

Donne's Architecture of Discernment

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This article argues, with extended glances at the poems, that difficulty of view is a vital feature of Donne's sermons. Difficulties of interpretation are 'curious frames' for Donne, ways of attaining a partial knowledge of God, and discerning a 'better architecture' beyond. Architectural images in particular are not only valuable means of dividing up and memorizing a sermon's content, but also provide epistemologically helpful obstructions. Physical sacred spaces also allow Donne to present a vision of Christian life contracted into a small, single area, if the believer attends in the right way, and does not expect to find God too easily. Particular spaces are generalized, made into abstracts for truths which might otherwise seem distant and unassailable. The purpose of the multiple meanings of scripture, and of Donne's eloquence and deep learning, is not a curious attention to individual details for their own sake. Instead, Donne pursues the listener's edification, the rebuilding of their life according to God's plan. The difficulties of building up this Christian life are epitomized in the difficulties of the sermon's form, but so too are the delights.

THROUGH LATTICES OF EYES

Though written four years before he took holy orders, Donne's *The Second Anniversarie* (1612), a poem commemorating the premature death of Elizabeth Drury, anticipates a position he would often take as a preacher:

Thou look'st through spectacles; small things seeme great,
Below; But vp vnto the watch-towre get,
And see all things despoild of fallacies:
Thou shalt not peepe through lattices of eies,
Nor heare through Laberinth of eares, nor learne
By circuit, or collections to discern.
In Heauen thou straight know'st all, concerning it,
And what concerns it not, shalt straight forget.¹

Here Donne contrasts knowing 'straight' in heaven with various convoluted, earthly ways of knowing: through lattices, labyrinths, circuits and collections, the latter two meaning obscure

¹ John Donne, *The Second Anniversarie*, ll. 292–300, in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., 8 vols in 11 parts (Bloomington, IN, 1995–2022), vi.31.

inferences or probabilities.² In heaven, knowledge is ‘straight’ in at least two senses, being both ‘certain’ and ‘immediate’, exactly like the view from a watchtower, and exactly unlike the view through labyrinths or lattices. The heavenly view is also, however, ‘straight’ in the sense of ‘narrow’, excluding all that ‘concerns it not’. This makes a stark contrast with the convoluted workings of the senses, but also suggests that something is lost without those labyrinths and lattices. The half-rhyme of ‘concerning it’ and ‘forget’, and barely-there chiasmus of ‘straight ... concerning it’ and ‘concerns it ... straight’, enact the process of forgetting which they describe. The weak echoes of the previous line are suggestive of memories being broken or overwritten, in contrast to the full rhyme of the previous couplet, where ‘learne’ leads ultimately to ‘discerne’, but only after the necessary delay of ‘By circuit, or collections’. There is satisfaction to be had, formal and otherwise, from learning to discern through these concrete, architectural means. Compared to this, heavenly knowledge seems almost unsatisfying, as if the circuits and collections contributed something to the knowledge gained through them. This ‘something’ is expressed in the clinch of full rhyme, satisfying because waited-for. Rhyme works on the reader precisely because it is not ‘straight’, emerging through delay, neither immediate nor resolvable to a single point.

If Donne here sounds a note of regret at the effortless perfection of heavenly knowledge, this sheds an appropriate light on his career as preacher as well as poet. What motivated him in the pulpit was not, as Spenser describes his own path not taken, to ‘haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts’.³ Indeed, in an especially memorable section of a sermon at Lincoln’s Inn on Job 19:26, he suggests that listeners might feel his doctrine could be given more ‘at large’: ‘you think you could have heard some other doctrine of downright *Predestination*, and *Reprobation* roundly delivered somewhere else with more edification to you’.⁴ Alison Knight has observed a certain unwillingness to resolve the difficulties in his biblical text in this sermon, and indeed throughout Donne’s preaching. As Knight has argued, this was part of broader willingness among Reformed Christians in this period to acknowledge the difficult or dark places of scripture and to use them for edifying ends, rather than resolving them into easily apprehended doctrine.⁵ St Augustine suggests that scriptural difficulty exists to stimulate the intellect and frustrate pride, but also to develop the mind not only through the apprehension of truth, but through exertion itself. Even when difficulties cannot be resolved, their discussion might be the means of revealing other truths which would otherwise be hidden.⁶ Following Augustine, Donne’s use of difficulty is intended to provoke the reader or listener to the taxing task of discernment, which reveals a variety of truths otherwise inaccessible.

Donne’s own style has often been recognized as ‘difficult’, sometimes implying not only philological obscurity, but a kind of poor behaviour.⁷ As a preacher, Donne does not tend to make things easy. In this sermon on Job, instead of ‘roundly’ delivering his doctrine, or making the text’s meaning immediately obvious, Donne gives his auditory the tools to discern the right way for themselves. Here, ironically, ‘roundly’ means something quite close to ‘straight’ in

² For a useful situation of this poem in relation to its biblical source, Song of Songs 2:9, and Donne’s 1628 Easter Sermon (both of which I discuss later) see Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne’s Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford, 2011), 217–18.

³ Edmund Spenser, ‘Letter to Raleigh’, in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Albert C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London, 2013), 716.

⁴ John Donne, *The Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley, CA, 1953–1962), III.110. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in-text.

⁵ Alison Knight, ‘“The Very, Very Words”: (Mis)quoting Scripture in Lancelot Andrewes’s and John Donne’s Sermons on Job 19:23–27’, *Studies in Philology*, 111 (2014), 442–69 (especially 456–69), and *The Dark Bible: Cultures of Interpretation in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2022), 1–26. On Donne’s imaginative responses to the Bible’s apparent inconsistency and ambiguity, see *The Dark Bible*, 74–81 and 106–13.

⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1997), 32, 106. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), 472–3 (11.19). See also *City of God*, 477 (11.22).

⁷ See Jeremy Maule, ‘Donne and the Words of the Law’, in David Colclough (ed.), *John Donne’s Professional Lives* (Cambridge, 2003), 19–36 (especially 35–6), and Barbara Everett, ‘Donne and Secrecy’, *Essays in Criticism*, 51 (2001), 51–67.

The Second Anniversarie, referring to a manner of delivery which is thorough (*OED*, 'roundly, adv.', 2a), without circumlocution (4a), plain or blunt (5a), eloquent (6b), or harsh and unsparring (7). Donne's roundness as preacher tends more towards the circumlocutory than the plain or blunt. He cannot quite wish away the 'lattices of eyes', the layers of obscurity which lie between the believer and the meaning of their experience, or between the reader and the meaning of a biblical text, because it is through this kind of lattice that Donne's imagination thrives. When Donne's own prose presents its own confusions and ambiguities, his style attempts to convey at once the difficulty of understanding God and living by his precepts, as well as moments of instant recognition and delight. Donne's difficulties might give the reader pause but, once apprehended, allow greater knowledge of the divine to be discerned. His sermons present the listener or reader with an architecture of discernment. Where they impose an apparent obstruction to understanding, it is often to offer a vision of things which could not be apprehended without mediation. Interpretative difficulty affords the possibility of discerning, through partial glimpses, something which could not be understood if viewed without a frame.

