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The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition

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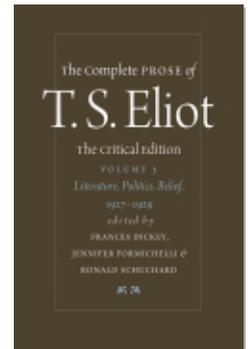
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The Prose of the Preacher: The Sermons of Donne¹

The Listener, 2 (3 July 1929) 22-23

In the classification of prose styles the theology of Hooker is nearer to the philosophy of Bacon than it is to the prose of Donne and other great preachers. The first represents an important step in the development of reasoning; the second represents a step in the development of oratory. However far apart in beliefs, the work of Bacon and Hooker brings us nearer to Hobbes and Berkeley and Locke and Hume; however different in style and subject matter, the sermons of Donne bring us nearer to the speeches of Burke and other great politicians. They have a relation, on the other hand, to the more "decorative" or "poetic" prose in English; to Jeremy Taylor, of course, but also to De Quincey. In Hooker and Bacon we find what we may call "reasoning in tranquility"; in Donne we find "reasoning in emotion."

Up to quite recent times the sermons of Donne were hardly read except by the specialist in seventeenth-century prose: most people, if they have the prejudice that sermons must be dull, suppose that their dullness increases in direct ratio to their age. This is not true, for the best sermons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not only among the most interesting sermons in the language, but among the best prose of any kind in the language. Even to-day very few people have the courage or interest to read through the many volumes of Donne. But we had, a few years ago, the admirable selection of passages from these sermons edited by Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith at the Clarendon Press.² The chief defect in the introduction to this book, otherwise excellent, is that the editor did not appear sufficiently interested in the other preachers of the period; and the chief defect of the book is that the selections are all much too short, and give the impression that Donne in preaching was from time to time inspired to a paragraph or so of superb English between dreary wastes of antiquated theology. The truth is that Donne's sermons are brilliantly written throughout, and brilliantly constructed, with a beginning, a middle and an end. For this reason I prefer the selections, including one complete sermon, given by Mr. John Hayward in his recent volume of Donne's poetry and selected prose published by the Nonesuch Press.³

[About John Donne himself, it is only necessary to remind you that after having written some of the most beautiful lyrics and love poems in the English language, and acquiring a vast erudition in theology and law, he was induced by James I to take holy orders. He became quickly a Royal Chaplain, and eventually Dean of St. Paul's. Many of his sermons were preached before King James – a considerable theologian himself – and others at St. Paul's or out of doors at Paul's Cross. At a time when preaching was popular, Donne became the most popular of all preachers. His success can only be compared with that of some popular evangelist in America; for we have recorded some astounding accounts of the effects of his oratory upon both populace and courtiers. People of all sorts crowded to hear him; and when he preached upon Damnation and the perils of the sinful, it was not out of the way for some of his auditors to swoon with terror.]

To put ourselves into a mood to read one of Donne's sermons, it is worth while reminding ourselves of the reasons for the popularity of preaching at that time. In the first place, theological questions were then taken very seriously by everyone but the most ribald. Theology was, indeed, a very important part of politics, and politics meant serious matters of peace or strife, prosperity or persecutions. The English Church had a dangerous position to defend, and the security of Church was then one question with the security of Crown and State. With all questions of foreign politics, the relations of England with France, Spain and the Empire, was inextricably involved the question of Canterbury *versus* Rome; and a priest from Rome was regarded with as much suspicion, and was indeed in much greater danger at times, than a Russian Communist emissary is now. With all questions of domestic politics was involved the question of Canterbury *versus* Geneva and Zurich: that is to say, the struggle which culminated in the Civil Wars and the assassination of Charles I was the struggle between the Established Church and the Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists, Brownists, Family-of-Love and the other stern dissenting sects.⁴ A sermon, by an important preacher, in an age when there were no regular newspapers, had something of the excitement of an important political speech at a moment when people are politically excited.

