and Herbert

John T. Shawcross

We have all read and heard sermons. Asked what a sermon is, we would say it is the talk that a minister might give during a church service, with the connotation of lengthiness, reproof, or exhortation. Outside the church locus, a sermon implies for us some kind of superior lecturing at us, telling us what we do or did that is wrong and how to amend our ways. There will be a sense that the present will lead to a future, which may be undesirable if we do not heed the words of the sermon but happy if we do. I suppose those connotations have accrued with the sermonizing of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century preachers, leading, for example, to Jonathan Edwards' fire-and brimstone approach. And the style of the sermon has altered accordingly from that delivered by such Anglican churchmen as John Donne and Thomas Adams.

Evelyn Simpson noted in Donne's sermons certain earmarks of the sermonic which I would stress: "There is perhaps less intellectual power in the sermons of Donne's last two years, and there is much prolixity and repetition, but the man himself appears more lovable in his desire to avoid oratorical fireworks and to preach the gospel as plainly as he can."[1] Gale H. Carrithers defines the genre this way: "a Christian sermon is the activity of a certain figure—a *preacher*—dealing concretely ..., and conventionally in prose, with what by definition is a *free* challenge of the highest import"; it is not a lecture or straight exposition despite the confused jumbling of the two in more recent times; and "A preacher would usually *place* his text in a biblical or congregational context. He would then *divide* his text into the *parts* which would become the sections of his sermon."[2] Dennis Quinn has separated Donne's work from lecturing, showing Donne's use of the Bible, for instance, as "an infinitely adaptable spiritual tool" rather than a proof-text of one's doctrinal exposition.[3] The imagery of the sermons aims at spiritual vision through memory rather than through rational intellect, a concept well

developed and demonstrated by Winfried Schleiner.[4] Joan Webber evidenced that Donne shaped "his prose in such a way as to appeal directly to the memory, by use of the long loose 'Senecan' sentence that Morris Croll calls meditative, and that seems to advance with the progress of thought and emotion, a sentence shaped for exploration and recollection of known truths, rather than for exposition and persuasion."[5] Douglas Bush reminds us that the sermon was "a highly developed literary form, the product of an unbroken oratorical tradition which went back to the ancients" and that "Whatever his particular method, the preacher had scope for his whole range of gifts, spiritual, intellectual, literary, and histrionic."[6]

The foregoing statements should erase the popular current view of what an early seventeenth-century sermon is and what it intends. The tradition to which Bush refers had in Donne and Herbert's time led to a literary form just as the epic had been developed out of the folk materials of an oral culture. The sermon was still largely oral, despite publication during the Renaissance, with none, at least then, being written down for readers primarily, even if some were altered when they went into print. And it is that oral context which seems insufficiently heeded in discussions of the sermon. The oral performance received its name from the Latin noun *sermo, sermonis* (through Norman French), which meant a *speaking* or *talking* with someone, *a conversation*. It always carries the connotation of ordinary speech and the language of conversation. The noun was developed from *sero, serere*, meaning to *arrange* or *join* or *put together*, as in our word *series* or *dissertation*. The concept of *sermo* which thus underlies the sermon is a conversation which, as in ordinary speech, develops by a joining together of ideas. Implied is a listener, whose reactions are assumed, and a line of development which has a clear forward movement, although there may be some repetition, as one idea leads to another. The time frame is a present, though the past and future may be involved.

An important phrase in the Middle Ages was *de virtute sermonis*, which stressed the power of expression. Philotheus Boehner[7] has discussed the phrase in logic as differentiating between the use of a term in its proper (that is, denotative) meaning and its improper (that is, metaphoric) meaning. Beneath the distinction are two views of language use, one based on things (*res*) and one based on convention (*verba*). In an unpublished study Martin Elsky argues that the Humanists of the English sixteenth-century Renaissance synthesized these two views of language, uniting *verbum cordis*, that is, internal and heartfelt language (or thought), and *verbum oris*, that is, external and spoken language (or expression). The sermons of the early seventeenth century can, thus, be

seen to stress *de virtute sermonis*, emphasizing *res* and the proper meaning of terms, the *verbum cordis*, but at the same time presenting *verba* by extending that meaning through *verbum oris*. The usual structure of the sermon—a joining together of ideas in a conversational way—facilitated the development of added meanings and extensions of contexts, and that development is dependent on expression. We might compare "The Authour's Prayer before Sermon," which George Herbert attached to *A Priest to the Temple, Or, The Countrey Parson His Character, and Rule of Holy Life* (1642):

