Parabolic Logic in John Donne's Sermons

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L ike many preachers and divines of his age, John Donne had a special admiration for the forms of literary expression found in the Bible. On one occasion he remarks that his preference for writing poetry and letters is complemented by his appreciation for the linguistic artistry of the Psalms and Epistles (2:49).[1] This essay considers the New Testament parables as an important influence on Donne's preaching. Although he does not "tell" parables in the same way that Jesus does in the New Testament, he often employs the same figurative technique and persuasive strategy—which I describe as *parabolic logic*—in his sermons.[2]

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[1] John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962). References are cited in the text by volume and page number.

[2] Some scholars have analyzed aspects of parabolic logic in seventeenth-century literature, though none has dealt with this figurative technique in Donne's sermons. Thomas F. Merrill draws on the same twentieth-century religious language theorists that I discuss below for his discussion of parabolic logic in Milton's depiction of Satan: *Epic God-Talk: "Paradise Lost" and the Grammar of Religious Language* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1986). Stanley E. Fish analyzes seventeenth-century poetry in terms that resemble parabolic logic, especially in the cultivation and disruption of reader expectations: *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Most recently, David V. Urban, in "The Talented Mr. Milton: A Parabolic Laborer and His Identity" (*Milton Studies* 43 [2004]: 1–18), analyzes Milton's use of the Parables of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) and the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) to work through anxieties about his calling, especially in Sonnets 7 and 19. Although he

Discussion of Donne's figurative technique in the sermons has focused on analogy as the principal means of communicating religious ideas via the imagery of ordinary experience. Dennis Quinn, William Mueller, and Joan Webber, for instance, have argued that Donne pursues an Augustinian preaching strategy that seeks to establish the essential correspondence between the world and the Word through the exhaustive elaboration of analogical parallels between mundane images and spiritual referents. Thus, with respect to many of Donne's images, "one receives the impression that the two terms are in every respect alike."[3] Winfried Schleiner extended this argument to suggest that Donne's preaching remains largely within established "fields of imagery," such as "sin as sickness" and "life as a journey," which are "constituted by the analogical link between two areas of meaning."[4] John S. Chamberlin notes the role of analogy in Donne's biblical exegesis, where Donne amplifies the meaning of a biblical image by multiplying the characteristics of the literal sign and applying them analogically to the spiritual referent.[5] Horton Davies's study of English metaphysical preaching echoes Schleiner's account of Donne's figurative technique, concluding that analogical imagery is the "essential" mechanism for eloquent preaching

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does not focus on the logicality of parabolic discourse *per se*, he shows how the imagery of New Testament parables is absorbed and reworked in other rhetorical contexts.

[3]Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," in *Seventeenth Century Prose: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stanley E. Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 364. For general discussion of analogy in Donne's homiletics, see Quinn, pp. 358–364; Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher*, reprint ed. (New York: Octagon Books, 1977), pp. 114–145; and Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 123–142.

[4]*The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1970), p. 11. Schleiner argues that when Donne departs from conventional fields of imagery or breaks the rules of decorum, he employs medieval exegetical practices, such as the extension of literal attributes of an image to the spiritual referent (as Chamberlin describes) and the three- or four-fold method of interpretation (pp. 163–200). Both practices are based on the logic of analogy.

[5]*Increase and Multiple: Arts-of-Discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), p. 128.

and that Donne largely adheres to standard fields of imagery.[6] The emphasis on analogy in Donne's preaching imagery has penetrated studies of his political views since the 1990s, as seen in Deborah Kuller Shuger's assertion that Donne advances an "absolutist" theology of kingship through his frequent practice of "[m]easur[ing] God by earthly Princes." Shuger contends that "Donne's religious writings differ from those of his contemporaries primarily in the *degree* to which he stresses the analogy between God and kings."[7]

The logic of analogy is indeed an important part of Donne's arsenal of figurative techniques in his sermons. However, some of the images that have been offered as examples of this technique do not in fact function analogically; Shuger's reference to Donne's comment "Measure God by earthly Princes" is one such case. Jeanne Shami, arguing against the larger view of Donne as an apologist for absolutist monarchy, points out that the full passage "qualifies, if it does not negate, the meaning Shuger intends" by adding "for we may measure the world by a Barly corne" (5:371).[8] The added phrase implies that to measure God by earthly princes would be extraordinary indeed; the sense is closer to *you may as well* measure the world by a barley corn as measure God in this way. The passage typifies a formula that occurs fairly often in Donne's preaching, in which he sets up the expectation of an analogical similarity only to contradict expectations by shifting the proportional scale on which the analogy is based or by representing the image in a radically incongruous way. We may better understand the logic of such imagery and its function within Donne's persuasive strategy by comparing it to the logic of New Testament parables.

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[6]*Like Angels from a Cloud: The English Metaphysical Preachers, 1588–1645* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1986), pp. 431–449. Davies does note the "element of surprise" arising from "macabre, grotesque, repulsive, or strangely out of context" imagery, which I associate with parabolic logic below, as an outstanding feature of Donne's preaching.

[7]*Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture*, reprint ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 165.

[8]*John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 11. See also Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), p. 76.