The second reason for the popularity of the sermon is that it took the place now taken by many other popular Sunday amusements; the third to be remembered is the greater emotionality of the people. The beatitude of Paradise, the horror of Hell, could be painted in colours to delight or terrify the auditors. They were, I suppose, neither better nor worse than

ourselves for being so easily moved; but they enjoyed themselves more thoroughly.

Donne was by no means either the first or the last of the great English preachers; I believe that his contemporary, Bishop Andrewes, is greater, and Jeremy Taylor must take an equal rank. But Donne is undoubtedly the most readable. Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, was a great preacher and a great prose writer long before Donne; and you can read some of his sermons preached before Edward VI in a volume in the Everyman edition. The peculiarity of Donne is that he was not only a great prose master, but also a great poet; and in many passages in his sermons we are reminded that he is not only a theologian but a poet, and a very human poet too. And both as a poet and as a man, a very modern person. He imports into English prose two qualities for the first time – qualities which we find among his contemporaries only in the blank verse of Shakespeare and the highest passages of Shakespeare's dramatic contemporaries: a curious knowledge of the human heart, and a stateliness of phrase and image hitherto possible only in verse. As an example of the former a very well-known passage will suffice:⁵

I am not all here, I am here now preaching upon this text, and I am at home in my library considering whether St. Gregory, or St. Jerome, have said best of this text, before. I am here speaking to you, and yet I consider by the way, in the same instant, what is likely you will say to one another, when I have done, you are not all here neither; you are here now, hearing me, and yet you are thinking that you have heard a better sermon somewhere else, of this text before; you are here, and yet you think you could have heard some other doctrine of down-right Predestination, and Reprobation roundly delivered somewhere else with more edification to you; you are here, and you remember your selves that now ye think of it: This had been the fittest time, now, when everybody else is at church, to have made such and such a private visit; and because you would be there, you are there.

Donne was in early years brought up, before deciding upon the Church of England, among Jesuit surroundings; his command of the terrors of death and damnation in other passages shows him a student of the Ignatian method; and I think he shows his training here too, in winning his auditors by sympathy and understanding, and suddenly pulling them up at the end. You would not find a passage like this in any other contemporary English preacher. He confesses later:

I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and His Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and His Angels, for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door; I talk on, in the same posture of praying; eyes lifted up; knees bowed down; as though I prayed to God; and, if God, or His Angels should ask me, when I thought last of God in that prayer, I cannot tell: Sometimes I find that I had forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a fear of tomorrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a chimaera in my brain, troubles me in my prayer.⁶

[I have been hauled over the coals by some of the best critics, for venturing to prefer the sermons of Bishop Andrewes to those of his contemporary Donne.^{7†} Certainly it was intemperate of me to call Donne "the Reverend Billy Sunday of his time" and I apologise for that;⁸ but I still think it fair to say that he has a touch of the religious spellbinder. I still prefer Andrewes, both as a prose writer and as a man. But I am talking now about Donne, instead of about Andrewes, because Donne is more widely representative of his time, and because his prose style is more nearly related to later styles than is that of Andrewes. And you cannot conceive of Andrewes writing anything else but sermons and theological works; accordingly his style is a nearly perfect style for what he had to say. But you can think of Donne writing many other things, and his style as clothing profane as well as sacred subjects. I can express the difference better by saying that Andrewes seems when we read him to be inspired by his subject; Donne seems rather a man with a prodigious gift of writing which he has turned to a subject: Andrewes is first the divine, Donne is first the writer. I do not imply a distinction between "sincere" and "insincere."^{9†} And this does not mean that Andrewes is a greater "prose writer" than Donne: but then, I never said he was.]

It is interesting to remark about Donne that although he appears first in history as a poet and as an aspiring worldly courtier, he betrays almost no contact with the literature of the time. He never alludes to his contemporary dramatists or poets, and certainly shows no direct influence by them; yet we know that he sometimes frequented the society of Ben Jonson, who left a critical phrase and a commendation of Donne.¹⁰ We are apt to suppose that a poet of all people must have read a great deal of poetry, certainly

that he must enjoy poetry. There are, however, poets who do not much care for reading poetry, and Donne was one of them. His poetic imagination was fed chiefly on works of theology and law. In his verse, he is a theologian and a lawyer; and in his theology, he is very much a poet. We admit that there are greater poets than Donne; we should, I think, admit that there are greater theological writers and greater preachers. But it is this mixture that gives Donne the quality which we express by the feeble worn-out word "fascination," and made him popular as a preacher.

