Squaring the Circle: Metaphors of the Divine in the Work of Donne and his Contemporaries

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Introduction: Squaring the Circle

There is a splendid apocryphal saying about Donne attributed to King James I by Archdeacon Plume which, whether genuine or not, is most apt to the topic of this paper: "Dr. Donne's verses," the King is reported to have said, "are like the peace of God: they pass all understanding." Now the difficulty of Donne's work has perplexed and fascinated readers in almost every generation since the Jacobean period, but King James's quip may (unknowingly) contain more than just a mocking wit. If the peace of God, as St. Paul concluded (Phil. 4: 7), indeed "passeth all understanding," then so too may texts which attempt to convey a sense of that peace by means of their words. Can words which in any way address the human "understanding" create an impression of the divine, which is, as the biblical text suggests, beyond or outside the realm of understanding? My concern here is to raise this and a number of other questions related to the metaphorical language employed by Donne and his contemporaries in their attempts to describe, converse with, or attend upon God.

My title quotation is taken from Donne's poem "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Phillip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister," which begins,

> Eternall God, (for whom who ever dare
> Seeke new expressions, doe the Circle square,
> And thrust into strait corners of poore wit
> Thee, who art cornerlesse and infinite)
> I would but blesse thy Name, not name thee now. (467-8)

Donne seems to be saying here that "expressions" for God are an impossibility; to try to contain God in the "poore wit" of the human writer is to "thrust into strait corners" that which is "cornerlesse," and thus to do the impossible,

to "square" the circle. The eternal and infinite cannot be expressed in the finite proportions of language. Donne himself, he implies, does not "dare" to do what the Sidneys attempted; he does not therefore try to "name" God, but will simply "blesse" God's name and thereby stay on safe ground.

This point of view has an ancient pedigree, though it is rarely so dynamically summed up as by Donne's verse. The principle of divine remoteness from human language and thought was given in simple clarity by St Anselm: "Lord, you are [then] not only that than which nothing greater can be thought; you are something greater than it is possible to think about." (*Proslogion*, ch. 15, p. 257). If we cannot think about God—other than in ways which always fall short of his true being—then we can surely not put the non-thought into words. Words will always represent a falling short of this great unthinkable other. Donne's contemporary Richard Hooker, despite being the author of multiple volumes on the *Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Polity*, stopped short when it came to writing or speaking about God himself, the church's ultimate focus: "Our greatest eloquence concerning God," he wrote with magnificent plainness, "is our silence." Mary Sidney, in her translation of Psalm 62 in the collection praised by Donne, used a brief alliterative phrase which modestly suggests the linguistic relationship between the believer and God: "my soul in silence."

Although Donne's anxieties about "squaring the circle" appear to be in line with this aesthetic of silence, a lack of language is not a principle with which we immediately associate him. The evidence of much of his (extensive) writing is in fact that he did not hold consistently to the idea that God is beyond human language. In a sermon of 1629, for example, he notes how some Platonic philosophers thought that "all verball prayer" was "too homely for God," and that "when our Thoughts were made Prayers, and the Heart flowed into the Tongue, and that we had invested and appareled our Mediations with words," then this was "superfluous" and inappropriate. Donne argues, on the other hand, against these philosophies, speaking up stoutly in favor of linguistic "dress" for spiritual thoughts, just as God, who is "all spirit," put on the flesh of a human body in the form of Christ and taught in human language. "God came to us *in verbo*, In the word; for Christ is, The word that was made flesh. Let us, that are Christians, go to God so, too" (*Sermons* 8: 338). Donne's comments here bring a vital element into the discussion: the "Word" is seen as not only human but divine. God came to us in Christ, the Word, and so we are given the right to approach God by the same means. There is a divine eloquence—the incarnation—given as a model for human

attempts at divine expression. Nor does Donne fight shy of rhetoric, tradition-
ally the best and most artful use of language: "How empty a thing is
Rhetoric?" he asks, rhetorically, in the pulpit, adding, "and yet rhetoric will
make absent and remote things present to your understanding" (*Sermons* 3:
87). Elaborate language thus has the power to bring distant things—such as,
perhaps, God—close to human "understanding" (St. Paul and King James
notwithstanding!).

