

*Lecture delivered by Dr Beatrice Groves during the Service to Commemorate John Donne,
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'New feather'd with celestial love:' Donne, metaphor and the Psalms

Four hundred years ago, Donne heard that his friend Edward Tilman had been ordained despite writing some verses expressing his own sense of unworthiness. Donne had likewise become ordained in the face of some personal scruples and his poem addressed 'To Mr. Tilman after he had Taken Orders' expresses his sense of the high calling of the preacher:

...we paint angels with wings, because
They bear God's message and proclaim His laws,
Since thou must do the like and so must move,
Art thou new feather'd with celestial love?...
Mary's prerogative was to bear Christ, so
'Tis preachers' to convey Him, for they do,
As angels out of clouds, from pulpits speak;...
How brave are those, who with their engine can
Bring man to heaven, and heaven again to man?

Critics have been a bit uncomfortable with this poem. Like Milton mourning Lycidas, Donne seems to use the pretext of addressing another to consider his own vocation – and to consider it in fairly self-satisfied terms. I love the expression 'new feather'd with celestial love' but it hardly counts as a humble assessment of the ordained state. The poem takes place in the interrogative mood – pretty much the whole passage I quoted is a question – in part as Donne's acknowledgement that he may be overstepping himself as he imagines preachers as angels bringing gods message to their congregations. (Standing where I do now, I certainly think he was overstepping himself)

This poem, however – with its talk of feathering and engines – is the written sound of Donne's thinking around the problem of how a preacher, and a poet, might be called to convey Christ.

The passage begins with an insistence that something Donne's audience might have assumed to be a simple truth – that angels have wings - was in reality a feathered and fleshed-out metaphor. Angels are painted with wings, Donne states, to convey the concept that they 'bear God's message and proclaim His laws.' Donne is here echoing one of the greatest ever preachers – the fourth century John Chrysostom (whose name means 'golden-tongued') – who explicates angel's wings thus:

'What do these wings tell us? These powers have no wings since they have no body; but by these sensible figures, the Prophet wants to make us understand hidden things... What do these wings mean? The elevated and sublime nature of these [angelic] powers.'

In Milton's *Paradise Lost* it is angels who bear God's messages to Man. Raphael the 'affable archangel' tells stories of the war in heaven and explains that they really shouldn't eat the apple and Michael, the less affable archangel, is sent to tell them about the future once they have transgressed. Milton, for whom the medium as the message, lusciously delineates these angel's wings: 'wings he wore/ Of many a coloured plume, sprinkled with gold' (Bk 3).

As Chrysostom explains these gold sprinkled wings are a metaphor and Milton's Raphael explains the essential nature of metaphor when trying to describe heavenly things to man's earthbound intellect:

what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
By likening spiritual to corporal forms,

As may express them best.

This is the theological idea known as ‘accommodation’ – the idea that the divine realm cannot be known or spoken about by humankind except through relation with their own world.

The famous reforming theologian John Calvin argues that metaphor is so important to the Psalms’ description of God precisely because God is *not* like anything: ‘wee know that god is compared with earthly fathers, not bicause he is like them, but bicause his incomparable loue towards vs cannot bee expressed otherwise.’ God is *incomparable* and when in the Psalms collects the Psalmist’s tears in a bottle, or rides on the cherubim or laughs, the jar between tenor and vehicle reminds the reader that all God-talk tries to render in human terms that which is outside human conception. When – as we have heard sung today - the Psalms describe God as a rock, a bird, a stronghold or a shield it rouses in the reader an understanding of the way in which *all* talk of the transcendent God in finite language is fundamentally metaphorical. In one sense all theology is metaphor.

The comforting angelic wings of the messengers in Donne’s poem ‘To Mr. Tilman after he had Taken Orders’ are linked with a Psalmic verse we have heard the choir sing. Those implicitly maternal wings which the Psalmist imagines for God himself in Psalm 63 ‘Because thou hast been my helper: therefore under the shadow of thy wings will I rejoyce.’ (7) The metaphoric language of new feathering with celestial love links Donne’s poetic and devotional writing, his sermons and his sonnets, because his linguistic imagination – whether composing homilies or poetry – is always rooted in the bible.

The Psalms are steeped in metaphor, something that in and of itself imbued metaphor with high status and led Christian thinkers to understand the possibility of theological profundity within this rhetorical figure. Donne preaches on the opening of Psalm 62 (which the choir have just sung so beautifully) of how the Psalmist ‘turnes to thee, in so many names and notions of power, and consolation, in this one Psalme.’ Donne’s sermons explore the multiplicity of metaphors found in the Scriptures as a whole, and in the Psalms in particular. He preaches that ‘As God hath spangled the firmament with starres, so hath he his Scriptures with names, and Metaphors, and denotations of power. Sometimes he shines out in the name of a *Sword*, and of a *Target*, and of a *Wall*, and of a *Tower*, and of a *Rocke*, and of a *Hill*; And sometimes in that glorious and manifold constellation of all together, [as] *Dominus exercituum, The Lord of Hosts*.’ Note how Donne takes psalmic metaphors here and binds his examples in a metaphor of his own – each image a star that not only illuminates but expresses even more meaning when seen within a constellation - that gathers the parts into a synthetic whole.