In a Lent sermon preached at Whitehall on 12 February 1618/19, Donne reprises the view from the watchtower first adopted in *The Second Anniversarie*.⁸ Taking Ezekiel 33:32 as its text, this sermon is a sustained reflection on the dangers of listening to preachers for pleasure, rather than edification.⁹ Preachers should be 'men placed upon a watchtower' to observe not only the lowly sins committed in the street or bedchamber, but also 'to look upon sins of a higher nature then these', those 'done upon colour and pretence of Religion', referring directly to those in the chapel who appear attentive while in fact letting their minds drift (*Sermons*, McCullough, 113–14). He condemns harbouring 'a despitiful and a contumelious neglecting of Gods purpose' as 'treason within doors' (114–15). The phrase 'within doors' brings the listener back to the immediate architectural setting of the chapel royal, while also drawing attention to the listener's hypocritical disposition, their spiritual negligence hidden behind a façade of pious attention. Donne directs the listener's attention both towards their surroundings, and away, towards their interior selves, just as in his sermon preached at Hanworth on Job 36:25, he directs the Earl of Carlisle and company to see very much 'within doors': 'nay lock up all doores and windows, see nothing but *thy selfe*' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, iv.167).¹⁰ Donne's watchtower image is arresting, rhyming visually with the raised pulpit, but it also suggests the limitations of the preacher's view: he could not really know whether his auditory were listening, and could not really see 'within doors', to the hidden dispositions of their souls. In another sermon, the ideal role of the preacher is to 'pierce' through the illusion of having already transgressed into the listener's secret space:

It is not the depth, nor the wit, nor the eloquence of the Preacher that pierces, but his nearnesse; that hee speaks to my conscience, as though he had been behind the hangings when I sinned, and as though he had read the book of the day of Judgement already.¹¹

Donne preached these words at Lincoln's Inn on Trinity Sunday 1620, in a sermon in which he used his text, Genesis 18:25, to remind his auditory that though God speaks through his

⁸ There is a recollection of the *Second Anniversarie's* final lines ('I ame | The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came', ll. 527–8, *Variorum Edition*, 37) in the same sermon, where the preacher is a 'Tuba' or trumpet, terrifying the congregation out of their sins. John Donne, *Sermons Preached at the Jacobean Courts, 1615–19*, ed. Peter McCullough (Oxford, 2015), 115. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in-text.

⁹ 'And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely Song, of one that hath a pleasant voyce, and can play well on an Instrument; for they hear thy words, but they doe them not.'

¹⁰ 'Every man may see it, man may behold it afar off.'

¹¹ John Donne, *Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620–23*, ed. Katrin Ettenhuber (Oxford, 2015), 8. Subsequent references to this edition are cited in-text.

prophets and preachers, the voice that speaks is still God's (17).¹² Though Donne's intent is serious, there is a hint of Polonius here, not only in the image of preacher lurking 'behinde the hangings', but also his seeming overcurious, even prurient. Although this nearness can only ever be an 'as though', that uncomfortable sense of crossing a threshold into the listener's inner self, probing their most secret dispositions, is important to Donne's conception of himself as preacher.¹³ There was always a danger of overstepping the mark. This was a period in which lurking behind the arras had notable hazards, as Donne discovered after his sermon on Mark 4:24, preached on 1 April 1627, displeased King Charles and his Dean of the Chapel Royal, William Laud.¹⁴ Nonetheless, attempting to discern something which is difficult to see, or attempting to look past the curtain, is an essential subject of Donne's preaching.

This is essential because, for Donne, any view we have of God is inevitably a glimpse through a lattice, never complete nor unmediated. To discern something of God's being through the difficult process of textual interpretation and extrapolation, of parsing out meaning from strange, ambiguous material, is therefore to learn something which could not have been learned otherwise, if it had been stated plainly. As Donne writes in the *Essayes in Divinity* (written c.1614), 'God will be glorified both in our searching these Mysteries, because it testifies our liveliness towards him, and in our not finding them'.¹⁵ Why exactly not finding them also furthers God's glory is not explained, perhaps itself one of those mysteries which defies the grasp of human learning. Donne expands more on the apophatic approach to God in the aforementioned sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn on Job 19:26.

If you limit God with any definition, hee growes larger by that definition; for even by that definition you discerne presently that he is something else then that definition comprehends (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, III.95)

There is a spatial sense to Donne's knowledge of God here, a sense drawn from the etymology of 'definition' as an area demarcated by limits. The *Essayes* make clear that it is hardly a satisfactory way of approaching divinity to say simply that God always 'better, wiser, and more just' (25). Donne asks his own soul if he can 'rely and leane upon so infirm a knowledg, as is delivered by negations?' It comes no closer to God, however, to say he is 'called Abstractly Goodness', as abstract epithets are often used for more worldly purposes, being 'daily applied to Princes' (25). Rather than wholly disclaiming these imperfect methods of knowing God, Donne suggests that they should not be relied upon totally, again addressing his soul: 'thou shalt not destroy, nor demolish their buildings, but thou shalt not make them thy foundation' (26). As Kirsten Stirling has recently argued, Donne did make imaginative use of an image of negative theology as sculpting, borrowed from the mystical theologian Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the *Essayes* are clear that knowing through negatives would make an especially unreliable foundation, as 'negatives have ever their infirmities, and must not be built on' (29). The imperfections of the knowledge we can gain through reason should not be cause for either presumption or despair, but instead a spur to, as Laud's predecessor Lancelot Andrewes might

¹² 'Shall not the Iudge of all the Earth do right?'

¹³ On Donne's conception of the preacher's authority over public and private spheres in this sermon and others, see Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge, 2003), 91–4.

¹⁴ See Peter McCullough, 'Donne as Preacher at Court: Precarious "Inthronization"', in Colclough (ed.), *Professional Lives*, 179–204 (199–202) and John Donne, *Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I*, ed. David Colclough (Oxford, 2013), 321–2. Subsequent references to the latter are cited in-text.

¹⁵ John Donne, *Essayes in Divinity*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal, 2001), 32.

¹⁶ Kirsten Stirling, *Picturing Divinity in John Donne's Writings* (Cambridge, 2024), 51–75. Stirling's broader argument that comparisons with visual art are for Donne means of picturing abstract theological truths rather than references to specific material objects has stimulating parallels with my own argument here.

put it, 'looke againe, better'.¹⁷ This motivates much of Donne's preaching about architecture: God is elsewhere, but that does not stop him being present, at least in part, in the architectural frame through which we find ourselves looking. As he puts it in the *Encenia* sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn in 1623, 'God is in Heauen, but yet hee is here, within these walles too' (*Sermons*, Ettenhuber, 136). The spaces in which Donne preaches are opened towards a better architecture, one which we cannot fully inhabit in this life.