Taking one brave step further, Donne suggests in an earlier sermon that
by means of the language of the liturgy and of preaching, earthly words not
only grant us an insight into God but may actually make him present to us:
"God made us with his word, and with our words we make God" (*Sermons*
3: 259). This reciprocal creativity, revealing a sacramental sense of the word
as "making God" here on earth, is Donne's most radical vision of the power
of human language and has brought us a long way from the principle of a
rhetoric of silence. It also links with the sense of the transforming energies of
Donne's own art as perceived by his contemporaries. Edward, Lord Herbert
of Cherbury, wrote in his "Elegy for Dr. Donne" that "thou didst so refine /
Matter with words, that both did seem divine / When thy breath uttered them."
Matter and words are lowly, but both can be "refined"; Edward Herbert's own
language is hyperbolic, as we would expect in such a context, but it echoes
Donne's claim that human language can be rendered "divine" and given the
power to trans-substantiate, as it were, earthly matter, and thereby "make
God" in and through words. Remembering Vitruvius's figure of the human
body giving form to both a square and a circle, perhaps it is possible to
accommodate the four-square wit of the devotional writer within the all-
encompassing divine circle.

Metaphor and Poetry

How, then, do writers begin to render God linguistically? It seems to me
that there are fundamentally two ways. The first is by means of naming; as
Donne wrote in the *Essays in Divinity*, God "contracted" his "immensity" and
"shut" himself "within Syllables," and "accepted a Name from us" (37). Even
names can represent a mystical non-representation, the term *Jahweh*, for
example, cryptically meaning "I am that I am." Beyond naming, the only
other way of embodying God in language is by means of metaphor. Despite
Donne's argument that we can "make God" in our words, it is in the nature
of fallen existence that no language can exist which is able fully to match or
express God. Thus description or evocation of the divine must proceed by the

use of likeness or connection. This is the essence of metaphor—the expression of one idea by means of another—and would suggest that metaphor is a sheer necessity for religious understanding, in its struggle towards some kind of likeness of God.

The idea of metaphor inherited by Donne and his contemporaries is neatly expressed in Thomas Wilson's 1553 definition: a metaphor is "an alteration of a woorde from the proper and naturall meanynge, to that whiche is not proper, and yet agreeth therunto, by some lykenes that appeareth to be in it" (91b). In a devotional context the "naturall" or secular meaning is used to convey a "lykenes" to a sacred meaning or idea—an apt use of language in the service of religion, since faith precisely concerns the "agreeing" or connecting of one realm to another. There is, however, a hint of danger in Wilson's description; the new meaning found in the "woorde" is not "proper" but an "alteration." We are already alerted here to the threat that metaphor introduces: it is useful "and yet" possibly associated with impropriety, difficulty, the slippage of meaning. Despite its inherent dangers, metaphor (and thinking through metaphor) is essential to religious devotion, as George Herbert well knew; he advised his "Country Parson" accordingly, that "things of ordinary use are not only to serve in the way of drudgery, but to be washed, and cleansed, and serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths" (*Priest*, p. 157). This is not only wise instruction for preachers, but also an illustration of a fundamental Christian principle; as Donne wrote in his *Devotions*, God has "made little things to signifie great" (p. 114).

A metaphoric mode of thinking underpins Christianity in its principles and practice, and authorizes writers in their use of the language of images, comparisons, or "signs." Such figurative language, signifying a way of interpreting the world other than literally, is the classical basis for eloquence. As George Puttenham put it, to write eloquently "cannot be without the use of figures" (p. 202), and this eloquence based in metaphor was, in his view, the essential feature of poetry: "the chief prayse and cunning of our Poet is in the discreet using of his figures . . . with a delectable varietie, by all measure and just proportion, and in places most aptly to be bestowed" (p. 202). Puttenham's adjectives are significant here: this figurative or metaphoric language is "delectable" in poetry, but only when it is also "discreet," measured, in "just proportion" and— importantly—"aptly" used.

According to Donne, it was indeed apt for poetry, which, although weak and imperfect, can make "things that are not, as though they were" (*Sermons* 3: 87) to use metaphors in order to bring the spiritual realm closer to human

perception. After all, as Donne pointed out in a sermon of 1625, the Holy Ghost, while being "a direct worker upon the soule and conscience of man," is also "a Metaphoricall, and Figurative expresser of himselfe, to the reason and understanding of man" (*Sermons* 9: 328). What is surprising about this description, it seems to me, is not so much that Donne sees God (in the person of the Holy Ghost) as a user of metaphors, as that he locates the impact of the metaphoric on human "reason and understanding" not, as we might have expected, on the imagination or the emotions. Metaphors have a rational purpose, and so, presumably, do the human poets' attempts at metaphors for God.

