CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thought and Images

For the force of a similitude not being to prove any thing to a contrary disputer, but onely to explaine to a willing hearer, when that is done, the rest is a moste tedious pratling, rather overswaying the memorie from the purpose whereto they were applied, then anie whit enforming the judgement alreadie either satisfied, or by similitudes not to be satisfied.

SIDNEY, Defence of Poesie

To the thinking soul images serve as if they were contents of perception (and when it asserts or denies them to be good or bad it avoids or pursues them). That is why the soul never thinks without an image.” And further: “When the mind is actively aware of anything it is necessarily aware of it along with an image; for images are like sensuous contents except in that they contain no matter.” Thus Aristotle in a statement that exerted great influence (De Anima 3.7.8). Augustine, working from other influences and toward other ends, places “corporeal” images at the bottom of his ascending scale, though nothing can be expressed unless it has been preceded by an internal image. “Spiritual vision is superior to corporeal” and does not need the lower faculty, “since the likenesses of absent objects appear in the spirit.” At the pinnacle there is “intellectual” vision, which is in effect autonomous, though needed to validate spiritual vision, and never errs, but is also, among other attributes, “ineffable.”

In writing on the subject of memory and following Aristotle in the main, Thomas Aquinas adds something else to his description of how the mind acts and reacts:

And those things are per se memorable of which there is a phantasy, that is to say, the sensibilia. But the intelligibilia are per accidens memorable, for these cannot be apprehended by man without a phantasm. And thus it is that we remember less easily those things which are of subtle and spiritual import; and we remember more easily those things which are gross
And sensible. And if we wish to remember intelligible notions more easily, we should link them with some kind of phantasms, as Tullius teaches in his Rhetoric.  

Among his precepts for training the memory is the use of "similitudes," preferably unusual ones, "because we wonder more at unfamiliar things and the soul is more strongly and vehemently held by them; whence it is that we remember better things seen in childhood. It is necessary in this way to invent similitudes and images." Further,

It is necessary that a man should dwell with solicitude on, and cleave with affection to, the things which he wishes to remember; because what is strongly impressed on the soul slips less easily away from it. Whence Tullius says in his Rhetoric that "solicitude conserves complete figures of the simulachra." (p. 75)

As Frances Yates, whom I have been following, points out, Aquinas has misquoted Ad Herennium ("solicitude" for "solitudo") and added "cleave with affection," thus introducing "a devotional atmosphere which is entirely absent from the classical memory rule" (p. 76). She also observes that the apologetic necessity of providing an image in order to remember the intelligibilia of "subtle and spiritual import" is "a concession to human weakness, to the nature of the soul" (p. 71).  

A specialized method of training the memory is not, of course, one of the more prestigious branches of thinking, but inasmuch as the discipline reflects a concept of mind and the relations of the mind to the abstractions it gains and holds, the effectiveness of the discipline was a kind of proof, not negligible, that it was in accord with the true nature of the mind. Besides its practical uses, in thought as well as rhetoric, memory had important functions in the practices of Christian thought and the history of salvation. It was no secret that in one of the more decorous Greek myths Mnemosyne was the mother of the Muses. That memory is immortal was a significant contribution of the Platonic legacy. Augustine's widely influential model of the human soul as based upon the Trinity identified God the Father with memory, Christ with reason, and the Holy Ghost with the affections. Therefore, the inspired messages and images of the affections could be understood as having direct access to memory, and the arts of meditation and devotion were consciously aware of that possibility. Aristotle's quiet corollary, "When the mind is actively aware of anything, it is necessarily aware of it along with an image" (emphasis added), presents a dimension of thought in which self-consciousness and a capacity for criticism are endued with
positions for their potential activity. To end this brief sketch: the word
of God in Holy Scripture, accommodating itself to common human
understanding, saw fit to employ images from the whole range of
ordinary human experience. Secular poets were bound by the more
prescriptive laws of decorum developed in their art, but they also
sought images that would stir the mind in the right way.

