

Donne's Sermons as Re-enactments of the Word: A Response to Margret Fetzer*

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Margret Fetzer is surely right that John Donne used theatrical strategies of impersonation and identification in his sermons so as to bring home the drama of salvation. By re-enacting Christ's passion and resurrection, Donne wished to open the hearts of his parishioners so that they might be reconciled to God. Through preaching he aspired to sway the obdurate and elicit the consent and cooperation necessary for grace. Nevertheless, while I agree with the broad outlines of Fetzer's analysis, I have a couple of reservations relating to mood and the chiaroscuro of soul-searching. The first pertains to the experiential affect of audiences at a theater or in church; the second pertains to exemplarity, given Fetzer's insight that Donne in the pulpit "illustrates what it is that his listeners are expected to do with the exempla he has provided" (7). By exploring the implications of Fetzer's observations, I hope to modify the emphasis of what is at stake in Donne's theatrical preaching.

My reservation about studies that identify similarities between the theater and church concerns their tendency to minimize the different atmospheres of each venue. Yes, St. Paul's was no doubt a noisy and distracting place, full of gallants showing off their fashionable wear. And yes, groundlings at the Globe might take away moral lessons from a show or experience feelings of sacramental fellowship and wonder at a climactic moment. These shared characteristics notwithstanding, if Londoners flocked in droves to the theater, leaving church

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pews empty, as anti-theatricalists claimed, this is—to state the obvious—because people were having more fun at a play. Margret Fetzer—even more than Bryan Crockett and Jeffrey Knapp whose studies she cites—overlooks how punitive and paranoia-inducing attending church could be. On the Sabbath, people were often asked to look inward and take stock of their sinfulness. But in the theater, they could forget the condition of their souls and escape the nausea-inducing reminders of the likelihood of their reprobation. The fact that Donne's language is gloriously ludic and his delivery, by all accounts, entertaining would not have dispelled the sobering uncertainty of one's own election and the suspicion that the divine comedy he was restaging and inviting one to join had long ago closed its doors.

Recent books by John Stachniewski and James Simpson remind us that the doctrine of predestination could overshadow the promise of redemption. As Simpson puts it: "For the Christian living under the dispensation of predestination, everything has been decided before one acts. What remains for the Christian is to search for signs of election" (140). The world thus becomes "a very complex and finally unreadable text that is incapable of answering the question: am I saved?" (141). As a preacher, Donne tried to alleviate the discouragement induced by the fear of damnation. He concedes to his congregation at St. Paul's that "God hath accompanied, and complicated almost all our bodily diseases of these times, with an extraordinary sadness, a predominant melancholy, a faintness of heart, a cheerlessness, a joylessness of spirit, and therefore I returne often to this endeavor of raising your hearts, dilating your hearts with a holy Joy, Joy in the holy Ghost" (VII.1.68-69). Elsewhere, he hearkens to the sociableness of church and the communion of holy meetings, protesting too much perhaps that "Religion is not a *melancholy*; the spirit of God is not a *dampe*; the Church is not a *grave*: it is a *fold*, it is an *Arke*, it is a *net*, it is a *city*" (VI.7.152). Although Donne may be trying to seduce his parishioners with what Bryan Crockett, quoting Jasper Mayne, calls "holy cozenage" (50), he takes it for granted that his

audience is subdued and depressed. They are not in the holiday mood of playgoers.

Given the uncertainty of salvation and the constant gauging of one's own responses to the preacher's spoken Word, I have to quibble with Fetzer's footnote that John Austin's concept of "take-up" can be applied to the speech act of the sermon. Fetzer paraphrases Austin, noting that "some speech acts, such as, for example, bets, require a take-up on the part of the audience to be felicitous" (12). Take-up she understands as adequate response: "An adequate response would mean the listener's identification with the exempla offered by the preacher whereas a refusal to identify would render the speech act of the sermon infelicitous" (12). This analysis is too simple. In the Protestant theology of grace, take-up is anything but straightforward. In a mindset where receptiveness to the Word might betray a fatal hubris and where a hint of detected indifference might produce the abjection requisite for hope, the challenge is to interpret take-up. How can one know that one is, in Luther's formulation, *simul justus et peccator*? Reading oneself for signs of justification is a life-and-death matter far more urgent and complex than the inner assent or permission involved in Austinian take-up. Donne confesses this in the *Devotions* when he prays: "So though thou knowest all my sins, yet thou knowest them not to my comfort, except thou know them by my telling them to thee. How shall I bring to thy knowledge, by that way, those sins which I myself know not?" (68). Donne concedes that he ignores the manifold ways in which he may have sinned. Self-knowledge is so difficult that it imperils the perception of the event of take-up, understood as an act of faith. That is why Donne concludes Holy Sonnet 19 with the paradox, "Those are my best days, when I shake with fear." Fear may be conducive to grace, yet fear is hard to sustain. Donne is alarmed monitoring his own inattention at prayer: "I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore [...]. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dan-

gers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer" (VII.10.264-65). He offers himself to the congregation as an exemplar of a troubled Christian always already compromised by relapse and frivolity.

Fetzer discusses Donne's frequent recourse to the trope of exemplarity as a way of bridging the gap between God and man, preacher and congregation. She claims that Donne relies on both Protestant and Catholic notions of *imitatio Christi*, at once drawing on remembrance as commemoration and on practices of Ignatian meditation, to carry out his "project of live re-enactment" (10). His goal is to produce a feeling of simultaneity whereby "the past of Christ's passion and the present of our sins are brought very closely together" (9), so that "both listener and preacher meet and merge in the figure of Christ and his passion" (10). While I have no quarrel with Fetzer's description of Donne's "project" as aiming at closeness and merged identities, I question her claim that exemplarity and theatrical re-enactment are the principal means to that end.