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"Parabolic logic" is a special type of religious speech that relates imagery to spiritual concepts in a way that is different from analogy. Twentieth-century religious language theorists such as C. H. Dodd, Ian Ramsey, Robert Funk, Donald Evans, and Paul Ricoeur define parabolic logic according to four major characteristics.[9] First, the term "parabolic" applies to figurative expressions that are frequently, but not exclusively, narrative. Dodd, whose *The Parables of the Kingdom* is seminal to modern research in this field, shows that parabolic logic may be found in figurative sayings (single images, such as the blind leading the blind in Matthew 15:14),[10] pictorial "similitudes" (more elaborate images, often including limited action, that represent complex ideas in multiple aspects, such as the hypocrite with a beam in his eye in Matthew 7:3–5), or what we commonly recognize as "parables proper" (full-length narratives involving definite characters, setting, and actions, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–36).[11] In all cases, it is apparent that the image has a pedagogical function: some aspect of human experience or the objective world is presented in order to communicate something about the spiritual life of people or the divine nature.

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[9]Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961); Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957); Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Dodd is the first to advance the four-part definition on which this discussion is based, although my presentation of it reflects refinements by later theorists.

[10]Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, except where they are presented as quoted by Donne.

[11]Dodd, pp. 5–7. Dodd's taxonomy is derived from Rudolph Bultmann's *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

Second, in parabolic imagery the characters, objects, and situations are familiar and predictable, representing the ordinary lives of people in the audience. The fields of imagery may appeal to universal aspects of human life, such as family relations, or to the experiences of particular classes of audience, such as farmers, merchants, city-dwellers, and rulers. The critical point is that the logical relations or "codes" implied by the images are clear to the audience. Logical codes include how certain types of people should behave in a given context, the value-judgments typically assigned to certain objects, and the scales by which various situations and relations are to be measured. For example, the logical codes associated with the merchant in the Parable of the Pearl are implicit at the outset: he is expected to make good monetary valuations and profitable trades as he goes "in search of fine pearls" (Matthew 13:45–46). In this way, parabolic images speak to the audience's sense of order and heighten their expectations about what should unfold in the "normal" case.

Third, and most distinctive, parabolic imagery involves the violation and contradiction of expectations, depicting what is familiar in startlingly *unfamiliar* ways. This is the "parabolic" quality that sets such imagery apart from analogy. Dodd describes parabolic imagery as "arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."[12] In Ricoeur's terms, parabolic logic is defined by a "process of 'transgression'" that "ruptur[es] . . . ordinary speech" in order to "open up our very experience" to spiritual concerns.[13] New Testament parables feature a variety of mechanisms for accomplishing the transgressive "turn," including hyperbole, extravagant action, and seeming ruptures of judgment.[14] In the Parable of the Pearl, for example, the transgressive elements are the "one pearl," whose value is magnified to hyperbolic dimensions, and the merchant's extravagant action in selling all his goods, which violates the codes of normal behavior and judgment implied by the initial situation. From a conventional point of view, he is a fool; his action only makes sense within a value-system that can conceive of—indeed, that compels—the subordination of material goods and concerns to an infinitely more valuable "good." Modern scholars are

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[12]Dodd, p. 5.
[13]Ricoeur, pp. 58–61.
[14]Funk, pp. 160–162, and Ricoeur, p. 60.

quick to point out that parabolic images do not indicate religious insights directly, but point the auditor in the direction of a spiritual perspective that lies outside the ordinary frame of reference. The pearl does not "stand for" salvation, but provokes a crisis of judgment between competing value-systems.[15] According to Ramsey, the disruptive quality of a parabolic image is the crux of its rhetorical effect. "The penny drops," "the ice breaks," and the discourse moves in a direction not previously perceived.[16] In these ways, parabolic images challenge ordinary assumptions about the order of things and advance a version of reality that is counterintuitive but spiritually more authentic. They suggest how different the world appears when seen from a spiritually committed point of view.

Finally, as suggested above, parabolic imagery demands a judgment from the audience. Dodd says that such images dramatize human beings' confrontation with the divine, in which "the eternal issues are laid bare. It is the hour of decision."[17] Many New Testament parables make this demand explicit by asking the audience a direct question, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan when Jesus asks, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" (Luke 10:36). Yet the call to judgment may be implicit in the confrontation that is revealed between ordinary and transgressive views of the situation being depicted. With respect to the Parable of the Pearl, auditors who approve of the merchant's action commit. themselves to look on the Kingdom of Heaven as a thing of immeasurable value that overwhelms material standards of worth and, perhaps, to adopt the behaviors that follow. For this reason, Evans describes parabolic logic as a type of "onlook" discourse, which reflects and constitutes a commitment to look on one thing with the attitudes and beliefs appropriate to another, even though the two may have no objective or

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[15]Indeed, religious language theorists such as Ramsey and Funk see parabolic logic as a special case that escapes the logical and philosophical problems surrounding indicative theological language. For larger discussions of these problems that do not focus on parabolic logic specifically, see Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) and John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

[16]Ramsey, p. 25.

[17]Dodd, p. 159.

analogical relationship.[18] The "self-involving" quality of such discourse may apply to the speaker or, in a religious context, to the auditor who assents to what is being said. Evans asserts that "to accept a parable is to *adopt an attitude*," which has implications for the auditor's basic beliefs about—and perception of—the reality that underlies his or her experience of the world.[19] Funk expresses this quality another way, saying that the auditor who "elects the parabolic world" over the conventional world "is invited to dispose himself to concrete reality as it is ordered in the parable."[20] Thus, parabolic logic is part of a persuasive strategy that is aimed not only at rational argumentation and illustration, but at active transformation of the audience's consciousness and commitment to spiritual life.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that the influence of New Testament parables goes far beyond the narrative formulae that we associate with parables proper or with the stock of allusions to biblical stories that infuse Christian literature. Parabolic logic is a figurative technique and persuasive strategy that a speaker may employ, whether in telling stories or in presenting images that *function* like their biblical counterparts.