Particulars, examples, similitudes, which move as well as enlighten
and clarify, were the acknowledged instruments of the reasoning of
poetry and story, but also of that part of religion that concerned indi­
vidual devotion. Though such uses of the mind were regarded as less
reliable and less well suited to travel over the reaches of intellectual
distance than the disciplines of severe reasoning upon principles, the
less reliable instruments could do some things incomparably well. In
any case, there could be no irreconcilable opposition. Like body and
soul, or the separate faculties of the soul (or in our time the conflicting
claims of basic and applied research), the rule of cohabitation had an
actual force that imposed limitations on the rules of ranking by intellec­
tual eminence. In a religion, one of the foundations of which is love, the
stirring and concentrating of the soul is a proper subject for intellectual
study. So Donne expresses nothing new, but the renewed testimony of
his own conviction, when he says: “For, the object of my understanding
is truth; but the object of my love, my affection, my desire, is good­
nesse . . . nothing supplies, nor fills, nor satisfies the desire of man, on
this side of God; Every man hath something to love, and desire, till he
determine it in God” (Sermons, 6:232). He can state the thesis in a
redaction of familiar philosophical reasoning:

*Primus actus voluntatis est Amor;* Philosophers and Divines
agree in that, That the will of man cannot be idle, and the first
act that the will of man produces is Love; for till it love some­
thing, prefer and chuse something, till it would have some­
thing, it is not a Will; neither can it turn upon any object,
before God. (Sermons, 6:361)

We shall need to return to Donne, but I draw an illustration now
from the leading Platonist of the Renaissance. Ficino, intent on oppos­
ing some of the Aristotelians’ emphasis on the high value of the visual,
oberves that visual images lack motion and therefore move the soul
only a little. (He has a great deal of the best literature of all kinds against
him here.) Similarly, the lower senses of smell, taste, and touch have
their known material effects but cannot penetrate the depths of the soul.
On the other hand, the sense of hearing in the example of musical sound
“excites the aerial spirit which is the bond of body and soul; by emotion
it affects the senses and at the same time the soul; by meaning it works on the mind.” It penetrates, flows, floods us with exalted pleasure, and “by its very nature, both spiritual and material, it at once seizes, and claims as its own, man in his entirety.” (The lovers of beautifully arranged words might wish to enter similar if more modest claims, mindful that the possibilities of disagreements about the meanings of words and their music make an uncertain basis for anticipating the harmony of other men in their “entirety.”)\(^4\)

Paracelsus, reasoning upon a humble phenomenon, is not much less ambitious than Ficino in his explanation. He too is interested in motion and penetration but also in the influential movement of celestial bodies:

> If the pregnant woman begins to imagine, then her bosom is borne round in its motion just as the superior firmament, each movement rising or settling. For as in the case of the greater firmament, the stars of the microcosm also move by imagination, until there comes a sort of bounding, in which the stars of the imagination produce an influence and an impression on the pregnant woman, just as though one should impress a seal or stamp a piece of money. Whence those signs and birthmarks derived from the lower stars are called “impressions.”\(^5\)

Part of the interest in these two examples is that each author’s mind is conscious of its thought “along with an image,” as Aristotle said, and each explanatory method is supplemented by quasi-narrative delineation, which when used formally Ficino calls *apologus*, a fable borrowed or invented for the occasion. A latent figure in Ficino’s discussion is the ideal harmony of the Platonic music of the spheres. Part of Paracelsus’s case is built upon the ancient similitude that for centuries had compared the human imagination to impressionable wax. Both the accounts depend upon the theory of correspondences and describe the phenomena by drawing upon their believed coincidence with phenomena of the supernal world; both turn the emphasis, however, to the relations of body and soul in this world.

I return to Donne with the limited purpose of drawing upon a few of his many statements on the nature and art of expression. His words on the subject of death are a chief source of this book; he has much to say on my present subject, in statements and asides, chiefly scattered throughout the *Sermons*. We saw him distinguishing between the object of understanding, truth, and the object of love, goodness, but also declaring that the first act of the will is love, and defending that proposition by familiar philosophical arguments directed toward the under-
standing and its object, truth. Donne keeps insisting on the primacy of understanding; we reach the true assurance of faith and we defend the possession of that happy state by means of the reasoning affirmed by the understanding. And “we know how to worke . . . we know what arguments have prevailed upon us, with what arguments we have prevailed upon others, and those we can use.” It is the will which “is so irregular, so unlimited a thing, as that no man hath a bridle upon another will . . . no man understands the faculty.” What we feel in ourselves we see in others, that they “persist in errors, after manifest convincing, after all reproofs which can be directed upon the understanding.” Therefore, it is an attractive notion, perhaps the best yet produced, but still not true enough, “that the last act of the Understanding is the Will” (Sermons, 6:321).