As I have argued elsewhere, Donne's appeal to exemplarity goes together with typological thinking (cf. *Skepticism and Memory*). While exemplarity and typology often overlap in Donne's thought, it is important to distinguish between them when considering theatrical identification, because the "re-enactment" that typology sponsors is more problematic than that elicited by exemplars. While patterns or exemplars, words Donne uses interchangeably, inspire copying and "performative imitation" (9), types operate through a system of figural interpretation that assumes providential interpellation. Thus, Donne compares King Josiah to King James through a process of "application" premised on typology (IV.9.247-48). Elsewhere he explains this process: "The Old Testament is a preparation and paedagogie to the New. [...] the accomplishing of those promises to us in the New-Testament are thus applyable to us" (I.8.291). The Christian who understands the historical past and the religious present in terms of the binaries of typology—Hebrew exemplars operating as heroic

types whose shadowy promise is fulfilled in the brightness of the evangelical present—finds himself drawn into the drama of salvation. God is hailing him, summoning that individual to see himself as a participant in the symmetries of salvation history. As Donne puts it, when that man “compares the new-Testament with the Old, the Gospel with the Law, he finds this to be a performance of those promises, a fulfilling of those Prophecies, a revelation of those Types and Figures, and an accomplishment, and a possession of those hopes and those reversions” (I.8.298). The well-ordered and streamlined narrative produced by figural interpretation is reassuring, given its premise that the baffling and confused present can be understood as a repetition—with a difference—of the past. Because Biblical types like Jacob, Josiah, David, and Deborah lend coherence to the present, anything that expedites identification with them brings solace. What could be more comforting in a nominalist universe ruled by a *deus absconditus*? In other words, when Donne ventriloquizes God, positioning himself, Fetzer notes, as a “liminal figure” (7), he is doing more than offering himself as a consoling exemplar, at once God’s representative and an ordinary sinner; he is appealing to the typological imagination of his auditory, inviting them to see themselves as providentially interpellated.

The idea of providential interpellation encouraged by typological tropes differs from Fetzer’s notion of theatrical re-enactment. The belief that the long arm of God has reached down and singled out an individual, tapping him on the shoulder and knocking on his heart, differs from the bashful experience of identification occasioned by a dynamic preacher. Indeed, the language with which Donne describes the work of providential interpellation often verges on the violent. “He entred into thee, at baptism,” Donne preaches. “He hath crept farther and farther into thee, in catechisms and other infusions of his doctrine into thee; He hath pierced into thee deeper by the powerful threatnings of his Judgments, in the mouths of his messengers; He hath made some survey over thee, in bringing thee to call thy self to an account of some sinful actions; and yet Christ is not come into

thee" (I.9.308). This labor-intensive process of interpellation has nothing to do, Donne notes, with "an inordinate delight, in hearing the eloquence of the preacher; for, so thou hearest the man, and not *God*" (IV.8.225). Donne conjures different portraits of his audience: the superficial parishioner who enjoys the theatrical skills of the preacher; the dutiful parishioner who patterns himself on Christ; and the providentially interpellated soul who encounters grace. The "alignment" (7) with God that Donne achieves in his preaching emerges, then, from typology as much as from exemplarity. But it is well to remember that the typological imagination in its desire for providential centrality has more force—and is ultimately more dangerous—than the emulative imagination with its engagement in theatrical role-play.

Finally, I wonder how appreciation of the materiality of Donne's voice might affect Fetzer's analysis of his theatricality, given Donne's self-conscious allusions to "breath" in his sermons. Gina Bloom has recently written about the ways that voice is produced, transmitted and received in an effort to theorize the relation of voice and agency. Speaking of the seed-Word metaphor in Protestant sermons, for example, Bloom observes that "the originator of the voice is imagined to be omnipotent God—the human preacher acts as a mere messenger or intermediary, delivering the seed-Word from its unwaveringly authoritative site of production" (113). But the seed-Word does not necessarily produce fruit in the heart of the listener. As Bloom puts it: "Because spiritual hearing is a temporal and spatial practice—not an instantaneous act one chooses or refuses to perform—bad hearers may disrupt the inception of the Word at a range of stages during the hearing process" (120). Donne himself represents the ear as an imperiled organ at risk of invasion, and not merely thanks to the noise of a fly, the rattling of a coach or the whining of a door. He preaches: "Take heed that you heare them whom God hath appointed to speake to you; But, when you come abroad, take heed *what* you hear; for certainly, the Devill doth not cast in more snares at the eye of man, then at the eare" (VII.16.405; cf. Bloom 113). The voice of Satan competes with the voice of the preacher such that the parishioner is urged

to raise his aural defenses, while not being deaf to God. Bloom comments that Protestant sermons like Donne's "locate agency in the bodies of hearers, defining spiritual subjectification as an acoustic feat" (114), a disciplining of one's auditory organ that always threatens to elude control. While I see the problem of take-up and reception as one of interpretation—reading one's internal weather for signs of election and finding one's self illegible—I think Bloom's materialist emphasis on the opening and shutting of ears can supplement and support Fetzer's analysis of Donne's sermons as re-enactments of the Word.

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