Hugh Latimer was adept in homely illustrations to drive a point home to an unlettered audience; Jeremy Taylor, in the next generation, has a sweetness and purity of tone unknown to Donne; Andrewes in his sermons, and Cranmer in his great prayer-book,¹¹ rose to greater heights. But Donne could best appeal to the ordinary worldly person of his day and of our day; and being a poet, could appeal, too, to an audience educated in verbal beauty by the Shakespearian drama. In the following passage we hear, I think, in the voice of the preacher, the minor tones of Shakespearian drama. Donne is the contemporary of John Webster, John Ford, Thomas Middleton and Cyril Tourneur:

Shall we, that are but worms, but silkworms, but glowworms at best, chide God that He hath made slowworms, and other venomous creeping things? shall we that are nothing but boxes of poison in our selves, reprove God for making toads and spiders in the world? shall we that are all discord, quarrel the harmony of His creation, or His providence? Can an apothecary make a sovereign triacle of vipers, and other poisons, and cannot God admit offences, and scandals into his physic?¹²

And again, in the following, the poet speaks:

Methusalah, with all his hundreds of years, was but a mushroom of a night's growth, to this day, and all the four monarchies, with all their thousands of years, and all the powerful Kings, and all the beautiful Queens of this world, were but as a bed of flowers, some gathered at six, some at seven, some at eight, all in one morning, in respect of this day.¹³

These are the sorts of passage to delight in first; we can then proceed to study the ingenuity with which Donne, in a long passage, will employ one simile, and develop it in immense detail. It is an old method in the sermon; it was used by the Buddha; you find it in Latimer's Sermons on the Card

and on the Plough; it has been used again. But Donne has an exceptional fertility in detail. One specimen is found on page 72 of Mr. Pearsall Smith's selection: "The World is a Sea," in which he brings forth every possible interpretation of this metaphor.¹⁴ The Elizabethan congregation was prepared to stay a long while, to listen standing for two hours; and in a sermon of such length to such an audience it was highly desirable to hammer every point very hard indeed. And for such hammering Donne's metaphors and similes were perfectly adapted. And it is of interest that many of them, as every reader of his poems knows, were drawn from his personal experience: many are of seafaring ships and tempests; and send us back to his early poems for reminiscences of his voyage, as an adventurous young man, long before he thought seriously of the Church, to the Azores.

And finally, as I said, no one can fully appreciate the greatness of Donne's enrichment of English prose without reading carefully at least one sermon from beginning to end. His method is that of other contemporary divines, in so far as he takes his text seriously and searches for exact meanings in every word and phrase. There is invariably this process, in an age when the exactness of the biblical text was undoubted, and the verbal inspiration taken literally. The meanings of one small text may be many, but they are all based on the exact word. This way of dealing with the text of a sermon is remote from us, but it had its literary as well as its theological advantages: for in those days a text had to be something more than a *pre* text; and the reasoning from it had to be close, and the illustrations of it clear.

While insisting on the peculiar qualities of the prose of Donne, which make it unique in its own and any time, one ought to show him also in his place as one among the great divines of the English Church of that period, of whom Hooker is another, and Andrewes is another, and remark upon the extent to which not the Church only, but the whole of English civilisation, is indebted to those men. Without Hooker, the prose of the philosopher, the jurist, even of the scientist, would not have developed so rapidly; without Donne, the more ornate types of English prose, of Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor, would not have developed so rapidly. And compare the prose of Donne with that of Thomas Nashe. Donne is of a more mature intellectual generation: not merely a greater writer, but more adult. There are "poetic" passages in the prose of Nashe and his group: but with Donne the sensibility of the poet and dramatist is infused into a prose which is that of the man of thought.