If “no man understands that faculty” of will, in himself and in others, the poet and the preacher are not therefore ignorant; as with arguments, they “know how to worke,” and if their instruments do not chart the way to final understanding, there is much they can do, and their effectiveness has been proved by experience and observation, one’s own and others’. For the preacher, Donne remarks, “it is a good art, to deliver deep points in a holy plainnesse, and plaine points in a holy delightfulness” (Sermons, 9:215). In part the purpose is to prevent the weariness (from not being able to understand) of the unlearned, and the weariness of the learned who understand things before they are said. The practical reason for so doing is explained thus. Quietly implicit is the understanding that only learned members of the congregation will recognize the qualities of the art that can present “deep points in a holy plainenesse.” The immediate reason for the statement, however, concerns the orator’s art of presenting himself acceptably while he manages the art of preparation and transition. Donne’s next words are, “To day my humble petition must be, That you will be content to heare plaine things plainly delivered.” He prevents weariness while explaining how to avoid it, and provides another kind of “delightfulness” by concealing the approaches to the plain point of making a necessary transition.

In presenting a more general principle, also in an aside, Donne says:

The way of Rhetorique in working upon weake men, is first to trouble the understanding, to displase, and to discompose, and disorder the judgement, to smother and bury in it, or to empty it of former apprehensions and opinions, and to shake that believe, with which it had possessed it self before, and then when it is thus melted, to powre it into new molds, when
it is thus mollified, to stamp and imprint new forms, new images, new opinions in it. *(Sermons, 2:282)*

Donne is here talking in general about rhetoric and weak men. In a still more general sense what he says applies to all men, and certainly to himself, when the “working” is that of God returning a sinner to the right path. “Melt” is an image that can suggest or describe the controlled, assenting death, or as here also suggest the symbolic “deaths” in life that are part of the recognized process of personal transformation. The emptying of the self is like that *kenosis* by which the “evacuated” man makes room for God to enter. The stamping and imprinting, when it is done by God, is true work and obliterates the distinction between understanding and will.

And so here an instructional aside, formally describing “the way” of rhetoric, steadily moves into broader and deeper ways by which men may be discomposed and recomposed. The methods and consequences of a human art tell one story; the vividness of the images, their cumulative intensity, and the apparently irresistible power of the progression tell another story, based upon two unadmitted similitudes. In Donne’s mind the “way” described is also one of the ways God may work in transforming a sinner in order “to stamp and imprint new forms, new images, new opinions.” For instance, Saul, a “vehement persecuter,” becomes Paul, a “laborious Apostle.” “Christ, who is about to infuse new light into Saul, withdrawes that light that was in him before; That light, by which Saul thought he saw all before, and thought himselfe a competent Judge.” “God shut up the naturall way, in Saul, Seeing; He struck him blind; But he opened the super-naturall way, he inabled him to heare, and to heare him” *(6:211, 214, 217).*

As for the way of rhetoric, in its context the development is excessive, as if answering some personal need. For Donne continues at once, “Here in our case, there was none of this fire, none of this practise, none of this battery of eloquence, none of this verball violence, onely a bare *Sequare me, Follow me,* and they *followed.* No eloquence enclined them, no terrors declined them” *(2:282–83).* But the dismissal of rhetoric is only a convenience of this particular case, and one may suspect a degree of embarrassment on Donne’s part as he consciously diminishes the force and import of what he has just said, reducing it to a kind of dubious eloquence, and he provides a minor farewell flourish of his own eloquence.

The ways of rhetoric are often in Donne’s thought, and seriously so. “How empty a thing is Rhetorique? (and yet Rhetorique will make absent and remote things present to your understanding)” *(4:87).* “It is
not the depth, nor the wit, nor the eloquence of the Preacher that pierces us, but his neareness; that he 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” (3:142). Arguments can be answered, but the forms, images, and opinions of epigrams, satires, libels, and scornful jests “passe more uncontroild, and prevaile further, and live longer, then Arguments doe” (8:65). The rhetoric that can discompose can also search out what the heart desires, or can offer to the world for admiration those displays that present under disguise the author’s own secret life; or, as at the end of the quotation below, the arts of speech can accomplish more general transformations:

For the most part, the heart affords a returne, and an inclination to those things that are willingly received at the ear; The Echo returnes the last syllables; The heart concludes with his conclusions, whom we have been willing to hearken unto. We make Satyrs; and we looke that the world should call that wit; when God knowes, that that is in a great part, self-guiltinesse, and we do but reprehend those things, which we our selves have done, we cry out upon the illnesse of the times, and we make the times ill.” (7:408)