Donne's longing to overcome a difficulty which is also a source of his imaginative energies often finds expression, as it does in *The Second Anniversarie*, in images of buildings. His writing is recurrently concerned with architectural division, the boundaries between spaces. These boundaries are, at one level, impediments. They may not exist in heaven, 'that house' where there will be 'no darknesse nor dazling, but one equall light' (*Sermons*, Colclough, 104). For now, however, divisions are necessary for our limited, fallen comprehensions. Donne's preaching is intended to help his auditory to 'discern' some meaning through the circuits and collections of their experience, 'discern' itself coming from the Latin *discernere*, 'to distinguish, separate', combining *cernere* ('to see') with a *dis* prefix which suggests 'in pieces, in parts'.¹⁸ Donne's interest in architectural discernment is evident especially in his repeated return to biblical passages about the separation imposed by doors (as in Revelation 3:20) and lattices (Song of Songs 2:9).¹⁹ What is tantalizing about this process of discernment is that we are not wholly removed from heaven. Describing the relation of heaven and earth in his 1622 Gunpowder Plot sermon, Donne preaches that 'they are not two houses; This is the gallery, and that the bedchamber of one and the same pallace' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, iv.240). Donne seems to wish for security, for a home that is untroubled by the outside, as he does in his solitary *Devotions*, while recognizing also that heaven must remain outside as long as we remain alive. Complete security is possible only in the grave, and any opening to grace is also an opening to sin. Thus in a sermon preached at St Paul's Cathedral on Psalm 32:6, Donne notes that just as God stands at the door and knocks, without breaking in, so does temptation stand and knock, without forcing its way (*Sermons*, Lund, 64–5). The choice of whom to admit is up to the listener to discern.

Sir Henry Wotton, Donne's friend, provost of Eton and author of the first extensive translation of Vitruvian architectural theory into English, defined 'Apertions' as '*Doores, Windowes, Staire-cases, Chimnies, or other Conducts: In short, all Inlets or Outlets*'.²⁰ Donne was especially interested in these conducts: his sermons are full of doors, windows and other points at which boundaries are breached or suspended. Architecture played for Donne, as for many of his contemporaries, a vital role in considering ideas as separate, and yet components of a wider structure. Architectural metaphors often occur in a sermon's *divisio*, helping to divide up the different sections of a scriptural text which will be covered. They appear frequently at the point of movement between a sermon's different parts, again suggesting that architecture has an underlying role in arranging a sermon's content. These metaphors are clearly connected with Donne's *memoria*, the way he conducted his sermons from notes or memory into eloquent delivery. For Peter McCullough, whereas in poems like 'The Canonization' Donne built the 'pretty rooms' of sonnet stanzas, 'in sermons he built palaces'.²¹ Donne often looked forward, as at the conclusion to a sermon to King Charles on John 14:2, to that house 'of many

¹⁷ Lancelot Andrewes, *Selected Sermons and Lectures*, ed. Peter McCullough (Oxford, 2005), 229.

¹⁸ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, 'dis-cerno', *Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879).

¹⁹ On Song of Songs 2:9, see below. On Revelation 3:20, see: *Essays*, 43; *Sermons*, ed. McCullough, 62; Colclough, 141; Ettenhuber, 7 and 113; and *Sermons Preached at St Paul's Cathedral, 1626*, ed. Mary Ann Lund (Oxford, 2017), 49 and 64–5.

²⁰ Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture* (London, 1624), 52.

²¹ Peter McCullough, 'Donne as Preacher', in Achsah Guibbory (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge, 2006), 167–81 (172).

Mansions, not an Abridgement, a Modell of a House, not a Monastery of many Cells, but an extension of many Houses, into the City of the living God' (*Sermons*, Colclough, 55). The architectural multitude of the heavenly mansion will be such that it extends with distinctions that are not total divisions, so that it has no need of summaries or maps. On earth, however, Donne remained dependent on models and abridgements of great houses. Here, divisions are often more absolute, requiring and eliciting discernment.

In the pretty rooms which make up his poems' stanzas, Donne is recurrently interested in apertions and the dangers of intrusion which come with them: the 'standing wodden chest' of a study in which he is 'coffind' in 'Satyre I', only to be persuaded, against his better judgement, to leave (ll. 1–4); the sequestered bedroom infiltrated by an unwanted, 'vnruely Sunne' in 'Ad Solem' (l. 1); the beloved's window flung open, not to Donne, but his rival, in the 'Valediction: My Name in the Window' (ll. 43–8).²² Though their occasions are far more public, Donne's sermons nonetheless evince the same interest in the penetrating and occluding features of barriers and conduits. Though his sermons often express the sentiment that, as he preached to Queen Anne on 14 December 1617, 'Christ is at home with thee', Donne was also aware that the home was constantly under threat, and that danger could easily be allowed in through its conduits (*Sermons*, McCullough, 54).²³ This danger often consisted of Roman Catholic, and especially Jesuit, influence at home in England. In his first sermon to King Charles, on Psalm 11:3 ('If the Foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous doe?'), Donne undertakes in his second part 'to Suruay some such Foundations' of four houses in which God dwells, ultimately to reassure his auditory, despite the negative tone of his text, that the foundations of Church and State were secure under the new king (*Sermons*, Colclough, 10). The third house, the family, is not threatened by the individual failings of its members as long as its foundations, of peace and obedience, are strong, a point Donne conveys by playing on the homonym of peace and piece to suggest that God's peace is the grammatically singular form of an otherwise fragmentary plurality: 'for Peace compacts all the peeces of a family together' (13). Donne warns, however, that this peace will be shattered into pieces 'if there bee a windowe opened in the house, to let in a *Iesuiticall firebrand*', because of the Jesuits' insinuations that there is no matrimonial duty 'due to an *Heretique*', i.e., a protestant. In a similar vein, Donne concluded his sermon on the 1622 anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot with a warning against papist influence on the family: 'look thou seriously to thine own doors' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, iv.263). The house of faith must be kept secure, which necessarily means keeping an eye on its inlets and outlets.

This sense of domestic conduits' dangers is most richly evident in the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, written while Donne was confined to 'the doore of the grave, this sicke bed'.²⁴ Here Donne dwells repeatedly on the total isolation imposed by his weakness, which is such that he cannot visit God's temple: even 'those thin sheets' are 'yron dores upon me' (17). As Donne's solitude becomes less total, broken by the visit of the physician, he implores God in prayer to keep the conduits to heart and house secure: 'Open none of my *dores*, not of my *hart*, not of mine *eares*, not of my *house*, to any *supplanter* that would enter to undermine me in my *Religion* to thee' (28). This sense of sin as something which can silently insinuate itself into the heart, furtive and sudden as Donne's illness, continues throughout the *Devotions*. Wishing to God that the tempter still 'went upright' and 'spoke' rather than 'creeping' in the form of a serpent, Donne describes how this serpent has insinuated himself silently into

²² John Donne, *Variorum Edition*: iii.5, iv.198 and 332.

²³ McCullough suggests that this phrase was a deliberate challenge to the Queen's Catholicism. *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching* (Cambridge, 1998), 178–82. McCullough slightly reframes his earlier argument in *Sermons*, ed. McCullough, 185–7.

²⁴ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford, 1987), 17. Subsequent references in-text.

human hearts. Quoting Jeremiah 9:21 on death infiltrating the windows of Zion, he writes that 'Death in him is come into our windowes; into our Eyes, and Eares, the entrances, & inlets of our soule' (53). It is strange, almost paradoxical, that the devil's invisibility should be described as an entrance into the faculties of perception. The phrase 'come into our windowes' suggests not only passing through the windows, but also an alteration of the windows themselves such that they cannot apprehend the tempter. As a preacher, Donne would warn his auditory of the devil's capacity to alter perception itself, a topic to which I will return later. In the *Devotions*, addressing the reader in private, Donne can afford to be more absolute about his own wish for privacy, to seal off temptation's means of access.