In a second discussion of God as metaphorist, in Expostulation 19 of his *Devotions* (pp. 99-100), Donne again makes the distinction between the divine tactics of "direct" and "literal" plainness on the one hand, and a "figurative, metaphoricall" style on the other. The suggestion is, again, that to be metaphorical is indirect, a term which brings with it the implications of complexity or deception. It is no doubt for this reason that, when Donne is about to introduce the idea of God as "a figurative, a metaphoricall God," he adds, "Lord, I intend it to thy glory, and let no prophane mis-interpreter abuse it to thy diminution" (p. 100). He is perhaps also guarding against the implication that, if God is a "metaphoricall God," he is in some way less real and trustworthy than a "direct God." Thus, while Donne is willing to assert God as a model for the metaphoric, he is conscious of the philosophical dangers of this position. However, he goes on to add that he is indeed referring here not only to God's own words as metaphoric, but also his actions: "The style of thy works, the phrase of thine actions, is metaphoricall." It becomes even more appropriate, therefore, for the poet to approach and construct God by means of figurative language; with a creative freedom greater than that achieved by naming God, the poet who writes metaphorically can begin to reflect the language and imitate the actions of God.

Kinds of Metaphor

What kinds of metaphor were available to Donne and his contemporaries in their expression of the divine? The richest source of metaphors was, of course, the Bible, the text on which most defences of figurative language in the service of religion were based. Lady Anne Southwell, in an inspired letter written in 1627, argues that the created world is itself a divine poem and that, furthermore, a model of "poesye in perfect beautye" is to be found in God's own text, the Scriptures: "see the kingly Prophett, that sweete singer of Israell,

explicating the glorye of our god, his power in creating; his mercye in redeeming, his wisedome in preseruing making these three, as it were the Coma, Colon, & Period to euery stanzae: who would not say, the musicall speeres did yeeld a cadencye to his songe, & in admiration crye out; O never enough to be admired, deuine Poesye" (Cavanaugh, p. 283). Anne Southwell here defiantly claims the central role of the poetic principle in the grammar of creation, asserting that "Imagination goes before Realitye" and that "devine Poesye" is the "banquett of soules." And the fount of that "devine Poesye," with all its figurative splendour and harmonious proportion, is the Bible.

For Donne, the Bible served as a much better storehouse of figurative language than any classical text: "there are not so eloquent books in the world, as the Scriptures: Accept those names of Tropes, and Figures, which the Grammarians and Rhetoricians put upon us, and we may be bold to say, that in all their Authors, Greek and Latin, we cannot finde so high, and so lively, examples, of those Tropes, and those Figures, as we may in the Scriptures" (*Sermons* 2: 171). As a source of metaphors which were "high" enough to depict God's being, but also "lively" enough to suggest his creative and redeeming actions, the Bible could not be bettered. Among the books of the Scriptures, the Psalms were particularly important, not only because they are poetic but also since they supply an example of a human voice in dialogue with God. As Anthony Gilby wrote, "whereas al other scriptures do teach us what God saith unto us, these praiers ... do teach us, what we shall saie unto God."

Donne and his contemporaries learned from the Psalms that a rich seam of metaphors is to be found in the created world itself. This is, of course, made clear in the Sidney Psalm translations, where given metaphors from the natural world are repeated and extended. In the penultimate stanza of her version of Psalm 104, for example, Mary Sidney writes:

> Soe may it, oh! so may it ever goe,
> > Jehovas workes his glorious gladdnesse be,
> Who touching Mountaynes, Mountaynes smoaking grow,
> > Who eyeing Earth, Earth quakes with quivering knee.
> > As for my self, my seely self, in me
> While life shall last, his worth in song to show
> > I framed have a resolute decree,
> And thankfull be, till being I foregoe.

While the biblical original relates the earthquake and volcano as part of a narrative of God's mighty power, Mary Sidney transforms this into a metaphorical description of the person of God the Father, *"who* touching Mountaynes,"* causes them to erupt, *"who* eyeing Earth,"* causes it to quake. The phenomena of nature are not just part of an inventory of creation but a way of understanding the nature of God. When she comes to describe herself, the speaker's own being is a "seely self," despite her commitment to praise God for the rest of her days. The stanza as a whole contrasts the direct, plain language of human self-expression with the indirect, metaphorical language of the expression of God.

An interesting step taken by the biblical author and by Mary Sidney, again in her 104th Psalm, is to use a double metaphor, by which I mean that a natural phenomenon is itself described metaphorically in relation to God. The poem opens:

> Make O my soule the subject of thy Songe
> > Th"eternall Lord: O Lord, O God of might,
> To thee, to thee, all roiall pompes belonge,
> > Clothed art thou in state and glory bright:
> > For what is else this Eye-delighting light
> But unto thee a garment wide and long?
> > The vaunted heaven but a Curtaine right,
> A Canopy, thou over thee hast hunge?

The "Eye-delighting light," so richly and rhetorically described in that phrase of Mary Sidney's, is often simply a metaphor for God, as in the work of Vaughan and Milton in particular. But here, the light in Sidney's Psalm has become "a garment," the glorious robe of God, in a second stage of figurative thinking. The more unimaginable the focus of the description is, the greater the need for layers of metaphorical access.

