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Imagery in the sermons and devotions of John Donne

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IMAGERY IN THE SERMONS AND DEVOTIONS OF JOHN DONNE

A THESIS

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BY

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The seventeenth century in English history is not unlike the twentieth century world in terms of paradoxes and problems, scientific innovations, conflicting theological, political, and philosophical ideas, territorial expansion and literary novices. Indeed, seventeenth century England can well be referred to as the mother century of modern ideas and accomplishments. The age of inquiry, the rise of skepticism, the rejection of scholasticism—all of these descriptions are characteristic of earlier seventeenth century England. In what had been a predominantly religious age, men were now questioning the authority of scholastic dogma, and a movement toward independent thought, inquiry, and investigation had begun. In an effort to gain insight into the perplexing problem of the "how of things," a deep seated interest in experimentation and scientific explanations had become planted in the seventeenth century mind. The scientific quest for truth had begun. As is characteristic of any revolutionary movement the evolving "new science" troubled the minds of many seventeenth century scholars and thinkers.

John Donne, poet-preacher, and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, was greatly disturbed with this profound change, which
was steadily taking place in the century, in men's attitudes toward the basic principles of life. His poetry and prose works, clearly reflect the influence of his age on him. His Sermons and Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions are full of the questions, theories, and new ideas imposed upon the thinking mind by the scientific discoveries of the day, and it is most interesting to note the startling images which he employs to set forth his main ideas in both his poetry and his prose. It is my belief that the temper of his age and the wonder of the new science influenced the use of the unique imagery found in his works. The Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and the Sermons have particularly impressed me because of the way in which they show the keen sensitivity and the extraordinary intellect of Donne. These works reveal very clearly the impact of the new learning on his ideas, and on the images which help to set forth these ideas. It is therefore my purpose to discuss the sources, nature, and effectiveness of the imagery found in Donne's Sermons and Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions.
CHAPTER I

SOURCES OF DONNE'S IMAGERY

John Donne, poet-preacher, dean of St. Paul's, and outstanding scholar of his day has often been referred to as the father of a new school of poetry which arose in the seventeenth century called the metaphysical school of poets. The metaphysical school began about 1600, with John Donne, who was followed by Henry Vaughan, George Herbert, and Richard Crashaw. These poets were so named because of their concern with philosophical concepts and human nature in the world around them. They reacted violently against the Elizabethan poetry which had been written before them. They sought to treat everything with which they came in contact--religious beliefs, philosophical concepts, and scientific findings. They attempted to unify complex thoughts and feeling, to elaborate on that thought, and to make use of all the material in their world.

For the most part these poets gave less attention to verse forms than the poets who preceeded them. Rather they sought to build their thought around some startling and unusual figure, making paradoxical inquiry into the nature of things--imaginative and intellectual--which exhausts by its use of antithesis, contradictions, and unusual imagery all the possibilities in a
given idea. This idea might be a psychological probing of love, death, or religion, and might be embodied in a striking metaphysical utterance or in the use of a common or scientific word.

Metaphysical stylistic devices are not only evident in the poetry of John Donne, but in his prose works as well. The figures upon which he builds his ideas in the Sermons and Devotions are shocking, explosive and stunning. This is indicative of the metaphysical style. So unusual is the imagery and so different from the metaphors of early Elizabethan poetry, that the question of the source of this imagery arises. One needs only look at Donne's world in order to discern the scene which inspired his metaphysical thinking and expression. The seventeenth century world was very different from that of the followers of Petrarch. The Renaissance had indeed flowered in this century and every thinking man was effected by it. If the imagery which Donne employed in his works was startling, if his ideas were complex and confusing, no less was the temper of his age. The literature of the period reflected the time. New philosophies, new scientific findings, and new modes of life in general were the order of the day. Therefore it is not incredible that these three characteristics of the age formed the sour-
ces of Donne's figurative language.

The philosophic quest for truth in the seventeenth century was typically concerned with the epistemological problem. The pervading questions were, can I know anything of reality? and if so, how and what?\(^1\) The problem of knowledge had not greatly troubled the schoolmen, since they had assumed that the mind was in contact with real things in sense perception. "Things," for them, were entities in themselves, having certain qualities which they regarded as being "in" the objects, somewhat as we do the ordinary common-sense view.\(^2\) With the advent of new scientific theories the fact that things are not what they seem began to disturb the comfortable precepts of the schoolmen. As a result, Descartes, in France, attempted to separate, for himself, the true from the false. For this he has been called the father of modern philosophy. Descartes' starting point was skepticism, as complete as he could make it, about the truth, first, of commonly received opinions and beliefs, and secondly of sense-data. He placed all in doubt, even questioning


\(^2\) Ibid., p. 85.
his own existence until he could prove it. His method was

Never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to compromise nothing more in my judgment than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt.  