The reason that we’ve heard Psalms 62 and 63 today is that this year is the four-hundredth anniversary of Donne becoming Prebendary of Chiswick [in 1622], a position which he held for almost a decade, and which required him to recite five psalms daily. And these Psalms were numbers 62-66. Each Prebend of St Pauls was given their own five psalms to ensure that in London’s cathedral church the whole Psalter would be prayed every day. So these psalms – recited every day by Donne for a whole decade (an astonishing 3650 times) – would have been extraordinarily familiar to him.

Donne was peculiarly suited to this part of his job as Prebendary of Chiswick for, as he explained, the poetic nature of the Psalms made them one of his favourite parts of the Scriptures:

I acknowledge, that my spirituall appetite carries me still, upon the *Psalms of David*, for a first course, for the Scriptures of the Old Testament... [in part] because they are Scriptures, written in such forms, as I have been most accustomed to... *David's* being

Poems: for, God gives us, not onely that which is meerly necessary, but that which is convenient too; He does not onely feed us, but *feed us with marrow, and with fatnesse*; he gives us our instruction in cheerfull forms... not in *Prose*, but in *Psalms*.

This is a passage taken from a sermon which Donne himself preached in this place 400 years ago. Donne entered Lincoln's Inn as a student on May 6, 1592 and returned here as Divinity Reader in 1616. The incomparable editors of his sermons, George Potter and Evelyn Simpson Potter, write that 'the five years during which Donne held the office of Divinity Reader for Lincoln's Inn must have been in many ways the pleasantest period of his clerical career.' He 'played an active part, during these years [in]... the planning, financing, and building of a new chapel.' This chapel. He returned from his new position in St Pauls – after a year of praying his own personal five daily psalms, in addition to praying the Psalter each month as part of the cycle of readings in the Book of Common Prayer - to preach at the consecration of this Chapel on Ascension Day 1623.

In the sermon from which I've just quoted, preached from this pulpit in this place, the text on which Donne is preaching is Psalm 38. But he draws his imagery from one of his Prebend Sermons – one of the psalms he recited daily, and which we've just heard sung - about the way in the Psalms nourish the spirit not simply with food, but with the best, most nourishing and delicious food: 'My soule shall be satisfied euen as it were with marrowe and fatnesse' (Ps 63.5, Coverdale). Coverdale translates this with a simile – '*even as it were with marrow and fatnesse*' but Donne converts this simile into a metaphor: 'He does not onely feed us, but *feed us with marrow, and with fatnesse*.'

Metaphor, like simile, explains the abstract through the concrete (God is like a shepherd) but, unlike simile, it also embodies the transcendence it describes (God is a shepherd). They seem very similar rhetorical figures, but metaphor is the more poetic and profound as it does not merely find likeness but creates it: imagining words-as-fatness not merely comparing them to it. Metaphor is often spoken of as a rhetorical figure in which an abstract subject or tenor (such as God) is presented in the concrete terms of the vehicle (a shepherd): 'the Lord is my shepherd.' But, as Benjamin Harshav has argued, the apparently concrete element of the metaphor is not concrete within the poem. Harshav convincingly describes the 'the mutual filtering and mutual fermenting' of tenor and vehicle arguing that 'Metaphors are one form of *diverted concreteness*... the poem strikes the reader with concrete, sensuous details, but in a secondary domain. Their concreteness is effective, has a sharper impact on the reader, precisely because these details are taken out of a continuous, plausible, reality-like context.' Metaphors leave almost everything unsaid and it is left to the reader to fill in the gaps.

Harshav's stress on the role of the reader in the 'gap-filling' of metaphor illuminates one reason that Psalmic metaphor has remained so potent. The Psalms' metaphors – in which the Lord is a rock (Ps.18.1), righteousness and peace kiss (Ps.85.11) and mountains hop and skip for joy (Pss 68.16; 114.4) - are one of the most distinctive and easily translated aspects of poetry. And, unlike rhythm or syntax, they survive translation relatively intact. But metaphor not only *survives* translation: it is revived by new languages, contexts and readers, revitalised by the distinct life-experience of each person who encounters them. Critics have convincingly that part of the power and distinctiveness of metaphor is due to its ability both to reflect, and to create, conceptual models. Because metaphors are not directly stated – embodying poetry's ability to 'create something unavailable in, and irreducible to, codified language' – they are deeply inflected by both the author's and the reader's conceptual models. (For example, when Donne extolls the Psalms as 'marrow and fatness' I'm reminded – but you might not be - about Fergus Henderson's Roast Bone Marrow dish at St Johns).

