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Self-Consuming Artifacts

The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature

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The Aesthetic of the Good Physician

INTRODUCTION

This book has four theses, which are at once discrete and interdependent. The first is historical and is concerned with the opposition of two kinds of literary presentation. In the following pages these kinds will be variously distinguished, but for the purposes of this introduction we can label one "rhetorical"—in the sense defined and attacked by Plato in the Gorgias—and the other "dialectical." A presentation is rhetorical if it satisfies the needs of its readers. The word "satisfies" is meant literally here; for it is characteristic of a rhetorical form to mirror and present for approval the opinions its readers already hold. It follows then that the experience of such a form will be flattering, for it tells the reader that what he has always thought about the world is true and that the ways of his thinking are sufficient. This is not to say that in the course of a rhetorical experience one is never told anything unpleasant, but that whatever one is told can be placed and contained within the categories and assumptions of received systems of knowledge.

A dialectical presentation, on the other hand, is disturbing, for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by. It is didactic in a special sense; it does not preach the truth, but asks that its readers discover the truth for themselves, and this discovery is often made at the expense not only of a reader’s opinions and values, but of his
self-esteem. If the experience of a rhetorical form is flattering, the experience of a dialectical form is humiliating.

Obviously the risk, on the part of the dialectician, of so proceeding, is considerable. A reader who is asked to judge himself may very well decline, but should he accept the challenge, the reward that awaits him—a better self than the self he is asked to judge—will be more than commensurate with his efforts. For the end of a dialectical experience is (or should be) nothing less than a conversion, not only a changing, but an exchanging of minds. It is necessarily a painful process (like sloughing off a second skin) in the course of which both parties forfeit a great deal; on the one side the applause of a pleased audience, and on the other, the satisfaction of listening to the public affirmation of our values and prejudices. The relationship is finally less one of speaker to hearer, or author to reader than of physician to patient, and it is as the "good physician" that the dialectician is traditionally known.

The metaphor of the good physician is one of the most powerful in western literature and philosophy. In the Christian tradition it belongs preeminently to God, who, as Augustine tells us, "setting out to cure men, applied Himself to cure them, being at once the Physician and the Medicine. . . . He applied humility as a cure . . . and cleanses . . . with certain medicinal adversities." ¹ These cleansing powers are also given by God to his minister, who, in the words of Milton, "beginning at the prime causes and roots of the disease sends in . . . divine ingredients of most cleansing power . . . to purge the mind . . . a rough and vehement cleansing medicin . . . a kind of saving by undoing." ² And in Plato's dialogues, these are the powers (and intentions) of the philosopher king, who, rather than catering to the pleasure of his charges, will "combat" them, "prescribing for them like a physician, or even deity" intentions are always don't want to hear in themselves clearly, they may.

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³ Gorgias, 511a. The term Library of Liberal Arts (In,

⁴ George Herbert, "The
The good physician, then, may be philosopher, minister, teacher, or even deity, but whatever his status, his strategy and intentions are always the same: he tells his patients what they don't want to hear in the hope that by forcing them to see themselves clearly, they may be moved to change the selves they see.

What exactly is the nature of this change? The question leads directly to my second thesis and to another opposition, an opposition between two ways of looking at the world. The first is the natural way of discursive, or rational, understanding; its characteristic motion is one of distinguishing, and the world it delivers is one of separable and discrete entities where everything is in its proper place. The second way is antidiscursive and antirational; rather than distinguishing, it resolves, and in the world it delivers the lines of demarcation between places and things fade in the light of an all-embracing unity. In a dialectical experience, one moves, or is moved, from the first to the second way, which has various names, the way of the good, the way of the inner light, the way of faith; but whatever the designation, the moment of its full emergence is marked by the transformation of the visible and segmented world into an emblem of its creator's indwelling presence ("Thy word is all, if we could spell"), and at that moment the motion of the rational consciousness is stilled, for it has become indistinguishable from the object of its inquiry.

It follows then (and this is my third thesis) that a dialectical presentation succeeds at its own expense; for by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer, it becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment. Hence, the title of this study, *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, which is intended in two senses: the reader's self (or at least his inferior self) is consumed as he responds to the medicinal purging of the dialectician's art, and that art, like other medicines, is consumed in the workings of its own best effects. The good-physician aesthetic, then, is finally an anti-aesthetic, for it disallows to its productions the claims usually made for verbal art—that they reflect, or contain or express Truth—and transfers the

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4 George Herbert, "The Flower," r.21.
pressure and attention from the work to its effects, from what is happening on the page to what is happening in the reader. A self-consuming artifact signifies most successfully when it fails, when it points away from itself to something its forms cannot capture. If this is not anti-art, it is surely anti-art-for-art's-sake because it is concerned less with the making of better poems than with the making of better persons.

My fourth thesis is personal, and will not be argued explicitly in these pages. It is the extension of the aesthetic of the good physician into a general principle of literary criticism: the proper object of analysis is not the work, but the reader. This is, of course, the "affective fallacy" as it has been invented and defined by Wimsatt and Beardsley: "The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does) . . . It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome . . . is that the poem itself as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear (The Verbal Icon, Kentucky, 1954, p. 21)." I would reply that this is precisely what happens when we read—the work as an object tends to disappear—and that any method of analysis which ignores the affective reality of the reading experience cuts itself off from the source of literary power and meaning. I do not ask my own readers to commit themselves to this position or even to consider it, if they find the issues it raises uninteresting or distracting. The burden of the argument in the following chapters is carried by the historical thesis, which finds its validation in the words of the authors themselves, in Bunyan's promise that "This book will make a traveller of thee," in Herbert's declared desire to "Ryme thee to good and turn delight into a sacrifice," in Milton's repeated entreaties to an understanding he is in the process of rectifying, and in Burton's plain declaration "Thou thyself art the subject of my discourse." All of these enroll themselves in the tradition of the good physician, which begins, as everything begins, with Plato.

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At a crucial point in Socrates' expounding, cries out ... For if you're seriously human life have to be right . . . it seems, i (49, 48r)." Socrates of an injury is more to to do wrong is to do vi correction are the great tender; and conversely do everything in our p justice . . . but if he ing the penalty (48, 4f) of common sense, "but and in this (implied) et to their common lights a truth they seem not philosophy of mind. The rational, and its corner of value and modes of Plato describes it in the declination from a high gazed upon reality itself soul that has "through earth spends its time enjoyed; but the very fall in the first place co result is a divided beir of two opposing appeti Every human soul of Reality, otherwi

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6 The first of these numb 3), the second to the tradition
At a crucial point in the *Gorgias*, Callicles, in response to what he thinks to be the manifest absurdities of the doctrine Socrates is expounding, cries out: “Socrates, are we to take you seriously? . . . For if you're serious and what you say is really true, won't human life have to be turned completely upside down? Everything we do, it seems, is the exact opposite of what we ought to do (49, 481).” ⁶ Socrates has been arguing that since the perpetrator of an injury is more to be pitied than the party he injures (because to do wrong is to do violence to one’s own soul), punishment and correction are the greatest goods an individual or the state can tender; and conversely, if we wish to injure an enemy, “we must do everything in our power . . . to prevent his being brought to justice . . . but if he is, we must devise how he may escape paying the penalty (48, 481).” Callicles’ objection is the obvious one of common sense, “but no one thinks of these matters as you do,” and in this (implied) opposition between what men do according to their common lights and what men ought to do in the light of a truth they seem not to perceive lies nearly the whole of Plato’s philosophy of mind. That philosophy is both antisensible and antirational, and its cornerstone is a profound distrust of the systems of value and modes of perception indigenous to human life. As Plato describes it in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere, human life is a declination from a higher state in which the individual soul once gazed upon reality itself, “without shape or color, intangible.” A soul that has “through some mischance” fallen from this state to earth spends its time here trying to recover the vision it once enjoyed; but the very impulse or “mischance” that occasioned its fall in the first place continues to block the desired return and the result is a divided being in the simultaneous and warring control of two opposing appetites:

Every human soul by reason of its nature has had a view of Reality, otherwise it could not have entered this human

⁶ The first of these numbers refers to the page in Helmbold's edition (see note 3), the second to the traditional paragraph numbering.
form of ours. But to derive a clear memory of those real truths from these earthly perceptions is not easy for every soul—not for such as have only a brief view in their former existence, or for such as suffered the misfortune, when they fell into this world, to form evil connections . . . forgetting the holy vision they once had. Few indeed remain who can still remember much (249-250).

While the natural motion of the soul is (like that of Milton’s fallen angels) ascent, the motion of the form it has assumed is downward toward the realm of “earthly perceptions,” of sensibles, and the pressure exerted by these sensibles is a pressure in favor of forgetting and against remembering. Remembering is painful and difficult because it requires the reorientation of the soul toward a reality that is simultaneously its natural object and yet, because of the incarnation it has suffered, wholly alien. Consequently, the soul which has some measure of success in freeing itself from the fetters of sense will be moving in a direction diametrically opposed to that of its fellows, who are likely to respond with derision and abuse: “He separates himself from the busy interests of men and approaches the divine. He is rebuked by the vulgar as insane, for they cannot know that he is possessed by divinity (32, 249).” The “vulgar” on the other hand are possessed by common sense, by the visible and insistent reality that presses in on them from all sides, and from that perspective the actions of the heavenly aspirant are at best incomprehensible and at worst evidence of derangement. If this is a Platonic doctrine it is also obviously Christian. The relevant scriptural verses are I Cor. 3:17, 19: “If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise.” “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” What is perhaps the most affecting literary embodiment of the tension between an egocentric and a theocentric vision was written by someone who in all probability had never read Plato at all: “So I saw in my Dream, that the Man began to run; Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return: but the Man put his fingers in his Ears, so he looked not behind him.”

Whether this action is a rejection of the busy interests of men, or other more abstractly and implications remain to be put as partial and of the senses and by a point where the truth view. In this process, but the values which values the point where the senses of those objects are progressively widening, he look down at this picture. Chaucer’s Troilus, last time he would have done Socrates’ line of reason. life have to be turned and, if the wandering and contemplation. Plato’s name for the values human life has the prodding of the in the notions it has always in some cases rejecting the orderly disposition transformation of the transformation of the seeing things in the picture (turning things upside down) a higher reality whose dated as earthly course of a dialectical some degree haphazard advances and backsliding which the minds involve.

7 The translation is by W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz in their edition for The Liberal Arts Press (New York, 1956), p. 33. Subsequent references will cite first the page in this edition and then the traditional paragraph numbering.

his fingers in his Ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life: so he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain."

Whether this action is described as separating oneself from the busy interests of men, or fleeing the things of this world, or some other more abstractly philosophical formulation, its constituents and implications remain the same: the individual soul is asked to reject as partial and distorting the version of reality yielded by the senses and by a merely rational wisdom and raise itself to the point where the truly and wholly real once again comes into view. In this process, not only are the objects of sense put aside, but the values which were in large part responsible for the appeal of those objects are replaced by the values accompanying a progressively widening vision. In the end, the triumphant soul can look down at this pinprick of a world and, in the manner of Chaucer's Troilus, laugh at all of those things for which at one time he would have died. In these terms, Callicles' objection to Socrates' line of reasoning—"if you're serious . . . won't human life have to be turned upside down"—is the highest of compliments, and, incidentally, a capsule statement of what is necessary if the wandering and dispossessed soul is to come home.

Plato's name for this education of the soul, this inversion of the values human life urges on us, this remembering, is dialectic, the prodding of the individual mind to the rigorous examination of the notions it has always rested in, with a view toward refining and in some cases rejecting them. The end of dialectic is not so much the orderly disposition of things in the phenomenal world, as the transformation of the soul-mind into an instrument capable of seeing things in the phenomenal world for what they really are (turning things upside down), imperfect and inferior reflections of a higher reality whose claim on our thoughts and desires is validated as earthly claims are discredited. It follows that the course of a dialectical investigation will be unpredictable and to some degree haphazard, since the turns of the argument, its advances and backslidings, will vary according to the degree to which the minds involved are in bondage to the realm of sensibles.

Self-Consuming Artifacts

The success a teacher-dialectician has, if he has one, will be measured not in the number of propositions he has proved, but in the number of illuminations he has provoked, in the horizons he has widened; and the locus of a dialectical experience is not the spoken or written word but the mind in which the word is working. There the action takes place and there the triumphs or failures are recorded. In fact, the value of a word or a proposition in a dialogue is determined less by its truth-content than by its effectiveness in stimulating further inquiry and thereby contributing to the progressive illumination of the aspiring mind. This is what Socrates means when he talks in the *Phaedrus* of words as “seeds,” “Words which bring their possessor to the highest degree of happiness possible (71).” And it is to the *Phaedrus* that we now turn, not only for an authoritative account of dialectic but for what is perhaps the supreme example of the dialectical mode in operation.

The point of the *Phaedrus* is usually taken to be the distinguishing of good rhetoric and writing from bad, and the basis for this reading is the text itself:

*Socrates.* Then this will be quite obvious to anyone: there is nothing in itself disgraceful about writing speeches.

*Phaedrus.* Why should there be?

*Socrates.* But the disgrace comes in when the speaking and the writing is not good, when it is, in fact, disgracefully bad.

*Phaedrus.* That is perfectly obvious.

*Socrates.* What then is the way to distinguish good writing from bad (44, 258)?

In the discussion that follows, the Sophist position—that a good rhetorician need only know the opinions men hold on a subject rather than the truth about it—is refuted and Socrates goes on to argue that a truly scientific rhetoric requires an exact knowledge of “the truth about any given point” and of the various kinds of audiences on whom that truth may at some future time be urged: “Since it is in fact the function of speech to influence souls, a man who is going to be a speaker must know how many types of souls there are . . . men of a special sort under the influences of speeches of a particular kind. . . .

Unfortunately, any opposition of good to evil is not formally delivered. To many articles, usually explaining it away. I do not rather to suggest that something is solved than something seems to me to be the result of these self-enclosed assumptions of the universe which can be clearly seen in the speech of Lysias and the criticism of the speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every discursive speech is criticized for lack of a middle discourse: “every 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speeches of a particular kind are readily persuaded to take action of a definite sort because of the qualitative correlation that obtains between speech and soul (63, 271)." Only when these two abilities—to specify and distinguish things and to specify and recognize souls—are joined will the art of speech be perfected; "Unless a man reckons up the various natures of his future audience and gains the capacity to divide existent things according to their classes and to compass them by a single kind in each case in which they are severally one, he will never attain such science in speech as it is possible for a man to achieve (66, 274)." Soon after this summary statement Socrates asks, "Then shall we take it for granted that the subject of science and the lack of it in speech has been adequately treated?" and Phaedrus replies "Surely (67, 273)"; the note of finality is unmistakable and satisfying.

Unfortunately, any view of the Phaedrus based on the simple opposition of good to bad speech-writing runs immediately afoul of the condemnation in the last few pages of anything written or formally delivered. This embarrassment has been the cause of many articles, usually entitled "The Unity of the Phaedrus," in which the offending section is somehow accounted for, usually by explaining it away. I do not wish to take issue with any of these, but rather to suggest that the inconsistency is less a problem to be solved than something to be noticed, and as something noticed it seems to me to be the key to the way the dialogue works. Rather than a single sustained argument, the Phaedrus is a series of discrete conversations or seminars, each with its own carefully posed question, ensuing discussion, and firmly drawn conclusion; but so arranged that to enter into the spirit and assumptions of any one of these self-enclosed units is implicitly to reject the spirit and assumptions of the unit immediately preceding. This is a pattern which can be clearly illustrated by the relationship between the speech of Lysias and the first speech delivered by Socrates. Lysias' speech is criticized for not conforming to the definition of a good discourse: "every discourse, like a living creature, should be so put together that it has its own body and lacks neither head nor feet, middle nor extremities, all composed in such a way that they suit both each other and the whole (53, 264)." Socrates, in fact, is careful to rule out any other standard of judgment: it is the
“arrangement” rather than the “invention” or “relevance” that concerns him as a critic. Subsequently, Socrates’ own effort on the same theme is criticized for its impiety, an impiety, moreover, that is compounded by its effectiveness as a “piece of rhetoric.” (So well ordered is it, that although Socrates breaks off in mid-flight, Phaedrus is able to supply the missing half.) In other words, Lysias’ speech is bad because it is not well put together and Socrates’ speech is bad because it is well put together.