Into some Roomes of this thy House, my *Body*, *Tentations* will come, Infections will come, but bee my *Heart*, thy *Bed-chamber*, O my *God*, and thither let them not enter (60–61).

The bed-chamber later becomes a symbol not only of security from temptation, but also total communion with God: 'Onely be thou ever present to me, O my *God*, and this *bed-chamber*, & thy bed-chamber shal be all one roome' (70). The *Devotions* begins with a meditation on the suddenness of sickness: we strive to maintain our health, 'we hew, and wee polish every stone, that goes to that building [...] But in a minute a Cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all' (7). In the book's final meditation, Donne returns to the image, only revising it to acknowledge that in relapsing into sickness or sin, we can contrive to do the cannon's work ourselves: 'we are not onely *passive*, but *active*, in our owne *ruine*; we doe not onely stand under a *falling house*, but *pull it downe* upon us' (122). Donne's meditations on his fragile nature, prone always to sin and sickness, have seen him long for the security of a private space shared with God, sealed against intrusion through any conduit. At their conclusion, however, Donne seems to acknowledge that no private space can be fully secure, as he realizes himself fully capable of destroying the house himself.

The *Devotions* are concerned throughout with the threats architectural apertions posed to the edifice of the soul, but Donne was aware also of their opportunities. In a letter to his friend and weekly correspondent Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne wrote with the awareness, richly evident in the *Devotions*, that illness had brought him to a threshold between life and death: 'I shall be in this world, like a porter in a great house, ever nearest the door, but seldomest abroad.'²⁵ Donne means here that he could never forget his infirmities, without ever quite being released from them by death, but this position was one of spiritual insight as well as suffering. The sermons revel in its possibilities. Throughout his preaching, Donne retains a dichotomy between a desire for seclusion motivated by fear of outside threats, and an awareness that the self could not survive for long on its own, if all its doors and windows were impregnable.

Donne never flinched from the fact that he and his listeners would not be porters at the great house forever, but would have to pass through that threshold. In a sermon preached to King Charles, Donne compared the moment of death to a journey towards greater architectural knowledge. At 'the issuing of his Soule', the faithful Christian would go out 'not as one that gave over his house, but as one that travelled to see and learne better Architecture' (*Sermons*, Colclough, 103). The same is true of the faithful listener to one of Donne's sermons. The house, or the listener's immediate architectural environment, does not have to be given over, or relinquished entirely. These immediate surroundings must, however, be only a staging

²⁵ John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), 32. See R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford, 1970), 201.

post for a longer journey. The sermon and the space in which it is preached allow an auditory to go out and learn better architecture, to build in themselves, in their homes, and the wider world, what they have heard built up over the sermon's course. Donne's imagined buildings provide models for what they cannot quite construe in their own material form. His images of buildings, and his physical surroundings as he preaches, allow the listener to discern the better architecture of God's temple. What is left behind for the 'better' is not wholly given up, but nor is the 'better' wholly defined. That Donne does not define this 'better architecture' gives the listener the autonomy to discern for themselves outside the immediate place of preaching, an instance of the 'pastoral' sensibility which Peter McCullough and other recent editors and critics of Donne's sermons have consistently recognized.²⁶ This pastoral sensibility emerges, among many other places, in Donne's images of 'contraction', which are a means of relating broader architectural and doctrinal structures to the individual listener, and making textual difficulty an affecting cause of edification.

LET US CONTRACT THE CHAPPELL

In a Lent sermon preached at Whitehall on 20 February 1616/17, Donne begins with a comparison between the various voices which make up scripture, including even the thief on the cross (in Donne's text, Luke 23:40) and the 'Mosaick work' of the tabernacle in the Temple of Solomon, 'a work compact of divers pieces, curiously inlaid' (*Sermons*, McCullough, 59). This sets up the first part of a contrast between the ornate, plural literary forms of the Old Testament, where various voices are compacted to reveal the glory of God, and the good news plainly expounded in the New.²⁷ While Donne's *exordium* lays out the 'curiously inlaid' tabernacle of the Temple as a representation of the composite richness of the Hebrew scriptures, his *divisio* describes the plainer circumstances surrounding Christ's preaching. The sermon's second part considers 'what doctrine he preaches; not curiosities, not unrevealed Mysteries, not Matter of State, nor of wit, nor of carnal delight, but onely the fear of God' (60). There is an implicit contrast here, made via the repetition of 'curious', between the delightful pluralities of the Old Testament and the simple, urgent message of Christ's preaching. The latter is itself, of course, the chief example and rule for Donne and his fellow preachers.²⁸ There is a hint here of a point which Bishop Joseph Hall took further, arguing that the Gospel's plain 'clay' is worth more than the ornate 'Marble' of the Jewish Law.²⁹ Donne, however, had no intrinsic objection to marble, instead focussing his contrast on the plural ambiguities of the Jewish scriptures and the moral certainties of Christian preaching. While his sermon opens by describing scripture's plurality, its *peroration* asserts this uniform singularity, warning that we are '*sub eadem*, [under] the same condemnation' as the thief put to death alongside Christ, unless we fear the Lord (70). There is, in this contrast between the two senses of curious, a model for the preacher's proper response to scripture's plurality of different voices. Rather than delighting in 'Holy Curiosities', as Donne Junior describes his father's essays in a preface 'To the Reader', the preacher should, like Christ, derive from scriptural plenitude a single, urgent moral message, preaching the fear of God, not curiosities.³⁰ This move from plurality to singularity, abstracting from variety into an ethically binding epitome of

²⁶ See, for instance, *Sermons*, ed. McCullough, xxxii, and Jeanne Shami, 'Labels, Controversy, and the Language of Inclusion in Donne's Sermons', in Colclough (ed.), *Professional Lives*, 135–57.

²⁷ On biblical variety in this passage, see Stuart Farley, 'Opus musivum, opus variegatum: The Mosaic Form in Early Modern Culture', *Renaissance Studies*, 31 (2017), 107–24 (114–15).

²⁸ As Donne preaches elsewhere, Christ's example is itself a rule, 'for his Actions are Rules' (*Sermons*, ed. Lund, 26).

²⁹ Joseph Hall, *A sermon preached at the happily-restored and reedified chappell of the... Earle of Exceter* (London, 1624), sig. B2^r.

³⁰ Donne, *Essays*, 5.

doctrine, is characteristic of Donne's preaching. It might impose its own difficulties but, like the lattices and conduits described so far, this difficulty allows for a more profound truth to be discerned.