> Ride on Lord, because of the word of truth, and meek-
> ness, and righteousnesse; and thy right hand shall teach
> thee terrible things. Especially, blesse this portion here
> assembled together, with thy unworthy Servant speak-
> ing unto them: Lord Jesu! teach thou me, that I may
> teach them: Sanctifie, and inable all my powers, that in
> their full strength they may deliver thy message rever-
> ently, readily, faithfully, & fruitfully. O make thy word a
> swift word, passing from the ear to the heart, from the
> heart to the life and conversation: That as the rain returns
> not empty, so neither may thy word, but accomplish that
> for which it is given. O Lord hear, O Lord forgive! O
> Lord, hearken, and do so for thy blessed Son's sake, in
> whose sweet and pleasing words, we say, *Our Father*,
> &c.[8]

What I thus would like to suggest in this article is that the concept of *sermo* as I have outlined it—a conversation and a joining together of ideas, presented to lead the auditor into a heartfelt and thoughtful experience—underlies some of the poetry of both Donne and Herbert, providing a somewhat different avenue into our understanding of those poems and our appreciation of their form, structure, and imagistic components.

Most of Donne's *Songs and Sonets* reflect the conversational style in setting of speaker and auditor, in tone and language. "The Dreame" immediately conforms:

> Dear love, for nothing less then thee
> Would I have broke this happy dreame,
>   It was a theame
> For reason, much too strong for phantasie,
> Therefore thou wakd'st me wisely. . . .

There is no tortuous syntax, no difficult words, no abstruse images, in refutation of some supposed earmarks of Donnean 'metaphysical' verse. The first lines of "A Valediction of weeping" are the same except for the equation of tears and coins:

> Let me powre forth
> My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here,
> For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,
> And by this Mintage they are something worth . . . .

The language is conversational in tone, though not colloquial, and following its syntaxis is not difficult, despite the metaphors involved. "I am two fooles, I know, / For loving, and for saying so / In whining Poetry," says "The triple Foole," and the sour-grapes poet, aware of "Loves Usury," requests, "For every houre that thou wilt spare mee now, / I will allow, / Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee."

This colloquial tone has been noted often, the most usual example being, "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love." And much has been written about the poetic voice and some things about the auditor. Unlike the sermon the audience is singular (or appears to be). But if, indeed, it is a concept of *sermo* that informs these poems, we see their intent differently and their structure in a different, less involved light. "The Dreame" is of the present though dealing with an event just now transpired (he *says*), with the hope for future action should the speaker's entreaty be heeded: "Enter these armes, for since thou' thoughtst it best, / Not to dreame all my dreame, let's act the rest." His case is based on teaching, offering, as Carrithers put it, "a *free* challenge of the highest import": "That love is weake, where fear's as strong as hee; / 'Tis not all spirit, pure and brave, / If mixture it of *Feare, Shame, Honor*, have. . . ." The poem is organized around three topics in three stanzas: the dream, her being, her effect on him. One leads to the other, and the whole has one intent stated in those last two lines of stanza one. The background of the broken dream which he thinks should now in the conscious world be completed leads to the compliment that she is even beyond the angelic—he is profane, not she. He is using a familiar enough technique, but the lines "it could not chuse but bee / Prophane, to thinke thee any thing but thee" are there to evade her being considered profane in a prostitutional sense. From this topic he moves to iterate his true intent of intercourse, by commenting on the way she "lights" him up by her presence, even though she leaves through too much fear, feelings of shame, a sense of honor. The organization has been a joining together as in the "Tapers light" of stanza two and the kindled torch (with its phallic

pun) in stanza three, and some contrastive repetition in the last two lines of the first and third stanzas, where the dream is over and reality should ensue and where the dream is reinvoked as long as reality does not occur, reality being the "act" that they might do.

As I read the poem under a concept of *sermo*, I cannot agree with certain conclusions of Mario Praz's often-reprinted article, "Donne and the Poetry of His Time." I cannot call the imagery crabbed and prosaic, nor can I accept that Donne's "sole preoccupation is with the whole effect."[9] We have instead a play on logic to persuade the auditor to succumb physically to him *de virtute sermonis.*

"A Valediction of weeping" is usually read biographically. Be that as it may, the three stanzas of the poem move to effect a heartfelt experience on the part of the auditor, but it is an experience which, like a sermon, hopes to teach the auditor something. In Herbert's expression: "That as the rain returns not empty, so neither may thy word, but accomplish that for which it is given." His tears in stanza one are, in reversal of reality, "Pregnant of thee" (the woman). In stanza two they are likened to a globe that becomes "All," its seas resulting from an overflow of both their tears. In stanza three the sphere of the globe which is more than moon is likened to her sphere. The relationship of female and moon indicates that the stanza is a direct address to the auditor as well as to the globe which he is about to travel upon:

> O more then Moone,
> Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,
> Weep me not dead, in thine armes, but forbeare
> To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone.

While her weeping (and sighing) may "teach" the sea how to be tempestuous and upset the ship in which he sails, potentially causing his death, he has aimed to teach her not to cry. He has begun by asking that his tears be allowed to come forth now as the couple part, so that they will not continue after he has gone:

> Let me powre forth
> My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here.