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Donne's sermon on Psalm 38:2, preached at Lincoln's Inn probably in 1618, illustrates how Donne uses parabolic logic. Quinn and Webber point to the sermon's central image, which relates the arrows of the Bible text ("For thine arrowes stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore") to the experience of temptation, as a model of Donne's use of analogy to establish a complete identification between image and referent, such that "the arrows become temptations and the temptations arrows."[21] But there is a sense in which the arrow contradicts this equation, for Donne says that although "[o]ne danger in our *arrows*, as they are *tentations*, is, that they come *unsuspectedly*; they come, we know not, *from whence*," the greater danger is that "a man cannot shoot an arrow at *himself*, but we can direct *tentations* upon our selves" (2:57). Donne describes a sense in

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[18]Evans, pp. 131–132.

[19]Evans, p. 223.

[20]Funk, p. 162.

[21]Quinn, p. 364, and Webber, pp. 168-169.

which temptations are *unlike* arrows as we know them. It is as if to say, arrows *would be* similar to temptations, *if only* they could behave radically differently than they do in ordinary experience.

We may understand this contradiction better if we observe how Donne develops the arrow image parabolically within the larger rhetorical strategy of the sermon. The sermon as a whole is concerned with the experiences of temptation, sin, and suffering as perceived by human beings, first in a state of unregenerate fallibility and then in a state of rectified forbearance. To the extent that we may abstract a set of "teachings" from the sermon, they are that no person is exempt from responsibility for sin, even when temptation appears to come from outside oneself, that suffering justly follows from sin, and that the patient bearing of one's suffering for sin uniquely qualifies one to "come to God, reason with God, plead with God, wrastle with God, and be received and sustained by him," because God has also suffered on the Cross for human sins (2:54). Thus, in terms of its thematic content, the sermon presents a "narrative" of rectification that moves from the perception of sin and affliction as external forces to one that recognizes them as internal forces arising from original sin, and finally to a perception of affliction as part of God's merciful instruction. This thematic arc is supported by the field of imagery implied by the Bible verse. Although the verse by itself does not obviously fit into any of Dodd's categories of parabolic imagery, it functions in a way that most closely resembles the narrative kind that Dodd associates with parables proper. The verse involves a speaker (David), an addressee (God), and two actions (arrows sticking and a hand pressing). The use of the arrow to represent the speaker's situation suggests that the speaker views his condition as inflicted upon him from outside; he is the passive object of God's action, whether to inflict suffering upon him (i.e., through shooting and pressing arrows) or to alleviate his suffering (i.e., implicitly, by withdrawing his arrows and hand). Donne associates this point of view with the universal condition of sinful humanity, over which God's anger hangs like a "cloud of arrows" (2:55). The view of one's suffering in passive terms is a standard view, but one that arises from the partial perspective afforded by sin. Thus, in keeping with the thematic arc of the sermon, the source of dramatic tension in the imagery is not God's action in shooting, pressing, or withdrawing arrows, but the necessary shift in the speaker's attitude from one of passivity and the implicit denial of responsibility for his

condition to one of active responsibility for sin and suffering and acceptance of God's correction.

The crux of this thematic and figurative shift is the parabolic development of the arrow image in the second division of the sermon. Here we see the elaboration of the image in its familiar aspects, followed by a set of transgressive disruptions that point to an alternative perspective on the dramatic situation. Donne establishes the logical codes implicit in the arrow at the beginning of the second division, which deals specifically with the phrase, "thine arrowes stick fast in me." As noted above, the standard logic of the image casts the speaker in a passive role—he is literally the target of the addressee's action. Donne shows that biblical examples of the image support this idea: there are many instances in which arrows "stand for" God's anger, as in Deuteronomy 32:23 when God says, "*I will heap mischiefs upon them, and I will spend mine arrows upon them*: yea, *Inebriabo sanguine, I will make mine Arrows drunk in their bloud*" (2:55). Donne further points out that many commentators read the arrows in the Psalm passage as allegorical representations of bodily disease, war, famine, pestilence, sorrow, and offenses committed against David's family. The sense that these tribulations are inflicted on one from others is amplified by the attributes of literal arrows—they are shot from others, they are swift, they are difficult to see (2:56). Donne disrupts this expectation with a set of scenes in which the speaker either puts himself in the way of the arrow or is himself both the shooter and the target. The statement quoted above—"[A] man cannot shoot an arrow at *himself*, but we can direct *tentations* upon our selves" (2:57)—upsets the analogical signification of the arrow. The sentence by itself is a pictorial similitude according to Dodd's taxonomy because it involves a limited action without specifying character, setting, or story. The following sentences expand the picture into a series of short narratives, which disrupt the logical codes established in the preceding section of the sermon. The first narrative, based on an episode in 1 Kings 22:34, places the scene of action in the wilderness, where the shooter appears to be alone:

> If we were in a wildernesse, we could sin; and where we are,
> we tempt temptations, and wake the Devil, when for any thing
> that appears, he would sleep. A certain man drew a bow at a
> venture, says that story; He had no determinate mark, no

expresse aime, upon any one man; He drew his bow at a
venture, and he hit, and he slew the King *Ahab*.

(2:57)

The story disrupts the spatial logic of the arrow: the man cannot remove
himself far enough from society that he cannot commit a grievous sin on
a grand scale. The narrative also suggests a conflation of shooter and
target, giving the impression that a man can indeed "shoot an arrow at
himself" by committing a sin, even when he shoots at no particular
target. By choosing to shoot at all, he cannot avoid the arrow rebounding
upon himself.