Descartes methodology pervaded the whole realm of philosophic thought in the age. The English philosophers seemed to have derived their impetus from Cartesian thought. Consequently Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke made serious inquiry into the nature of education and government.

The whole state of education was analyzed and revamped in the mind of Bacon, who had an inspiration to internationalize and categorize all of knowledge so that the overall advancement of learning could take place. In Bacon's work, one of his purposes is to expose the prentitiousness of the Aristotelian philosophy, which seemed to him the source of much academic mischief in his time. Bacon cried in a loud voice for the advancement of science, of reason, and of inquiry. In his three great works, The Advancement of Learning, Novum Organum, and the New Atlantis, he tries to show the worth and dignity of knowledge.

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1 Descartes, Discourse de la Methode, quoted in Basil Willey, ibid., p. 85.
to analyze and explain its hindrances, and to show the method by which advancement is to take place. His great contribution lies not in what he achieved but in the tremendous advertisement which he gave to the trend of philosophical thought and to the advancement of science.

The philosophy of government occupied a seat of great interest in seventeenth century thought. Thomas Hobbes was in the forefront of this movement. Hobbes was a pragmatist; he felt that "The universe is corporeal; and all that is real is material and what is not material is not real."1 This attitude is a perfect example of the general temper of the new learning. One can see the influence of Cartesian thought on Hobbes. He too is unable to accept the theories of the Aristotelians and their doctrines. In his philosophy of government he maintained that "Self interest is the mainspring of human action,"2 and asserted that only an absolute monarchy could control a complex society.

On the other hand, another outstanding philosopher of the late seventeenth century, in opposition to Hobbes, was to argue

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1 Ibid., p. 100

that if things are left to themselves they are more likely to work together for good than if interfered with by meddling man.\(^1\) John Locke, too, was continuing the quest for truth. He argued that man in a state of nature has certain rights. But in order to live in a civil state he gives up some of these rights by making a social contract. It is evident then that the new philosophies were permeating the spirit of inquiry which permeates the ideas and images found throughout the works of John Donne. Although there were many conflicting theories, and trends of thought, the significance of the seventeenth century philosophers is their contribution toward the search for truth, the value of experimentation, and the advancement of learning.

The contribution of the philosophers was no more striking than that of the scientists. Along with this questioning of the central meaning of life as expressed through the philosophers, there began to appear a hundred other challenges to the whole periphery of human knowledge.\(^2\) It was reserved for this century to see the first strong impact of the new science, chief

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child of the Renaissance, which was soon to change the complexion not only of the earth but of the whole universe beyond.

The schoolmen headed by St. Thomas Aquinus had rationalized the order and movement of the universe as they had done every other plane of human knowledge. Scholasticism was a science of being. Its conclusions were pre-determined, its explanations were all given in terms of the forms, qualities, origins, and ends of things. The truth of any proposition thus depended upon its being consistent with a body of given and unquestionable doctrine.  

1 It may be said, then, that for the scholastics there was little or no distinction between a fact and a theological truth. For them the important consideration was not how things behave, but how they were linked with total Being.  

2 This, therefore, is the kind of reasoning which went into Aquinus' theory of motion. He asserted that God had given all creatures a form of which they are necessitated both to be what they are, and to seek that which is proper to them. Thus earth and heavy bodies,

1 I. A. Richards, Mencius on the Mind, p. 111, quoted in Basil Willey, op. cit., p. 22.

2 Ibid., p. 23.
tend downward; fire and light bodies upwards. ¹

With these considerations in mind it is well to examine an example of the rejection of scholasticism by a seventeenth century scientist. Galileo, the pioneer of scientific investigation, ignored the scholastic theory of motion because Aquinus had only explained why and not how it happens. Seeking to measure the speed of falling bodies in terms of time and space, Galileo dropped weights from the top of a tower, to see how they behave. By means of the telescope, which Aquinus had refused to look through, Galileo had observed generation and corruption going on in the heavens. As a result of this kind of experimentation Galileo set forth the new principle of inertia. Thus a case in point which clearly reflects the rejection of scholasticism which led to the forming of the Keystone theory of seventeenth century science.