Although neither Socrates nor Phaedrus acknowledges the contradiction, the reader, who has fallen in, perhaps involuntarily, with the standards of judgment established by the philosopher himself, is certainly confronted with it, and asked implicitly to do something with it. What he does, or should do, is realize that in the condemnation of Socrates’ speech a new standard (of impiety) has been introduced, one that invalidates the very basis on which the discussion, and his reading experience, had hitherto been proceeding. At that moment, this early section of the dialogue will have achieved its true purpose, which is, paradoxically, to bring the reader to the point where he is no longer interested in the issues it treats, because he has come to see that the real issues exist at a higher level of generality. Thus, in a way peculiar to dialectical form and experience, this space of prose and argument will have been the vehicle of its own abandonment.

Nor is that by any means the end of the matter. This pattern, in which the reader is first encouraged to entertain assumptions he probably already holds and then is later forced to reexamine and discredit those same assumptions, is repeated again and again. In the course of exploring the subject of good and bad writing, Socrates asks, “If a speech is to be well and fairly spoken, must not the . . . speaker know the truth about the matters he intends to discuss?” and Phaedrus objects that he has heard something quite different, that an orator “may neglect what is really good and beautiful and concentrate on what will seem so; for it is from what seems to be true that persuasion comes, not from the real truth (46, 260).” Socrates immediately rejects this position and

9 Helmbold & Rabinowitz, p. 22 (241): “But I thought you were only in the middle of it. I thought you were going on to say as much about the non-lover and how he ought to be preferred, enumerating all his good points.”
we naturally anticipate an argument asserting the interdependence of rhetoric and truth, much in the manner later made familiar by Aristotle and Cicero. In fact, that is exactly what Socrates promises, to "convince the fair Phaedrus that if he doesn't give enough attention to philosophy, he will never become a competent speaker on any subject (47, 261)." In one sense we are not disappointed; but in another sense we get more than we bargained for. Socrates begins as might have been expected, by explaining that the art of speaking requires one to be "able to produce every possible sort of resemblance between comparable objects as well as . . . expose the attempts of others to produce resemblances through obfuscation (49, 261)." This seems not only scientific, but moral. But then suddenly, before either Phaedrus or the reader is aware of it, the argument takes a funny little turn and knowledge of the truth is declared necessary because ignorance would impair the orator's ability to deceive:

*Socrates.* When a man sets out to deceive someone else without being taken in himself, he must accurately grasp the similarity and dissimilarity of the facts . . .

Will it then be possible for an expert rhetorician regularly to lead his auditors step by step through a maze of similarities from the truth to its opposite or will he be able himself to avoid such pitfalls if he does not know the truth about each point he makes?

*Phaedrus.* Never!

*Socrates.* So, my friend, any man who does not know the truth, but has only gone about chasing after opinions, will produce an art of speech which will not only seem ridiculous, but no art at all (50, 262).

It is important to note that the conclusion to this amazing sequence ("So, my friend") is delivered as if nothing at all had changed since the question (whether the orator must know the truth) was first posed. The attentive reader, however, can hardly accept Socrates' QED with the equanimity Phaedrus evidences, for the content of the key terms has been blurred in the interim. While art and truth have been joined in one context—the ruthlessly practical context of manipulative rhetoric—a wedge has been
driven between them in another—the moral context assumed at the beginning of the discussion. The reader now begins to inhabit two opposing worlds of discourse, although the two are represented by the same linguistic components. There is (1) the truth about things and (2) the truth that is, or should be, the goal of all investigative inquiry and efforts at persuasion. And corresponding to these are two concepts of persuasion, one in which the auditor is brought along step-by-step to an apparently rational conclusion, which may well be the opposite of truth, and another in which the auditor is brought up to a vision, to a point where his understanding is so enlarged that he can see the truth immediately, without the aid of any mediating process or even of an orator. This distinction is not made in the text; it is rather a distinction between what is happening in the surface narrative, in the self-enclosed world of Socrates and Phaedrus, and what is happening in the mind of the reader. It is he, not Phaedrus, who notes the contradictions and non sequiturs and is moved by them to reach new levels of insight (or at least he is given the opportunity to do so). That is, for the reader, the unfolding dialogue provides a series of stimuli to intellectual growth that is in some sense progressive: to the earlier insight that a well-made speech is not necessarily a true speech (in the moral sense), the reader must now add the further (and extending) insight that “well madness” is likely to be a weapon in the arsenal of Truth’s enemies. So that what was at first a standard of judgment (good writing) to which Socrates, Phaedrus and the reader repaired, is now seen to be positively deleterious to the higher standard now only gradually emerging from the give-and-take of the dialogue.

The important word in my last sentence is “seen,” for it suggests that what is being processed by the Phaedrus is not an argument or a proposition, but a vision. As an argument, in fact, the dialogue makes no sense, since Socrates is continually reaching conclusions which he subsequently, and without comment, abandons. But as an attempt to refine its reader’s vision it makes a great deal of sense; for then the contradictions, the moments of blurring become invitations to examine closely premises too easily acquiesced in. The reader who accepts this invitation will find, on retracing his steps, that statements and phrases which had seemed

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10 This description will come from the argument by Michael Oakeshott, *The Political Philosophy of Burke*.
unexceptionable are now suspect and dubious (the concept of a "competent speaker," for example, on rereading, is less unambiguously positive than it was when Socrates introduced it as the basis of the discussion), and that lines of reasoning which had seemed proper and to the point are now disastrously narrow. Of course the phrases, statements, premises, and conclusions haven't changed (as Socrates remarks later, "written words . . . go on telling you the same thing over and over"), the reader has, and with each change he is able to dispense with whatever section of the dialogue he has been reading, because he has passed beyond the level of perception it represents.

To read the Phaedrus, then, is to use it up; for the value of any point in it is that it gets you (not any sustained argument) to the next point, which is not so much a point (in logical-demonstrative terms) as a level of insight. It is thus a self-consuming artifact, a mimetic enactment in the reader's experience of the Platonic ladder in which each rung, as it is negotiated, is kicked away. The final rung, the level of insight that stands (or, more properly, on which the reader stands) because it is the last, is, of course, the rejection of written artifacts, a rejection that, far from contradicting what has preceded, corresponds exactly to what the reader, in his repeated abandoning of successive stages in the argument, has been doing.

If an interpretation in which the work disappears seems strange, I invite my readers to substitute this more conventionally literary account, although the end result is the same: in the Phaedrus, there are two plots; Socrates and Phaedrus are busily building up a picture of the ideal orator while the reader is extracting, from the same words and phrases, a radical criticism of the ideal. The two merge in the final assertion—"no work . . . has ever been written or recited that is worthy of serious attention (73, 278)—which is problematical only if it is considered apart from the experience of the reader. That is, the reader who some time ago joined with Socrates and Phaedrus in an attempt to distinguish good from bad writing is not the same reader who hears

10 This description will hold, as we shall see, for Milton's The Reason of Church Government, many of Herbert's poems, Bacon's Essays, Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, and Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy.
Socrates reject writing in favor of the "serious pursuit of the dialectician (71, 276)"; he has changed (largely as a result of having been pursued by a dialectician) and one measure of his change is the fact these last pages are neither surprising nor disconcerting; rather, they are confirming, for they state explicitly an intuition that has been growing in the reader's mind, at the same rate as that mind itself has been growing.

In short, the Phaedrus is what it urges: "a discourse which is inscribed with genuine knowledge in the soul of the learner (70, 276)." Although a piece of writing itself, it escapes the criticism leveled at written artifacts because it does not exhibit the characteristics of those artifacts. Specifically, its words do not "go on telling you the same thing over and over (69, 275)," for as a result of passing through them, the reader is altered to such an extent that if he were to go back they would mean quite differently. The value of such words lies not in their truth content or in their answerability to a speaker's state of mind (literally speaking, Socrates is often lying), but in their effect; they are neither statements about the world nor expressions of a point of view (one cannot infer Plato's beliefs from any assertion made in the body of the dialogue, if only because so few of them stand), but strategies directed at an audience; and as strategies, they have reference to a vision developing within the reader-respondent rather than to objects in the empirical field of vision. As objects themselves they do not survive the moment of speech; once they have been uttered or read and worked their effect on the reader-respondent's mind, they die, except for the life they continue to live in that effect; and that life has nothing to do with their relationship to things and concepts in the phenomenal world and everything to do with the interior motion they induce in concert with other similarly strategical words. In terms of the functions we usually assign to language—communication of facts, opinions, desires, and emotions—they are not words at all, but seeds, "for they can transmit their seed to other natures and cause the growth of fresh words in them, providing an eternal existence for their seed; [they] bring their possessor to the highest degree of happiness possible to attain (71, 277)."

The highest degree of happiness possible to attain is, of course,
a knowledge of Reality; and if the *Phaedrus* is a model of the kind of discourse that can help the soul to this happy state, the object of its criticism is the kind of discourse that does exactly the opposite. The name Socrates gives to this inferior and dangerous mode is rhetoric and its properties, or more properly, crimes, are continually exposed in the course of the dialogue. It makes lies and impieties attractive, as Lysias and Socrates do when they blaspheme against divine love. It enables an "expert rhetorician to lead his auditors step by step through a maze of similarities from the truth to its opposite (50, 262)," initiating a movement directly contrary to the upward movement initiated by dialectic. Rather than facilitating the process of memory by which the soul ascends to its former height of vision, rhetoric and things written induce forgetfulness and complacency:

This invention [writing] will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it. They will not need to exercise their memories . . . calling things to mind no longer from within themselves by their own unaided powers, but under the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves (68, 274).

No work . . . has ever been written or recited that is worthy of serious attention—and this applies to the recitations of rhapsodes also, delivered for the sake of mere persuasion, which give no opportunity for questioning or exposition—the truth is that the best of these works merely serves to remind us of what we know already (73, 277-278).

This last charge is the most damaging; for by reminding us of what we know already, artifacts constructed with a rhetorical, or persuasive, intent stabilize our knowledge at its present inadequate level. Rhetoric tends, as Robert Cushman notes, to canonize the status quo; for "to persuade is to render plausible and to render plausible is frequently to render something one believes and desires apparently conformable to what one's hearers also believe and applaud." 11 The rhetorician panders to his audience's imme-

mediate desires and thereby lessens the probability that it will come to see the desirability of something better. In short, he acts toward his audience much as the bad lover of Socrates' first speech acts toward his beloved, and with somewhat the same motives:

The lover will not willingly endure to have his beloved stronger or an equal but will continually strive to make him weaker or inferior. . . . He . . . does great harm by trying to keep his favorite from many other advantageous associations which would tend to make a man of him, and especially from the one that would most increase his wisdom. . . . This is divine philosophy from which the lover must necessarily and strictly bar his beloved, for he fears that he would then be despised (18, 239).

The lover would be despised because divine philosophy would have the effect of refining the beloved’s perceptions so that what once seemed attractive and valuable would now seem base and worthless. This picture of the bad lover, who jealously guards his prerogatives and in his selfishness does irreparable harm to the soul of his beloved, is later counterpointed in every detail by the account, in Socrates' second speech, of the actions and motives of true lovers:

Each selects his love according to character; and as though the youth were the very God whom he once followed, the lover fashions and adorns him like an image to be the object of his worship and his veneration. So the followers of Zeus desire that the soul of their beloved should follow that God; they look for one who loves wisdom. . . . When they come upon such a person the memory of the God they followed is aroused; enraptured, they pattern their way and manner of life upon his—in so far as a man can partake of a God’s ways. And they consider the beloved cause of all this and love him still more: the drafts of inspiration which they draw from Zeus they pour like Bacchants into the boy’s soul, making him so far as they can exactly like their God. . . . They exhibit no jealousy or pettiness toward the loved one; rather, every act is aimed at bringing the beloved to be as: that is, like the God the lover...

Such a pair become lovers of each other because singly and in pairs the relationship is not sense and madness confer any greater advantage. At this point human disciples of divine philosophy must necessarily bar their beloved as the lovers do; “the dialectician resembles the God he imitates in that he looks for one who loves wisdom . . . . When he comes upon such a person the memory of the God he imitates is aroused; enraptured, he pattern his way and manner of life upon his—in so far as a man can partake of a God’s ways. And he considers the beloved cause of all this and love him still more: the drafts of inspiration which they draw from Zeus they pour like Bacchants into the boy’s soul, making him so far as he can exactly like their God. . . . They exhibit no jealousy or pettiness toward the loved one; rather, every act is aimed at bringing him . . . .”

It is in this implied equation of the bad lover, on the one hand, with the true lover on the other, that the following two tables:

**Bad Lover-Rhetorician**

For slightly different reasons they impede progress of imitating Christ by loving one's fellow human beings, not by being like the God the lover . . . . It is not difficult to see of imitating Christ by loving one's fellow human beings, not by being like the God the lover . . . .
the beloved to be as much as possible like themselves, that is, like the God they honour (36–37, 252–253). 12

Such a pair become lovers of wisdom and therefore lovers of each other because singly and together they are growing into images and repositories of the wisdom they love. The true basis of their relationship is not sense but soul, and their final victory is an escape from sense and a meeting with the source of all goodness: “At the end of life they will have full-grown wings and cast off the burdens of the flesh. . . . Nor can human discipline or divine madness confer any greater blessing on man than this (41, 256).” At this point human discipline has no more specific name than “philosophic way of life”; later, however, it will be more precisely identified as dialectic, whose practitioners, not surprisingly, follow the same procedures and reap the same reward as do the good lovers: “the dialectician . . . finds a congenial soul [one that resembles the God he followed] and then proceeds with true knowledge to plant and sow in it words which are able to help themselves and help him who planted them; words which . . . bring their possessor to the highest degree of happiness possible for a human being to attain (71, 276).”

It is in this implied equation of the dialectician and the good lover, on the one hand, and the rhetorician-writer and the bad lover on the other, that the unity of the Phaedrus—so much sought for by modern commentators—is to be found. The correspondences are exact, although they are at no point spelled out by the text (the spelling is the reader’s job, one more exercise in the course of education the dialogue offers him); and for the sake of convenience and for future reference they can be represented by the following two tables:

**TABLE I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Bad Lover-Rhetorician</strong></th>
<th><strong>Good Lover-Dialectician</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For slightly different reasons they impede progress toward the perception of the good; one</td>
<td>They lead the lover-respondent toward the good by making him dissatisfied with the opinions his</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 It is not difficult to see how in Christian terms this becomes the doctrine of imitating Christ by loving our neighbors for His sake.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bad Lover-Rhetorician</th>
<th>Good Lover-Dialectician</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>because he doesn't want the beloved to become cognizant of higher pleasures than those he has to offer him; the other because he wishes only to gain applause or impose his will, and thus urges on an audience the opinions it is already known to hold.</td>
<td>mind is stocked with and thus inducing a motion upward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both are committed to the status quo and leave untouched the soul of the lover-respondent.</td>
<td>Both are committed to the purification of the soul, to the raising of the eye of the mind to the point where it is congruent with Reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both are flatterers who provide a pleasant and comfortable experience, an ego-satisfying experience.</td>
<td>Both are physicians whose ministrations are often painful because they force their charges to face unpleasant truths about themselves and counsel abandonment of the values they have always lived with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both present their pitches in a form that corresponds to the sense of order built into the consciousness to which they address themselves.</td>
<td>Both follow no set form, but act in response to what they consider to be the best interests of their charges, and that means breaking out of the perceptual set they were born with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both encourage and speak to that part of the mind which is in bondage to the sensible world.</td>
<td>Both strive to free the mind from its enslavement to the material and visible so that it can fly to that of which the material and visible is but an imperfect reflection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Both speak to a man's basest instincts. | Both speak to a man's best self and to instincts of which he may not even have been aware, i.e. may have forgotten.
### TABLE II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rhetoric and Writing</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dialectic</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse controlled by the predetermined goal of the rhetorician which is likely to be suited to the known inclinations of the audience.</td>
<td>Discourse controlled by the unknown but real goal (the Good, Reality) toward which dialectician and respondent make uneven, nonpatterned progress, according to the state of the soul.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuades by taking the mind from point to point, according to the laws of logic or aesthetics (beginning-middle-end) which are actually reflections of the perceptual machinery in the mind itself. Assenting to a well-made speech or a well-made syllogism is assenting to oneself.</td>
<td>Persuades by changing the mind into an instrument congruent with the reality it would perceive; this involves breaking out of built-in frames of reference and evidentiary processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claims to contain or corral truth, or to process it; and thus discourages active and self-critical participation in the search for truth.</td>
<td>Claims to initiate a movement of the soul (which is the vehicle, not it) toward an experience of truth; makes no claims for itself as truth expressive, either at any stage or as a whole; it is strategical not expressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge as the organization of items outside the mind of the respondent.</td>
<td>Knowledge as the transformation of the mind into the object of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success independent of the moral probity of either party.</td>
<td>Success depends on the moral probity of both; the perception (possession) of knowledge and the attainment of moral purity are one. Knowing the good and being the good are one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfies present expectations and so confirms the mind in its ignorance and corruption. Canonizes community values.</td>
<td>Disappoints present expectations and even challenges them, and thus induces dissatisfaction with the mind’s state of knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetoric and Writing</th>
<th>Dialectic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dulls, encourages pride and</td>
<td>Awakens, encourages humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complacency.</td>
<td>and aspiration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secures assent to a form,</td>
<td>Secures assent to an experience;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when the form is taken away,</td>
<td>thus the assent is inner and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so is the force of the assent.</td>
<td>does not depend on any form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>external to the mind (soul).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These tables offer two perspectives on the same opposition, one from the vantage point of the speaker or writer, the other from that of the forms he employs. In both, the emphasis falls finally on the very different effects produced by the two kinds of forms, effects which are contrasted explicitly in the methodological alternatives Socrates poses for himself in the closing pages of the Gorgias: “To which treatment of the city do you urge me? ... Is it to combat the Athenians until they become as virtuous as possible, prescribing for them like a physician; or is it to be their servant and cater to their pleasure (99, 521)?” One is tempted to pause here to consider the implications of Socrates’ phrasing, the suggestion that in order truly to serve the people, one must first somehow pain them; the use of the physician metaphor, which becomes a commonplace in Christian homiletics. But for the present I would call attention to the assumption underlying this passage, to what Cushman in Therapeia labels “the central theme of Platonism regarding knowledge . . . that TRUTH IS NOT BROUGHT TO MAN, BUT MAN TO THE TRUTH (213).” In other words, to educate is to change, and in a sense, to convert; the end of education is not so much the orderly disposition of things, but the illumination and regeneration of minds; the end of education, to borrow from a seventeenth-century Platonist, is “to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the neerest by possessing our souls of true virtue which . . . makes up the highest perfection.” It can be truly