One group of metaphors of the divine which obviously originate from the Bible, but can take on many and varied forms, are those which we might loosely describe as *amorous.* Since Achsah Guibbory considers the influence of the *Song of Songs* on Donne in a forthcoming paper in this journal, I shall not pause long on that model of religious eroticism, other than to point out that the variety of uses of this trope does seem to bear some relation to the gender of the poet. We are probably all familiar with the violence of Donne's desire to be "ravished" by God as expressed in his "Batter my heart," or the gentle

lover's welcome in Herbert's "Love (III)." These are already two extremes of the metaphor of God as lover, so no easy generalizations are possible. However, it is not, I think, risking essentialism to suggest that these encounters are different in kind from the lyrics of "Eliza," anonymous author of *Eliza's Babes* (1652), who in her poem "The Lover" compares notes with her female reader over their respective partners:

> Come let us now to each discover,
> Who is our friend, and who our Lover,
> What? art thou now asham"d of thine,
> I tell thee true, Ime not of mine.
>
> And you will say when you him see,
> That none but he, desir"d can bee,
> He is the onely pleasing wight,
> Whose presence can content my sight.

This heavenly lover is more homely than those of Donne and Herbert— almost one of the lads— and is in the subsequent stanzas more materially present, with "pleasant haire," a "fair sweet lovely face," and Petrarchan-style "pleasing eyes" which dart arrows into the speaker's heart. Indeed, although paraded as the speaker's boyfriend, the divine lover has some of the feminine traits of the Petrarchan mistress. He also combines the qualities of human attractiveness and distant divinity often found together in Stella and other mistresses of English sonnet sequences. In later poems in Eliza's sequence, for example, the lover is in a quite practical sense a rival to the husband to whom the speaker has been betrothed; in her material context she feels betrayed by her heavenly lover into the arms of an earthly man. And yet the original lover is undoubtedly divine:

> These beauties all are richly grac'st,
> For on his head, a crown is plac'st,
> Of glory, which doth shine so bright,
> As mortall eye can see this light.
>
> This lovely Lord's, the Prince of Peace,
> In him, my joyes will still increase;
> For he's the true, and constant friend,
> Whose love begun, will never end. (p. 24)

A mixture of immediacy and eternity is achieved here through this metaphor of the divine lover, viewed from a feminine perspective. Eliza's verse, written in a paradoxical tone of boastful humility, is a vivid illustration of the curious potential of the metaphor of God as lover, particularly when tangled up with the constraints of a woman's social position. For as Donne asserted from the pulpit, "God is Love, and the Holy Ghost," like the poets after him, "is amorous in his metaphors" (*Sermons* 7: 87).

It is not my purpose in this paper to attempt a catalogue of the most commonly used metaphors of the divine in the early seventeenth century, nor to plot all the differences of usage which I have found between texts by women and men on this intriguing subject. Rather, I am concerned to ask a series of questions concerning the sources, functions, and limitations of metaphor in the work of a range of religious writers, both male and female. Before leaving behind the question of fundamental kinds of metaphor, however, it does seem appropriate briefly to dwell on one other important group of metaphors: abstract geometrical figures or mathematical principles. As far as I can tell, these have no direct biblical precedent but fulfil a mystical fascination with purity of idea, unsullied by material concerns. For Donne, of course, the dominant image of God is the circle—that which cannot be squared—as an emblem of perfection and completeness. The circle is, as Donne reminds us, "endless," just as the love of God remains "to the end" (*Sermons* 6: 173). Even an earthly circle, made with a pair of compasses, is insufficiently perfect as a metaphor for God; he is no earthly mathematician but the creator of the eternal circle which is "stamped with a print, an endlesse, and perfect circle, as soon as it begins" (*Sermons* 2: 200). This circle is, like God but unlike the circle of human life, totally independent of the progress of time, being complete from the beginning and for all time. Donne's spiritual world does, however, entertain the occasional straight line. In his *Devotions* Donne admits that although God is a circle, "first and last, and altogether," he is also, "considered" in terms of his "working upon us, . . . a direct line" (pp. 9-10). This brings to mind immediately Herbert's poem "Coloss. 3.3" in which, instead of Donne's double geometry of circle and straight line, we are confronted (visually and intellectually) with a "double motion." The metaphor of daily human life as a "straight" line is expressed in the conventional horizontal lines of the poem, while the sense of our heavenly tendencies as an "oblique" line is highlighted in the italicized biblical text woven diagonally into the texture of the verse. The idea of the divine within the ordinary is summed up in the poem's form and metaphoric literalness; is this a case of the

"cornerlesse" God being thrust into the "strait corners" of Herbert's wit, or are the metaphors here a mode of discovery?