Donne's point in contrasting the two meanings of curiosity at the opening of his sermon at Whitehall is not that architectural embellishment itself is suspect. Instead, he suggests that embellished structures can be of great value if 'contracted' to God, made into abstracts or epitomes of broader, otherwise unrealizable, truths. In this sermon, Donne makes the twofold case that richly ornamented spaces such as the Hebrew tabernacle are valuable because their work is composite, assembled into wholeness from various fragments, and 'compact', concentrating God's glory in a limited compass. As he preached to the nobility in an architecturally structured sermon on Luke 23:24: 'God is replenishingly every where; but most contractedly, and workingly in the Temple' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, v.233). Donne's most extensive espousal of this case is his *Encænia* sermon, preached at the dedication of a new chapel at Lincoln's Inn on Ascension Day, 1623. In an opening letter to the Master of the Bench, Donne describes his chief purpose in the sermon as opposing the Catholics' 'pestilent calumny [...] that wee haue cast off all distinction of places, and of dayes, and all outward meanes of assisting the deuotion of the Congregation' (*Sermons*, Ettenhuber, 131). These 'outward meanes', improperly understood, could be obstacles. As Donne preached the previous year at Paul's Cross, in defence of King James's insistence on catechesis over controversy in the *Directions for Preachers* (1622), 'Ceremonies are stumbling blockes to them who looke upon them without their Signification, and without the reason of their Institution'.³¹ In the *Encænia* sermon, the ceremonial richness of the church, in an appropriately furnished temple, is no stumbling-block, as long as one looks through to its proper purpose. This argument is epitomized in Donne's conclusion. He comes to his close by dwelling on the appropriateness of preaching for the length of an hour:

I see it is a Compasse, that all Ages haue though sufficient. But as we haue contracted the consideration of great *Temples*, to this lesser *Chappell*, so let vs contract the *Chappell* to our selues: *Et facta sint Encænia nostra*, let this be the Feast of the Dedication of our selues to God. (142)

Donne begins by acknowledging that preaching is a contracted form: contracted both because it operates under a shared set of rules and assumptions, and because it is compressed into a limited time span. He then moves from contraction of time to contraction of space, first summarizing his preceding argument as a contraction of the great biblical temples into the smaller space of the new chapel at the Inn, leading him by analogy to suggest that we should, in a similar way, dedicate ourselves to God. The move from dedication of chapel to dedication of self works in part through wordplay on 'contract', which initially means a spatial compression, before in its second usage expanding to refer also to an agreement, especially one concerning exchange of property.³² The chapel derives its value, therefore, from inculcating a pattern of extension beyond one's immediate surroundings. This is a pattern which both senses of 'contract' convey: as legal agreement, the individual believer has responsibilities to God; as spatial compression, the believer is an epitome of the chapel, itself an epitome of the Solomonic Temple, wholly consecrated to God.

³¹ John Donne, *A Sermon upon... the Booke of Judges*, ed. Mary Morrissey and G. Stanwood, in Torrance Kirby (ed.), *Sermons at Paul's Cross, 1521–1642* (Oxford, 2017), 454–84 (479).

³² J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Oxford, 2002), 317–18.

Contraction, chiefly as spatial compression, is a vital aspect of Donne's religion. 'The excellency of the Christian Religion', he preached at St Paul's in a sermon on Psalm 32:6, 'is that it is *Verbum abbreviatum*, A contracted Religion' (*Sermons*, Lund, 62). For Donne, this is most intensely true of the incarnate God, in his person and preaching. Christ has even further simplified the contracted doctrine of the creed, Lord's Prayer and commandments:

he was pleased to binde it in a lesse roome, and a more portable forme, when he re-abridged that Abridgement, and recontracts this contracted Doctrine, in those two, *Love God*, and *Love thy Neighbour*. (63)

Donne here figures Christ's two central commandments as an abridgement, a structure built to a smaller scale, or single volume summary of the law, a point he also makes in a sermon on Romans 13:11, preached at Heidelberg on 16 June 1619.³³ Doctrine is sometimes, as at the opening to *Deaths Duell*, a whole cathedral, but here in the St Paul's sermon it takes the 'more portable forme' of a small room, even a book. As Jeremy Maule has argued, Donne's abridgements often imply excision, though here the combination of abridgement and contraction implies that Christ's work is an epitome, which does not exclude anything of importance, instead containing everything in a smaller compass.³⁴ In Francis Bacon's 'Of Dispatch', 'it is one Thing, to Abbreviate by Contracting, Another by Cutting off', and in Christ's contracts, nothing is cut off.³⁵ The ubiquity of God's abridgement implies an obligation, a 'binde' which is 'contracted' in the words' other senses. If Christ's abridgement is easily entered, even small enough to carry around, we have no excuse for ignoring it, though the devil will try to distract us 'by Multiplication' (*Sermons*, Lund, 63). This comes in the context of a sermon which argues for the power of the listener's attention to render extensive material immediate, beginning as it does with the suggestion (odd given the brevity of this sermon) that just as one would not be bored reading a conveyance or will that benefits oneself, so one should not be bored listening to a long sermon, as all doctrine directly concerns the listener's salvation (53). Donne emphasizes the need to serve God alone, in the singularity of the present moment. God speaks to the listener now, but 'now' is always passing away in the flow of time, the continuation of which itself betokens God's mercy: 'That *Now*, that I named then, that minute is past; but God affords thee another *Now*; he speaks againe, he speaks still' (60–61). This is strikingly similar to the development of the Heidelberg sermon, which begins with a reflection on the word 'now' ('There is not a more comprehensive, a more embracing word in all Religion') and concludes with a brilliant peroration on the approach of death as the sun setting over the Christian's 'houses and furnitures', which also seems to bring on the second coming, collapsing the time between the death of the individual and universal judgement. A bell tolling seems to voice the believer's words to the returned Christ: 'come quickly, come now' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, II.250, 267–8). The 'now' in both sermons is Donne's abridgement of Christ's abridgement, conveying the need to serve God in the immediate present. Doctrine is 'contracted' therefore in the specifically legal sense introduced in the St Paul's sermon's *peroration*: property is due via conveyance to the listener, if only they accept the contract, and serve God now. This contract between believer and God also implies a contraction, an alteration in scale, where heaven is very close, as it is in the final words of the sermon at Heidelberg.

³³ *Sermons*, ed. Potter and Simpson, II.256. 'For now is our salvation nearer then when we believed.' On this sermon's context and views propounded on divine grace, see Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (London, 1999), 119–23.

³⁴ Jeremy Maule, 'Words of the Law', 31–4.

³⁵ Francis Bacon, *Essays or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford, 2000), 77.

Most of all, it is the Christian believer, in the pattern of Christ himself, who is a contraction of doctrine, and therefore a window onto God's better architecture. Donne makes this point forcefully at the conclusion to his sermon preached at Denmark House in 1626, before the body of King James. Having been 'signed with his hand in the Absolution, and sealed with his blood in the Sacrament', every Christian (including, and especially, the late king) is 'an abridgement of Christ himselfe' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, vi.290). These terms were echoed, knowingly or not, two weeks later in Bishop John Williams' funeral sermon for the King, where James is a type of Solomon, who is himself a type of Christ.³⁶ Donne, however, is especially dextrous with the spatial paradoxes of contraction. Preaching at Lincoln's Inn on the importance of martyrdom as a 'witness', in the second part of a Whitsunday sermon on Romans 8:16, Donne describes a martyr 'that (to contract all, nay to enlarge beyond all) suffers', being tortured on the rack by the Inquisition.³⁷ The agreement to epitomize all of God's goodness in the act of martyrdom is to 'contract all' in many senses. Legally, the martyr agrees to Christ's bargain, giving up earthly for heavenly life. Medically, the martyr is infected by the wages of sin. Spatially, they resolve all of God's work into a single point, and therefore enlarge their life beyond life itself. There is a strain of dark comedy to the martyr's being stretched on the rack into exemplary status. Donne's parenthesis also captures the paradox of the Christian epitome, one which had already been recognized by Augustine: if God can become man, then a small action, a single person, can achieve universal significance, not despite but because of their small, humble scale.³⁸ Whereas in heaven God's house will be of many mansions, 'not an Abridgement, a Modell of a House', in his earthly preaching the only way Donne can suggest this better architecture is through models, abridgements and contractions, which give a sense of God's presence in the sermon's 'here' and 'now'. This presence can only be discerned with difficulty. Indeed, in the case of the martyr on the rack, it entails great suffering, suffering which the believer must share at least in spirit. Donne's abridgements are not painless. To enter the narrow door or see through the obscure lattice was the only way into the abbreviated Christian religion, and this required the acceptance of affliction, as my next section will illustrate.