The next two narratives amplify this impression by reversing the logic
of volition implicit in the arrow image. The first involves a "woman of
tentation" whose beauty shoots an arrow *"at randon."* Here, the
opportunity to sin is external to the subject (i.e., the first person in the
Psalm verse and the second person in the sermon passage). Yet Donne
shifts the agency from the shooter to the target, saying, "shee aim'd at no
particular mark; And thou puttest thy self within shot, and meetest the
arrow; Thou soughtest the tentation, the tentation sought not thee"
(2:57). The shifting of agency is further evident in the next vignette,
based on Psalm 52:1, in which a man intentionally shoots arrows in order
to "doe mischief" against others, yet the target is the principal actor. The
grammar of the full passage is significant:

> A man is able to oppresse others; *Et gloriatur in malo quia
> potens*, He boasts himselfe because he is able to doe mischief;
> and *tendit arcum in incertum*, he shoots his arrow at randon, he
> lets it be known, that he can prefer *them*, that second his
> purposes, and thou putt'st thy self within shot, and meet'st the
> arrow, and mak'st thy self his instrument; Thou sought'st the
> tentation, the tentation sought not thee; when we expose our
> selves to tentations, tentations hit us, that were not expresly
> directed, nor meant to us.
>
> (2:57)

All but one of the man's actions ("he shoots . . .") involve either his
capability to commit an offense ("A man is able . . . he can prefer . . .") or
his *talking* about his capability to do mischief ("He boasts . . . he lets it be
known . . ."). By contrast, all of the second person's verbs are concrete,

willed actions (thou putt'st . . . and meet'st . . . and mak'st . . . Thou sought'st"). In the last sentence, in which Donne abstracts the meaning of the narrative, there is no analogue for the shooter. The main action ("tentations hit us") is entirely predicated on the subject's (now amplified to the first person plural) action ("when we expose our selves").

The final narrative in the passage reinforces the transgressive disruptions of the preceding vignettes with the image of a person who first runs away from an arrow shot by another, then turns to meet it. Donne supplies the biblical example of Joram, who goes out to negotiate with his enemy Jehu and thus is unable to outrun the arrow aimed at him (2 Kings 9:21–24). Here, seemingly virtuous impulses are paradoxically associated with the subject's continuing tendency toward sin. Donne says that even after a person resolves to "depart a little" from a temptation, "a little point of *honour*, not to be false to former promises, a little *false gratitude*, and thankfulnesse, in respect of former obligations, a little of the *compassion* and *charity* of Hell, that another should not be miserable" put one back within the arrow's range. Such impulses are "the good nature of the *Devill*," which allow a person to be shot "even when wee had a purpose of departing from that sin, and kil us over again" (2:57–58). The target's wounding is associated with his attempt to remove himself from what he perceives to be an external danger, yet the logical codes are shown to function in precisely the opposite way: the target directs the arrow toward himself; the danger is internal rather than external; to flee is to fall.

Donne's transgressive dilation of the arrow image in this part of the sermon presents the audience with two competing views of the human spiritual condition. The auditor is compelled to make a choice: if the more natural perception of temptation as an external force is correct, then the narrative is nonsense; human beings are no more responsible for the temptation to sin than a person is capable of shooting an arrow at himself. If the more spiritual perception of temptation as an internal force for which the subject is responsible is correct, then the ordinary perception of the world is distorted; the true order of the universe is as different from ordinary perception as the image of a self-shot arrow is from ordinary arrows. Either view entails a commitment to an onlook (to use Evans' term). In this case, the call to judgment is more implicit than explicit, as is also the case with many New Testament parables. Indeed, Donne concludes this section with the competing view that "this is the

first misery in these arrows, these tentations, *Quia alienæ*, they are shot
from others, they are not in our own quiver, nor in our own government"
(2:58). Following the parabolic development of the image, this statement
should be read ironically: the chief danger and "first misery" is in *seeing*
arrows as "not in our own quiver, nor in our own government." The
choice between onlooks is more explicit later in the sermon's second
division, when Donne describes the two instances in the gospel narrative
in which Jesus is threatened with stoning. Here, Donne uses stones and
arrows interchangeably, for the logical codes that accompany active
throwing and passive wounding and the external functionality of the
missiles are the same. Noting that in one instance Jesus "*went away and
hid himself*" and in the other "[stood] to it," Donne presents the audience
with a choice between "go[ing] out of the way, to abandon all occasions,
and conversation, that may lead into tentation" and "receiv[ing] all these
arrowes, upon the *shield of faith*." The auditor must apply the parabolic
insight established earlier in the sermon: fleeing is intuitively correct, but
it reflects a false view of temptations as external to oneself. "Our safe
shield" is to bear temptations in the recognition that they originate in the
self and cannot be avoided (2:60–61).

The parabolic image returns a final time at the end of the sermon,
where Donne offers Jesus as the supreme example of a man who put
himself in the way of arrows, bearing tribulation while trusting God's
decree for deliverance. The final exhortation, delivered in the form of a
prayer, urges the audience to compare their tribulations to those of Jesus
and to be grateful that, by virtue of his action, the same guarantee of
deliverance is extended to them. Thus he prays, "when thy hand presses
our arrows upon us, enable us to see, that *that* very hand, hath from all
eternity written, and written in thine own blood, a *decree* of the *issue*, as
well, and as soon, as of the *tentation*" (2:71). This rectified perspective is
the basis for true prayer. Indeed, by recasting the dramatic scene of the
Bible verse in this way, Donne suggests that one who has sinned and
suffered is uniquely positioned to speak to God, who has also suffered for
human sins. This thematic conclusion reflects back upon the overall
pedagogical aim of the sermon, and is indeed a recurring theme in
Donne's entire homiletic corpus. Here, as elsewhere, Donne dramatizes
the journey towards God as experienced by the sinner, a homiletic
strategy to which parabolic logic is especially well suited.