Functions of Metaphor

This leads us clearly into the question of the functions for which these metaphors of the divine are intended. They serve primarily, I would suggest, as a means of definition and description of God. Donne points out that Christ explains and defines himself in the metaphors of the Bible: "How often, how much more often doth thy Son call himself a *way*, and a *light*, and a *gate*, and a *Vine*, and *bread*, than the *Sonne of God*, or of *Man*?" (*Devotions*, p. 100). In Herbert's "Sighs and Grones," while the speaker is merely "a silie worm," God's capacity for both love and judgement is summed up in a series of directly defining metaphors in the final stanza:

> But O reprieve me!
> For thou hast *life* and *death* at thy command;
> For thou art both *Judge* and *Saviour*, *feast* and *rod*,
> *Cordiall* and *Corrosive*; put not thy hand
> Into the bitter box; but O my God,
> My God, relieve me!

As these lines make clear, the conciseness of simple metaphor leads to an enriching of the poem's pleading; the brief address to God as both "*feast* and *rod*," for instance, unleashes a series of biblical associations, images of joy and punishment, ideas of celebration and chastisement within a family . . . all economically conveyed in two short words. The metaphors are, to borrow another of Herbert's figures, "a box where sweets compacted lie" ("Vertue"), and the use of metaphors for purposes of definition can turn out to be a discovery as well as a containment within language. The element of surprise in the use of metaphor, as Donne further suggests, concerns not only a discovery of God on the part of the writer or reader, but also a reciprocal discovery of the human soul by God. Donne called the memory, where metaphors are to be found and put together, "the Gallery of the soul, hanged with so many, and so lively pictures of the goodness and mercies of thy God to thee," and added that, "as a well made, and well placed picture, looks alwayes upon him that looks upon it; so shall thy God look upon thee, whose memory is thus contemplating him" (*Sermons* 2: 237). If metaphor is a means of definition, discovery and contemplation, it is, according to Donne and his contemporaries, always a mutual experience between God and his creatures.

It is clear from the texts we have already considered, that metaphor is a necessity in writing or speaking about the divine. This applies to more than definitions of God. If the devotional writer wishes to go further into the mysteries of creation, redemption and eternity, then metaphorical thinking becomes even more vital. The incarnation of God in Christ is a recurring mystery for every generation of Christian writers. As Anne Ley wrote in her "Christmas Caroll" of the early 1620s, God's action in sending his son to be born and die for the sins of humanity was "after such a manner . . . as men and angells could not comprehend" (p. 168). That which is beyond comprehension is outside both understanding and linguistic expression; it is, as Ley says of the virgin birth, a "conception most divine," meaning not only the physical conception but also the concept or idea of the incarnation which must take shape in the form of the "word." The only way to deal with such mysteries is by means of metaphor. Donne's description of the incarnation as mystery is most revealing for our sense of the function of metaphor: "all the mysteries of all the Religions in the World," he writes in a sermon, "are but Milke in respect of this Bone, but Catechismes in respect of this Schoolepoint, but Alphabets in respect of this hard Style, God and Man in one person" (*Sermons* 3: 297). This is a fascinating passage: the incarnation is to Donne a puzzle best contemplated through metaphors of food (milk or bone), of learned argument (catechism or scholastic debate) and of language (alphabet or rhetoric). In each case, the incarnation is likened to an advancement, a process of growing up: from mother's milk to bony meat, for instance, or from the rudiments of learning to the skills of argument. In trying to help his listeners to come closer to the awesome mystery of the incarnation, Donne uses metaphors of adult challenges, and it strikes me as deeply significant that these advancements include the graduation from simple letters to the "hard Style" of complex figurative language.

Metaphors can function in the spiritual context, then, as ways of defining the divine, knowing and being known, and understanding the mysteries of faith. It is important to stress in addition the capacity of metaphors to open up a discussion or argument. Take Donne's "Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," in which the opening stanza self-consciously offers several metaphors as a potential means of exploration:

> In what torne ship soever I embarke,
> That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;
> What sea soever swallow mee, that flood
> Shall be to mee an embleme of thy bloode;

> Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise
> Thy face; yet through that maske I know those eyes,
>   Which, though they turne away sometimes,
>   They never will despise.

The intended figures of speech and thought are clear and traditional—the ship as ark, the sea as redeeming blood—though it is curious that they are so formally announced rather than simply used. It is as though the speaker is warming up here, sorting out the emblems as a necessary preliminary to real discussion with God, rather as a public speaker might order the pages of her talk before beginning. What is perhaps more interesting is the startling personification which appears in the second half of the stanza, without announcement, depicting Christ as a face behind a mask, discernible only by the eyes which will never "despise" what they look upon. The emblematic metaphors have functioned almost as decoys, leading the unsuspecting reader to the shock of meeting the eyes of Christ piercing through a (metaphorical) "maske" of angry clouds.