A PIECE OF A CURIOUS FRAME

In the aforementioned sermon preached at Hanworth on Job 36:25, just before Donne has recommended that his listeners look into themselves for testimony that all things are made by God, he notes that even the basest matter bears God's pattern: 'every worme in the grave, lower, every weed upon the grave, is an abridgement of all' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, iv.167). And yet, in the sermon's second part, Donne acknowledges that the weakness of human understanding is such that we might fail to recognize God in his abridged form: 'mans infirmity requires spectacles; and affliction does that office' (171).³⁹ Though in this sermon earthly spectacles seem less distorting of the divine, Donne's language is strikingly similar to *The Second Anniversarie*, where in lowly, earthly vision 'through spectacles; small things seeme great'. Through the spectacle of affliction, small things do not only seem but truly are contractions of something greater. In this Donne's preaching departs from his own poem, as the spectacular enlargement of small things is not simply illusory, but instead reflects how humble Christian action can reflect

³⁶ John Williams, *Great Britains Salomon* (London, 1625), 2–3.

³⁷ 'The Spirit it selfe beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.'

³⁸ Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, 124.

³⁹ On Donne's tailoring of terms to his auditory in this sermon, see Johnson, *Theology*, 77–85.

a broader pattern of divine mercy. Donne is closer to Seigneur du Bartas's description of creation as an obscure book which baffles many,

But he that wears the spectacles of *Faith*,
Sees through the Spheares above their highest heighth:⁴⁰

In Donne's preaching, the perfect view from the watchtower is elusive. He is precisely interested instead in the view through the spectacles and lattices which he half-heartedly disclaims in his *Anniversarie*, these becoming, as for Du Bartas, tokens of faith and epistemic humility, rather than mere confusion. Through Donne's preaching, the spectacles of adversity become not only obstacles, but means of seeing further, providing their own architecture of discernment.

The precision offered by different spectacles does, however, differ. In Donne's satire against the Jesuits, *Ignatius his Conclave* (1611), the narrator sees 'all the roomes in Hell open to [his] sight' through 'certaine spectacles'.⁴¹ The spectacles are certain in the sense of being a technological oddity particular to this fiction, one which the reader should not expect to find available in the optician's. But they are certain also in the sense of imparting a vision which is precise and definite, glancing in a single moment through every architectural boundary, and rendering even Satan's most 'inward places' visible.⁴² This certain view of the devil is not generally possible 'below' the watchtower, to Donne's auditors. In Donne's very first sermon, preached at Eastertide in 1615, he describes a sinner's desire for knowledge as a pursuit of worthless, glittering things:

for his deformities would make ye hate him: but in his glasses in the riches, & in the vanities of this world, you see him and know him not; you see him, and know him, and embrace him.
(*Sermons*, McCullough, 14)

The devil offers a partial perspective, 'his glasses' suggesting of course St Paul's view 'through a glasse, darkely'.⁴³ Instead, this is a view through a glass glitteringly, the devil being seen through the deceptive lens of worldly wealth, which makes sin seem glamorous, attractive and justifiable. A semi-colon divides the preacher's description of the sinner's ignorance ('you see him and know him not') from the sinner's own perspective ('you see him, and know him'). The word 'know' moves from describing knowledge of the devil's true character (essentially a *savoir*, knowing-what) towards social recognition (*connaître*, knowing-who), dramatizing the distortion of perspective in process, and conveying the moral message that you could only bear to know the devil personally if you did not know (or wilfully forgot) who he really is.

The kind of glasses Donne recommends to his auditors are somewhat duller. He goes on to preach at Hanworth 'that man, who through his owne *red glasse*, can see Christ, in that colour too, through his own miseries, can see Christ Jesus in his blood' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, iv.174). Kirsten Stirling has identified Nicholas of Cusa as the source of Donne's image. She notes that, in the theologian's original, the 'red glasse' represents only the limits of an individual perspective, with the 'red glasse' as a kind of theological vision sharpened

⁴⁰ Guillaume de Saluste, Sieur du Bartas, *The Divine Weeks and Works*, trans. Joshua Sylvester, ed. Susan Snyder, 2 vols (Oxford, 1977), i.116 (First Day of the First Week, ll. 193–4).

⁴¹ John Donne, *Ignatius his Conclave*, ed. T. S. Healy (Oxford, 1969), 7.

⁴² Donne, *Ignatius his Conclave*, 9. See also 65.

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 13:12, in *The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament, and the New* (London, 1611).

by affliction being Donne's innovation.⁴⁴ There is, however, an irony to Donne's use of the metaphor, which preserves Cusanus's original sense that the 'red glasse' represents a limited perspective: a red glass would hardly be the best colour through which to make out Christ's blood as distinct from anything else. As Robert Burton puts it, 'he that looketh through a peece of red glasse, judgeth every thing he sees to be red'.⁴⁵ As in *The Second Anniversarie*, the discernment through spectacles is ambivalent, at once partial and revealing. The state of indistinction implied by Donne's image of the red glass is far from accidental. This indistinction is also conveyed grammatically through the ambiguity over whether 'his blood' is the blood of the afflicted believer himself or the blood of Christ on the cross, and through the pun on 'spectacle' as 'glass to be looked through' and 'horrific display to be looked at'. Indistinction is written into the structure of the sermon as a whole through its unusual double *divisio*, with the first introduced with some humorous self-deprecation and giving little detail (164). The second *divisio* anticipates the components of the sermon's second part, but also gives a retrospective analysis of its first part, in greater detail than before, separating its subjects into Object, Faculty and Person (170). The revision of the first part into greater structural clarity in the second *divisio* mimics the movement of the sermon as a whole, from the uncertainties of this earthly life where the best vision of God we can achieve is through the red glass of affliction, towards the perfect vision of God in the next life, where we will see the whole triumphant church, 'all in one roome together' (177). This united moment of perfect, effortless vision is possible only after the believer has done their best to discern through the labyrinths and lattices of endless revisions, which constitute the best knowledge that can be gleaned on earth.