Another example of the march of science is to be found in the rejection of the Ptolemaic conception of the universe by Copernicus. The Ptolemaic conception was the idea of the world which centered around the earth. The earth was in the middle, and the concentric spheres were around it. Forming a kind of

¹ Ibid., p. 22
circle around the earth moved the planets (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn); the stars were thought to be in a fixed position. Outside of the spheres was the primum mobile. While all of the other spheres moved from West to East, the primum mobile moved from East to West. It was further thought that all of the planets must move within their proper orbits. Anything contrary meant a prophecy of disaster.\(^1\) Also inherent in the ptolemaic theory is the fact that since the earth is the center of the universe, then everything exists for man. Thus the universe is a macrocosm, and man, being a little world himself is a microcosm.\(^2\)

Copernicus, like Galileo, denied in his own mind Ptolemy's theory of the universe, because of its lack of scientific proof. By observing the movement of the heavenly bodies for years, he set forth the theory that the earth is only one planet among many, and that the planets move around the sun. Here again is revealed the way in which the scientific method was upsetting old authoratative beliefs and speculations. The Copernican theo-

\(^1\) J. M. Berdan, Early Tudor Poetry (New York, 1931), p. 23.

ry was perhaps the most revolutionary and disturbing effect of the renaissance. It completely upset the concept that man was a little world, and that the universe existed for man's sake. This gave rise to philosophical probings into the state of man in the total scheme of things. The literature of the period, particularly that of John Donne, as we shall see later, clearly reveals the disturbing effects of Copernicus' theory.

Sir Isaac Newton was to throw even clearer light on the conception of the universe, and by so doing perpetuated the march of science. In his *Principia* he proved that both the world and the earth are mechanisms and are subject to certain natural laws which remain constant.\(^1\) It is here that the law of gravity had its origin. Along with the development of the natural sciences other areas of scientific endeavor were also advancing. In mathematics, the theorems and axioms of analytic geometry were being developed by Descartes and Kepler. John Napier made a tremendous contribution in this area with his invention of the logarithm. William Gilbert laid a solid scientific foundation for the study of magnetism and electricity. Medical history was being

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made by William Harvey, who had discovered the circulation of
the blood. Even the science of psychology had taken root with
Robert Burton who concerned himself with the universal madness
of man, and therefrom attempted to anatomize melancholy.¹ It
is no wonder then that Donne presents us with unusual images;
his lived in an unusual age, the age that gave birth to modern
science.

As a result of the new philosophic search, and the new
scientific investigation, John Donne, as did other seventeenth
century thinkers, found himself living in a century of profound
change in the entire mode of life. This was the century of the
beginnings of colonial empires, competition for raw materials
and markets. This was the commencement of the multiplication of
the earth's population by five times its size. The new thinkers
were beginning to make their world more comfortable. Bacon, was
laying the foundation for the modern refrigeration of meat. New
foods, new drinks, spices, tobacco, the potato, coffee and tea,
were coming into England to alter the very chemistry and physics
of men's bodies.² When Donne uses what are called homespun ima-

¹ Thomas D. Jarrett, op. cit., October 1, 1956.

ges, when he uses a figure as that found in "homiles are cold meats," and "mingling religions is making linsey-woolsey garments," he is drawing upon the homely aspects of the world around him. But so interesting figures strike us as unusual, since they had not appeared in the literature of the Elizabethans, unless we understand the background out of which these images evolve was itself unusual.

Finally the seventeenth century was the age of the real beginning of modern English prose; it brings the origins of biography, of modern history, of the diary and the periodical essay. This is the day of the discovery of the classics, of the beginning of criticism and satire, of the philosophic and political essay, of the Sermons and Devotions of John Donne. It was difficult for the seventeenth century writer to be anything but copious, for, as has been shown, there was a wealth of material to inspire him. Whatever the rift between science and the humanities, there was little or none between scholarship and literature. Donne kept up with the advances of philosophy and science to an


extraordinary degree. Both in extent and up-to-dateness the
range of his scientific allusion is remarkable. He appreciated
the importance of the new science as did few of his contempora-
ries. In "Ignatius His Conclave" he makes Copernicus describe
himself as one who "had turned the whole frame of the world."\(^1\)
Donne's intellectual digestion is of the best, and his appetite
for strange knowledge is unfailing."\(^2\) The frequency and gusto of
his allusions to physics, astronomy, anatomy, and the chemistry
of the time show at once a very high degree of impressionableness
and an unusual capacity for the assimilation of all sorts of in-
tellectual material.

It is with the above facts in view that I have suggested as
three sources of the imagery found in the Sermons and Devotions,
the philosophical quest for truth, the impact of scientific in-
quiry, and the general mode of life existing in Donne's time. It
is now possible to look at the types of imagery found in the two
works with a reasonable knowledge of the sources from which they
originated.

\(^1\) Helen C. White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York, 1936),
p. 138.