The Holy Ghost is the supreme rhetorician and accommodates the language he inspires to the human faculties of understanding and will, but not always to both equally. In moving the affections he is direct, with the “neareness” of a felt presence: “The Holy Ghost . . . is a direct worker upon the soule and conscience of man, but a Metaphoricall, and Figurative expresser of himselfe, to the reason, and understanding of man” (9:328). As Donne notes elsewhere, not wishing to suggest that comments on the ways of the Holy Ghost are to be thought of as rules or as lessons in how to anticipate his expression: “The Holy Ghost pursues his owne way.” Yet in the case that prompts this remark he goes on to say that the Holy Ghost does here “as hee does often in other places, he speaks in such formes, and such phrases, as may most worke upon them to whom he speaks” (2:304). The direct way that touches the soul is easily recognizable and requires little or no interpretation. But the figurative expressions tax the minds of the best exegetes. The accepted standard of Donne and his co-religionists was to establish “the literall, that is, the principall intention of the Holy Ghost,” but that standard could not always be met or the results attain the agreement of others. There were ways to manage the problem, such as by the discreet charity and toleration toward other opinions Donne himself liked to practice when he could.
Another way, which has its counterpart in more personal unargued practice not obliged to attempt the persuasion of others, as we shall see in a moment, is this:

In the figurative exposition of those places of Scripture, which require that way oft to be figuratively expounded, that Expositor is not to be blamed, who not destroying the literal sense, proposes such a figurative sense, as may exalt our devotion, and advance our edification. (6:63)

Donne then proceeds, as one may among friendly listeners, to induce a figurative exchange, mild and smooth by social usage. He will decide, as if by an analogy discovered and affirmed by reason, to accept the invitation “of the day, which we celebrate now,” by proposing to add something of his own to the “three expositions authorized by persons of good note in the Church.” It is, he says with winning modesty and candor, “a fourth sense, or rather, use of the words; not indeed as an exposition of the words, but as a convenient exaltation of our devotion.” In another sermon preached four years earlier, he had prepared the way for “a convenient exaltation” by referring to the fact that there are plenty of “direct proofes” in Scripture and “undeniable arguments” in the possession of the church. Following Luther, Donne acknowledges, “We must not proceed alike with friends and with enemies.” The issue is a possible reference to, or adumbration of, the Trinity, which Donne thinks “is a lovely and a religious thing, to finde out” and meditate on. There is no good proof, however, and the literal sense plainly means something else, as Luther avers. But there are other considerations too. Though Augustine is right to say that “a figure, an Allegory proves nothing; yet sayes he, *addit lucem, & ornat*, It makes that which is true in it selfe, more evident and more acceptable.” Besides, as Luther said, there are passages in Scripture where no proof is needed for us to exercise meditation and devotion, as we may use a wooden sword for purposes of exercise. Therefore, “to exercise our owne devotions, we are content with similitudinary, and comparative reasons” (3:143–44).

This brief selection from Donne’s thought and practice in the pulpit is made for “similitudinary and comparative” purposes, not as an argument but to illustrate and explain some of the conditions and circumstances that influenced thinking and speaking with images and “along with” images. We have also had occasion to observe in passing some of the potentialities when separation and divergence develop between the thought and the image. When noted by a strict Renaissance critic, such self-indulgent straying from “the purpose whereto they
were applied” was to be condemned. Another attitude was required while facing up to the problems experienced in trying to interpret the figurative expressions of the Holy Ghost.

I point to some problems in human expression easier to solve once than to make the solution thereof continuous: where and how by its laws thought should conduct itself and the attending image; where the image may tend, by its nature and its attachments scrutinizable like a text, but also partly hidden, perhaps wayward, perhaps inspired and discovering or illuminating the true, making it beautiful, releasing its power to convince. I have touched on other problems that share some resemblances. In Aquinas the grosser images of sense are easily remembered, but to be remembered the subtle and complex matters of higher thought need an image, preferably one felt with affection. The nature of the relationship between body and soul could be fixed in a definitive judgment, but the claims of each in any particular case could make the scales of justice quiver; so too the claims of life and death and their relations to this world and the next. The Holy Ghost, with or without an image, acts directly on the affections and will, but by figurative expressions indirectly on the reason. Because of the nature of the Good it is possible to chart by the principles of reason the desire of the will which leads to its source in the first cause. But Calvin “discomposed” and convinced many that the mind is more easily endowed with thought than the heart furnished with that assurance which is a major effect of faith. Devotional thought had its own reasons, and some would think these both nearer and more effective than the outmoded reasoning of the Scholastics and pagan philosophers. “Houses that stand in two Shires, trouble the execution of Justice.”