This is one reason for the tenacity and vitality of metaphor - it is reimagined through time by the subtly shaded 'gap-filling' of each reader.

William P. Brown calls the Psalter 'the schoolhouse of incarnational imagination' and writes of how the synthesis of analogy and anomaly in psalmic metaphor creates 'conceptual and emotional friction by which new meaning is created and the impossible becomes conceivable.'

The Psalter's metaphors were a uniquely powerful poetic source for early modern poets due both to their innate poetic power and to the early modern fluency in this text. The Psalms were not only the best-known poetry but actually the best-known *text* of Donne's day. Psalmic metaphor was crucial for early modern poets – partly as a source: they borrowed liberally from its poetry of 'jagged edges yet luminous intensity;' 'rich in metaphor yet raw in texture.' But also as a defence of their craft – Psalmic metaphor proved that the Holy Spirit approved of this figure and found in it a suitable medium for divine revelation. While the precise workings of Hebrew poetry were not understood in England at the time, both poets & Hebrew scholars were clear that psalmic 'song' was written as verse; and the Psalms' use of metaphor is one of their most evidently poetic aspects. Even Calvin (not perhaps the most natural defender of poetic rhetoric) expressed in his Psalm commentary an expansive understanding of how Psalmic metaphor functions as 'a surmounting eloquence, that might waken the world' to the wonder of the divine. The famous sonneteer and defender of poetry, Philip Sidney, meanwhile not only used the poetics of the psalms in defence of his craft, but emphasised the Psalmists' use of metaphor as evidence that he was indeed a poet: 'for what else is...his telling of the beasts' joyfulness, and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith?'

In Donne's Prebend sermons he declares – in the passage that we heard read earlier – that the way in which listeners respond to Psalmic metaphor is personal to each one of us:

The Psalmes are the Manna of the Church. As Manna tasted to every man like that he liked best, so doe the Psalmes minister Instruction, and satisfaction, to every man, in every emergency and occasion. *David* was not onely a clear Prophet of Christ himselfe, but a Prophet of every particular Christian; He foretels what I, what any shall doe, and suffer, and say... the whole booke of Psalmes is *Oleum effusum*, (as the Spouse speaks of the name of Christ) an Oyntment powred out upon all sorts of sores, A Searcloth that souples all bruises, A Balme that searches all wounds.

Donne brings Old Testament metaphors – Manna and perfume – that are traditionally understood in relation to Christ and understands them instead in relation to the Psalms. For (as he writes elsewhere) 'no booke of the Old Testament is so like a Gospel, so particular in all things concerning Christ, as the Psalmes.' The repurposing of Christic metaphors for the psalms is a poetic device which powerfully expresses the way in which Donne finds both Christ and himself in the Psalms: '*David* was not onely a clear Prophet of Christ himselfe, but a Prophet of every particular Christian; He foretels what I, what any shall doe, and suffer, and say.'

Donne's image of himself as new-feathered with celestial love, with which we began, comes in part from the Psalmic imagery of God's own wings which we heard in Psalm 63 '*Because thou hast been my helpe, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoyce.*' Donne writes of this verse:

Now as the spirit and soule of the whole booke of Psalmes is contracted into this psalme, so is the spirit and soule of this whole psalme contracted into this verse... We see what was passed between God and [David] before, in the first clause of our Text; (*Because thou hast been my helpe*) And then we see what was to come, by the rest, (*Therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoyce.*) So that we have here the whole

compass of Time, Past, Present, and Future... Fixe upon God any where, and you shall finde him a Circle; He is with you now, when you fix upon him; He was with you before, for he brought you to this fixation; and he will be with you hereafter, for *He is yesterday, and to day, and the same for euer.*

Donne finds in the metaphor of God-as-bird everything that he desires – a verse that is a summation of the Psalter, as the psalter itself is the summation of the Bible. It is image, he declares, intended by the Holy Ghost as a ‘Refreshing, a Respiration, a Conservation, a Consolation in all afflictions that are inflicted upon me.’ And he tells his congregation to ‘goe your severall wayes home, and every soule take with’ them the name, the psalmic metaphor for God ‘which may minister most comfort unto [them]... any of these notions [*God is my Rocke, and my Salvation, and my Defence... my Refuge, and my Glory*] is enough..., but God is all these, and all else, that all soules can thinke.’ For, as Donne declares in a delightful fusion of his preacherly and poetic selves: ‘God is Love, and the Holy Ghost is amorous in his Metaphors.’ So I repeat to you Donne’s valediction, ‘go your severall wayes home, and every soule take with them the name which may minister most comfort unto them, for God is all these, and all else, that all soules can thinke.’