\(^2\) Ibid.
CHAPTER II

TYPES OF IMAGERY IN DONNE'S DEVOTIONS AND SERMONS

The use of imagery more than any other stylistic device used by John Donne in his poetry and prose, reflects the influence of the new learning on his writing. The use of scientific, cosmological or homely terms, and the comparisons based on scientific phenomena are often the vehicles which ride his most important ideas. Douglas Bush comments that in order to see Donne's reaction to the new cosmology we must turn to the prose and poetry of his middle years, which of course, includes the Sermons and Devotions. Donne reveals, in this period, his knowledge of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. "Donne is one of the few minds troubled by the new philosophies, although not thoroughly converted."1 The poet says of himself that:

I am up and I seem to stand,  
and I goe round; and I am a new  
argument of the new philosophie,  
that the earth moves round... 2

The type of imagery found in Donne's works is significantly different from that of early Elizabethan poetry because of the


2 John Sparrow (ed.), Donne's Devotions (Cambridge n.d.). All quoted material from the Devotions will come from this reference; therefore the author's name will not be repeated.
different milieu out of which it comes. The seventeenth century background which led to such literary repercussions has already been discussed in Chapter I. To be sure, the metaphysical poets were learned poets. They were witty poets too, in all the senses in which their age understood wit. ¹ There are comparisons used in the poetry of the earlier seventeenth century for which we find no parallel in Chaucer, Spenser or Shakespeare. A number of the images used by Donne and his followers were new, because the stimuli to imagination that produced them were new.

"Donne and his contemporaries did not rack their brains to invent them, they burst around them as the atomic bomb around us."²

A century later Samuel Johnson was to look back on Donne's works and say that some of his finest figures were produced "by a voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange."³ What Johnson either ignored or failed to under-

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¹ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.


stand was the fact that Donne was producing images out of the
world around him not for merely the sake of being strange and
new, but because the time in which he lived was strange and new,
and therefore naturally provoked such expression. The new math-
ematics that stirred Kepler to rapture, when he discovered that
Plato's "five regular solids" afforded the clue to the relation-
ship between the planets, was the same mathematics which led
Donne to think of lovers as a pair of compasses\(^1\)--a comparison
about which Johnson said, "It may be doubted whether absurdity
or ingenuity has the better claim."\(^2\) Looking back with histori-
cal perspective, modern critics draw lines of demarcation between
three main epochs in European thought: the classical, the post-
Renaissance, and the modern. Before and down through the Rennai-
sance a majority of philosophers thought that the world was ani-
mate. It lived and flourished as did man. During the seventeenth
century this conception gave way to the idea of the world as
a mechanism, no longer animate, but mechanically responsive to
the laws of nature.

\(^1\) Marjorie Hope Nicolson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. xix.

\(^2\) Samuel Johnson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 28.
The earlier Elizabethans thought of their world in metaphors. The world was not like an animal; it was an animal. Seventeenth century men began to think of their world in terms of similes, they explained the world and man by figures of speech drawn from history and from natural science. This habit of thinking in terms of universal analogy had a profound effect upon the advancement of science. It also had effect upon medicine, for physicians sought to explain the structure of the human body by analogy with the structure of the earth. Renaissance man who had discovered much about the geographical globe still knew little about the processes of his own body. \(^1\) Donne suggested this in "The Second Anniversary!"

Knowest thou but how the stone doth enter in
The bladders cave and never breaks the shinne?
Knowest thou how blood, which to the heart doth flow,
Doth from one ventricle to th' other goe?
And for the putrid stuffe, which thou dost spit,
Knowest thou how thy lungs have attracted it? . . . .
What hope have we to know our selves, when wee

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\(^1\) Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
Know not the least things, which for our use be?¹

During Donne's lifetime, science was to answer some of the questions that had puzzled man for centuries. The march of science, however, did not deter the attempt of man to explain human mysteries by means of analogy. It led however into a probing inquiry into the very nature of things. Images wrought out of the seventeenth century man of letters is the type of imagery employed by John Donne in his love poetry and his religious writings. This type of imagery born out of the throng of new philosophical, scientific, and everyday facts is the new imagery—the imagery influenced by the impact of the new learning. An analytical study of the Devotions and Sermons will reveal that Donne used, to a great extent, figures of astronomical, medical, and homely origin. Examples of each of these types of imagery will be noted and explained in their context.