Reworking the Metaphoric

Bearing in mind the complexity of the functioning of these and other metaphors as route towards the divine, we need to ask some questions about the limits of the metaphorical. To what extent do we consider that all figurative language, for example, can represent metaphorical thought? I am often struck by the fact that, while a conventional metaphor may lead the devotional poet towards the spiritual, a simile can have the opposite effect, laying bare the conventions of comparison and thereby drawing thought down to earth, levelling the heavenly and the familiar. How far, to take another borderline case, are negative metaphors really metaphoric? Do they not imply the limitations of our capacity to understand or imagine? Aemilia Lanyer describes Christ in her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* as

> More glorious than all the Conquerors
> That ever liv'd within this earthly round,
> More powrefull than all Kings, or Governours
> That ever yet within this World were found;
> More valiant than the greatest Souldiers
> That ever fought, to have their glory crown'd:
>   For which of them, that ever yet tooke breath,
>   Sought t'indure the doome of Heaven and Earth?

The instinct here is indeed metaphorical, attempting to suggest Christ's greatness by means of comparisons with earthly figures of authority and triumph. However, the negative formula implies that it is beyond our imaginative capacity to conceive of Christ's greatness; thus metaphor, while attempting to suggest and define, can in fact point up the inadequacy of the tools of language and human experience.

On the other hand, is it a mistake to think of metaphors for the divine as necessarily taking us away from the familiar world of kings, governors and soldiers? To seek God only as "other," as distant and unfamiliar, is to forget the fundamental incarnational aspect of Christianity; the human being, like the word itself, can indeed serve to express God. As Donne wisely commented, "there is not so poore a creature but may be thy glasse to see God in" (*Sermons* 8: 224). A "glasse" or mirror gives an image, and an image is a metaphor. Learning from this, we ought not to be surprised to find examples of the metaphoric principle in the lowliest of places. Take the pun, for example: is that not the simplest and most compact form of metaphor? It suggests one idea by means of another, drawing attention to itself by the sheer coincidence of an identical or closely related linguistic form. The principle of definition by means of both likeness and difference—of metaphor, in other words—is most intensely and economically expressed in the pun. The sequence of Donne's three hymns is telling in this respect. The first, "at the Authors last going into Germany," overtly seeks its dominant emblems of "Arke," "flood" and "bloode," as we have already seen in our consideration of metaphors as a mode of exploration. The second of the three hymns, "To God my God, in my sicknesse," narrows the focus of the metaphors to the speaker's own body as the "mapp" which tells that same history of salvation, the bringing together of west and east, death and resurrection. Lastly, the "Hymne to God the Father" appears to abandon the use of metaphor to express the movement from sin to redemption, ark to blood, west to east, and, in the place of metaphor, daringly puns on the author's own name and on Christ as the shining "sonne." I would suggest that this is actually not an abandonment of the metaphoric, but an intensification of it. Christ is, by means of the simple and familiar pun, defined as both son of God and the glorious light in the heavens; Donne is, through word-play, both the sinful individual bearing the name "Donne" and the redeemed soul once God's saving work is "done."

Perhaps the logical next step in this process of understanding metaphor is to ask to what extent language itself was perceived by Donne and his

contemporaries as fundamentally metaphorical. It is certainly the case that Donne, in his talk of "hieroglyphics" (his term for the circle which represents the essence of God [*Sermons* 6: 173]), implies that there is an expressive and signifying function in words or letters themselves: they already suggest meaning by standing in place of that which they signify. Donne's meditation on the Pythagorean letter Y, whose forked shape represents the two divergent paths from which we must choose—earthly treasure or the "Treasure laid up for the World to come" (*Sermons* 9: 174)—makes the symbolic function of language abundantly clear. Herbert, too, shared this assumption, as may be seen in poems such as "Jesu," where the letters of Christ's name break apart under the pressure of suffering and, newly reassembled, spell out the comforting message, "I ease you."