Thus, the primary figurative technique in this sermon is not to reinforce the analogical correspondence between the image as it is known in ordinary experience and the religious concept being taught, although analogy plays a part in amplifying the ideas to which the arrow may refer, especially early in the sermon. Rather, Donne takes a parabolic approach, positing and then challenging the audience's expectations about both the image and the concept, "teasing the mind into active thought," and prompting the auditors to choose between mundane and spiritually committed points of view.

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Not all of Donne's sermons employ parabolic logic, however, and not all of his parabolic images play such a major role in the sermons where they occur. Some are brief images that help advance a specific point within a sermon. Nor do all of Donne's parabolic images employ precisely the same formula, the chief variation lying in the way he constructs and executes the transgressive "turn." As noted above, biblical scholars have identified hyperbole, extravagant action, and seeming ruptures of judgment as frequent devices in New Testament parables. We will survey some of the variations that occur most often in Donne's parabolic imagery, focusing on shorter examples for the sake of breadth.

Donne often opens the parabolic possibilities of an image by depicting a familiar object functioning in an improper or unfamiliar way. The "self-shot arrow" is one example, where the object provides an opportunity to complicate ideas about personal agency in the context of temptation. Temptation is the subject of another Lincoln's Inn sermon, this one on Psalm 38:4, where Donne compares sin to a flood that is already over one's head at the instant one sees the water. The "instant flood" violates the normal function of the natural world, in which a person would expect to have some warning of the onset of storm. Donne draws out the implied exhortation when he says, "Beloved, if we fear not the wetting of our foot in sin, it will be too late, when we are over head and ears" (2:109). These examples show how Donne uses the improper functioning of ordinary objects and phenomena—whether manufactured or natural—to depict sin as a crisis of perception. In each case, the proper function of the object reinforces an attitude of passivity, while the improper function reveals the subject to be in immediate danger of his or

her own making. At the same time, Donne may use an improper object to point to the redemption that lies beyond earthly affliction. In the 1625/6 Prebend sermon on Psalm 63:7 he uses the image of a scale that cannot be tipped to show that earthly affliction, however severe, is always outweighed by glory in heaven (7:53–55). Here, too, the proper function of the scale reflects the limited perspective afforded by sin: the sinner sees no justice in suffering and has no hope of relief. The improper function points to the overwhelming compensation that awaits the sufferer in Heaven. Seen from a rectified perspective, the scale's immovability may reflect the sufferer's own capacity to endure. By developing images of ordinary objects in this way, Donne points to the reality that is beyond ordinary perception and encourages a reformation in the auditor's understanding of his or her spiritual situation.

Some of the more interesting examples of parabolic logic occur in places where Donne posits an image according to the logic of analogy, then points to the inadequacy of that logic to describe the spiritual referent. The passage to which Shuger and Shami refer functions in this way, first setting up the standard analogy between God and monarchs, then undercutting it by equating it with the absurd analogy between the world and a barley corn. A similar strategy is employed in the 1626/7 sermon on Isaiah 65:20, where Donne confronts the difficulty of describing the concept of eternal blessedness in terms of the scale of human life:

> Long life is a blessing, as it is an image of eternity: as Kings are blessings, because they are Images of God. And as to speak properly, a King that possest the whole earth, hath no proportion at all to God, (he is not a dramme, not a grain, not an atome to God) so neither if a thousand *Methusalems* were put in one life, had that long life any proportion to eternity; for *Finite* and *Infinite* have no proportion to one another.
>
> (7:357)

The passage contains three analogies: two sets of relations that are analogous to each other in the sense that each posits an illogical proportionality between finite and infinite. Here the mundane terms are already magnified to hyperbolic dimensions, so that the king possesses the entire world and one long life spans a thousand of Methuselah's. The effect is all the more jarring when these terms are shrunk to the size of

drams, grains, and atoms compared to God and eternity. Donne's aim is not to provide a more accurate quantitative measurement of either God or eternity, but to undermine the validity of such measurements altogether. Thus, later in the sermon he suggests that long life on earth is more a burden than a blessing and that the hundred-year lifespan in the Isaiah passage should be understood as an image of spiritual rather than temporal maturity. Donne illustrates this point with a second parabolic image: "He that is ready for Heaven, hath lived to a blessed age." Seen from this perspective, "a childe newly baptized may be elder then his Grandfather" (7:359). Donne presents an image in which temporal and familial relations are inverted. The auditors are asked to deny the value of literal long life and to measure their lives by their readiness for salvation. Donne illustrates this shift in attitude when he says that he would not exchange the "joy and consolation" he expects to feel on his deathbed with "all the joy that I have had in this world over again" (7:360). Although it does not represent a wholesale rejection of analogy as a rhetorical device, this application of parabolic logic reflects Donne's awareness of the limitations of analogy and the proportional conceptualization of spiritual reality. In such cases, analogical thinking reflects the limited perspective of unrectified reason, which cannot help but measure spiritual by earthly things. The parabolic treatment of such images is meant to dislodge the auditor from this way of thinking and to open the conscience to a radically different standard of judgment in spiritual affairs.