said that every would-be educator, speaker, statesman, poet, preacher, faces the choice Socrates articulates in the *Gorgias*, a choice of motives—whether to strive selfishly for a local and immediate satisfaction or to risk hostility and misunderstanding by pursuing always the best interests of his auditors (readers, citizens, parishioners); a choice of modes, whether to use language and discursive modes of thought in order to construct internally coherent artifacts whose strength lies in their conformability to the limitations of the human mind, or to use language and discursive modes of thought in order to push his auditors beyond their confining horizons (the ambiguity is intentional); and, above all, a choice of results, whether to immure the mind even more firmly in its earthly prison or to free it by raising it to the point where it becomes congruent with the Reality it would perceive. The seventeenth-century authors who are treated in this study, with the possible exception of one, consistently choose the second of these pairs of alternatives and produce works that exhibit many of the self-consuming characteristics of Platonic dialectic; but before examining those works, I would like first to look closely at one of the documents by which the philosophical and aesthetic concerns of the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias* were transmitted to the Christian world.

**AUGUSTINE: WORDS AS SIGNS**

To the modern literary sensibility, the least acceptable tenet in Augustine's teachings on the interpretation of the Bible is likely to be his theory of figurative reading. What are we to do, he asks in the *On Christian Doctrine*, when the literal sense of a scriptural verse "seems to commend either vice or crime or to condemn either utility or beneficence (93)?" The answer he gives is at once dazzlingly simple and, from the point of view of our normal assumptions about the world and our perceptions of it, wholly subversive:

Whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative (88).
Therefore in the consideration of figurative expressions a rule such as this will serve, that what is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced (93).

A hostile reader might rephrase these two statements in the following way: “Whenever you find something that doesn’t say what it is supposed to say, decide that it doesn’t mean what it says; and then make it say what it’s supposed to say.” In other words, this rule would seem to urge us to disregard context, to bypass the conventional meanings of words, and, in general, to violate the integrity of language and discursive forms of thought. To such an accusation, Augustine would no doubt reply, “That is exactly the point,” for his assumption is that if a word or a sentence does not seem to contribute to the reign of charity, the fault lies in the eye that so misinterprets it; and therefore what he enjoins is a way of reading that exercises eyes prone to misinterpretation (as ours, darkly clouded, surely are) until they are sufficiently “corrected” to see what is really there. “What is really there” will always be another instance of the only lesson the Bible ever teaches: love of God and love of one’s neighbor for the sake of God. Anything else is an illusion, created by the distorted glass of a limiting and darkened perspective.

Clearly this exercise, insofar as it serves to push the mind’s eye beyond the confining limits of literalism, is analogous to dialectic. The difference is that the dialectician in this case is God, who has not only informed Scripture with his true meaning, but so arranged matters that the discovery of that meaning becomes a program of self-improvement:

The obscurity itself of the divine and wholesome writings was a part of a kind of eloquence through which our understandings should be benefited not only by the discovery of what lies hidden, but also by exercise (123).

Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men (88, my emphasis).
Earlier in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine outlines the course of this shaping: first, "the student . . . will discover that he has been enmeshed in the love of this world, or of temporal things (39)." This discovery arouses fear and leads him "to lament his own situation" (exactly the sequence found in the opening pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*). As a result "he will extract himself from all mortal joy in transitory things and as he turns aside from this joy, he will turn toward the love of eternal things." When he begins to see these eternal things "glowing in the distance," he finds that "because of his weakness he cannot sustain the sight of that light" and he "purges his mind, which is rising up and protesting in the appetite for inferior things, of its contaminations (39)." Finally, he "cleanses that eye through which God may be seen by those who die to the world as much as they are able (40)" so that he "neither prefers his neighbor to the Truth nor compares him with it"; and thereafter "this holy one will be of such simple and clean heart that he will not turn away from the Truth either in a desire to please men or for the sake of avoiding any kind of adversities to himself which arise in this life (40)." What Augustine describes, of course, is a total reorientation (conversion) of being, which involves an inversion of earthly values and a rejection of conventional ways of knowing, a turning of the world, as our natural faculties receive it, upside down.

It is important to note that while this passage looks forward to Augustine's theory of hermeneutics, what it urges is not only a way of reading the Bible, but a way of reading the World, which, no less than the Bible, is God's book. If the "cleansed eye" interprets the words and events of the sacred writings according to the reign of charity, that same eye will perform an identical action on the words and events of life; for, "to the healthy and pure internal eye He is everywhere (13)." And if the obscurities and difficulties of Scripture were intended medicinally to "benefit our understandings," the obscurities and difficulties of our everyday existence are to be used to the same end. In fact everything is to be used to that

end and the danger of doing otherwise is the subject of Augustine's first book:

Some things are to be enjoyed, others to be used, . . . Those things which are to be enjoyed make us blessed. Those things which are to be used help, and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed. If we . . . enjoy those things which should be used, our course will be impeded and sometimes deflected, so that we are retarded in obtaining those things which are to be enjoyed, or even prevented altogether, shackled by an inferior love (9).

To enjoy the things of the world is to have a rhetorical encounter with them; to use them is to have a dialectical encounter. The temptation, then, is to confuse means with ends, and the journey metaphor, somewhat submerged here, is made explicit in the next paragraph: “Suppose we were wanderers . . . miserable in our wandering and desiring to end it and to return to our native country. We would need vehicles . . . which could be used to help us to reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed. But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed (9–10).” The allegory is, of course, commonplace and transparent: our native country is the “better country” of Hebrews XI where we shall enjoy the everlasting bliss of those who move and sing before the Lamb; the vehicle is this temporal life and its “amenities,” all those things usually referred to as the “pleasures of this world.” Thus, Augustine continues, “in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country . . . we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the ‘invisible things’ of God ‘being understood by the things that are made’ may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual (10).” Translated into a rule for living, this means that as we proceed through our allotted three-
score-and-ten, everything we encounter is to be interpreted (and valued) not with reference to the appearance it makes in any earthly configuration, but with reference to its function in the larger design of God’s providential dispensation; and every commitment into which we enter is to be regarded either as temporary or as a shadow of our greater and overriding commitment to Him. In short, we are to live in time, but for (the sake of) eternity, seeking always to discern and respond to God’s meaning rather than to the meaning that leaps immediately to our carnal eyes:  

We should not causelessly and vainly consider the beauty of the sky, the order of the stars, the radiance of the light, the alternations of day and night, the monthly course of the moon, the fourfold organization of the year, the fourfold harmony of the elements, the minute force of seeds . . . . In considering these things, no empty and transient curiosity is to be exercised, but a step is to be made toward those things which are immortal and which remain always.  

Living in these terms is a continual exercise in translation, a seeing through the literal contexts of things (objects, events, persons) to the significance they acquire in the light of a larger perspective, and thus a means of enlarging our understanding. And the dangers life holds out, the many opportunities to cling to its “perverse sweetness” and thus forget the sweetness which would make us blessed, is exactly the danger Augustine warns against when he comes to discuss the writing and hearing of sermons:  

And we should beware lest what should be said escape us while we are thinking of the artistry of the discourse (120).  

He who speaks eloquently is heard with pleasure; he who speaks wisely is heard with profit . . . . Just as things which are both bitter and healthy are frequently to be taken, so also a pernicious sweetness is always to be avoided (122–123).  

15 This, as we shall see, is the obligation that generates the dynamics of The Pilgrim’s Progress.  
The artistry of the discourse and the artistry of the beautifully ordered natural world are regarded with an exactly equivalent ambivalence. Whether you are listening to a sermon or simply living your life, the point is to keep your eye on the object; and the object, in either context, is not the vehicle within which you are moving, but the end to which the vehicle may bring you. The forms of this mortal life and the forms of a sermon, both proceeding in time and space, are to be used much as the forms of Platonic dialogue are used, that is, used up; and to do otherwise, to value them for their own sake rather than for the promise they shadow, is to court the death of the soul:

Nor can anything more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the . . . understanding is subject to the flesh in the pursuit of the letter. He who follows the letter takes figurative expressions as though they were literal and does not refer the thing signified to anything else. For example if he hears of the Sabbath, he thinks only of one day out of the seven that are repeated in a continuous cycle; and if he hears of Sacrifice, his thoughts do not go beyond the customary victims of the flocks and fruits of the earth. There is a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit of taking signs for things, so that one is not able to raise the eye of the mind above things that are corporal and created to drink in eternal light (84).

But we are taught to love and worship one God, who made all those things whose images they venerate either as Gods or as signs and images of Gods. If it is a carnal slavery to adhere to a usefully instituted sign instead of the thing it was designed to signify, how much is it a worse slavery to embrace signs instituted for spiritually useless things instead of the things themselves? Even if you transfer your affections from these signs to what they signify, you still, nevertheless, do not lack a servile and carnal burden and veil (86).

It becomes difficult in these passages to tell whether one is being counseled against a misinterpretation of words or of things, and in fact the usual distinction between the two tends to disap-
pear in *On Christian Doctrine* into the larger category of signs. The first paragraph in which the nature of signs is discussed is itself a tour de force of distinctions that are finally without a difference: Augustine begins by apparently denying "real objects" the status of signs: "All doctrine concerns either things or signs. . . . Strictly speaking, I have here called a 'thing' that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on (8)." But his "strict speaking" (proprie) doesn't last long and immediately he begins to qualify his two categories into one "but not that wood concerning which we read that Moses cast it into bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled, nor that stone which Jacob placed at his head, nor that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. For these are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things." Of course these things of which other things are signs are themselves signs: Moses' "wood" is a sign of the Cross which is a sign of the crucifixion, which as an action is a sign (and a seal) of Christ's love for man; and the ram offered by Abraham as a sacrifice is a sign of Christ's sacrifice of Himself, for the love of man; and the stone Jacob places at his head is a sign of the firmness of Christ (that pure rock) on whose love we may all rest. Not only are these things signs of other signs which are also signs, but the chain of signifying all points in the same direction.

As the paragraph continues, a new distinction between verbal signs and thing signs is introduced. "There are other signs whose whole use is in signifying, like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something (8)." But words that are signs are also things, "for that which is not a thing is nothing at all," and therefore "every sign [every word] is also a thing (9)." Augustine forestalls the complete collapse of his categories by stipulating that "not every thing is a sign (9)"; that is, some things do not signify beyond themselves; but it becomes clear as he proceeds that one should be interested in such self-referring things only because a knowledge of them as objects will help us when they are used as signs:

An ignorance of things makes figurative expressions obscure when we are ignorant of the nature of animals or stones or plants. . . . Thus the well known fact that a ser-
Self-Consuming Artifacts

pent exposes its whole body in order to protect its head from those attacking it illustrates the sense of the Lord’s admonition that we be wise like serpents. That is, for the sake of our head, which is Christ, we should offer our bodies to persecutors lest the Christian faith be in a manner killed in us, and in an effort to save our bodies, we deny God (50–51).

It is instructive to follow the line of interpretation in this example: One begins presumably with a real-life situation or problem, the persecution with which professing Christians are threatened, and looks for direction to the Scriptures. There a verse is found which counsels, somewhat obscurely, a kind of wisdom, the wisdom of the serpent. The known characteristics of actual serpents are then recalled, but only so that they can be allegorized into a reading of the verse that instructs us how properly to read the situation. A proper reading of the situation is, of course, one that issues in a response consonant with the truths of Christian faith. Such a reading, while it appears to be the result of the sequence of interpretation, is actually the cause of it. One does not derive from the text and the situation (and the physical properties of serpents) a general truth; rather one scrutinizes the text and the situation until a relationship between them and a general truth that is assumed is discerned, until “an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced.” Thus persecution is finally seen providing an opportunity to signify our love of Christ above all else, including our bodies, and the fact of persecution becomes a sign just as the “well known fact that a serpent exposes its whole body in order to protect its head” becomes useful (true) knowledge when it becomes a sign. “Becomes” is perhaps the wrong word. It has always been a sign; what has been transformed is not it, but the eye looking at it.

In the course of On Christian Doctrine, the number of areas in which figurative reading of this kind is to be the rule grows and grows until the list of things that are signs is finally all-inclusive. “Every good and true Christian,” Augustine declares, “should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord’s (54).” If anything in the arts (music, painting, literature) is found useful
for purposes of instruction, that usefulness is to be attributed to Him, and not to any merely human artificer. And while history may be the narration of "the human institutions of the past," "history itself is not to be classed as a human institution"; rather its "creator and administrator is God (64)" whose sometimes hidden purposes give it meaning and direction. History is God's sign. Even logic is God's sign: "the truth of valid inference was not instituted by men . . . [but] by God (68)," not invented "but discovered (69)." In fact everything is instituted by God—the "order of events in time," the "location of places," the "natures of animals, plants, or minerals," the rise and fall of nations, the rise and fall of a sparrow—and man's task is always one of discovery, the discovery of His (instituted) meaning amidst the distracting camouflage of local contexts. In short, "to the pure and healthy internal eye He is everywhere (13)," which means that for the pure and healthy internal eye, to see correctly is to be forever producing interpretations contributing to the reign of charity.

The implications of this way of looking at the world are enormous. If all things are signs of God's loving presence and if the usefulness of all things inheres in their signifying function, the distinctions we are accustomed to make, between persons, times, places, nations, callings, etc., must be abandoned, along with the systems of value that support them. "We say amiss/This or that is;/Thy word is all, if we could spell," writes George Herbert,17 testifying to the survival into the seventeenth century of this radically unified vision along with its attribution of all perceived differences to the carnal eyes of "uneducated" readers. In another poem Herbert extends his "levelling" insight to the hierarchy of human actions: "Nothing can be so mean/Which . . . for thy sake/Will not grow bright and clean." 18 The value of our various callings is not to be determined by the service they render to society, but by the service they would render to God; and in these terms all callings are equally meritorious or base, depending on whether or not they are entered into "for thy sake."

Obviously such a view makes nonsense of the system of rewards and honors by which we live and, less obviously, it also makes nonsense of the traditional rationale for the deployment of the classical “three styles.” In the fourth book of On Christian Doctrine, Augustine recalls Cicero’s authoritative formulation of the relationship between style and subject matter—“he therefore will be eloquent who can speak of small things in the subdued manner, of moderate things in a temperate manner, and of grand things in a grand manner (1-13)” —and he goes on to explain why this correlation does not obtain for Christian rhetors:

Among our orators, however, everything we say, especially when we speak to the people from the pulpit, must be referred, not to the temporal welfare of man, but to his eternal welfare and to the avoidance of eternal punishment, so that everything we say is of great importance . . . for as the Lord says, “He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in that which is greater.” Therefore what is least is least, but to be faithful in what is least is great (143-144).