It seems probable that Donne's study of the new astronomy produced something like a crisis in his intellectual and religious development. Donne certainly experienced to a greater degree than most Englishmen the disturbing effects of the Copernican theory.² In all ages any ray of scientific light may alter the

¹ John Donne, Complete Works (New York, 1949), p. 82.
focus of religious vision. In the seventeenth century the most disturbing light was astronomical.\(^1\) New observations and deductions, combined with old and new speculations, slowly effected a great change in the traditional picture of the universe and of man's place in it. The issue here is not to decide whether or not Donne accepted the new astronomical findings wholly, the point is that the interest in, and the influence of the new philosophies are evidenced by his continuous reference to astronomy and other areas of science in his works. In view of the background already given,\(^2\) we can understand the source of Donne's idea when he compares man to the heavenly bodies in terms of the change which both undergo.

The Heavens are not less constant because they move continually one and the same way
The earth is not the more constant, because it lyes still continually, because continually it changes, and meets in al parts thereof.
Man, who is the noblest part of the Earth, melts so away. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . \(^3\)

\(^1\) Douglas Bush, op. cit., p. 260.

\(^2\) Supra, pp. 7-9.

Or in comparing his own body with the earth he says:

Earth is the center of my Bodie,
Heaven is the center of my soul,...
The sunne who goes so many miles
in a minut, the Starres of the
Firmament, which go so fast, as my
body to the earth.¹

The ideas set forth in both of these passages show at once
the conflicting theories of the universe existant in Donne's age.
The first reveals the pre-Renaissance idea of the animate world,²
and the second shows the influence of the Copernican theory on
Donne. Again in the Devotions, which were written during a seri-
ous seize of illness, Donne compares his sickness, which manifest-
ed itself by means of spots on his body, with the stars in the
firmament. Seemingly more spots appeared on one side of his body
than on the other. In this passage the stars represent the spots.

We say that the Firmament is full of
stars, as though it were equally full;
but we know that there are more stars
under the Northerne, than under the South-
ern pole.³

¹Ibid., p. 6.
²Supra, p. 16.
Donne's reference here probably comes from Copernicus' observation of the location of the planets, by means of his telescopic study of the heavenly bodies. This same astronomical reference is made in the Sermons, although used in a different context. In an Easter sermon, preached at Saint Pauls, Donne set forth the idea that man draws closer to God by means of faith; that earthly knowledge is incomplete; but that when man reaches his heavenly home all knowledge will be complete.

And in that place where there are more suns than there are stars in the firmament, for all the saints are suns, and more light in another sun, the sun of righteousness, the sun of glory, the Son of God, than in all them in that illustration, that emanation...which began 6,000 million of millions before, in those uncreated heavens, shall we see God.

Another image drawn from the realm of astronomy or cosmology is the famous world metaphor. Here Donne observes that:


In this honor which man both by being a little world that he hath these earthquakes in himself, sudden shakings; these lightenings, sudden flashes; these thunders, sudden noises; these eclipses, sudden offuscations and darkening of his senses; these blazing stars, sudden fiery exhalations; these rivers of blood, sudden red waters. . . . . . . . . . . . . 1

This passage, from the Devotions, ascribes to man, all of the qualities which go into the making of the universe. Donne's source here is the microcosmic theory of the universe and its treatment during this time. 2 The passage also reveals the growing seventeenth century practice of comparing the universe and man by figures of speech drawn from natural science. 3

Donne's knowledge of medicine, and physical science is also reflected in his imagery. Interest in medical science is a definite part of the modern spirit of inquiry, investigation and experimentation. 4 That Donne had read medical theories of his day

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2 Supra, p. 8, et passim.

3 Supra, p. 15.

4 Supra, p. 9.
is evident. That he was inaccurate concerning some information that he read or received from other sources is to be acknowledged, but the fact that he was concerned about the importance of medicine shows his vast knowledge and interest in the current discoveries and problems of his day. Don Cameron Allen has made an interesting study of Donne's interest in medicine. Because of its pertinency a direct passage from his paper should be quoted here so that the reader may receive the information in its full strength.

Medical data, anatomical terminology, physiological theory, apothecary's "drug tongue" and physicians jargon elbow from the pages of Donne's poetry and Sermons the classical allusions so popular with his contemporaries....

The Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions is a fine clinical account of the progress of an illness...we could almost establish a dictionary of medical terms based on Donne's writings because they are studded with words like ague, anatomy, antidote, apoplexy, physic....

In the Devotions, when tracing his illness from the onset to the finish, Donne uses medical nomenclature. In setting forth the idea that man (as opposed to lower animals who by instinct find

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cures for their discomforts) is dependent on the aid of physicians, Donne makes this interesting comparison:

Man hath not the innate instinct, to apply these naturall medicines to his present danger as these inferior creatures have; he is not his own apothecary, his own physician.¹

When Donne attempts to describe his illness to the physicians who wait on him he seems to realize that even though medical science has advanced in his day, it still has great limitations.