As seen in the examples above, Donne's parabolic images often feature the disruption or reversal of social and familial relations. The audacity of images that diminish kingship next to the divine cannot be overestimated, especially in sermons preached before the king or court, as is the case with the passage on kingship and long life. At the same time, images that purport to describe spiritual reality while contradicting normal family relations will appear incongruous to any audience. It is important—both to the modern reader of Donne' sermons and, undoubtedly, to his historical audiences—to distinguish between the literal and parabolic implications of such images. The undated Trinity Sunday sermon on 2 Corinthians 1:3 furnishes a good example, in which Donne preaches that one cannot properly bless another person or fully rely on that person's greatness or goodness because human relationships are fallible. First, he lists the people on whom one might rely, moving

along the social scale by increasing degrees of personal closeness from kings to princes, prophets, brothers, sons, wives, and friends. Then, citing Deuteronomy 13:9, he states that a faithful person would be obliged to kill any of these people if they should tempt him to idolatry (3:261). In a certain sense, the transgressive element is literal; the Deuteronomy verse is a real commandment. In its rhetorical context, however, the purpose of the image is to make a radical distinction between the attitudes and expectations appropriate to mundane relations and those appropriate to the divine. The shift in perspective is brought about by magnifying the distinction to hyperbolic dimensions: one's closest relations and greatest rulers will fail, even to the point of committing capital offenses, before God fails. As audacious as such images are, the target of Donne's critique is not the social order itself or its representatives, but the kind of value judgment *in the mind of the individual* that projects the models of human relations—however efficacious in their worldly contexts—onto the divine.

Another application of parabolic logic in Donne's sermons is the use of images in a series, related to each other by degree, followed by their negation or diminution by the introduction of a radically disproportionate spiritual term. We have seen how this approach works when the series involves social relations and, in a limited way, when it involves disproportionate measures of time and eternity. There are many fuller examples of the latter case, where Donne's strategy is to posit a large span of time, then to contract it to a small part of an even larger span, which is contracted in turn. For example, in the 1626 Whitehall sermon on John 14:2, Donne describes the state of Heaven as an everlasting day. He first says that "all the foure Monarchies, with all their thousands of yeares" make up only "one Morning, in respect of this Day." Next he compresses each two-thousand-year period under nature, the Law, the Gospel, and Grace to one hour, the last of which "we have heard three quarters strike." Yet in Heaven "there was never heard quarter clock to strike, never seen minute glasse to turne" (7:138–139). The scale of the image contracts to a fine point as the referent grows to infinite proportions. This application of parabolic logic is especially effective in places where Donne speaks about the vanity of human self-perception when viewed in light of one's true spiritual situation. For example, in the Christmas sermon on John 10:10, probably preached at St. Paul's in 1629, Donne presents a sequence of images that attempt to

place fallen humanity on the Chain of Being. Here, too, his strategy is to posit a large scale of measurement and then to reduce it to a small part of a larger scale, which is reduced in turn. This method works as Donne moves up the Chain of Being from man to angels to God. Thus, "all the men, that ever were, and are, and shall be, would not have the power of one Angel in them all, whereas all the Angels . . . have not in them all, the power of one finger of Gods hand" (9:136). Thus far is man removed from God; but Donne drives the point further by moving down the Chain of Being from man to worms to nothing. In this case, he reorders the scale itself to put man lowest of all. Whereas David says in Psalm 22:6, "*I am a worme and no man*," Donne adds, "[h]e might have gone lower, and said, I am a man and no worm; for man is so much lesse then a worm, as that wormes of his own production, shall feed upon his dead body in the grave, and an immortall worm gnaw his conscience in the torments of hell" (9:136–137). Donne draws out the parabolic implications of these images when he asks, "if that which God . . . hath made thee, Man, be nothing, canst thou be proud of that, or think that any thing which the King hath made thee, a Lord, or which thy wife hath made thee, Rich, or which thy riches have made thee, an Officer?" The audience is meant to conclude that such marks of worldly distinction are "miserable creations." As with other parabolic images we have seen, the effect is to present the audience with a bifurcated view of reality— one that is conventional and familiar and another that is counterintuitive but spiritually more authentic. Yet the ultimate aim of this parabolic sequence is not to deflate a person's self-perception, but to redirect it in a more authentic and spiritually constructive direction. Donne follows this series of images with yet another transgressive "turn," pointing out that God, who is "infinitely more then all," seeks out man, who is "infinitely lesse then nothing" in an attitude of mercy, and makes him "a new creature in Christ Jesus" (9:137). Thus, the parabolic devices of hyperbole, disruption of scale, and extravagant action combine to produce a picture of divine mercy that both humbles and elevates the human spiritual condition.

A final variety of parabolic disruption that bears notice is Donne's use of seemingly inferior objects as images of God's nature and power. Whereas the disruptions of proportionality and scale discussed above tend to minimize earthly measurements, so that things held to be great by earthly standards are miniscule when seen from a spiritual perspective,