By the end of this paragraph “least” (minimum) and “great” (magnum) have reference to a standard of judgment that is no longer operative (in the Latin the alliteration and assonance accelerate the confusing and merging of the two words), either in terms of the real world or the rhetorical world of a sermon; and the novice who has gone to Augustine’s book for instruction is left with the three styles but with no directions for employing them. This is hardly what one would expect from a manual for would-be preachers, although it is true that Augustine warns us in his preliminary remarks not to expect “the rules of rhetoric which I learned and taught in the secular schools (118).” But this (negative) statement of intention only complicates the confusion, for if the rules of rhetoric do not apply to Christian teaching, why is so much of this fourth book devoted to discussing them? The answer lies not so much in the presence of the rules in the tract, as in what happens to them and to the entire world view from which they issue; and the answer lies, too, in a method of instruction very much like the method Plato employs in the Phaedrus.
We may begin where Augustine does, with one of the classical conundrums of rhetorical theory. Is eloquence learned from the rules, or from the example of eloquent men? Augustine first poses the question and then answers it almost immediately: “Those with acute and eager minds more readily learn eloquence by reading and hearing the eloquent than by following the rules of eloquence . . . if capacity of this kind to learn eloquence is lacking, the rules of rhetoric will not be understood (119).” Augustine then declares that the speeches of truly eloquent men are the basis of the rules, not their product: “they were eloquent whether they had learned the rules or never come in contact with them. They fulfilled them because they were eloquent; they did not apply them that they might be eloquent (120).” The rules, he concludes, are merely an ex post facto codification of what true eloquence naturally effects.

This is perfectly straightforward and not at all surprising, especially to someone familiar with Cicero’s writings on the subject. What is surprising, however, is the first sentence of the next section: “But since some do these things dully, unevenly, and coldly, while others do them acutely, ornately, and vehemently, he should approach this work about which we are speaking who can dispute or speak wisely even though he can not do so eloquently (121).” If rhetoric is the art of persuasion, then the criterion for judging the products of that art has suddenly changed, as eloquence, up to this point the assumed standard of judgment, is now declared superfluous, indeed even dangerous: “But he who is foolish and abounds in eloquence is the more to be avoided the more he delights his auditor with those things to which it is useless to listen so that he thinks because he hears a thing said eloquently, it is true (121).” The new standard is wisdom (one recalls the progression in the Phaedrus) but its ascendancy lasts only a few moments until Augustine literally defines it out of existence: “A man speaks more or less wisely to the extent that he has become more or less proficient in the Holy Scriptures (122).” “For one who wishes to speak wisely, therefore, even though he cannot speak eloquently, it is above all necessary to remember the words of Scripture (122).” Wisdom thus defined is not wisdom as we usually understand it because it is something external
to the individual, who merely attaches himself to the wisdom of someone else. In the next paragraph, both wisdom and eloquence reappear in a sentence that would seem to resolve the question as originally posed—"he who wishes to speak not only wisely but also eloquently . . . should more eagerly engage in reading or hearing the works of the eloquent and in imitating them . . . than in setting himself to learn . . . the art of rhetoric"—but the usefulness of this conclusion to Christian rhetors is somewhat impaired by the change its terms have undergone since the discussion began. Eloquence and wisdom have been taken away from the orator-preacher and given to Holy Scripture which consequently constitutes the whole of the category "works of the eloquent." Implicit in all of this, of course, is the true conclusion to which the reader is being directed: Eloquence, wisdom, and, finally, persuasion belong solely to God and, in the end, eloquence is redefined as the act of praying for its effects (142).

Two interdependent actions have been set in motion by this sequence: (1) the reader's understanding of certain concepts has been refined to the point where the concepts more or less disappear; (2) as a direct result of (1) the book begins to work against the stated intention of its author, to "say a few things concerning teaching" (118). That is, each chapter or section of what purports to be an art of preaching succeeds only in further narrowing the area in which that art and its would-be practitioners are allowed to operate. It is not a distortion to call this method dialectical; for, as in the *Phaedrus* and other works that carry this designation, the reader is first invited to consider a problem in terms with which he is likely to be familiar (and therefore comfortable) and then forced by some unexpected turn in the argument to reconsider not the problem, but the terms. As the book unfolds, the same question is always being asked—how does one become a good preacher? (how does one tell good writing from bad?)—but to the reader whose experience has led him to redefine "good" and "preacher" and perhaps to reject "become," that question means differently every time.

In fact, after a while it becomes meaningless, because the abilities that would go to make a good preacher turn out to be either beside the point or illusory. Eloquence is, as we have seen,
the first prerequisite to go by the boards, and later in the book it is dismissed peremptorily ("The speaker should not consider . . . eloquence") and replaced with a new criterion, the effectiveness of teaching: "I am not here treating the method of pleasing; I speak of the method of teaching those who wish to learn (135)."

But what of those who do not wish to learn or who wish to learn pleasurably? Here Augustine seems to make the concession first yielded by Aristotle (and subsequently by every apologist for rhetoric) to the "defects of our hearers," and thus to reintroduce the possibility of an art of preaching:

Therefore a certain eloquent man said, and said truly, that he who is eloquent should speak in such a way that he teaches, delights, and moves. Then he added, "To teach is a necessity, to please is a sweetness, to persuade is a victory." Of the three, that which is given first place, that is, the necessity of teaching, resides in the things we have to say, the other two in the manner in which we say it (136).

In the paragraph that follows, Augustine expands on these Ciceronian distinctions and begins to translate them into rules for effective preaching. The speaker must not only say what he wished to say, but if he desires to retain the attention of his listener, he must delight by speaking "sweetly"; and if he wishes his listener to act on what has been said, to doctrine and delight must be added exhortation, so that "he loves what you promise, fears what you threaten, hates what you condemn . . . and is moved by whatever else may be done through grand eloquence (136-137)."

But no sooner has this superstructure of a rhetorical art been reerected than it is immediately dismantled, piece by piece, simply by collapsing its parts into one another: "But . . . instruction should come before persuasion. And perhaps when the necessary things are learned, they may be so moved by a knowledge of them that it is not necessary to move them further by greater powers of eloquence (137)." This moves quickly from a statement of priorities (instruction before persuasion) to the suggestion that the first action, if successfully undertaken, makes the second unnecessary, and it proves to be only a short step from the qualifying "perhaps" to a firmly conclusive "therefore": "And therefore persua-
sion is not a necessity because it need not always be applied if
the listener consents through teaching and even through delight
also (137).” Of the three constituents of eloquence—to teach, to
delight, and to move—only two remain, to teach and to delight.
But this new refinement of the original definition is itself short­
lived as Augustine immediately declares “But delight is not a
necessity either,” for “when the truth is demonstrated in speaking,
an action which pertains to the function of teaching, eloquence is
neither brought into play nor is any attention paid to whether the
matter of the discourse is pleasing, yet the matter itself is pleasing
simply because it is true (137).” With this last phrase, “simply
because it is true,” the cat is let out of the bag. The teaching of
the truth need not be accompanied by pleasing words or forceful
exhortations, because the truth itself, if it is understood, both del­
lights and moves. Cicero’s anatomization of eloquence is therefore
redundant, and in place of the instruction he had been led to
expect, the novice preacher is left with little more than a sense of
his own superfluousness. Not only have eloquence and the verbal
arts usually associated with eloquence been declared unnecessary,
but teaching, which has replaced eloquence as the sine qua non of
Christian rhetorical art, has been defined in such a way as to make
the preacher unnecessary, except as a passive transmitter of truths
whose force is independent of anything he might do. And the force
of truth, of course, is to be identified finally with God, who is
Truth, and therefore the sole agent of persuasion. At this point
this conclusion is only implied (rather strongly), but it is not long
before it surfaces along with all its implications:

And who shall bring it about that we say what should be
said through us and in the manner in which it should be
said except Him, in “whose hand are both we, and our
words”? . . . “Take no thought how or what to speak:
for it shall be given you in that hour what to speak. For it
is not you that speak, but the spirit of your Father that
spaketh in you (140).”

One would think that after this assertion, with all its author­
ity, nothing more could be said on the subject, since the subject—
the art of preaching—has been shown not to exist; but Augustine
continues to consider the

continues to consider the rules of rhetoric, although, not surprisingly, as he explains them, he explains them away. From the three ends of persuasion—to move, to please, and to teach—he proceeds to the three styles traditionally associated with those ends—the grand, moderate, and subdued, or high, middle, and plain. In classical theory, the deployment of these styles is determined either by subject matter—is it grandly important, moderately important, or relatively unimportant?—or by the occasion—are we speaking in the senate, delivering an after-dinner speech, or instructing our servants in their duties? In the context of Christian rhetoric, however, these considerations do not obtain; for the single subject matter of Christian rhetors, salvation, admits to no distinction of degree and therefore to no differentiation of occasion:

When we are speaking of the eloquence of those men whom we wish to be teachers of things which will liberate us from eternal evil or lead us to eternal good, wherever these things are discussed, either before the people or in private, either with one or with several, either with friends or with enemies, either in extended speech or in conversation, either in treatises or in books, either in long letters or in short, they are great things (145, emphasis mine).

With both the imitative and the occasional rationales for the three styles undermined, there would seem to be no reason to retain them; but Augustine is strangely reluctant to give them up and he advises that they be varied according to the condition of one’s hearers: “when . . . speaking to those who ought to do [something] but do not wish to do it, then those great things should be spoken in the grand manner in a way appropriate to the persuasion of their minds (145).” The force of such advice, however, is likely to be blunted if the reader remembers what he has been told before and will be told again, that the “persuasion of their minds,” if it occurs, is to be attributed not to him, but to God. And even the reader who has forgotten will find this section of the treatise less than helpful, simply because it becomes increasingly difficult to tell one style from another. The grand style differs from the moderate “in that it is forceful with emotions of the
spirit (150),” but “even in the grand style the beginning of the discourse should always be, or almost always be, moderate (159).” Again, the grand style is used for persuading, the moderate for delighting (160), but “when praises and vituperations are eloquently spoken, although they belong to the moderate style, they so affect some that they are not only delighted . . . but also desire to live in a praiseworthy way (161),” that is, they are also persuaded. The only positive rules that emerge from these pages are firmly negative: “no one should think that it is contrary to mix these three manners (158)”; one should not employ the subdued style for “understanding,” the moderate style for “willingness,” and the grand style for “obedience,” rather the orator should attend always “to all three ends even when he is using a single style (162),” for “who does not know that, if he is not heard with understanding, neither is he heard willingly or obediently (163)?” The climax of what is certainly to be regarded as a “rhetorical” tour de force is a long sentence describing the subdued style in the course of which the subdued style disappears:

Plurumque autem dictio ipsa submissa, dum soluit difficillimas quaestiones et inopinatae manifestatione demonstrat; dum sententias acutissimas de nescio quibus quasi cauernis, unde non sperabatur, eruit et ostendit; dum adversarii conuincit errorem et docet falsum esse quod ab illo dici uidebatur invicium; maxime quando adest ei quoddam decus non appetitum sed quodammodo naturale, et nonnulla, non iactanticula, sed quasi necessaria, atque, ut ita dicam, ipsis rebus extorta numerositas clausularum, tantas acclamationes excitat, ut uix intellegatur esse submissa (De Doctrina Christiana Liber Quartus, ed. and trans. Sister Therese Sullivan, Washington, D.C., 1930, pp. 176, 178).

Frequently the subdued style, when it solves difficult questions and demonstrates in unexpected ways, when it brings to light and sets forth most acute principles from I know not what caverns, as it were, in an unexpected way, when it shows an adversary’s error and reveals that what he seemed to say uncontrovertibly is false, and especially if a certain
beauty is added to it, not deliberately sought but in some way natural, and a few rhythmic closings are used, not ostentatiously but, as I say, as if necessary, arising from the things discussed themselves, then it excites such acclamations that it is hardly recognized as being subdued (Robertson, p. 163).

Submissa frames the body of this long sentence but its appearance at the end is something of a surprise, since it is we who have lost sight of it, scarcely know it, hardly recognize it.

It is true, of course, that an insistence on flexibility, and an unwillingness to narrowly circumscribe the use of the three styles is characteristic of the best of the classical theorists, and especially of Demetrius; and, were this an isolated feature of Augustine's treatment, the interpretation I put on it would be unwarranted. But as one instance of a pervasive pattern, this discussion falls into place as a further limiting of the orator-preacher's effectiveness. It is finally not too much to say that the implications of this fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine* are wholly negative. The only positive action is the relentless expansion of the category of those things that are irrelevant (and the corresponding narrowing of the area in which the preacher is allowed to operate):

- Eloquence is irrelevant, because it is an adjunct of wisdom.
- Wisdom is irrelevant, insofar as the speaker has any responsibility for it, since to be wise he need only remember the words of Scripture.
- Persuasion and all the arts of persuasion, including the three styles, are irrelevant, since the truth alone persuades and its persuasiveness is independent of the speaker's skills and even of his intentions.19

19 On this point see *On Christian Doctrine*, pp. 164–165: "But since the good faithful do not obey any man, but obediently hear that Lord who said 'All things therefore whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and do: but according to their works do ye not; for they say, and do not,' thus they may hear usefully those who do not dare to teach their own doctrines, at least not from the high place of ecclesiastical authority which sound doctrine has constituted. On this account Our Lord, before He spoke of those I have mentioned, said by way of introduction, '[They] have sitten on the chair of Moses.' Thus that chair, not their own but
Considerations of time, place, and audience are irrelevant, for the same reasons.

All that remains, it would seem, is to declare the speaker himself irrelevant, and this is precisely the import of Augustine’s final piece of advice:

Whether one is just now making ready to speak before the people or before any other group or is composing something to be spoken later before the people or to be read by those who wish to do so . . . he should pray that God may place a good speech in his mouth (168, emphasis mine).

This remarkable statement stands to everything that precedes it exactly as Socrates’ rejection of labored artifacts stands to the earlier sections of the Phaedrus. Both works conclude by discrediting the very arts in whose use they had promised instruction, and both leave their nominal addressees—the writer of speeches and the writer of sermons—strangely silent, stripped of everything usually assumed to be theirs, and wholly dependent on the one genuinely effecting force in the universe.

The fact that the fourth book of On Christian Doctrine is, like the Phaedrus, a self-consuming artifact should not be surprising to anyone who has understood books I–III, for in the universe they describe, the assumptions that make possible an art of rhetoric are invalid. Traditional oratory assumes that some things are more important than others; consequently, the persuasion it effects always involves the making of distinctions (let us do A rather than B because A will bring about X which, as an objective, is preferable to Y). Distinctions, however, are what the Christian rhetorician finally denies, for he believes in a world everywhere informed and sustained by God’s presence (“to the pure and healthy internal eye He is everywhere”), a world that, because it is without parts, is without hierarchies, either of persons or actions. Techniques for dividing and distinguishing, including the

— that of Moses, forced those to speak well who did not also act well. They did what they would in their lives, but the chair of another did not permit them to teach their own doctrines. . . . And thus they benefit many by preaching what they do not practice. —

rules of rhetoric, are to be abandoned. It is not to persuade to a positive end that one (he works to turn people away from their own inclinations) and his success, not his failure, involves the rejection of traditional theory is attributed to the Holy Spirit. In the context of Christian doctrine, He persuades independently of audience, whether it be a man or a group, to what is inexplicit. The practical nonsense of the lessons of traditional rhetoric, the result of that result is the same. It is a question Augustine asks: “Who or what to speak: should the Holy Spirit they would say or how they would go first to the practice of physicians: Does the Apostle command that the apostles are made teachers but at the same time that to teach? Or is it to be teaching even these generosity of the Father that planteth is any that giveth the increase with the assistance of the disciples themselves take part which pertain to life to God, to the sick, to thine will, for the apostle says to that they do thy will, for they do thy will, for they do thy will, for
rules of rhetoric, are therefore antithetical to his purpose, which is not to persuade to a point, but to a vision in which all points are one (he works to turn the world, as we naturally know it, upside down); and his successes are marked neither by applause nor by votes, but by conversions. A further difference between the two rhetorics, because it is a difference between the world views they reflect, involves the responsibility for persuasion which in traditional theory is attributed to men and to the forms they employ. In the context of Christian assumptions, only God persuades, and He persuades independently of the vessel He chooses as a means, whether it be a man or a sermon (or, as in the case of Herbert, a poem). The practical result of this, as we have seen, is to make nonsense of the lessons rhetorical manuals usually teach; and the result of that result is the raising of a question: why write sermons at all?