So likewise, we infer, may she cry and sigh now, and indeed we can realize that it is she who has been crying as the poem begins. But the poem ends by admonishing weeping after he has gone: she is now asked not to set an example for the wind to bring him harm:

> Let not the winde
> Example finde,
> To doe me more harme, then it purposeth.

The time frame is present but the future is involved. The listener's reactions have apparently been an increase in crying and sighing. And the images behind the poem have been concatenated to lead to "accomplish that for which his words are given." The parallels, as in a sermon, underscore the thought they present. Read as informed by *sermo*, the poem cannot be an example of ambiguity as Empson discusses it in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.[10]

While one can accept that the listener of "The triple Foole" is some nebulous soundingboard, it is really the poet himself, talking to himself. It becomes a kind of meditation built on a thought or emotion exploring and recollecting known truths rather than to persuade. The poem is certainly oral, conversational. The initial thought of writing poetry in which he whines his unrequited love links up "wiseman," dissolution through purgation, and plagiarists who trivialize his love and grief through songs. He is a little wise by being able to write poetry, but he thus becomes the best fool by offering opportunity for others to increase his grief.

The usurious god of Love addressed in "Loves Usury" is being asked not to cause the poet truly to fall in love, since we infer his experience has been so one-sided and grief-filled. He advances a bargain that he be allowed now in youth to lead a love-life ruled by body and noncommitment, and in old age to fall in love and submit to whatever Love exacts of him then. But, of course, the addressee is a fiction: the real addressee is the poet himself who tries to convince himself through his experiences, not through rational intellect, to be blase about love; it's the only way to be spared grief. He is teaching himself, though clearly not "sermonizing."

I have chosen poems which I doubt anyone would have thought of as reflecting *sermo*. My remarks suggest the way in which the concept may underlie a number of poems not read in such a context. Two more examples, but of poems which can immediately be thought of in connection with *sermo* will embolden this as avenue to understanding. "Lecture upon the Shadow" specifically says that the poet is going to read a lecture in love's philosophy to his loved one, the auditor. It presents a pointed discussion to lead to an intellectual realization on the part of the listener; it is a proof-text of the philosophy being advanced; the ideas are not simply linked as if parts in the division of a whole, but sustained argument growing out of the metaphor of sun and shadow.

The poem is *not* an example of *sermo*, and its contrast with those that we have been considering indicates their affinity with the concept of *sermo* I am presenting. On the other hand, "Communitie" clearly has the tone of *sermo*: it does not lecture although it offers "philosophic" observations; it winds from one idea to another (a supplied memory of important truths) to lead to an attitude or belief, with an implication for futural attitude and action on the part of the auditors. And indeed, the audience gives every impression of being multiple.

I have, of course, not been arguing that these poems are sermons, but rather that the concept of *sermo*, which underlies sermons in intent, style, and treatment, also underlies some of the poems. George Herbert's work, like his follower Edward Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations* less than a century later, is replete with examples of the author's prayers before sermon, and recognizing the influence of *sermo* on those poems, I think, nullifies some of the difficulties that critics have created therein.

The conversational tone is everywhere and need not specifically be quoted; the addressee is usually God, but we note the other usual addressee in "O Blessed bodie! Whither art thou thrown?" ("Sepulchre"), "Rise heart; thy Lord is risen" ("Easter"), "Canst be idle? canst thou play, / Foolish soul who sinn'd to day?" ("Businesse"). The poems, in fact, can be divided most frequently into "speakings" to God or himself or "narratives" as in "The World" or "Christmas." There is no lecturing with a well-defined point to be made in such poems as "The Discharge" or "A Parodie" or "Constancie." They are all, like the sermon itself, spiritual visions moving to known truths, and they are all built on a linking of materials as they might come linearly to mind as one talks. "Conscience" is a case in point:

> Peace pratler, do not lowre:
> Not a fair look, but thou dost call it foul:
> Not a sweet dish, but thou dost call it sowre:
>> Musick to thee doth howl.
>> By listning to thy chatting fears
>> I have both lost mine eyes and eares.
>
>
>> Pratler, no more, I say:
> My thoughts must work, but like a noiselesse sphere;
> Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:
>> No room for pratlers there.
>> If thou persistest, I will tell thee,
>> That I have physick to expell thee.

> And the receit shall be
> My Saviours bloud: when ever at his board
> I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me,
>   And leaves thee not a word;
>   No, not a tooth or nail to scratch,
>   And at my actions carp, or catch.

>   Yet if thou talkest still,
> Besides my physick, know there's some for thee:
> Some wood and nails to make a staffe or bill
>   For those that trouble me:
>   The bloudie crosse of my deare Lord
>   Is both my physick and my sword.