this approach works in the opposite direction, showing how things held
to be insignificant can point toward the divine when viewed from a
perspective of faith. For example, in the 1628 Easter sermon on 1
Corinthians 13:12, Donne compares the natural world to a mirror that
can show objects larger than itself—in this case, the creative power of
God. The mirror is an improper object according to the definition given
earlier. Within this mirror, the natural hierarchy of creatures is
compressed. Donne says that even if "every gnat that flies were an Arch-
angell, all that could but tell me, that there is a God." The same is true of
all creatures, whether they be worms or basilisks, hyssop or cedar (8:224).
Passages such as this one suggest that parabolic logic may function not
only by contradicting the traditional rules of decorum (i.e., the use of
"low" images to describe "low" things and "high" images to describe
"high" things), but by showing that the proportional scale on which
decorum depends is largely arbitrary when applied to the divine.[22] Donne
frequently uses quotidian imagery to magnify God's generosity in
condescending to humankind and to call attention to the larger spiritual
implications of people's everyday affairs. In the 1623 sermon on Psalm
6:8–10 Donne describes God as a clockmaker who labors over the wheels
of the machine simply "that thereby the Bell might give a sound, and
that thereby the hand might give knowledge to others how the time
passes." The image is startling in its modesty: God has nothing to gain
from the work but to hear the bell chime. Yet the chime is all the more
important because of God's concern. The rhetorical effect is to elevate a
person's obligation to "make open declarations of [God's] mercies, to the
winning and confirming of others" from a duty that is as nothing
compared to "the infinitenesse of Gods love unto us" to "the principall
part of that thankfulnesse, which God requires from us" (6:42). The use
of quotidian imagery to magnify spiritual roles recalls Funk's point that
the ultimate aim of parabolic imagery is not to illustrate an objective fact

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[22]Augustine makes essentially the same point when he refers to Cicero's
dictum that an orator should speak in a subdued manner in cases involving
money and a grand manner in cases involving human life. He argues that since
everything a preacher says pertains to eternal life, no subject should be
considered small. Like Donne, however, Augustine maintains the usefulness of
decorum as a rhetorical device (*De Doctrina Christiana*, book 4, chaps. 17–18,
see R. P. H. Green's Latin and English edition [Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1995], pp. 239–245).

about the divine but to effect a transformation in the auditor's way of being *in the world.*[23] All of the variations of parabolic logic that we have examined in Donne's sermons function in this way, whether they speak to the experiences of sin and suffering, the hope of salvation, the standards for judging one's temporal and spiritual conditions, or the roles and attitudes that are proper to one's relationship to God.

This brief survey of variations further shows that the fields of imagery that are subject to parabolic logic in Donne's sermons are quite diverse and are often more specialized than those found in the New Testament parables. It is generally recognized that Donne adapts the imagery of his sermons to appeal to the professional and social makeup of his audiences. This is true of his parabolic imagery. Indeed, as suggested above, it is essential to parabolic logic that the imagery initially represents the world as the audience members know it. New Testament parables are noted for depicting the most common situations and relationships, but, as Dodd and others have discussed, this is largely because Jesus often uses parabolic logic when speaking to the broadest classes of people. Donne, too, draws on universally recognizable situations and relations, including nature (as in the worm/hyssop image), family relations (as when he describes God as a father who can never die, never squander his children's inheritance, never exhaust the gifts that he gives, and never grow dependent on his children [3:267–268]), and commerce (as when he describes God as a buyer who pays such a price for a certain item that he can never be persuaded to sell it [7:92–93]).

Donne also applies parabolic logic to images from more specialized fields of knowledge. Interestingly, this is true whether he preaches to the king, to the members of Lincoln's Inn, or to the popular (albeit urban) audience of Saint Paul's Cathedral. For example, he disrupts the proportionality of a geometric figure in a 1628 sermon to King Charles, saying, "[t]o have been once nothing, and to be now co-heire with the Son of God, is such a Circle, such a Compasse, as that no revolutions in this world, to rise from the lowest to the highest, or to fall from the highest to the lowest, can be called or thought any Segment, any Arch, any Point in respect of this Circle" (8:250–251). He draws upon classical natural philosophy for an improper object in the 1625/6 Prebend sermon mentioned above to show what becomes of the person who fails to

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[23]Funk, p. 162.

believe that the scale of heavenly justice cannot be tipped by temporal affliction. That person is like the legendary plant whose slender stalk produces a heavy stone for fruit. Thus can a misjudgment of worldly ills lead to a more serious spiritual crisis and create the conditions under which the scale *can* be moved (7:55). Other specialized areas of knowledge include optics (as with the mirror image discussed above), shipbuilding (as with the image of Christ's blood as varnish to protect a ship's hull from worms [8:206–207]), and law (as with the depiction of God's decree for humanity's death and salvation as an extraordinary case in marriage and divorce law [7:85–91]), to name only a few. In short, the fields of imagery to which Donne applies parabolic logic are no less diverse than those to which he applies any other figurative technique; the handling of such imagery in relation to the rhetorical aims of the sermon is the key distinction. Donne even offers himself as a parabolic image of God's generosity. Adopting the rhetorical persona of the "chief of sinners" (familiar to auditors and readers of his sermons and poetry) he marvels that God continually bestows mercy on him despite the many opportunities God might have had to "let [him] slide away." Donne says, "if any man doubt his salvation, if any man thinke himselfe too great a sinner to attain salvation, let him repent, and take mine for his" (8:251). The image works by extending guilt and mercy to hyperbolic dimensions such that no sinner can judge his case so bad that he could not change places with Donne himself and still be pardoned. These examples of specialized imagery suggest that parabolic logic has enormous flexibility in accommodating fields of knowledge and experience across historical and social contexts, while maintaining the basic function of its biblical models.