It is a question Augustine himself raises in the form of an imagined objection to his citing from Matthew “Take no thought how or what to speak: for it shall be given you.” What are we to say, he asks, to those who argue “that if teachers are made learned by the Holy Spirit they do not need to be taught by men what they should say or how they should say it (141)?” For his answer, Augustine goes first to the Scriptures and then to an analogy in the practice of physicians:

Does the Apostle contradict himself when he says that men are made teachers by the operation of the Holy Spirit and at the same time tells them what and how they should teach? Or is it to be understood that the office of men in teaching even these teachers should not cease even with the generosity of the Holy Spirit assisting? For “neither he that planteth is anything, nor he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.” Whence it happens that even with the assistance of holy men, or even if holy angels themselves take part, no one rightly learns those things which pertain to life with God unless he is made by God docile to God, to whom it is said in the Psalm, “teach me to do thy will, for thou art my God.” Whence also the Apostle says to that same Timothy, speaking as a teacher
to his disciple, "But continue thou in those things which thou hast learned, and which have been committed to thee, knowing of whom thou hast learned them." Medicines for the body which are administered to men by men do not help them unless health is conferred by God, who can cure without them; yet they are nevertheless applied even though they are useless without His aid. And if they are applied courteously, they are considered to be among the works of mercy or kindness. In the same way, the benefits of teaching profit the mind when they are applied by men, when assistance is granted by God, who could have given the gospel to man even though it came not from men nor through a man (142).

In these terms, teachers and ministers (whether to the body or the soul) do their work under a double obligation. They must act as if the health of their charges depended solely on the proper application of human skills, while at the same time believing that the cures these skills effect have really been effected by God, who could have done very well without them. They are, then, to continue in their professions not because their labors are either efficacious or necessary, but because Scripture commands it; and indeed the value of what they do inheres in their willingness to do it under these humiliating conditions, sacrificing the satisfaction that attends a personal success for the greater satisfaction of being an instrument of the Lord, if He so chooses. Obviously such an obligation imposes a great many difficulties, not the least of which is the avoiding of the Scylla and Charybdis of pride and despair. On the one hand there is the danger of becoming so involved in the mechanics of an art that the claims of the Lord are implicitly denied; and on the other, the equal danger of affirming those claims to the extent of doing nothing at all. What is required is a mode of action that is simultaneously assertive and self-effacing, a difficult balance which Augustine achieves here by continually calling attention to the ultimate insufficiency of the very procedures he is discussing (and therefore to the insufficiency of his present effort). This is a self-protective device which also pro-
The Aesthetic of the Good Physician

The obvious question remains. What would a sermon faithful to the spirit of On Christian Doctrine be like? Augustine never tells us in so many words, but we may infer its characteristics from what he does tell us, as well as from his own practice.

1. It would be a sermon whose strategy was to open eyes rather than to validate propositions, persuading, if it did persuade, not to a point, but to a vision.

2. Since the vision it would persuade to is of a universe in which all things ("and words also are things") are signs of God and therefore are finally not (separate things), its language could not function conventionally. The simplest syntactical string—subject-object-verb—assumes distinctions a sacramental view of the world denies, and one cannot write a sentence without placing the objects to which its words refer in relationships of subordination and dependence. In the face of this, the writer of sermons must either remain silent (hardly a feasible alternative) or contrive somehow to frustrate these dividing and distinguishing tendencies of language, perhaps by writing sentences like this one of Augustine's:

Illec ergo venit ubi erat.
He came to a place where he was already (I, 12.12).

The first part of the sentence—"He came to a place"—establishes a world of fixed and discrete objects, and then the second half—"where he was already"—takes it away. (The effect is even swifter in Latin.) As a result, the words "He" and "place" lose their specificity, becoming finally as indistinguishable as their
referents, and the forward (linear) movement of the syntax is countered by the feeling a reader has at the end of the sentence that he has returned to its beginning. Augustine, in effect, has made language defeat itself by making it point away from the temporal-spatial vision it naturally reflects. Of language such as this one cannot ask the question, "what does it mean?" for in everyday terms it doesn't mean anything (as a statement it is self-consuming); in fact, in its refusal to "mean" in those terms lies its value. A more fruitful question would be "what does it do?"; and what it does is alert the reader to its inability (which is also his inability) to contain, deal with, capture, say anything about, its putative subject, Christ. The sentence is thus a ploy in the strategy of conversion, impressing upon the reader, or hearer, the insufficiency of one way of seeing in the hope that he will come to replace it with something better.

3. A sermon filled with such sentences will reproduce the same characteristics on a larger scale. There will be movement, from word to word, paragraph to paragraph, page to page, but it will be illusory. The reader-hearer will pass through doors only to find himself in the room he has just left. Sequence will not be the generator of meaning, but the marking off of discrete areas within which the audience will or will not make contact with the one true meaning, as its great author permits. ('Thy will be done.)

4. Such a sermon, then, will be continually pointing away from itself, calling attention to what it is not doing (and indeed could not do), proclaiming not only its own insufficiency, but the insufficiency of the frame of reference from which it issues, the human frame of reference its hearers inhabit.

5. And therefore, a sermon that is true to Augustine's *ars praedicandi* will in the end give itself over to God, just as it will give over to God the selves of its charges. It will thus be self-

20 For illuminating discussions of Augustine's attitude toward language see Mazzeo, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence," and Mardic L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 47-53. See especially p. 49. "Earthly ways of knowing are necessary, but they have a term. . . . In heaven the things which serve on earth as cognitive channels between God and man fall silent, for their work is done. All languages, whether literally or figuratively verbal, will cease, for the heavenly communion is beyond language."
The Aesthetic of the Good Physician 43

consuming in two directions, as an object, which is to be used rather than enjoyed, and as a strategy.

These five characteristics may be taken (at least provisionally) as a paradigm description of a self-consuming artifact.

DONNE: THE WORD AS ALL

Whatever the influence of Augustine's writing on the preaching of his own time, his influence on the preaching of the seventeenth century was enormous. And in that century his chief disciple was John Donne.21 Here is a sentence from Donne's last sermon, Death's Duel:

And therefore as the Mysteries of our Religion, are not the objects of our reason, but by faith we rest on God's decree and purpose, (It is so, O God, because it is thy will, it should be so) so Gods decrees are ever to be considered in the manifestation thereof.22

The opening of the sentence bears two interrelated promises: its point will be made discursively, and the making of the point will take the form of a demonstrative argument, thesis and proposition, followed by a conclusion. For a time these promises are kept, and because they are kept the reader is involved in the very activity the sentence is warning against. The mysteries of our religion are not the objects of our reason, we are told, and yet the simple act of taking in the words "And therefore" involves us unavoidably in reasoning about the mysteries of our religion. In the logic of the experience, as opposed to the logic of the syntax, the weakest word in the first three clauses is "not," for as we nego-


tiate the sentence, its message is less pressing (literally) than the machinery that is supposedly processing it; and although we read and understand the words, the thrust of our attention is forward, in the direction of the waiting "so" which will complete the sequence begun by "And therefore as."

But when that "so" is reached (twice, in a parenthesis), it does not complete, but disrupts the sequence, for it is the wrong "so." "It is so, O God, because it is thy will, it should be so." This is the "so" of divine fiat, of a causality more final than any that could be observed in nature or expressed in a natural language, and its appearance makes an a priori mockery of the fulfillment of the reader's expectations. Nevertheless, they are fulfilled. The second half of the demonstrative argument does arrive ("so God's decrees are"), but a second too late and without the force of its earlier promise. The true force of the sentence now resides in the clash of the two "so's," one of which usurps the right of concluding from the other, leaving the reader to complete a sequence that has been emptied of its powers. Usually, a parenthesis is a momentary detour in the progress of a larger syntactical unit, but this parenthesis subverts the progress (and the claims) of the larger unit in which it occurs. Although the sentence continues, ending with a verbal and parodic echo ("therefore . . . thereof") of its beginning, it is finally an exercise in futility, which declares its own insufficiency and the insufficient faith of those who believed, even for a time, in its promise.

Obviously this sentence fulfills all the conditions of my paradigm (it is spectacularly self-consuming), and the pattern of its unfolding is a model of the entire sermon. Doctor Donne's "Own Funeral Sermon" opens by offering its auditor a striking image and inviting him to use it as a mnemonic device:

Buildings stand by the benefit of their foundations that susteine and support them, and of their butteresses that comprehend and embrace them, and of their contignations that knit and unite them: The foundations suffer them not to sink, the butteresses suffer them not to swerve, and the contignation and knitting suffers them not to cleave. The body of our building is in the former part of this verse: It is this, hee that is our God is the God of salvation; ad
salutes, of salvations in the plurall, so it is in the originall; the God that gives us spirituall and temporall salvation too. But of this building, the foundation, the buttresses, the contignations are in this part of the verse, which constitutes our text, and in the three divers acceptations of the words amongst our expositors, Unto God the Lord belong the issues of death (230).

What is provided here is, literally, a building or floor plan whose rooms are to be filled and furnished as we listen. Nearly every device available to the preacher's art is employed to make certain that we have the plan firmly in mind as Donne proceeds. The alliterative patterns of the first sentence do double duty: they support the assertion of the sense by combining with antistrophe and isocolon to perform a knitting and uniting action of their own; and in doing so they strengthen the probability that the image and its components will be recalled at a later point. This work continues in the following sentences: the functions of the foundation, buttresses, and contignations are restated (albeit negatively); the relationship between the image, the day's text, and the unfolding of the sermon is made explicit; and a third set of memory hooks or places is provided in "the three divers acceptations of the words amongst our expositors" and the three pronoun phrases with which Donne distinguishes them, a morte, in morte, and per mortem: "And these three considerations, our deliverance a morte, in morte, per mortem, from death, in death, and by death, will abundantly doe all the offices of the foundations, of the buttresses, of the contignation of this our building (231)."

This is, of course, wholly conventional and there are any number of traditions that would account for Donne's practice:

1. The tradition of artificial or place memory recently explored by Frances Yates; this would seem especially likely since as Miss Yates observes, "the commonest . . . type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type," 23 or

2. the tradition of the artes praedicandi, with its many ways of opening or dividing a text, including the way of "textual precognition, an advance survey of text and content," 24 or

23 The Art of Memory (Chicago, 1966), p. 3.
24 Joan Webber, Contrary Music (Madison, 1963), p. 144.
3. the venerable tradition of legal rhetoric to which Bacon has recourse when he promises "I will give you at the first entrance a form or abstract of them all four, that, forthinking what you shall hear, the proof may strike upon your minds as prepared." 25

It is not necessary to tie Donne exclusively to any one of these, since in each of them (and they were all available to him) he could have found a rationale and a set of directions for the clarity of presentation he achieves here. The directions would have varied slightly, but the rationale would have been the same: to afford the reader-auditor the comfort and satisfaction of a manageable experience. one whose contours he will be able to predict, and by predicting, control. In other words, these opening sentences constitute a promissory note, and what they promise is that the shape of what follows will correspond exactly to the shape that has been introduced into the auditor's mind. (We shall later see how Herbert makes use of this same principle and promise in his shaped poems.)

The advantages of such a procedure are obvious. What is not so obvious, perhaps, is the subtle flattery it implies. By providing us with a foreplan of his sermon, Donne pays us the compliment of assuming that we will be able to make use of it. The compliment is simultaneously to our memories and to our understandings. Our memories are presumed to be up to the task of keeping things in their appointed places (a morte, in morte, per mortem) and since these places are interior places in the mind, our understandings are presumed to be answerable to the dimensions of the sermon's subject. The order of the sermon will be a reflection of the ordering capability of the receiving mind, and together they (mind and sermon) will proceed to process and contain the mysteries of divinity.

Unfortunately, however, things turn out differently. The memory of the reader-auditor is taxed beyond its capacity; the distinctions represented by the components of the architectural image and by the three prepositional phrases are blurred and cease to be helpful; and the categories by means of which the mysteries of divinity were to have been anatomized become themselves the subject of question and dispute. That we are here encouraged to dispelling experience in the place of question and debate is the satisfaction of nature. The explanation for this is another memory tradition that he declares in a sermon "Of salvation, is but the two twin sources in the memory of Augustine, the memory forms as the "places," or loci, or terms of persons, places, things, between the multiple philosophies and theologies of the Middle Ages. These forms are an illusion from a plurality of personal memories of what our science and memory tradition now assert to be the reality of divinity itself." The aspiring reader-auditor can, through memory forms, discern and use the presence . . . he must use" of memory, he himself," through the memory (32, 249)." The memory, as it turns us away from the spirit which Augustine this spirit is God of those enticing this

subject of question and debate. The result is precisely the opposite of what we are here encouraged to expect: an uncomfortable and unsettling experience in the course of which the understanding is denied the satisfaction of its own operations.

The explanation for this reversal of expectations is to be found in another memory tradition, one to which Donne explicitly refers when he declares in a sermon preached at "Lincoln's Inne," "The art of salvation, is but the art of memory." In this tradition, which has its twin sources in the dialogues of Plato and the writings of Augustine, the memory functions to obliterate the very distinctions the "places," or loci, help us to maintain. These are distinctions of persons, places, things, actions, etc., the distinctions, in short, between the multiple forms of the natural world. In the philosophy and theology of Plato and Augustine the discreteness of these forms is an illusion, the product, in one case, of too long a sojourn in the inferior realm of sense impressions, and in the other, of too exclusive a reliance on the evidence of things seen. The dispelling of this illusion is the business of the faculty of memory. Thus, in the Phaedrus we read that the process of "passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity" involves the "remembering of what our soul once saw . . . looking down upon what we now assert to be real, and gazing upwards at what is Reality itself." The aspiring philosopher "remains, always so far as he can, through memory, in the field of precisely those entities in whose presence . . . he is himself divine." And if a man makes "right use" of memory, he becomes "truly perfected," for he "separates himself," through memory, "from the busy interests of men (32, 249)." The function of memory, then, is admonitory; it turns us away from the variegated beauties of the visible world to the spirit which created and still informs them. For Augustine this spirit is God, who is to be remembered even in the midst of those enticing things that lead men to "become devotes

of their external products, while abandoning internally [forgetting] their own Maker (Confessions X, 53)." 27 "The eyes," laments Augustine, "love beautiful and diverse shapes, brilliant and pleasing colors (X, 51)." 28 These threaten to occupy the soul, but they can be crowded out if the internal eye will but fix on God's mercies: "I . . . do get my steps involved in these beautiful things, but Thou dost free me, O, Lord, Thou dost free me, 'for thy mercy is before my eyes' (X, 53)."

It is in this tradition, then, that Donne enrolls himself when he advises (following St. Bernard) that "wee . . . place all Religion in the memory":

The art of salvation, is but the art of memory. When God gave his people the Law, he proposes nothing to them, but by that way, to their memory; I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt; Remember but that. And when we express Gods mercy to us, we attribute but that faculty to God, that he remembers us; Lord, what is man, that thou art mindful of him? And when God works so upon us, as that He makes his wondrous works to be had in remembrance, it is as great a mercy, as the very doing of those wondrous works was before. It was a seal upon a seal, a seal of confirmation, it was a sacrament upon a sacrament, when in instituting the sacrament of his body and his blood, Christ presented it so, Doe this in remembrance of me. Memorare novissima, remember the last things, and fear will keep thee from sinning; Memorare praeterita, remember the first things, what God hath done for thee, and love, (love, which, mis-placed, hath transported thee upon many sins) love will keep thee from sinning. Plato plac'd all learning in the memory; wee may place all Religion in the memory too: All knowledge, that seems new today, says Plato, is but a remembring of that, which your soul knew before. All instruction, which we can give you today, is but the remembring you of the mercies of God, which

28 Ibid., p. 308.
29 The Sermons of John Donne, discussed in those places cited in note 28 (Donne's Prebend Sermons) are p.
30 Ibid., II, 337.
have been *new every morning* . . . let them but remember thoroughly, and then as it follows there, *They shall turn unto the Lord, and all the kindreds of the Nations shall worship him*. Therefore *David* makes *that* the key into this *Psalme; Psalmus ad Recordationem, a Psalm for Remembrance*. Being lock'd up in a close prison, of multiplied calamities, this turns the key, this opens the door, this restores him to liberty, if he can *remember* (*Sermons*, Vol. II, 73–74).