If this process of meditation on the compacted expressiveness of language itself, too, may be seen as part of the aesthetic of the metaphoric prevailing in devotional verse, then the important role of acrostics and other hieroglyphic verse forms, so popular in the early seventeenth century, may be linked to the same mentality. The sonnets of Elizabeth Major, in which her own name is inscribed in the movement of the verse; the elaborate acrostics of Henry Colman, depicting the Passion in intertwining texts and shapes; the "double motion" of Herbert's "Coloss 3.3" which we touched on breifly earlier—all these may be seen, not as rarities, but as continuations of the same metaphorical principle in the form of the poem. This flexibility, or reworking of the definition of the metaphorical, is entirely in line with Donne's own thought, since he describes God, the model of the metaphoric, as not only a "metaphoricall God" in his "words" but also in the 'style" of his "works," in the "phrase" of his "actions" (*Devotions*, p. 100). Thus, we should not be surprised to find that the structural principle of Donne's "La Corona" sonnets is circular, linking each sonnet to the next by means of a repeated line; if the best "hieroglyphic" for God is the circle, then it will not only feature in Donne's language but in the action of his text. Herbert's interwoven "Wreath" is another instance of this principle at work; metaphors function in both the words and the construction of devotional verse.

The Rejection of Metaphor

Despite what we have so far seen of the necessity of metaphor, as well as its expressiveness and its flexibility, in the service of devotion, we have also been regularly made aware of its inbuilt difficulties and dangers. In this final section I want to consider to what extent Donne and his contemporaries were

led towards a rejection of the metaphoric. The ingenuity of figurative language and the richness of metaphor are a vital source of expression for the religious poet, but they can prove troublingly excessive in the approach to spiritual matters. Take, for example, Aemilia Lanyer's description of Christ at the beginning of the first Good Friday:

> The beauty of the World, Heavens chiefest Glory;
> The mirrour of Martyrs, Crowne of holy Saints;
> Love of th'Almighty, blessed Angels story;
> Water of Life, which none that drinks it, faints;
> Guide of the Just, where all our Lights we borrow;
> Mercy of Mercies; Hearer of Complaints;
>   Triumpher over Death; Ransomer of Sinne;
>   Falsely accused: now his paines begin.

Lanyer's sequence of metaphoric phrases for the saviour is impressive in its variety, enabling a lively adoration of Christ's greatness as the source of life, love, beauty and compassion. The contrast with the last line is poignant; after titles such as "mercy of mercies" and "ransomer of sin," the phrase "falsely accused" misleads us at first into an expectation of another meta-phoric description, until we realize that the verse has returned to the plainness of narrative fact, concluding with the blunt statement, "now his paines begin." By contrast, the metaphors seem, in retrospect, out of keeping with the reality of Christ's situation. The gap between the rhetoric of praise and the pain of the Passion is a measure of human sin—but, though the judgement is on the cruelty of those who tried and crucified Jesus, doubt is cast also on the role of the metaphors of praise. Are they audacious and overweaning, ironically upstaged by the plain language of history?

A similar contrast between a series of descriptive metaphors and the simplicity of a closing line is famously to be found in Herbert's "Prayer (I)." In this case, doubt is not so much cast on the appropriateness of the figures used to suggest prayer—such as "The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth" or "A kinde of tune, which all things hear and fear" (70)—as on the capacity of metaphors to catch the essence of prayer. In the last half-line Herbert shifts from a metaphoric register to the plainest, simplest and least specific phrase of the entire sonnet: "something understood." Prayer is, we conclude, not something to be depicted from outside, but experienced. Metaphors, by their very nature, introduce a layer of distance, of doubleness; the "sense" must always, as Herbert wrote in "Jordan (I)," be caught "at two

removes." When he abandons the metaphoric at the end of "Prayer (I),"
Herbert implies that for all their range and potential, metaphors are always
secondary to the actual process described—in this instance, conversation
with God through prayer.

It is also in the nature of metaphor to introduce complexity where
simplicity might have sufficed. Even Donne, who was so eloquently in favour
of the metaphoric, admitted the power of plainness, asserting that "*Pray*, and
Stay, are two blessed monosyllables" (*Sermons* 5: 363), summing up in
rhyming simplicity the relationship of God and the human soul. I am
reminded here of the monosyllabic directness of the last line of Herbert's
"Love (III)" after the courtly dance of the rest of the lyric: "so I did sit and
eat." The clarity and lucidity of this plain speech is in direct opposition to the
assumptions of many of Donne's contemporaries concerning metaphor,
which is associated with darkness rather than light, and secrecy rather than
openness of expression. We have only to think of Spenser's so-called "dark
conceit," and Carew's account of Donne's creative imagination as a "mine of
rich and pregnant fancy." Metaphors may appear rich and fertile, but they
come, in Carew's metaphor at least, from a dark place, a "mine" where
precious stones may be found but not without effort and danger.