NOTES

1. Broadcast at 7:25 p.m. on Tuesday, 2 July, as TSE's fourth talk in a series of six lectures on "Six Types of Tudor Prose"; original broadcast title, "The Popular Preacher: Donne"; the unpublished TS of full text is in the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham; passages of the broadcast deleted at publication are restored in square brackets. TSE modernizes the quotations from Donne's texts.

2. *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages, with an Essay by Logan Pearsall Smith* (Clarendon, 1920)

3. *John Donne: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (Nonesuch, 1929)

4. During the First Civil War, the Puritan ministers of the Long Parliament split into the Independents, who advocated freedom of religion and complete separation of church and state, and the Presbyterians, who were intolerant of nonconformists and advocated a national system of church government. The Anabaptists, a Protestant sect formed in Switzerland in 1525, believed in the complete separation of church and state, denied the validity of infant baptism, and advocated re-baptism of adult believers, who were required to make a public, free-will profession of faith. The Brownists were dissenters and separatists under the leadership of Robert Browne (d. 1633), an Anglican priest who came under Puritan influence. Though he eventually returned to the Church, many of his Puritan followers sailed to America on *The Mayflower* in 1620 and were known as the Brownist Emigration. Sir Andrew Aguecheek states in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, "I had as leif be a Brownist as a politician" (III.ii.33). The Family of Love, or Familists, a sect that originated in Holland ca. 1540 and believed that true religion was to be found in a fellowship of peace and love, had a strong following in England. Though Elizabeth I issued a proclamation against the sect in 1580, it remained active up to the Restoration in 1660.

5. From Donne's Sermon XIV, "Preached at Lincolns Inne," titled "I am Not all Here" in Logan Pearsall Smith's edition, *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, 3-4.

6. From Sermon LXXX, "Preached at the funerals of Sir William Cokayne Knight . . . December 12, 1626"; titled "Imperfect Prayers" in Smith's edition of *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, 4.

7†. Crossed out in TSE's text: Donne: "perhaps one or two critics may even be doing me the honour to listen now, in the hope of an amends or retraction which I shall not make."

8. This criticism of Donne appears in "Lancelot Andrewes" (1926): "About Donne there hangs the shadow of the impure motive; and impure motives lend their aid to a facile success. He is a religious spellbinder, the Reverend Billy Sunday of his time, the flesh-creeper, the sorcerer of emotional orgy" (2.820).

9†. Crossed out in TSE's text: "but between degrees of sincerity."

10. TSE refers to the famous descriptive phrase of Donne in the opening line of Jonson's "To John Donne," "the delight of Phoebus and each Muse," and to Jonson's commendation of Donne in his conversations with William Drummond of Hawthorne (1619) as "the first Poet of the World for some Things."

11. Thomas Cranmer, appointed first protestant Archbishop of Canterbury, was a major contributor and editorial producer of the first Book of Common Prayer (1549); the Preface contains Cranmer's explanation of why a new prayer book was required for the new Anglican communion: "There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted."

12. From Sermon XVII, "Preached at Lincolns Inne"; titled "Silkworms" in *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, 165; triacle (OED): obsolete form of treacle

13. From Sermon LXXIII, "Preached to the King in my Ordinary wayting at White-hall, 18 Aprill 1626"; titled "Eternity" in *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, 235-36.

14. From Sermon LXXII, "At the Hague December 19, 1619"; titled "*Mundas Mare*" in *Donne's Sermons: Selected Passages*, 72-75; TSE quoted from the sermon and compared it to Latimer's sermon "Of the Card" (1529) in his review of Smith's edition in 1919 (2.167). In his fourth Clark lecture, "The Conceit in Donne," TSE again discussed the expository device of "the extended, detailed, interminable simile" in Buddha's Fire Sermon and in the sermons of Richard of St. Victor, Donne, and Latimer, who uses the device in his sermon on "The Plough" (1548) (2.677). TSE owned J. M. Dent's Everyman edition of Latimer's *Sermons* (1906).