These are large claims (one could almost believe that Bunyan was reading this sermon as he wrote the Doubting-Castle episode of *The Pilgrim's Progress*), and it is obvious from this passage that memory, while it is only one of the faculties of the soul, is more than a third among equals. The will is perverse unless it be informed aright; and the understanding that ought to inform the will intrudes itself into the very areas from which, by fiat, it is excluded ("*Thy judgements are unsearchable and thy ways past finding out*") so that "*truly the Memory is oftner the Holy Ghost's Pulpit that he preaches in, than the Understanding*": 29 *"Let God make his wonderful works to be had in remembrance. . . . This is the faculty that God desires to work upon; and therefore if thine understanding cannot reconcile differences . . . if thy will cannot submit itself to the ordinances of thine own church, go to thine own memory."* 30 To the extent that this recourse to memory bypasses or obviates the operation of the understanding, it is the opposite of the memory which forms the basis of the classical mnemonic systems. Whereas, in one tradition things are fixed in their respective places, in the other, a growing awareness of God's immanence makes all places and things one. In one tradition the categories by means of which the visible world is divided and made manageable are validated, while in the other those categories are collapsed when they are discovered to contain the same essence. One tradition calls upon and exalts the powers of the rational understanding, while the other asks the
rational understanding to abdicate in favor of the revealed word. In brief, to remember God is to forget everything else, because, as Thomas Browne declares, “he onely is, all others . . . are something but by a distinction (Religio Medici, I. 35)”; it is that distinction, between God and everything else, which one tradition preserves and the other denies.

I would like to suggest that *Death’s Duell* is built in part on the tension between these venerable traditions. At first it appears that the apparatus of the rhetorical or artificial memory will be employed in the service of the Christian-Platonic memory and that we will be able to anatomize and contain the Word within the structures of rational thought; but as the sermon unfolds, the two kinds of memory work against each other: the memory of “what God hath done” occupies all the supposedly discrete categories established in the artificial memory and thereby undermines the distinctions those categories support.

This process begins almost at once, even as the components of the mnemonic image are supposedly being established. As Donne proceeds to “open” his text, the prose continues to move in the direction of clarity and order: “For first the foundation of this building . . . is laid in this; That unto this God the Lord belong the issues of death, that is, it is in his power to give us an issue and deliverance, even then when wee are brought to the jawes and teeth of death, and to the lippes of that whirlepoole, the grave (230).” This is perfectly straightforward, even conventional, (“the jawes and teeth of death,” “that whirlepoole, the grave”) and it exactly fulfills the promise of the introductory “that is.” The second “acceptation” begins by following the same pattern, but unexpectedly it is complicated by a thrust out toward the audience:

And then *secondly*, the buttresses that comprehend and settle this building . . . unto God the Lord belong the issues of death, that is, the disposition and manner of our death: what kind of issue, and transmigration wee shall have out of this world, whether prepared or sudden, whether violent or naturall, whether in our perfect senses or shaken or disordered by sicknes, there is no condemna-

The warning “there is nothing judgmental to bee made . . . before we have been invited, indeed, to a first pairing of alter egos—famously; there are the second “acceptation” begins by following the same pattern, but unexpectedly it is complicated by a thrust out toward the audience:

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The Aesthetic of the Good Physician

The warning "there is no condemnation to bee argued ... no Judgement to bee made" comes a split second too late, after we have been invited, indeed compelled, to judge and condemn. Only the first pairing of alternative ways of dying can be received differently; there are things to be said both for a death that has been anticipated and for a death that takes one unawares. The choice between "violent" and "natural," however, is less neutral, and in the third pairing, the balance, both rhetorically and in terms of the sheer quantity of words, is heavily weighted against disorder and sickness. In short, the reader-auditor cannot help but react judgmentally to the sequence, to argue a condemnation or commendation from the physical circumstances of a death. And in the act of judging, he is himself judged. The sentence ends by referring the matter to the true judge or, more precisely, to his word—"with him are the issues of death." With him, not us, in his hands, not our minds. The rebuke is local, but its implications extend to the business in which the prose has involved us, the anatomizing and understanding of God's word.

Even at this early stage, then, there are two forces operating in the sermon, one embodied in the point-by-point unfolding of the divisio, and another that is subversive of that unfolding and of the presumption which underlies it. And curiously enough, the vehicle of subversion is "the verse which constitutes our text"—"Unto this God the Lord belong the issues of death"—which is brought in whenever the machinery of rational discourse breaks down. The pattern is established in this opening section when the expectations created by the thrust of the syntax ("Is laid in this," "consists in this") are met not by a reason or a piece of evidence, but by the bald repetition of the verse, which is put forward as if it were wholly explanatory. We look for a statement that will ask for our rational assent and find instead the self-sufficiency of the revealed Word. What we have, then, are two logics, the everyday
logic of definition and inference, and the logic (or anti-logic) of
divine decree. At first, these coexist uneasily in a relationship of
mutual threatening, but as the sermon continues, theirs becomes
an adversary relationship in which the terms exacted by the victor
are no less that total surrender. The first overt clash occurs in the
climactic sentence of the proem:

And these three considerations, our deliverance *a morte,*
in *mortem,* per *mortem,* from *death,* in *death,* and by *death,*
will abundantly do all the offices of the *founding,* of the
*butteresses,* of the *contignations* of this our building; That
he that is our *God,* is the *God of all salvation,* because
unto this *God the Lord belong the issues of death* (231).

This sweeping period recapitulates the entire section and brings
to bear all the machinery that is to attend the opening of the text,
the image of a building with its architectural supports, the three
"acceptations" of the verse, the three pronoun phrases to which
they are attached. The weight of this machinery falls squarely on
"because" which in turn invites us to transfer its burden to the
reason that will presumably follow. But, once again, the antici­
pated reason fails to appear (despite the promise of "because")
and we are deposited, as we have been before, on "the verse which
constitutes our text."

When the forms of logical discourse abdicate their respon­
sibility in this way, the audience is left in an uncomfortable posi­
tion, committed both by training and instinct to
rational pro­
cedures and yet increasingly aware of the irrelevance of those
procedures to the business at hand. This is an intellectual, almost
abstract, discomfort, but it becomes more visceral when the ser­
mon fails us at precisely those points where the issues it raises are
personally oppressive and threatening, for then we are trapped
by the very mechanisms which were to have served us. This is
particularly true of the long first movement which is supposedly
to take us through "all our *periods* and transitions in this life,...
so many passages from *death to death* (231)." "Periods," "transi­
tions," and "passages" are familiar literary terms and, although
their primary reference is to the progression of our lives, they
refer also to the anticipated progression of this sermon; and in
both contexts they promise development and change. That promise is immediately qualified, however, by the phrase "from death to death." The prepositions divide the phrase into discrete areas or (in temporal terms) periods, but as we go from one to the other, they are discovered to be indistinguishable. There is a passage and a transition, but the reader who negotiates them exits from one room (the architectural metaphor is, of course, Donne's) only to find himself in the room he has just left.

This is exactly the pattern on a larger scale of the entire section. We move (supposedly) from one period to another, from one section of the sermon to the next, but discover in each new period and section the same horrors we thought to escape. As a result, the experience of the sermon becomes a cycle of frustrations, at each stage of which the pressure for release is greater. Thus we are at first assaulted by an imaginative recreation of our life in the womb: "for in our mothers wombe wee are dead so, as that wee do not know wee live, not so much as wee doe in our sleepe, neither is there any grave so close, or so putrid a prison, as the wombe would be unto us, if we stayed in it beyond our time (232)." Staying in the womb makes us murderers. "In the wombe the dead child kills the Mother." Staying in the womb may deprive us of salvation. "And there in the wombe wee are taught cruelty, by being fed with blood, and may be damned, though we be never borne (232)." As this catalogue of terrors lengthens, the claustrophobia of the actual situation is transferred to the experience of reading (or hearing) about it; the prose envelops us in its own womb and asks a question (with the help of St. Paul) that is self-refering: "wretched man that he is, who shall deliver him from this body of death (232-233)?" The answer is given quite properly by Eve, our general mother, whose unopened womb would have been the grave of the entire race: "... shee might well say, possesti virum a Domino, I have gotten a man from the Lord... the Lord that brought into the world that which himselfe had quickened; without all this might Eve say, My body had been but the house of death, and Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis, to God the Lord belong the issues of death (233)."

The unburdening of Eve's womb and our exit from the womb-like enclosure of the prose are effected simultaneously, but the
effecting agent is not time, but God, who intervenes to reverse the direction events seemed to be taking. Once again the linear movement of the sermon defaults to the verse (or half verse) it was to have explained. The machinery of rational discourse, with its temporal structures and spatial images, has served only to generate perplexities ("who shall deliver?") and dilemmas ("damned, though we be never borne"); for their resolution we are returned to the word of God, which does not so much untie as cut through a Gordian knot of our own (and Donne's) making.

The result is a feeling of release and relief which carries with it a strong suggestion of closure, and for a moment we forget that this is but the first (indeed prior to the first) of the ages of man. This is a sweet forgetting, but its duration is less than a word:

But then this exitus a morte, is but introitus in mortem, this issue, this deliverance from that death, the death of the wombe, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death, the manifold deaths of this world. Wee have a winding sheete in our Mothers wombe, which grows with us from our conception, and we come into the world, wound up in that winding sheet, for wee come to seek a grave (233).

"It is," declares Donne, "the exaltation of misery to fall from a neare hope of happines (232)"); and it is just such a fall that we experience here, not once, but twice, as the prose plunges us back into the cycle of death and at the same time nurtures in us the hope of escape. The miseries of the "manifold deathes of this world" are at least as great as the miseries of the "death of the wombe" and of longer duration; their description, like their living, threatens to be interminable:

That which we call life, is but Hebdomada mortium, a week of deaths, seaven days, seaven periods of our life spent in dying, a dying seaven times over; and there is an end. Our birth dies in infancy, and our infancy dies in youth, and youth and the rest dye in age, and age also dyes, and determines all. Nor doe all these, youth out of infancy, or age out of youth arise so, as a Phoenix out of the ashes of another Phoenix formerly dead, but as a waspe
or a serpent out of a caryon, or as a Snake out of dung. Our youth is worse then our infancy, and our age worse then our youth. Our youth is hungry and thirsty, after those sinnes, which our infancy knew not; And our age is sorry and angry, that it cannot pursue those sinnes which our youth did. And besides, al the way, so many deaths, that is, so many deadly calamities accompany every condition, and every period of this life, as that death it selfe would bee an ease to them that suffer them. Upon this sense doth Job wish that God had not given him an issue from the first death, from the wombe, Wherefore hast thou brought me forth out of the wombe? O that I had given up the Ghost, and no eye had seen me; I should have been, as though I had not been (234-235).

The topos of the seven ages of man has a long and varied history before Donne employs it here; but in all its versions two characteristics remain constant: it is a device for the making of distinctions, and it is a figure of progression. Often the distinctions are qualitative and the progression is from weakness to strength, before returning in a circle to weakness: “The strength of manhood . . . is released from the tutelage of boyhood . . . the number seven multiplied by itself produces the age which is properly considered and called perfect, so that a man of this age . . . is considered ripe in wisdom.” 31 Even Christianity, with its emphasis on the debilitating effects of original sin, does not abandon the more positive implications of the sequence: “the first age . . . infancy . . . submits without any resistance to the flesh, and the second age . . . boyhood . . . has not yet understanding enough, . . . But when we reach that age which can now comprehend the commandment . . . we must declare war upon vices, and wage this war keenly, lest we be landed in damnable sins.” 32 The se-

32 Augustine, *City of God*, XXI, 16, trans. Marcus Dods in *The Works of Aurelius Augustinus* (Edinburgh, 1871-1876), 15 vols. Most readers know the topos from Jacques’s speech in *As You Like It* (Act II, scene vii, 11. 147-174) which begins with the famous line “All the world’s a stage.” Jacques’s version is of course supremely cynical, but still his ages are distinguishable, if not exactly progressive.
quence in *Death’s Duell* is quite different, as Donne empties the topos of its conventional associations in two swift and decisive maneuvers: first its distinguishing force is taken away, when the last age is made the essence of every age; and then, not content merely to arrest movement, he reverses it. Maturity brings the maturing of sin \(^{33}\) and more deadly calamities follow upon the calamities we have already known. The effect is all the more powerful (and distressing) because the framework of the topos is not abandoned; it remains as an area to be negotiated, but without the sense of progression that makes its negotiation a source of satisfaction. In short, the topos becomes a prison. This is, of course, precisely what has happened to the sermon; its mechanisms, too, have been deprived of power and efficacy, yet they remain, stretching before us, not, however, as a chain of inferences leading to a triumphant conclusion, but as a succession of graves. The forward movement (like the forward movement of the topos) has become deprogressive, or retrogressive, from worse to worse, and the discomfort we are now beginning to feel is compounded when we are forced to assign the responsibility for this declination to ourselves. Twice in this passage we are tempted (literally) to shift it elsewhere. For a moment, “our youth is hungry and thirsty” is read as a complaint against the time, but the addition of “after those sins, which our infancy knew not” alters the force of the construction and leaves us with no choice but to return the blame to ourselves. In the same way, the assertion that “our age is sorry” seems at first an invitation, readily accepted, to self-pity (“sorry” is read as sorrowful), until the delayed syntax reveals that it is we who are sorry (regretful) that we are no longer capable of the sins we enjoyed in youth. From every direction, the sermon assaults us, with carrion, with dung, and there were in the Renaissance numerous pictorial representations of the ages, often in the form of a circle, with “mature Manhood” at the apogee and infancy and age meeting at the bottom. There is also the tradition, descending from Horace’s remarks in the *Ars Poetica*, of suiting speech and action to each of the ages, and again the distinctions implied were qualitative and progressive. See in this connection S. E. Fish, *John Skelton’s Poetry* (New Haven, 1965), Ch. III. For a general discussion see Franz Boll, *Die Lebensalter* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1913). For the relationship between the seven ages and the deadly sins see Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing, 1957).

33 For the unfolding of time, the actual framework of the sermon, and if death itself were but in a pilgrimage, the greatest persons have lies in their graves (2.1.1.199). We be in by holding sentences-only to earth, yet to be negated, and divisions the second, our understanding marred. We begin by holding the opening sentences only to it. The architectural metaphor of the prison’s force: “In heaven, in earth The Son of man is sorrow; for we are but in a pilgrimage, all the righteousnesses, real and rhetorical, and time are but the artificial hope is held out:

There is an end (234).
with accusations, and the prospect, given the divisions and "acceptations" yet to be negotiated, is for more of the same. The distinctions and divisions that were to have marked the progress of our understanding mark, instead, the extent of our entrapment. We begin by holding on to the discursive framework of the opening sentences only to find that it now has a stranglehold on us. The architectural metaphor returns, but with a new and distressing force: "in heaven there are many mansions; but here upon earth The Son of man hath not where to lay his head . . . we are but in a pilgrimage, and we are absent from the Lord; he might have said dead, for this whole world is but an universal church-yard, but our common grave; and the life and motion that the greatest persons have in it, is but as the shaking of buried bodies in their graves (234)." Again these statements apply equally to life and to this sermon. Movement is illusory; all places, real and rhetorical, are the same, all graves; all distinctions of time are but the artificial measures of an endless dying.

In the whole of the passage, and in the sermon to date, only one hope is held out:

There is an end (234).

If the unfolding of time, through the agency of her discursive structures, will not deliver us, we can at least be delivered from time; and if death itself would be an ease to those who suffer life's calamities, the linguistic equivalent of death—silence—will be an ease to us who suffer their chronicling. The sermon cannot go backward, despite the reference to Job's wish "that God had not given him an issue from the first death, from the wombe" (a wish that we might echo were it not for the earlier description of the womb as a "grave so close," "so putrid a prison"), but it can conclude; and it is the promise of concluding that Donne holds out when he allows us to anticipate the final period (again the double reference) of the ages of man: "age also dyes and determines all." In short, we are once again looking to the temporal-spatial framework of the sermon for the resolution of our difficulties, even though it has failed us so many times before. Of course, there is a difference. Earlier we were confident that discursive forms, in the service of our rational intelligences, would be
answerable to the task of identifying and processing truth; now we hope that by exiting from those same forms we will be able to escape a truth whose application has become distressingly personal. In both cases, however, we make the mistake of putting our trust in what Milton calls the “rare devices of man’s brain” and of forgetting that *Domini Domini sunt exitus,* to God the Lord—and not to sermons, or sermonists, or parishioners—belong the issues of death.

It is a mistake and a forgetting that Donne continues to encourage, as he recalls the laments of all of those who, like us, have wished for death and for an end: “Elijah himself, when he fled . . . requested that hee might dye, and sayd, It is enough, now O Lord, take away my life. So Jonah . . . O Lord take, I beseech thee, my life from me, for it is better for me to dye then to live (235).” The conclusion is obligingly drawn by Donne, who leads us forward in the manner of Spenser’s Despair: “How much worse a death then death, is this life, which so good men would ever change for death (235)?” In this case the “so good men” are ourselves, who have been changing death for death, and are ready to do so again, in the foolish hope that the passing of time will bring us rest. The climactic sentence of this section follows immediately, and it seems to offer the rest we have been seeking.