I have cut up mine anatomy, dissected myself, and they are gon to read upon me . . . . . . . . . . . . as if there were no ruine but sickness we see the Masters of that Art, can scarce number or name all sicknesses; the names will not serve them which are given from the place affected, the Plurisie is so, the falling sickness is so, the canker is so; they cannot have names ynow, from what it does, nor where it is, but they must exort names from what it is like, what it resembles.² In many diseases, that which is but an accident, but a symptom of the main disease, is so violent that the Physician must

² Ibid., Meditation IX, p. 48.
attend the cure of that, though he pretermit (so far as to intermit) the cure of the disease itself.¹

These passages show not only Donne's familiarity with medical terms, but his awareness of the status of medicine in his day. One that shows his apparent knowledge of the make up of the human body is evident in this prayer.

There is no veine in mee, that is not full of the blood of thy Son, whom I have crucified...there is no artery in me, that hath not the spirit of error, the spirit of lust; no bone in me that is not hardened with the custome of sin, and nourished, and soupled with the marrow of sinn; no sinews, no ligaments, that do not tie, and chain sin and sin together.²

Such references to viens, arteries and marrow may very well be in some way due to Harvey's³ discovery during this time.

Again in his sermon on "Wretched Man", where he discusses man's frailty, Donne asserts:

If a man do but prick his finger and bind it above that part so that the spirits or that which they call the basalum of the body cannot

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¹ Ibid.
² Ibid., Expostulation IX, pp. 51-52.
³ Supra, p. 9.
pass by that ligature to that wound, yet the gangrene will pass from that wound by that ligature to the body, to the heart, and destroy.

The reference to the "basalum" shows that Donne was well read in the science of Paracelsus, a sixteenth century German physician. In his works, Paracelsus, showed a genuine desire to promote the progress of medicine. Fundamentally his system is based on a visionary neoplatonic philosophy in which the life of man is regarded as inseparable from that of the universe. Such references further indicate Donne's vast knowledge and the impact of all areas of learning on his works.

One of the chief characteristics of John Donne, the writer, is his knowledge of the world around him and of the way that knowledge is employed in his works. The use of what is known as homely imagery is a clear example of the writer's interest in the common everyday world around him. Donne and his followers rejected the classical myths and imagery of the Elizabethans. They arrived at an actuality in style. The poetry and prose are full

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of images taken from the life and habits of his time. Where the Petrachan and Spenserian schools had used mythology to ornament their verse, Donne weaves in, instead, the science, philosophy, and the new nomenclature of his own age. The most interesting element of Donne's works is the wide range of material from which he draws his analogies. Some of the most pronounced homely images found in the *Sermons* and *Devotions* are those pertaining to real estate, books, geography, food, legal matters and other such homespun figures which illustrate practical applications of religious truths. These homely illustrations show the widening horizons in every area of endeavor in the seventeenth century. Again and again, in expressing the idea of man's relation to the universe, Donne uses real-estate terms to state his idea. In one of his "Meditations" he says:

> of the happiness, even of this world, he man is but tenant, but of the misery the freeholder; of happiness he is but the farmer, but the usu-fructuary, but of misery the lord, the proprietary.

or

> We are God's tenants here, and yet here, he, our land-

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lord pays us rents; not yearly, not quarterly; but hourly and quarterly.... 1

In determining the relationship of the parts of the body, one to the other, a legal image is employed in his Sermons and Meditations. For example, in "Meditation XI Donne says:

But howsoever, since the heart is both the birthright and Primogeniture, and that it is nature's eldest Sonne in us, the part which is first borne to life in man, and that the other parts, as younger brethren, and servants in this family, have a dependence upon it.... 2

Or when comparing the interdependence of man he compares mankind with the pages of a book.

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume. . . . . . .
God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. 3

1 Ibid., Expostulation, I, p. 4.

2 Ibid., Meditation, XI, p. 61.

3 Ibid., Meditation, III, p. 2.
Seventeenth century England was on its way to becoming the world empire that it finally accomplished in the nineteenth century. Donne was conscious of the continuous expansion of the little island so that in further illustrating man's dependent nature he uses a figure drawn from the realm of geography.

No man is an island intire of itselfe; every man is a piece of the continent a part of the Main. If a clod bee washed away by the sea, Europe is the lesse, as if a pramotorie were, as well as if a manner of thy friends or of thine owne were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Scattered throughout the sermons are brief little comparisons which vividly show the extent to which Donne used the homespun image.