Donne's wordplay on the various senses of 'spectacle' captures a kind of earthly knowledge which is composed of a variety of texts, experiences, and meanings. This variety is intrinsic to the seventeenth-century window-frame, of which Wotton writes:

There is no part of *Structure* either more expencefull, then *Windowes*; or more ruinous [...] because consisting of so different and vnsociable pieces, as *Wood, Iron, Leade, and Glasse*, and those small and easily shaken⁴⁶

Wotton warns against an excess of windows, because the 'vnsociable pieces' which their lattices bring together will never cohere perfectly. It is exactly this imperfect coherence, or unsociability, which makes the lattice a suitable image for knowledge of God. Early in his writing career, Donne also took it as a suitable image of a more human kind of knowledge, as the window interposes between poet and beloved in his 'Valediction: My Name in the Window'. Here, the poem continually conflates the window with writing itself. Donne's own name is written in his beloved's window as a reminder of the constancy of his love and of the accessibility of his inner being through his words, with the glass coming close to being 'As all confessing, and through shine' as Donne himself (l. 8).⁴⁷ Later the ambivalence of the spectacle betrays Donne, however. First, he doubts that a 'scratched name' can really convey learning so 'hard, and deepe' (ll. 19–20). Then the 'through shine', or transparent, nature of Donne's name in the glass serves to reveal his beloved's new lover, 'one, whose witt or land | New

⁴⁴ Stirling, *Picturing Divinity*, 65–7.

⁴⁵ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicholas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford, 1989), I, 424 (1.3.3.1).

⁴⁶ Wotton, *Elements of Architecture*, 56.

⁴⁷ On Donne's writing as self-revelation in this poem and elsewhere, see Brian Cummings, 'Donne's Passions: Emotion, Agency and Language', in Freya Sierhuis and Brian Cummings (eds), *Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture* (Farnham, 2013), 51–71.

batterye' to her heart 'may frame' (ll. 45–6). The word 'frame' here means plot or plan, but the rival's framing of course sets up an alternative to the window in which Donne's name has been inscribed. The best Donne can hope for is that the glass will not be so 'through-shine' after all, instead 'superscribinge' Donne's own name onto his rival's, as the beloved attempts to write to the latter (l. 57). Though it begins by suggesting that Donne's name contributes his 'firmnes to this glass', the poem concludes by doubting whether either the unsociable window or the equally unsociable medium of writing is really capable of maintaining their love: 'But glasse and lines mvst bee | Noe meanes, our firme, substantiall loue to keepe' (ll. 2; 61–2). He has given up hope that the letters of his name could make the ruinous window firm, and apparently given up hope in letters too. Words and windows are unsociable in that they are both composite and mediated ways of knowing another's mind. They both imply the possibility of revised interpretations, even in a relationship as passionate as that between lover and beloved, or believer and God.

There is a strong scriptural precedent for comparing the knowledge we have of God to a lover's glimpse through a window. In the Song of Songs 2:9, a lover, often interpreted as God himself, 'standeth behind our wall, looking forth of the windows, shewing himself through the grates' to his beloved, who represents either the Church or the individual believer. Origen of Alexandria reads these windows as the windows of the senses, which allow us to glimpse God, but which also give temptation access.⁴⁸ They have, therefore, the doubleness of the apertion, a source of risk and uncertainty which Donne looks forward to doing without in heaven, but with which he must make do on earth. Citing this passage in the *Essayes*, Donne wishes that the beloved, standing in for the Church, 'might contemplate Christ clearly and uniformly' (58). In a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn in 1618, on Psalm 38:4, Donne uses the same passage to describe the divisions in the Church. Here the devil, imitating God's workmanship, has built a wall

and hath mortar'd it in the brains and bloud of men, in the sharp and virulent contentions arisen, and fomented in matters of Religion. But yet, says the Spouse, *My well beloved stands behind the wall*, shewing himself through the grates: he may be seen on both sides. (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, II.111)

The devil imitates the form of God's workmanship, but with the baser matter of brains and blood. Brains and blood are glossed in the next clause as standing in for the intellectual and emotional roots of the division between different denominations, but the explanation comes too late to overwrite the gruesome image. Whatever the human or diabolical divisions that have been set up within God's Church, Donne desires a unity of sense like the 'one roome' at the conclusion of the Hanworth sermon, a unity expressed in the *Essayes* as the simultaneous blowing of the North and South winds, from Song of Songs 4:16 (59). As he preached at the churching of Lady Doncaster in 1618, on the Song of Songs 5:3, all earthly materials require some 'baser, and courser stuffe, to unite them together', whereas 'in the uniting of a Christian soule to Christ Jesus, here is no mortar, all of one *Nature*' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, v.169).⁴⁹ In heaven such contraries will be reconciled, but to us now they appear as paradoxes, impossibilities and grotesques, requiring much mortar, of various kinds.

⁴⁸ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (London, 1957), 233–4.

⁴⁹ 'I have washed my feet, how shall I defile them?.'

Defending the eloquence of the scriptures in the aforementioned sermon at Whitehall on Ezekiel 33:32, Donne provided a pithy summation of the Song of Songs' capacity to reconcile contraries. Having given various examples of scriptural songs which convey doctrinal truths, Donne preached that God's

greatest work, when he was come, which was his union and marriage with the Church, and with our souls, he hath also delivered in a piece of a curious frame, *Solomons Song of Songs*. (*Sermons*, McCullough, 118)

In its context, Donne's phrase suggests the fine artistry of Solomon's love poem, but there is also a particular significance to Donne's describing its form as a 'frame'. The frame, like the lattice, brings together various contrasting parts at right angles, and the Song of Songs is precisely about the meeting of contraries. It has also been subject to contrary interpretations. In part because of its erotic register, the poetic content of the Song of Songs was often considered to be an allegory for the love of Christ for the Church, or for the individual believer's soul.⁵⁰ Beginning his sermon on Psalm 32:7, Donne turned immediately to this question of what exactly is allegorized, preaching that the Song of Songs is one of many places in scripture that 'have received such an indifferent interpretation, and are left in suspence, whether they be to be understood of the Church in generall, or of particular soules' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, ix.334).⁵¹ The Song of Songs is 'left in suspence' not only because the book can be taken to refer to either the general or the particular, but also because even scriptural literalists were willing to read it allegorically. As a later seventeenth-century commentator puts it, the book's 'Literal sense is mediat', as the Holy Spirit's intention 'is couched under the Figures and Allegories, here made use of'.⁵² The 'curious frame' of the Song of Songs is therefore not only an artful arrangement of words, but also a 'structure composed of parts joined together', bringing various meanings, literal and figurative, into contact.⁵³ There is a double-sense to 'of' in Donne's phrase, suggesting on the one hand totality, 'a work made up of an embellished form', and, on the other, partiality, 'a portion of a wider framework'. The 'piece' is whole and part at once, capturing the way this divine poem can, in its small form, epitomize the conjunction of finite and infinite.

The 'curious frame' might also suggest the various interpretations to which the poem has been subject, with the phrase being used to describe allegorical reading in another poem, closer to Donne's time. In the 28th Sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney uses this phrase to dismiss allegorical readings of his own professions of love:

You that with allegorie's curious frame,
Of other's children changelings use to make,
With me those paines for God's sake do not take⁵⁴

⁵⁰ On the influence of the Canticle of Canticles on the erotic and religious imaginations of Donne's contemporaries, see Timothy H. Robinson, 'Varieties of Reformed and Puritan Reception of the Song of Songs, 1550–1730', in *The Song of Songs Through the Ages*, ed. Annette Schellenberg (Berlin, 2023), 329–46. For other literary responses to the book, see Victoria Brownlee, *Biblical Readings and Literary Writings in Early Modern England, 1558–1625* (Oxford, 2018), 113–42. Brownlee also discusses Donne's 'ambivalent' views on biblical literalism, 47–8.