But if my case bee as Saint Paules case, *quotidie morior,* that I dye dayly, that something heavier then death fall upon me every day; If my case be Davids case *tota die morificamur,* *all the day long wee are killed,* that not onely every day, but every houre of the day some thing heavier then death fall upon me, though that bee true of me, *Concepsus in peccatis,* I was shapen in iniquity, and in sinne did my mother conceive me, (there I dyed one death,) though that be true of me (*Natus filius irae*) I was borne not onely the child of sinne, but the child of wrath, of the wrath of God for sinne, which is a heavier death; Yet *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis,* with God the Lord are the issues of death, and after a Job, and a Joseph, and a Jeremie, and a Daniel, I cannot doubt of a deliverance. And if no other deliverance more to his glory and my good, yet he hath the *keys of death,* and hee can let me out at that dore that is,
deliver me from the manifold deaths of this world, the *omni
die* and the *tota die*, the *every dayes death*, and every
*houres death*, by that *one death* the *final dissolution*
of body and soule, the end of all (235).

This is not a real conditional; there is no doubt that everything
predicated hypothetically of the first person voice is true, espe-
cially since the hypotheses correspond exactly to the facts as they
have been relentlessly detailed in the preceding paragraphs. As a
result, the pressure of the construction is anticipatory, pointing
forward to whatever it is that will counterbalance the depressing
reality of the sinner’s situation. The weight of that pressure falls
directly on the conjunction “yet,” just as earlier it had fallen on
“because” in the concluding sentence of the proem. The parallel
is continued when the cascading clauses of the extended period
are met not by a statement of equal length, but by the simple
reinvocation of the verse that constitutes our text, “*Domini,
domini.* . . .” The satisfaction we experience at this moment is a
double one: we are released at last from the cycle of daily and
hourly dyings, and our release coincides with the completion of
one of the sermon’s rhetorical divisions. For a moment it seems
that what had been denied to the formal structure—a place in the
expounding of God’s word—is to be restored, as its cadences
merge with revelation to provide the offtime promised “end of
all.”

The breaking of that promise is particularly brutal:

But then is that the end of all? Is that dissolution of body
and soule, the last death that the body shall suffer? (for of
spirituall death wee speake not now) It is not. Though this
be *exitus a morte* it is *introitus in mortem*; though it bee
an *issue* from the manifold *deaths* of this *world*, yet it is an
*entrance* into the *death of corruption* and *putrefaction* and
*vermiculation* and *incineration*, and dispersion in and from
the *grave*, in which every dead man dyes over againe (235–
236).

This last reversal should disabuse us of any remaining confi-
dence we may have had in temporal and discursive forms; they
have helped us neither to escape nor to understand. Once more
we are remanded back to prison just when release seemed imminent, and this second remanding, more peremptory and (apparently) final than the first, brings into sharp and pressuring focus the three prominent patterns of the sermon: the periodic defaulting of the argument to the verse it was to have explained; the persistent short-circuiting of our normal modes of discursive response (by ends that are beginnings, progressions that go backward, etc.); and the refusal of the sermon to move toward a conclusion.

Although these three patterns are to some extent discrete, they finally function as one; for together they constitute a radical subversion not only of the sermon's pretensions, but of the pretensions of those who are prepared (or so they think) to understand it and to exit from it with a portable truth. If the expository mechanisms of rational discourse will not serve, what are we to do? How are we to proceed without the support and direction (and self-satisfying comfort) they usually provide? These questions are not asked directly; they arise gradually (and unavoidably) when the habits of thought we have always found reliable fail us, and they arise more immediately when Donne follows this most recent disappointment of our expectations with a question of his own: "It was a prerogative peculiar to Christ, not to dy this death, not to see corruption. What gave him this privilidge (236)?"

At first this question, because it signals a change of subject, is welcomed for the relief it seems to offer from the cycle of frustrations that precedes it; but, like everything else in the sermon, that relief is temporary and illusory, and in the sequence that follows the frustrations return with a new and newly personal intensity. A question, after all, implies the availability of an answer; it is one half of a maneuver in the strategy of rational inquiry; and to ask it is always to create a psychological need for its completing half. Thus, even though Donne's question is to some extent rhetorical—he doesn't expect us to answer it—the force of the interrogative draws us into its rhythm and creates in us the expectation of an answer. But rather than a single answer, Donne puts forward a series of answers, holding out each one just long enough to make it attractive, before withdrawing it. It was "Not Josephs
great proportion of gums and spices, that might have preserved his body . . . longer than three dayes, but it would not have done it for ever (236).” Was it then “his exemption and freedome from originall sinne?” This possibility is considered at greater length, in part because it is more theologically respectable than the natural explanation of gums and spices; after all, “‘tis true that the original sinne hath induced this corruption and incineration upon us.” But not upon him, it seems, for “since Christ tooke sinne upon him, so farre as made him mortall, he had it so farre too, as might have made him see this corruption and incineration, though he had no originall sinne in himself.” As the passage continues, the speculation becomes more rarified: “Did the hypostatical union of both natures, God and Man, preserve him?” for this was indeed “a most powerfull embalming, to be embalmed with the divine nature it selfe, to bee embalmed with eternity.” But even this will not satisfy the case, since “for al this powerful embalming . . . we see Christ did dye; and for all this union . . . hee became no man (for the union of the body and soul makes the man, and hee whose soul and body are separated by death, (as long as that state lasts) is properly no man) (236).”

With each repeating of the question—“What preserved him then?”—the pressure for an answer is more and more felt. At the same time, the explanation of the inadequacy of the answers prof­fered grows longer and more complicated, demanding from us increasingly precise, even scholastic, distinctions, until finally, we are met with a sentence that is literally impossible to follow:

And therefore as in him the dissolution of body and soul was no dissolution of the hypostatical union; so is there nothing that constraines us to say, that though the flesh of Christ had seen corruption and incineration in the grave, this had bene any dissolution of the hypostatical union, for the divine nature, the Godhead might have remained with all the Elements and principles of Christ’s body, as well as it did with the two constitutive parts of his person, his body and his soul (236).

The difficulty of this sentence is to be located in the number of operations it asks us to perform consecutively and simultaneously.
From the beginning we are waiting for the conclusion introduced by "And therefore"; and within the arc of that suspension we are waiting, too, for the completion of the concessive argument introduced by "as." This second expectation is satisfied by the clause beginning "so is there"; but here two difficulties arise; this clause has imbedded within it another, and it is ruled by the nicely ambiguous "nothing that constraines us to say." In other words, the status of whatever will be asserted (or perhaps not asserted) is profoundly uncertain. To make matters even worse, the "that" clause itself contains a second concessive construction which requires a third suspension, again within the arcs of the first and second. It becomes impossible to keep the various "nos" and "thoughs" and "sos" in their respective places; the sentence collapses under the weight of its own apparatus and our efforts to understand it collapse also. By this point our stake in the answering of the original question—"What preserved him then?"—is at least as great as the difficulty and perplexity this paragraph has generated, and when Donne begins a sentence that promises to end with a flatly definitive assertion—"But this incorruptiblenes of his flesh is most conveniently plac'd in that . . ."—we strain forward in anticipation. For our troubles, we are slapped on the wrist; the long-awaited answer is spectacularly inadequate to the question, especially in the light of the distance we have traveled and the obstacles we have negotiated: "Non dabis, thou wilt not suffer thy holy one to see corruption (237)." This is not "the verse which constitutes our text," but it performs in the same deflating way, as an implicit criticism of the creaking machinery that has preceded its appearance (or should I say its revelation). This criticism extends to us and to our involvement with that machinery, and it is made explicit (and unavoidable) in the next sentence. "We looke no further for causes or reasons in the mysteries of religion, but to the will and pleasure of God (237)."

Of course, looking for causes and reasons is exactly what we have been doing, what we have been encouraged to do, and what the forms of expository prose were invented to do. The rebuke in this declaration is self-reflexive, for it includes not only the audience, but the sermon and also the sermonist who has set its now discredited processes in motion. (The editorial "we" has real,
not rhetorical, force.) Those processes continue to function, but as a parody of the promise they once held out. “Christ’s body did not see corruption, therefore because God had decreed it should not (237).” The words “therefore” and “because” are here surrogates for every claim that has been made for the discursive movement of the sermon, and they suffer the common fate when the phrase “God had decreed” countermands them and robs them of their explanatory force.

Almost immediately, this sequence is repeated, with an even greater flourish, in the sentence with which this analysis began: “And therefore as the Mysteries of our Religion, are not the objects of our reason, but by faith we rest on God’s decree and purpose, (It is so, O God, because it is thy will it should be so) so God’s decrees are ever to be considered in the manifestation thereof (237).” That is to say, the mysteries of religion are not to be rationally considered at all. It is here that the true object of Donne’s concern and the true object of the sermon’s assault are openly identified. The undermining of the original plan, and the disallowing of its implicit claims (to explain the mysteries of our religion) is a strategy that is directed not at “Reasons,” “therefores,” and “because”—although they are the most obvious casualties—but at the presumption inherent in the act of reasoning itself. It is, therefore, a strategy directed at the audience, which is first invited to a consideration of the day’s text and is then systematically frustrated in its attempt to take up that invitation. The result, as we have seen, is a progressive loss of confidence in the capacity of the sermon’s structures to organize and manage its materials; and this in turn (and in time) leads to a loss of confidence in the capacities of our own understandings. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to say that understanding, or the possibility of understanding, is what the sermon is finally “about”; for as the expectation of an orderly and manageable experience is repeatedly (and variously) disappointed, the focus of attention changes from the supposed subject of the sermon to ourselves, who become (as we always have been) the true subject; and this change is here confirmed and acknowledged by Donne when he implicitly enjoins us from further “considering.”

In what follows, that injunction becomes more explicit and
more obviously subversive of our intellectual pretensions. The next large topic to be considered (or not considered) is the manner of the death we must all finally suffer; but even before the alternative forms of death are enumerated, Donne steps in (and out toward us) with a warning: "Wee may bee deceived both wayes (240)." What will deceive us is the natural tendency of the human mind to make distinctions and pass judgments on the basis of appearances, to identify our powers of discrimination with God's: ". . . wee use to comfort our selves in the death of a friend, if it be testified that he went away like a Lambe, that is, without any reluctacion. But, God knowes, that may bee accompanied with a dangerous damp and stupefaction, and insensibility of his present state (240)." Here the colloquial expression "God knows" regains its original force. God only knows and it is an act of the greatest presumption to confuse our knowledge with His. This example of Christ Himself who "suffered colluctations with death . . . and an agony even to a bloody sweate" should be enough to prevent us from judging those who die painfully or violently. Nor is a man's unwillingness to die necessarily an indication of an unhealthy attachment to the pleasures of this world. Of course, this is not to say that in some cases such inferences may not be correct ("Wee may bee deceived both wayes"); the moral of this passage is unequivocal, and it becomes a virtual litany as Donne proceeds: "Make no ill conclusions upon any mans loathnes to dye (240)." "Christ himselfe hath forbidden us by his owne death to make any ill conclusion (241)." "God governes not by examples . . . and therefore make no ill conclusion upon sudden death nor upon distempers neyther (241)." 34 As the list of situations in the context of which conclusions are not to be drawn grows, the adjective "ill" becomes superfluous. What is being asked of us is a refraining from conclusions altogether, and a yielding of the responsibility for concluding (and everything else) to God, who is here represented, as he has been so many times before, by the verse that constitutes our text: ". . . never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken with such deaths; Donce may see the end of the . . . Come may see the end of the . . . when . . . to, de.
with such deaths; *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis, to God the Lord belong the issues of death* (241).

If there is any progress at all in this sermon, it is the progressive widening of the influence of this verse which arrogates to itself the functions of both preacher and parishioner. It is ruthlessly self-sufficient, requiring no supports, and at the same time requiring that we rely for support only on it. It begins, as we have seen, by supplanting the structures that were to have explained it, and now it supplants the faculty (of understanding) of which those structures are an extension. This, however, is but one half of the story, for the subversion of the one faculty results in the strengthening of another; the disabling of the forms of rational thought has as its corollary the triumph of the memory ("truly the Memory is oftener the Holy Ghost's Pulpit . . . than the Understanding"), not of the memory of places and distinctions, of buttresses, contingencies, and foundations—these have receded from view and mind as the influence of the day's verse has grown—but the memory of God's mercy, the Christian memory whose emergence into full and exclusive prominence is the shape of our experience.

Indeed that experience is finally the sermon's true structure, although the outline of the formal structure, the structure of the artificial memory, remains visible in the articulations of its original plan; but when Donne recalls us to that plan at the end of this paragraph, the effect is to make us realize how far from it and its assumptions we have moved. "And further wee cary not this second acceptation . . . and passe to our third part (242)." The vocabulary of "parts" and "acceptations," "seconds" and "thirds" is wholly irrelevant to our present situation, for it refers to a procedure in which we no longer have any confidence and to expectations we no longer entertain. Our expectations are now of a different order and our confidence is centered elsewhere, on the verse itself and, in the final section (this "third part and last part"), on the reality of the flesh the Word became:

Now see the end of the Lord, sayth that Apostle, . . . see the end of the Lord. . . . The end, that the Lord himselfe came to, death, and a painefull and a shamefull death (242).
This exhortation is different from any we have met before; it asks for a more immediate and personal seeing than would be possible in the light of a merely carnal understanding. The protection of discursive reasoning, the screen it places between us and the full weight of the truth, has been removed along with its presumptions, and we are now to be brought face-to-face with the presence to whom our triune faculties have been turned. Here there will be no intellectualizing, but a merging, insofar as possible, with the object of our contemplation, for “Our meditation of his death should be more viscerall and affect us more because it is of a thing already done (245)”: “Christ bled not a dropple the lesse at the last, for having bled at his Circumcision before, nor wil you shed a teare the lesse then if you shed some now. And therefore bee now content to consider with mee how to This God the Lord belong’d the issues of death (243).” The possibility of a rational (“therefore”) considering is reintroduced one last time so that it can finally be laid to rest in the felt experience of the next sentence:

That God, this Lord, the Lord of Life could dye, is a strange contemplation; That the red Sea could bee drie, That the Sun could stand still, That an Oven could be seaven times heat and not burne, That Lions could be hungry and not bite, is strange, miraculously strange, but supermiraculous that God could dye; but that God would dye is an exaltation of that. But even of that also it is a superexaltation, that God shold dye, must dye (243).

It is a strange contemplation indeed when the smaller part of a proportional analogy is a series of miracles. Each of the units in this sequence gives us a frame of reference in terms of which God's death could be comprehended; but the next unit always destroys it as a possible norm, and this continues until we are in the position Thomas Browne so loved to affect: “I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an O altitudo.” With proportion and measure gone the way of reason and disquisition, we have no choice but to obey Donne's injunction to “follow this [Christ's death] home,” that is, to take it to ourselves, “to consider it seriously,” not as an occasion for logic-chopping or moral-
izing, but as the central fact of our existence to which we can
give no response but acceptance: “anwre you with David, ac­
cipiam Calicem, I will take the cup of salvation; take it, that Cup
of salvation, his passion, if not into your present imitation, yet
into your present contemplation (244).” Imitation of Christ, then,
is to be the end of our efforts, and as a first step, Donne proposes
a meditative exercise: “Take in the whole day from the houre that
Christ received the passeover upon Thursday, unto the houre in
which hee dyed the next day. Make this present day that day in
thy devotion, and consider what hee did, and remember what you
have done (245).” Even at this late stage, however, there is more
to be given up, more to be taken away, a further humiliation to be
suffered; for, rather than bringing us closer to Christ, the perform­
ing of this exercise serves only to widen the gulf that separates us
from Him by making painfully clear the impossibility of truly
conforming our lives to His. At first, the measure of conformity
is comfortably abstract: “Hast thou considered that a worthy
receiving of the Sacrament consists in a continuation of holinesse
after, as well as in a preparation before? If so, thou hast therin
also conformed thy selfe to him (246).” But as the questions grow
shorter and more insistent, the probable answers (Donne plays
both parts) become increasingly embarrassing and painful:

About midnight he was taken and bound with a kisse, art
thou not too conformable to him in that? Is not that too
literally, too exactly thy case? . . . then hee was examined
and buffeted and delievered over to the custody of those
officers, from whome he received all those irrisions, and
violences . . . the spitting upon his face, . . . and the
smartnes of blowes . . . . How thou passedst all that time
last night, thou knowest (246).