The poem has received little critical attention, but its exemplification of *sermo* is clear. The movement is from potential internal lets on one's record in the Book of Life to defiant action against potentially external lures. The poem appears immediately after "Obedience" (and it and those following are not found in the Williams manuscript), suggesting that only obedience is not enough to assure salvation: there must also be action directed outwardly. The conscience opposed to sensual joys so overprotects that the senses—seeing, tasting, hearing—are lost. The conversation begun (for conscience continues to prattle), the speaker admonishes that his thoughts must be free to work by themselves (to make him worthy). The means to expel conscience, if it will not go willingly, is communion, for the ensuing state of grace does not admit any need for conscience. This truth he has known, of course, but he will proceed, through the linkage of these ideas, to another: conscience may also fend off, not only his "tooth or nail" and "actions," but those that externally trouble him. The wood and nails of the cross, representing the Savior's defiance of men's evil, can become a sword of conscience to fight assault from without. The physic will purge; the sword will ward off. I cannot agree that the main point of the poem is repentance: it is a conversation with the self, leading to an awareness, a truth previously known but now again iterated, that may alter the actions of the immediate future.[11]

Those poems addressed to the Lord are, of course, ultimately directed to the self, and as such many illustrate what has been said about *sermo*. But rather than being sermonic, they exist to bring the poet to the point of the delivering of the sermonic, creating, as it were, one who fulfills what Milton admonished: "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to

write well hereafter in laudable things, ought him selfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things."[12] A poem like "Clasping of hands" or "The Search" fulfills these criteria.

Acknowledgment of *sermo* in Herbert's poems may alter critical commentary, and "The Windows" provides an example:

> Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?
>   He is a brittle crazie glasse:
> Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
>   This glorious and transcendent place,
>   To be a window, through thy grace.
>
>
> But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,
>   Making thy life to shine within
> The holy Preachers; then the light and glorie
>   More rev'rend grows, & more doth win:
>   Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.
>
>
> Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
>   When they combine and mingle, bring
> A strong regard and aw: but speech alone
>   Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
>   And in the eare, not conscience ring.

Clearly this is a general preparatory to sermon; without the fusion of doctrine and life speech merely rings in the ear, not in the conscience of the congregation. Man the preacher must become like unto a church window annealed by God and reflecting his life as the man-God. R. A. Forsyth has missed the point when he says that the poem proposes that it is only by becoming Christ-like that man can become the true Christian.[13] And so has W. H. Auden: "but Herbert thought that, on occasion, a stained-glass window could be of more spiritual help than a sermon."[14]

Of course, we will find this concept of *sermo* in poems of such authors as Robert Herrick, as well. Conversational tone, linked ideas (here unified by a single image), and a culminating thought are evident in even a brief poem like "No Shipwrack of Vertue. To a friend":

> Thou sail'st with others, in this *Argus* here;
> Nor wrack, or *Bulging* thou hast cause to feare:
> But trust to this, my noble passenger;

Who swims with Vertue, he shall still be sure
(*Ulysses*-like) all tempests to endure;
And 'midst a thousand gulfs to be secure.

But the much-anthologized "To the Virgins, to make much of Time" is unexpectedly sermonic, though most *carpe rosam* poems are not. The time frame here is decidedly the present, we realize, in spite of the future which impends in each stanza; each stanza is, as it were, the sermonist's division of his text: flowers, the sun, chronology, the culminating thought.

University of Kentucky

Notes

[1] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), Vol. 10, Introduction, p. 4.

[2] *Donne at Sermons* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1972), pp. 8, 3, 4 respectively.

[3] See "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *ELH* 27 (1960), 276-97.

[4] *The Imagery of Donne's Sermons* (Providence, RI: Brown Univ. Press, 1970).

[5] *Contrary Music* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 22, quoting Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," *Studies in English Philology*, ed. Kemp Malone and Martin B. Rudd (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1929), p. 452.

[6] *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600-1660*, 2nd ed. revised (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), pp. 313-14.

[7] *Medieval Logic* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 38-39.

[8] *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), p. 289.

[9] See *A Garland for John Donne, 1631-1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931), pp. 51-72; quotations, pp. 56, 57.

[10] *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), pp. 175-83.

[11] James Winny offers a reading of the poem in "A Critical Examination of Some Metaphysical Poems," *A Preface to Donne* (New York: Scribner's, 1971). Barbara Kiefer Lewalski writes of its having "some affinity with those meditations upon one's spiritual state intended to promote repentance and the considerations of one's evidences" (*Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979], p. 171).

[12] *An Apology against a Pamphlet call'd A Modest Confutation* (London, 1641), p. 16.

[13] "Herbert, Clough, and Their Church Windows," *Victorian Poetry* 7 (1969), 17-30.

[14] *George Herbert*, ed. W. H. Auden (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), p. 11.