⁵¹ 'Thou art my hiding place', appropriate to the often-hidden Canticles. This is the fifth of a series of eight sermons Donne preached at St Paul's on Psalm 32, with the second half of the series probably resuming after a long gap, in 1629 or later. See *Sermons*, ed. Lund, lv.

⁵² James Durham, *Clavis Cantici: An Exposition of the Song of Solomon* (Edinburgh, 1668), 6.

⁵³ OED, 'frame, n. and adj.', II.i. On the changing meaning of the 'frame', see Rayna Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), especially 29–33.

⁵⁴ Philip Sidney, *Poems*, ed. William A. Ringler (Oxford, 1962), 178–9.

Sidney is alarmed at the way allegorical readings estrange poems from their parent-author's intentions, an alarm which was shared by many of his contemporaries, especially when it came to reading the scriptures.⁵⁵ The 'frame' here is not only an arrangement of words, but a kind of portable window, a framework which can be applied regardless of the particularities of the literary object, 'those paines' drawing out the etymological sense of 'curious' as 'full of care', or over-elaborate.⁵⁶ Sidney resists the violent appropriation of his poetic materials for allegorical purposes, concluding:

But know that I in pure simplicitie,
Breathe out the flames which burne within my heart,
Love onely reading unto me this art.

The idea that love reads an art to Sidney admits that there is some mediation between his amorous feelings and the poem on the page. The word 'onely' makes a strong claim to unity in its sixteenth-century spelling, but here it is a curious simplicity, as it can be read two ways. Read backwards, modifying Love, 'onely' asserts that it is Love alone who reads to him, therefore that Love is the sole source of the poet's *inventio*. Read forwards, modifying 'reading', the 'onely' carries a different emphasis, suggesting that Love dictates the exact words that Sidney should write, which he then copies down. The ambiguity demands readerly interpretation, complicating the poet's claim to possess pure simplicity. Even writing the poem is already a process of 'reading', or transcribing from a pre-existing source. Though he strives to escape interpretation entirely, he can in the end only insist on his preferred interpretation, that his art is not artful but spontaneous, and even then in terms which hardly preclude ambiguity. But in attempting so artfully to control the reader's reading, the poem only draws attention to how finely it has been crafted. As long as the poem is a frame in the sense of a carefully crafted arrangement of words, it cannot also be a frame in the sense of a lens of interpretation.

In Donne's hands, the scriptures escape this bind. The 'curious frame' is not a window of interpretation onto the Song of Songs, but instead the nature of the book itself. The Song's multiplicity of interpretations is entirely congruent with the multiplicity it describes, the meeting of creation and Creator. Rather than inflicting 'paines' of laborious interpretations on the reader, the book delights, its impossible difficulties evident at once. The kind of appreciation Donne recommends is in this way comparable to the kind of vision endorsed by George Herbert, a notable appreciator of Donne's eloquence, in 'The Elixir'.⁵⁷

A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.⁵⁸

The condition 'if he pleaseth' is an oddly flippant, almost accidental way to describe the desire to ascend onwards towards knowledge of heaven, sounding rather like 'if he feels like it'. Herbert might silently omit the crucial object: 'if he pleaseth [God]', then the believer is

⁵⁵ See Brian Cummings, 'Protestant Allegory', in Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge, 2010), 177–90.

⁵⁶ Gordon Teskey has described allegory as a similar kind of violence, where 'materials' are 'subdued for the purpose of raising a structure of meaning', *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 23.

⁵⁷ See George Herbert, *English Poems*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge, 2007), 31–2.

⁵⁸ Herbert, *Poems*, 641.

allowed to at least glimpse his eternal reward. But God does not clearly come into view in these lines. We are left with the believer's 'pleaseth', implying that the pleasure he takes in looking on the glass is exactly what allows him to look through it. Taking some delight in the glass or lattice is not an impediment to ultimately crossing over into the 'one roome' of many mansions. Instead of being an impediment to knowledge, holy delight is itself a way of knowing.

The curious frame of the scriptures, in contrast, offers a difficult, obstructed view onto something which even the eyes of faith cannot see clearly. As Donne preached in his 1628 Easter sermon at St Paul's, on 1 Corinthians 13:12: 'Faith is a blessed presence, but compared with heavenly vision, it is but an absence' (*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, viii.229). Donne did not let his listener forget this absence for long, as he so often dwells on the inadequacy of our knowledge. But his sermons give a generous measure of 'blessed presence' also. Over the course of this essay, I have argued that when Donne did draw attention to his architectural surroundings, he made them a contract, an epitome of God's goodness which imposes moral obligations. I have argued also that Donne's sermons are their own kind of 'curious frames', both because they are artfully composed and because they redeem interpretative multiplicity as spiritually valuable, as all our earthly knowledge remains 'in parts'. Donne's style has been recognized as 'curious' not only for oddity, but also for its attempts to express the torturous complexity of divine truth in splendid form.⁵⁹ His preaching makes the mediate nature of our knowledge a matter not only of difficulty, but also of a kind of joy. The lattice-work of his prose might be an absence compared to the beatific vision, but it is anything but a colourless means of transporting mind and soul beyond the immediate confines of church or chapel. It is as delightful as the union of preaching with holy living which Herbert describes at the conclusion of 'The Windows':

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and aw: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the eare, not conscience ring.⁶⁰

Eloquent expression and holy living mingle easily in Donne's prose, where, as in Herbert's poem, for a moment the mediated nature of the form disappears from attention, and one is unsure whether one is looking through or at the lattice. The grace of the mortarless union described in his sermon at the churching of Lady Doncaster in 1618 is such that it can redeem all our attachments to ornament and eloquence:

Thou that lovest the Rhetorique, the Musique, the wit, the sharpnesse, the eloquence, the elegancy, of *other authors*, love even those things in the *Scriptures*, in the word of God, where they abound more, then in other authors. Put but thy affections out of their ordinary sinfull way, and then *Lavasti pedes*, thou hast washed thy feet; and God will take thy work in hand, and raise a building farre beyond the compasse, and comprehension of thy foundation ...
(*Sermons*, Potter and Simpson, v.177)

The affections do not have to be suppressed or excised, only directed to their right object. God can still make use of his followers' initial foundations. Donne told his listeners that God will

⁵⁹ Morris W. Croll, 'Attic' and Baroque Prose Style, ed. J. Max Patrick, Robert O. Evans and John W. Wallace (Princeton, NJ, 1969), 192.

⁶⁰ Herbert, *Poems*, 247.

complete their work, not demolish it. Human abilities such as learning and eloquence are not, or not only, obstacles to grace, but the lattice through which God can be glimpsed, the foundation on which he builds. The difficulty of Donne's own style, his ambiguities and uncertainties, are means of discerning truths which would be baffling or implausible if stated baldly. His use of images drawn from architecture lend intensity to his epistemological concerns, about the spiritual value of limited access. The view through half-closed doors or obscure windows yields sight of something which could not be apprehended directly, sights which redeem the afflictions which made them possible. These glimpses, and the difficulties which attend them, can be frustrating, even painful, but are not wholly so. For Donne as poet and, especially, as preacher, they are sources of joy, even when they do not yield full comprehension. Donne guided his listeners to look beyond the architectural structures he gave them, to something far beyond their compass or comprehension, but within their capacity for delight.

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