Once again the promise that this sermon has continually held out,
the promise that in some way we will be able to come to terms
with the death of Christ, is proffered and cruelly withdrawn.
Forced to admit the irrelevance and presumption of rational in­
quiry, the motion of the mind, we have turned instead, at Donne's
urging, to acceptance and conformity, the motion of the heart.
But the will is no less corrupt than the reason (“For the good
that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do”),
and with each step along the way, the blows that strike at Christ strike with even more force at our self-esteem. Our affective response, which should issue in righteous action, is no less inadequate than our intellectual response, which should end in understanding, and the self-consciousness we are now feeling is the consciousness of shame ("Thou knowest").

There is, after all this, still another turn to Donne's screw. Having at first encouraged to conform and then made us aware of how impossible the act of conforming would be, he now tells us that conformity (even if it could be achieved) would not be enough, "that will not serve, that's not the right way, wee presse an utter Crucifying of the sinne that governes thee; and that con­formes thee to Christ (247)." An "utter" conformity indeed, when the conforming agent is asked to die. The enormity of what is required of us here is reflected in the phrase "governes thee," which receives no qualifications. Sin governs us not in one, but in all respects, and therefore an utter crucifying of that sin involves nothing less than the crucifying of the self. No way of ours can be the right way and all our ways are to be given up. (This, of course, is what has been "pressed" on us all along.) And yet this death and silencing of the self and its pretensions is paradoxically an entrance into a new and better life. For while we may be unable to conform ourselves to Christ, He has already (and literally) conformed Himself to us. The way of satisfaction has been paid by Him to whom it was due ("I am the way"); our sins are utterly crucified in His crucifixion. So that, at this lowest point in our careers, when, in Herbert's words, all our abilities have been confounded, we receive, as a gift, what those abilities could never have won; not merely an understanding of Christ's death, but an equal portion of the fruits it has purchased:

There wee leave you in that blessed dependancy, to hang upon him that hangs upon the Crosse, there bath in his teares, there suck at his woundes, and lye downe in peace in his grave, till hee vouchsafe you a resurrection, and an ascension into the Kingdome, which hee hath purchas'd for you, with the inestimable price of his incorruptible blood. AMEN (248).
This is more than a striking image; it is a precise statement of what has been happening to us in the course of the sermon. We begin in self-dependency, but as the motions of the self are one by one stilled, we grow gradually less self-sufficient, until we are finally left here, hanging, "in dependency." And yet this dependency is blessed, for although by means of it we are rendered powerless (disabled), our powers are increased in the person of Him on whom we depend. By taking away our initiative (of both reason and will) and directing us to the figure on the cross, the sermon brings us to a felt knowledge of the state in which we always were—"In Him we live, and move, and have our being"—and it does this not despite, but because its promises have not been kept. Like the Phaedrus and the fourth book of On Christian Doctrine, Death's Duell succeeds (if it succeeds) by calling attention to what it is not doing, by transferring the burden it first assumes (the burden of containing and communicating the truth) from the words on the page (which are contradictory and circular) to the Word that is inscribed on the fleshly tables of the reader's or auditor's heart. The sermon does not inscribe that Word (it has always been there, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God") but merely reveals it; and it reveals it by removing from our line of vision the structures that obscure it and cause us to forget it. These are, of course, its own structures which, in turn, reflect the structures of our understandings; like the other self-consuming artifacts to be considered in these pages, Death's Duell serves us by refusing to serve us, by failing.

The preacher is, no less than we, the beneficiary of this failure; for by fashioning words and sentences that point only to their insufficiency, he displaces attention from his own efforts to the Spirit which informs them; and by emptying his art of its (claims to) power, he acknowledges his own powerlessness, becoming like us and like the shell of his sermon a vessel filled by and wholly dependent on the Lord. Of course the audience to whom Donne preached in 1630 would have had no need of this clumsy exposition, for the sublimation of his personality would have been visible to them in the figure he presented in the pulpit, gaunt, enfeebled, dying. For once, Donne's theatricalism served
him well, not for the dramatization of the self, but for its consuming in the consuming of his artifact. "Not I," says the Apostle, "but the grace of God which was with me (I Cor. 15:10)." Not I, says Donne, but "thy Master (in the unworthiest of his servants) lookes back upon thee (246–247)." In answer to the prayer recommended by Augustine, God has placed a "good speech" in his mouth, and in the end Donne becomes indistinguishable from the Word he preaches, which is also the Word to which our understandings have defaulted. He loses his identity exactly at the point where we are blessed with the loss of ours, and at the point where the broken forms of his art are gathered into the verse they were to have explained. So that sermon, preacher, and parishioner dissolve together into a self-effacing and saving union with the source of their several motions.

Those who are accustomed to regard Donne as the type of the metaphysical preacher, given to ingenious puns and fanciful analogies, may find it difficult to think of his as a self-deprecating art. And yet it is by calling attention to itself that his prose becomes a vehicle of humility, for its most spectacular effects are subversive of its largest claims, which are also, by extension, the claims of the preacher. The prose of the Puritan sermon, by way of contrast, is self-effacing in style, but self-glorying (in two directions) in effect, for by making no claim to be art, it makes the largest claim of all, that it simply tells the truth. The Anglicans may display language, but it is the Puritans who take pride in language, because it is the Puritans who take language seriously.

The Puritan objections to Anglican preaching are well known and they receive their classic exposition in Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*. To the Puritans, Miller explains, the Anglican way of "topical preaching," preaching "according to the series of the words . . . especially when each one carryeth some kind of emphasis with it," is a "logical absurdity." In place of an orderly disposition of axioms, the Anglican "weavers" offer discrete and unconnected verbal fireworks which do little to advance the argument, but merely serve the preacher "as occasions for sensual eloquence (345)." Worse still, in his

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The Aesthetic of the Good Physician 71

concern for language, the “witty” preacher defaults on his obligation to edify. His auditors are not led step-by-step according to “the order of nature,” to a clear understanding of Christian doctrine, but dazzled and discomfited by all manner of “wit and conceit” and “by absurd . . . and prodigious cogitations (358).” Too many things are happening at once in an Anglican sermon and too few of them are related to one another in logical sequence. There is no opportunity for the hearer to either get or maintain his bearings, and as a result he carries little of value away with him: “When the speech is carried on like a swift stream, although it catch many things of all sorts, yet you can hold fast but a little, you can catch but a little, you cannot find where you may constantly rest; but when certaine rules are delivered, the Reader hath, alwayes, as it were at every pace, the place marked where he may set his foot.” In the Puritan sermon, the places are marked by the numbered sequence of axioms, and you are helped to “hold fast” to those axioms by examples and analogies which are brought in specifically to support them. This is the “right opening and expounding of the Scripture (344)” whereby preaching is made “the means better to convince our judgements (344),” and lest we be turned away from the meat of doctrine to the wind of words, the expounding comes to us in a plain and unaffected style.

The most significant of the objections to the Anglican way is that it “prevented understanding (359)”; for this implies that understanding, in the sense of a rational clarification, is possible. The sermon controversy is finally not about styles and their decorums but about minds and their capabilities. Both parties subscribe to the doctrine of innate depravity and testify to the inability of the fallen consciousness to comprehend the mysteries of divinity but, in practice, the Puritan sermon is designed to process that comprehension, and to the degree that it succeeds, the abilities of the hearer are magnified. Here, for example, is a passage from a sermon by John Cotton:

We are now to speake of living by faith in our outward and temporall life: now our outward and temporall life is twofold, which wee live in the flesh. It is either a civill, or

36 Ibid., p. 359. The author is William Ames.
a naturall life, for both these lives we live, and they are different the one from the other: Civill life is that whereby we live, as members of this or that City, or Town, or Commonwealth, in this or that particular vocation and calling.

Naturall life I call that, by which we doe live this bodily life, I mean, by which we live a life of sense, by which we eate and drinke, by which we go through all conditions, from our birth to our grave, by which we live, and move, and have our being. And now both these a justified person lives by faith; To begin with the former. 87

The subject is faith, but the exposition is logical, or at least methodical. The point is opened in the Ramist manner, the proposal of the subject—"living by faith"—its delimiting specification—"in our outward and temporal life"—and its division into two branches—"either a civill, or a naturall life"—which are then, themselves, further specified—"Civil life is," "Naturall life I call." The movement is always from the more general to the particular, and the reader is led by the hand (or nose) from place to place until there is nothing left to be said and no possibility of his not understanding. In the process, meanings are narrowed and flattened out; abstractions are not allowed to stand, but are at once tied down to palpable specifics; and even Scripture is emptied of its mystery and domesticated so that it refers not to Christ (in whom we live and move and have our being) but to "a life of the sense." 87

I do not mean to suggest that the reading or hearing of a Puritan sermon requires no effort, only that the effort is always followed by understanding. One is never asked to do more than one can and, more important, one is never asked to undo what has already been done. References backward are not, as in an Anglican sermon, complicating and unsettling, but clarifying and confirming, and repetitions, rather than expanding the area of reference, pin it down and make it manageable:

First, it hath a care that it be a warrantable calling, wherein we may not onely aime at our own, but at the

publike good, that is a warrantable calling, *Seek not every man his owne things, but every man the good of his brother*, I Cor. 10:24. *Phil. 2:4*. Seek one anothers welfare; faith works all by love, *Gal. 5:6*. And therefore it will not think it hath a comfortable calling, unless it will not onely serve his owne turne, but the turn of other men. Bees will not suffer drones among them, but if they lay up any thing, it shall be for them that cannot work; he would see that his calling should tend to publike good (439).

The pattern of this paragraph is established in its first sentence where the phrase “publike good” (which is to be opened) is preceded and followed by “warrantable calling.” The connection between them is thus made inescapable; in whatever direction the reader looks (or the hearer listens) he will find himself relating one to another. Since “publike good” also concludes the paragraph, the same forward and backward pressure is exerted on everything in the middle. There scriptural and natural proofs are marshalled in mutual support (they are not hierarchically distinguished) and in support of the original proposition, which, with slight variations, is regularly repeated. Everything leads from and toward “publike good” which is relentlessly surrounded, hemmed in, pinned down, and, in a word, known.

The movement of this paragraph is typical of the sermon as a whole. A perspective is established, and then never abandoned. Rather, it is reaffirmed and reinforced. Every step along the way is confirming; nothing is distracting; there is no sense of strain and as a result we do not strain either. It would be a mistake to think of this as artless; it is simply a different kind of art, one that involves the illusion of a simple and natural unfolding; and this is an illusion that is transferred to the operations of our understanding. Confidence in the building of the argument builds confidence in our ability to follow it.

This is, of course, a reflection of the formal strategy of a Puritan sermon which is designed to restore (or to be a means in God’s restoring of) the right working of man’s disordered faculties. When Adam disobeyed God’s command for the sake (or so he believed) of Eve, he reversed the priorities by which the affections are properly subordinate to the reason, and as the in-
74

Self-Consuming Artifacts

heirors of his error we are naturally inclined to repeat it. The urgings of our carnal appetites prevail over the urgings of the revealed word, and emotional appeals persuade us more readily than rational arguments. If this unhappy situation is to be remedied, the understanding must be regenerated and reason returned to its rightful preeminence. Regeneration is, of course, the work of the spirit, but the spirit prefers to work through natural means and especially through the means of sermons. Sermons by themselves cannot bring about conversion, but they can, in their unfolding, follow the order of conversion the spirit prefers. To this end the Puritan preacher is careful to speak to the minds of his hearers before proceeding to move the will by stimulating the affections. Edification must precede exhortation, and the form of the Puritan sermon is directly answerable to these priorities—first doctrine, then reasons, and then uses:

The Puritan sermon quotes the text and “opens” it as briefly as possible, expounding circumstances and context, explaining its grammatical meanings, reducing its tropes and schemata to prose, and setting forth its logical implications; the sermon then proclaims in a flat, indicative sentence the “doctrine” contained in the text or logically deduced from it, and proceeds to the first reason or proof. Reason follows reason, with no other transition than a period and a number; after the last proof is stated there follow the uses or applications, also in numbered sequence, and the sermon ends when there is nothing more to be said.38

What this means for the auditor or reader is an absence of surprise. One is never misled in the course of a Puritan sermon; topic sentences accurately forecast the shape of what follows; the vocabulary of logical arguments is neither superfluous, nor self-defeating; similes establish points of correspondence that are always relevant, and limitedly relevant; the meaning of a word is not changed in successive appearances; rather the meaning of its first occurrence is more firmly fixed. These are all negative characteristics, but they have a positive effect. They give one the ex-


The Aurora of being in control
I've been and where you're going there.

In brief, the Puritan sermon is sufficient, in two directions. First, they open and make plain not only that you shall know the truth, and it keeps both hands and Death's thumb in its bin. Here, it follows the two sermon traditions of working order and making truth; in the other, it is those who want to carry the truth away. 39

Moreover, of course, that these two sermons which represent certainly find Anglican preachers, like Andrewes, with ease, see my “Structures as

These burdened over the gradual truth, and it keeps both out of sight. 40


The Aurora of being in control
I've been and where you're going there.
The Aesthetic of the Good Physician

In brief, the Puritan sermon is not self-consuming, but self-sufficient, in two directions. Its forms are sufficient to its pretensions—they open and make plain the points of Scripture—and its auditors are sufficient unto the occasion—they are able to understand that which is made plain. In its unfolding the sermon promises not only that you shall know the truth, but that you can know the truth, and it keeps both promises. The Anglican sermon, on the other hand—and *Death's Duell* is a brilliant example—consistently defaults on its promises. Its divisions and transitions do not indicate the stages of a progression, either in the argument or in the hearer’s understanding; they are merely “ands,” marking out areas and opportunities for illumination, even if they read literally as “buts,” “althoughs,” “because,” “therefore,” “first,” “seconds,” and “thirds.” The movement of the sermon’s central action is away from its discursive machinery (although that machinery continues to creak along) and therefore away from the listener’s rational powers, which are increasingly disabled (as the machinery is disabled). Here, then, is the fundamental difference between the two sermon traditions; in one the faculties are put in good working order and made answerable to the task of comprehending truth; in the other the faculties are first broken and then replaced by the object of their comprehension, “a kind of saving by undoing”; one makes linguistic forms serviceable by making them unobtrusive; the other thrusts the forms of language before us so that we may better know their insufficiency, and our own; one claims only to convey the truth and therefore claims everything; the other begins by claiming everything and then presides over the gradual disallowing of all its claims; one invites us to carry the truth away, the other to be carried away by the truth.30

30 I am aware, of course, that these are very large conclusions to draw from a comparison of two sermons which represent the extremes of their respective traditions. One can certainly find Anglican preachers who are less metaphysical than Donne, or preachers, like Andrewes, who are metaphysical in a different way. (In this connection, see my “Structures as Areas: Sequence and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Narrative,” forthcoming in the *William Andrews Clark Memorial
We have, of course, encountered these large oppositions before, in the distinction between rhetoric and dialectic, between the bad and the good lover, between persuading to a point and persuading to a vision, between the memory of places and the Christian memory of the promise, and in the one distinction that informs all of these, between a presentation that leaves the mind...
complacent and self-satisfied and a presentation that unsettles the mind and demands, literally, that it change.

This opposition and these distinctions are to be found everywhere in the seventeenth century, but not always in their pure forms. There is a danger in a study like this that real differences will be sacrificed to a paradigm; and it is, in part, to avoid that danger that I now turn to Francis Bacon, who is committed, more overtly than the Puritans, to the rehabilitation of man's faculties, yet shares with the Anglicans a profound distrust of those faculties. As a result, his artifacts are both self-consuming and self-satisfying, although, as we shall see, the satisfaction is very much in the future.

Therefore it is language in which the meanest capacity has an increasing confidence, a confidence that is transferred to its own operations. What this language does not do is confuse or challenge or puzzle or call attention to itself apart from its expository and clarifying function; and therefore it never calls into question the sufficiency of its own procedures or the sufficiency of the understandings it makes plain. This suggests that my analysis of the sermon controversy would hold even if examples less stylistically "pure" than those I have introduced were brought to bear; for in every case it could be shown that while the two traditions are not always distinguishable by the formal properties of their language, they remain distinguishable in terms of the relationship between that language and the understandings of their auditors. Of course, this holds only for the first half of the century. In the Restoration, for reasons we shall consider in the epilogue, everyone is in the business of making plain.

Even when the sense of a Puritan sermon is unflattering, its experience is satisfying. The hearer who attains a "true sight of sin" may be tracing out the shape of his own depravity, but it is he who is doing the tracing out; and when the job is done he can take a personal satisfaction in it.