God's pardon is an eye salve

The church is God's mint

homilies are cold meats

\[1\]
Ibid., Meditation XVII, p. 97.

\[2\]
The Sermons, op. cit., VII, p. 58.

\[3\]
Ibid., p. 70.

\[4\]
Ibid., I, p. 92.
private religious service is a tap of water outside, but the church is the cistern of the water itself.\(^1\)

speech is the glue and cement of religion\(^2\)

mingling religious is making a linsey woolsey garment, or plowing with an ox and an ass.\(^3\)

It is clear then that the types of imagery employed in the Sermons and Devotions illustrate the wide range of Donne's knowledge, and the impact of the new seventeenth century learning on his writings. The use of figures drawn from astronomy, medicine, and other newly developing areas of interest in his time show that the sources of this type of imagery and the reasons for it are valid.\(^4\) The next point of interest is the question of the function or effectiveness of the types of imagery already studied.

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\(^1\) Ibid., VIII, p.10.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 12.

\(^3\) Ibid., I, p. 56.

\(^4\) Supra, pp. 1-12, et passim.
CHAPTER III

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE IMAGERY
IN DONNE'S SERMONS AND DEVOTIONS

Sermons do not often survive as literature, and Donne's sermons are no exception. Some few of us read sermons of today for especial reasons, and, in some instances, as great literature; but we rarely read sermons of yesterday or of the seventeenth century. However, when the student of seventeenth century English Literature, or any John Donne enthusiast reads portions of his Sermons and Devotions he will immediately find that "the great poet was not lost in the preacher, but transmuted." The eloquence, passion, and beautiful language of these works reveal Donne at his best. In any personal evaluation of his works, the writer maintains that the value of the Sermons and Devotions lies not so much in what is said as how it is said. The effectiveness of the imagery employed in the works is the quality which makes them both interesting and delightful. The most successful and characteristic effects of Donne's overall style is secured by brief words, sudden contrasts, the tele-

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1 "Flowers From the Pulpit", *Times Literary Supplement*, December 27, 1923, p. 55.

2 Ibid.
scoping of images and multiplied associations.¹

G. H. Palmer in his introduction to the English works of George Herbert says that "Spenser's lulling rhythms and bloodless heroes were being displaced by the jolting and passionate realism of Donne....the soul of man took the place of an outer world."² Donne and his followers lived in a period of declining faith and growing secularization, they often felt the inadequacy of traditional form to communicate new feelings.³ Although there is not a complete revolution in stylistic devices, men like Bacon and Donne certainly are examples of the newer literary techniques. The imagery found in Donne is unique because he rejected earlier Elizabethan imagery and borrowed nothing from the French or Italians. His poems are full of images taken from the life and habits of his own time. No poet of his time, has equalled the concentrated passion, the delicate, long drawn musical effects, the bold and ecstatic rapture of Donne at

² G. H. Palmer (ed.) The English Works of George Herbert (Boston, 1905), pp. 89-99
his very best.\textsuperscript{1} The effectiveness of the imagery in the Sermons and Devotions, as well as in the poetry of John Donne, led to several important developments in the literature of the earlier seventeenth century--psychological realism, the art of surprise and intellectualized emotions.\textsuperscript{2}

The fact that Donne is a realistic writer is vividly brought out in the very subjects which he treats and how these subjects are treated. Three subjects with which he deals most often are love, death, and religion.\textsuperscript{3} In the Sermons and Devotions he is mainly interested in religious questions, particularly those on death. Donne seems haunted by the thought of death, he plays with the idea over and over again. It would appear that he tries to calm his own fear of death by exploring all of the possibilities in the idea itself. The very fact that there is this probing and searching into the nature of a particular idea or phenomena suggests the influence of the age of inquiry. It is indicative of man's search into the how of

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things, his need for a satisfying explanation of things, based on inquiry and experimentation, his search for truth. In his Meditations Donne views death not as a generality, but as a very personal fact. It is an inevitable force which man is helpless against.

Death is at an olde man's dore, he appears, and tells him so, and death is at a young man's back, and saies nothing; Age is a sickness, and youth is an ambush. There is scarce anything, that hath not killed somebody; a haire, a feather, hath done it; Nay that which is our best antidote against it, hath donn it.¹

We are able to empathize with Donne in his attitude toward death here, because almost everyone, at some time or the other, has thought at least apprehensively about the nature of death. The feeling is real, and the way the feeling is expressed in the passage is equally real. The language is not pompous or artificial, rather it is down to earth and homely. It is a real expression of a real feeling. Such realism is an integral part of Donne the thinker, and Donne the writer. Such realism also reflects the effectiveness of the images which Donne carefully selects to embody his idea.