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Having reviewed the function of parabolic logic in Donne's sermons, we may conclude with some general remarks about how this figurative technique fits into Donne's overall homiletic approach.[24] Discussions of

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[24]A full discussion of Donne's homiletic theory exceeds the space available here. In the absence of an *ars praedicandi*, P. G. Stanwood and Heather Ross Asals (*John Donne and the Theology of Language* [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986]) still provide the most complete overview of Donne's

Donne's preaching theory must recognize that the transgressive use of imagery is part of a homiletic strategy that emphasizes *dissonance* as well as harmony. Donne frequently describes the preacher's role using metaphors of the trumpet, the thunder-clap, and (by a fortunate pun) military ordnance—sudden, startling, even terrifying sounds that rouse the audience and lift the pedagogical situation out of the "normal." For example, commenting on the musical imagery of Ezekiel 33:32, he says that "God shall send his people preachers furnished with all these abilities, to be *Tubæ*, Trumpets to awaken them; and then to be *carmen musicum*, to sing Gods mercies in their ears, in reverent, but yet in a diligent, and thereby a delightful manner" (2:167).[25] Here Donne moves

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statements about the "theology of language." Their collection demonstrates the great extent to which Donne's homiletic theory and practice is founded on Augustine. However, as I have argued, the implications that Quinn, Webber, and others draw for Donne's figurative technique tend to focus too narrowly on analogy. More recent studies have broadened our understanding of Donne's homiletic influences to include a diverse range of contemporary views. For example, whereas earlier studies separate Donne from the Hyperian homiletic model that emphasizes the teaching of doctrine and the use of classical forms of oratory (e.g., Quinn) and align him with the theory and practice of "Anglo-Catholic" preachers such as Lancelot Andrewes and William Laud (e.g., William Fraser Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of Its Literary Aspects*, reprint ed. [New York: Russell & Russell, 1962]), Daniel W. Doerksen argues that Donne's understanding of preaching has more in common with the "word-centered piety" of conforming Puritans than is previously recognized. See "'Saint Pauls Puritan': John Donne's 'Puritan' Imagination in the *Sermons*," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond–Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995), p. 351. Similarly, Maria Salenius aligns Donne with Reformed homiletics typified by Thomas Wilson, especially in his view of biblical and homiletic language—including figurative language— as having "a more communicative and functional purpose, with an emphasis on its operation on the level of reason rather than on the level of emotion." See "True Purification: Donne's Art of Rhetoric in Two Candlemas Sermons," in *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives*, ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003), p. 318.

[25]See also Donne's descriptions of preaching as thunder (4:105) and military ordnance (4:195).

beyond the classical idea that the principal aims of oratory are to teach, to delight, and to move. The portrayal of the preacher as a trumpet-blast suggests that these aims are possible only after the preacher has shaken the auditors out of their natural complacency.

Donne's view stems from the belief that people's natural rational faculty is blunted by original sin, and that most people experience the world in only limited terms (i.e., without recognizing the spiritual order that permeates creation). In several sermons, Donne compares natural reason to the state of the world before the Word imposed form upon it. Thus, reason corresponds to the "promogeniall light" which "did that office of distinguishing night and day" before the sun was created. Faith corresponds to the sun itself, which "did all the offices of the former light, and more." The essence of rectified reason is that a faithful person is able to glimpse the divinity inherent in everyday things. Thus, although a person's "*Morall*, and *Civill*, and *Domestique*" affairs are conducted within the limited scope of human vision, "they have a deeper tincture, a heavenly nature, a relation *to God*, in them" (3:362). Based on this concept of natural and rectified reason, Donne's homiletic model calls for a *rational* as well as a spiritual transformation in the auditor. Part of this transformation is brought about by grace; but Donne is emphatic that the disruptive function of preaching is an instrumental means of effecting this transformation:

> The exalting of *naturall faculties*, and good *morall life*, *inward inspirations*, and private *meditations*, *conferences*, *reading*, and the like, doe awaken some; but the testimony of the messenger of God, the *preacher*, crying according to Gods ordinance, shaking the soule, troubling the conscience, and pinching the bowells, by denouncing of Gods Judgments, these beare witness of the light, when otherwise men would sleep it out.
> (4:211)

Parabolic logic is one figurative strategy that Donne uses to rouse the sleeping conscience. The depiction of familiar situations in a troubling light focuses critical attention on the auditor's basic perception of the world. This function is seen in the sermon preached at St. Paul's Cathedral on Psalm 90:14, "O satisfie us early with thy mercy . . . ," in which Donne suggests that no matter how early a person "rises" to meet God, God "rises" earlier to "raise" the repentant sinner:

> Now, upon the Sabbath, and in these holy Exercises, this
> Sonne shines out as at noone . . . and if you will but awake
> now, rise now, meet God now, now at noone, God will call
> even this early. Have any of you slept out the whole day, and
> are come in that drowsinesse to your evening, to the closing of
> your eyes, to the end of your dayes? Yet rise now, and God
> shall call even this an early rising.
>
> (5:282)

The passage features a parabolic disruption of time, so that no matter how long a person has waited to repent, God will call it early and grant mercy. Donne applies the image to the literal here and now, urging his audience to see this very moment as an opportunity to wake up and be redeemed. In this way, he portrays the divine order as *different from* but not *other than* the world of human experience. Indeed, Donne's homiletic strategy aims to show that the world perceived by natural reason is not in fact "ordinary," but a partial view that must be broken apart to reveal the true state of things. Viewed in this light, the use of vivid imagery in startling ways is much more integral to Donne's homiletic approach than mere illustration or adornment for the sake of holding the audience's interest. Rather, it is a central part of the preacher's role in bringing people closer to salvation.

With its emphasis on the disruption of ordinary images and situations and its call to commit to a rectified view of reality, parabolic logic accords with Donne's concept of how the preacher communicates spiritual insights to his audiences. While it is not the only technique that Donne uses to relate ordinary language to the divine, often appearing side-by-side with the logic of analogy, it occupies an important place within the taxonomy of linguistic practices that make Donne's sermons stand out as compelling literature.

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