One of the difficulties encountered in the "mine" of "fancy" during this
period is the fear that figurative language is a display of eloquence which is
not in keeping with a spiritual subject. This was Herbert's dilemma in "Jordan
(II)" when he found that he was apt to "weave" himself "into the sense"; there
is a danger that the more elaborate the language, the more focussed it becomes
on the art of the human rather than the divine artist. As "Eliza" wrote at the
beginning of her poetic collection, she hoped that her readers would not
mistake "a Divine affection, for a poeticall fancy," since she did not wish
merely to express her "fancy" but rather to allow her fancy to express her
"affection." The aim of "fancy" here is to facilitate devotion, not to set up a
rival creation; God is, as Eliza adds, the only source of truly "rich poems."

Are metaphors then superfluous, being as much a sign of human skill as
a means of divine praise? Herbert's "True Hymn" boldly states that it is not
linguistic skill but purity of heart which makes a "true hymn": "The finenesse
which a hymne or psalm affords, / Is, when the soul unto the lines accords."
When this aesthetic prevails, the human spirit knows no bounds; it is not
hemmed in by the need for, or the attraction of, metaphor. This position can
lead either to very plain poetry, or to the mystical sense of the superfluity of
language itself in the union with God.

Is it possible that the metaphoric is, finally, superfluous in the religious context, and for another very important reason too? We need to consider for whom the metaphors are intended. We learn from Donne's contemporaries that the role of figurative language, and of eloquence in general, was to rouse the affections and passions of other humans, in order then to control and guide them (for good or ill). Henry Wotton told the boys of Eton College "not to neglect *Rhetorick*, because *Almighty God has left Mankind affections to be wrought upon*" (Walton, *Life*, p. 51) Is rhetoric before God, then, inappropriate, since God does not need rousing in that way? Perhaps, if that is indeed the case, metaphors for the divine have only a limited function—they are for other human readers, and not for God (their focus) at all.

Conclusions

This paper has been a meditation on some of the fundamental questions concerning metaphors of the divine in the work of, primarily, Donne, but also, among others, Mary Sidney, George Herbert, Anne Southwell, Richard Hooker, Aemilia Lanyer, Anne Ley and "Eliza." I have attempted to consider why, if squaring a circle is a geometrical impossibility, devotional poets keep on trying to do it. In researching some basic types of metaphor and their sources, I was led to examine some of the functions of metaphor—however inadequate—in this context. I also began to consider how our idea of the metaphoric may be extended or redefined, and enquire into the grounds on which poets—and their readers—might limit or reject the role of metaphor in divine verse. The overall question of this paper might be summed up using phrases from the opening of Donne's Holy Sonnet: if poets need to "imagine corners" in our "round" God, why do they do so, and how?

These are not issues to be resolved in the space of one short paper, but perhaps to frame and inform our further study of these texts. My concluding thoughts focus on just two puzzles within the larger picture I have sketched. Firstly, do male and female poets in the earlier seventeenth century approach divine metaphor with different needs and different attitudes towards the capacity of language to handle the divine? There is a tendency for male poets (educated in the classical tradition of figurative language) to have the capacity for metaphor, if not always the confidence in it. There is equally a tendency for women writers—at least, those less classically educated—to prefer the language of relationship to that of geometry, and to use simile or even negation rather than to assert by means of metaphor. We need to look further into this question, now that we know the work of so many more women

devotional poets, and to consider its implications for our understanding of language, gender and imagination.

Secondly, to what extent do we need to reformulate our ideas concerning modes of religious representation through metaphor? Is metaphor a means of likening, bringing closer, or is it a means of distinguishing, distancing to "two removes"? Where is the center of metaphoric activity: who is representing whom, and to whom? To return to my opening quotation, who (or what) is "past all understanding"? Perhaps we have an erroneous impression of the relationship of God, the poet and language. We tend too easily to assume that the center of activity is the writer, interpreting God's metaphors in the world and using new metaphors for God. But is this a false perspective? I am reminded of the words of Joseph Brodsky when he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987 (a not inappropriate connection since Brodsky learned English specifically in order to read Donne): "language is not the tool of the poet, but the poet is the vessel of language." Or, as this thought would have been expressed in the early seventeenth century, the poet is the vessel of the Holy Spirit, expressed through language.

Both of these puzzles—the relationship of the gendered individual to metaphor, and the relationship of individuality to linguistic creation—are worthy of further exploration. I will close with a reminder that, at least in the divine context, the poetic use of language and metaphor must be regarded as only temporary, part of the brief human experience which anticipates eternity. As Donne wrote in the "Hymn to God my God, in my sickness,"

> I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
> And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

Thought to Donne was "inward speech" (*Sermons* 3: 292); thus, putting ideas into words, "thinking here," is a preliminary process, a "tuning up," a finding of metaphors now for what becomes action in eternity. And so we find in the end that this topic is indeed a circle which cannot, here at any rate, be either squared or made complete.

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