The art of surprise is another characteristic of Donne which is achieved through the effectiveness of his imagery.¹ Donne often exhibits sudden and startling turns of thought. He built this thought around some unusual or striking figure. He sought to unify complex thought and feeling, and he seemed to enjoy taking the opposite view of conventional theory. "Donne is the expression of a unique and intense individuality; a complex imaginative temperament; and a swift and subtle intellect."² The use of paradox, antithesis and unusual imagery to achieve the surprise element is evident in this passage in which Donne discusses fear.

A man that is not afraid of a lion is afraid of a cat; not afraid of starving and yet afraid of some joint of meat at the table presented to feed him; As then every cold air is not a damp, every shivering is not a stupefaction; so every fear is not a fearfulness....

Modern critics are more likely to be struck by the intellectual intensity of Donne. To Gosse this intellectual intensity

¹ George Williamson, op. cit., p. 25.


³ Op. cit., Meditation VI, p. 28
is "the great gift which Donne passed down to his disciples,"¹ to Grierson it is a peculiar blend of passion and thought and the greatest achievement of the metaphysical poets;² to T. S. Eliot it is a "direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling."³ It seems that no matter what the emotion, no matter how strongly felt, the great mind of Donne, the deep thought, cannot be separated from the feeling. This intellectualized emotion again is expressed through the effectiveness of the imagery with which he chooses to express himself. An interesting comparison between a sensual expression found in one of his love poems, and an expression of deep religious feeling in the Sermons reveals this fact very pointedly. In one of his poems "The Extasie," he argues that

As our blood labours to beget
   Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
   That subtle knot, which makes us man:
So must pure lovers soules descend
   T' affection, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
   Else a great Prince in prison lies.
To our bodies turn wee then, that so
   Weake men on love reveal'd may looke;
Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,

¹ Edmund Gosse, More Books on the Table (New York, 1923), p. 311.
But yet the body is his booke.¹

In his sermon on "The Comforting Power of God," he says:

Heaven is Glory, and heaven is Joy; we cannot separate them; and this joy is comfort in the Holy Ghost. This consolation from the Holy Ghost makes my midnight noone, mine Executioner a Physician, a stake a pile of fagots, a Bon-fire of triumph; It makes a Tolle and Ave, a crucifixe an Hosanna; It makes my death-bed, a marriage-bed, and my Passing bell, an Epithalamion.²

These two selections, one from a love poem, "The Extasie," and one from the Sermons, reflect the fact that Donne's thought cannot be separated from his feeling, that there is an interplay of wit and emotion, and that the stronger the feeling, the more striking is the image. In "The Extasie," when he says that: "Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,/But the body is his booke," he is expressing a purely sensual idea. He is saying that through the body we learn the extent of true love. The image which he uses to describe this feeling is witty and striking. This is what is meant by intellectualized emotion.


Again in his sermons when he is expressing the comfort that man derives from God he maintains that

This consolation from the Holy Ghost....
makes my midnight noone,...
my death-bed, a marriage-bed,
and my Passing bell an Epithalamion.

Here, too, is seen the poignancy of Donne's intellect combined with an emotional expression. The choice of words, the comparisons, the wit, and the feeling cannot be separated. Intellect and emotion are combined into one great poetic utterance whether Donne is being flippant or sensual in his love poetry, or whether he is pouring out his soul to God in the *Sermons and Devotions*.

To conclude this consideration of the effectiveness of Donne's imagery, a very interesting description is made by Donne himself in the *Devotions*. He describes God's style by means of literary allusions. Austin Warren in his article "The very Reverend Dr. Donne"\(^1\) suggests a very definite affinity between Donne's description of God, and the effectiveness of Donne's own style.

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\(^1\) Austin Warren, "The Very Reverend Dr. Donne," *Kenyan Review*, SVI (1954), 274.
God, thou are a figurative, a metaphorical God............
A God in whose words there is such a height of figures,
such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch such remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such quality of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious eloquitions, so retired and so reserved expressions...
thou are the dove that flies.¹

SUMMARY

This study has sought to show the impact of the new learning, as defined in the preface, on the imagery employed in the Sermons and Devotions of John Donne. The fact that Donne had a vast knowledge and interest in the advances of science and of new philosophies and habits of his day has been noted. The frequency of his allusions to science, astronomy and other terms which reveal specific learning and familiarity with the temper of his age suggest that the sources of his imagery are all sorts of intellectual material which his age offered.

Through the effectiveness of the imagery employed in his works Donne achieved a type of realism, intellectualized emotion and surprising quality thus far not known to his age. His innovations gave rise to a whole new school of poets in the seventeenth century called the metaphysical school of poetry.

The Devotions and Sermons, outstanding examples of his prose works, have given me a deeper appreciation of John Donne as one of the truly great literary men of English literature.
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