Dissertation Summary

“The Art of Salvation, is but the Art of Memory”:
Memory as Art and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne

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Budapest, 2010
The image on the front dust jacket is the first page of “A Sermon of Valediction” from the Merton manuscript, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
Setting the Scene

Scholarship on the 160 extant sermons of John Donne (1572-1631), though still overshadowed by the disproportionately vast amount of criticism pertaining to his lyric oeuvre, has come into its own. The fifty years since the appearance of the ten-volume critical edition (published 1953-1962) of the sermonic canon have produced an admirably wide range of approaches to these admittedly challenging texts. Scholars in the past two decades especially have worked toward an increasingly holistic approach in which the literary form, theological content and historical context of the sermons are considered in tandem to produce more accurate readings and a deeper understanding of the works whose composition occupied the whole length of Donne’s mature years.

I have chosen for my topic the fundamental principle of memory, both as presented in theory and as put into practice throughout Donne’s sermonic oeuvre. I believe that the concept of memory is capacious enough to unite two of the most robust areas of scholarship on Donne’s sermons: his theory of mind, treated within philosophical/theological criticism of the sermons and his exuberant use of imagery, the key concern of the literary approach. Donne’s Augustinian/Thomistic theory of memory relates to his vibrant imagery as theory does to practice, therefore I offered in my dissertation the first comprehensive attempt to read this particular theory and consequent practice side by side.

I. Introduction

The Introduction began with broad considerations of the importance of the sermon to seventeenth-century English culture (Shami) and continued with reflections on Donne’s own exterior and interior career which brought him, by
the year 1615, to the threshold of a brilliant ecclesiastical career eminently suited to his ambitious temperament and poetic sensibilities (Post). Practical considerations of Donne’s preaching venues and preparation style (McCullough) were followed by a short evaluation of his preaching prowess. In his description of Donne’s profoundly moving preaching style, Izaak Walton highlighted his ability to “pictur[e] vice so as to make it ugly to those that practised it; and a vertue so, as to make it be beloved even by those that lov’d it not” (24; emphasis added), thereby setting the scene for later discussions of Donne’s powerful imagery. Next, an overview of the publication history of the sermons established the groundwork necessary to discuss the twentieth-century critical response to this crucial and challenging oeuvre (Krueger, Haskin). This critical response was depicted in three bold brushstrokes corresponding to theological/philosophical, literary, and historical approaches (e.g., Johnson, Simpson, McCullough “Sermons at Court” respectively) and further detailed as I discussed the critical evaluations of Donne’s appeal to memory spanning approximately fifty years from Robert L. Hickey to Noralyn Masselink (Hickey, Quinn, Webber, Mueller, Chamberlin, Guibbory, Sherwood, Masselink) and presented my own position. My argument was been that memory is central to Donne’s preaching enterprise, both as the bedrock of his psychology and as a wellspring of his vivid imagery.

II. Three Theories of Memory

In chapter II, I gave patient consideration to the three memory traditions informing Donne’s own appeal to memory. Within the Augustinian tradition, I began with salient biographical parallels between St. Augustine and Donne, Izaak Walton’s second St. Augustine, and continued with a brief juxtaposition
of Augustine’s concept of ‘memory’ with common definitions of the same. In my reading of Book X of the *Confessions*, I presented the various layers of memory as envisioned by Augustine, ever moving inward and upward from the image-based sensible memory, imageless intellective memory to the mind as memory, and (carefully) to the memory as the dwelling place of God. In Books X-XV of *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that if man is truly created in the image of a Triune God (cf. Gen. 1.26) he must bear upon himself impressions of the Holy Trinity, the highest of which are memoria, intelligentia, voluntas, ‘memory, understanding, will’ and memoria, intelligentia, amor, ‘memory, understanding, love.’ It was a challenge to bring Augustine’s all-consuming vision of memory as presented in the *Confessions* into dialogue with the painstakingly egalitarian treatment of the three faculties of the soul—memory, understanding and the will—in *De Trinitate*. The key to the successful absolution of this seeming contradiction was the realization that memory in the *Confessions* stands for the entire soul, while memory in *De Trinitate* refers only to the higher levels of memoria sui and memoria Dei and is truly presented as one of three coeval faculties. The Thomistic tradition, due to the rigorous, textbook-like organization of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* and commentary on Aristotle’s *De memoria et reminiscentia* proved easier to separate into its respective strands. In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas reflects on memory as a part of his theory of mind and of his epistemology (within the Treatise on Man) and as a part of his ethics (within the Treatise on Prudence and Justice). In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De memoria et reminiscentia* the concept of ‘habit’ links the psychological, epistemological, ethical and even rhetorical aspects of memory. After placing the *ars memoriae* tradition within the broader framework of antique rhetoric, I examined the architectural mnemonic as taught in three classics of
Latin oratory: the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero’s *De oratore* and Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, separating their admonitions into rules on *loci* ‘places’ and rules on *imagines agentes*, ‘active images’ with which the orator was to fill his mental spaces in an effort to store information. Tracing the fate of *ars memoriae* into the Renaissance (Carruthers, Yates) and reflecting on the form in which it may have reached Donne (Mack), I closed my theoretical chapter with a syncretic view of the Augustinian, Thomistic and rhetorical memory traditions. Concluding that Augustine and Aquinas were clearly working in the dialectical memory tradition and the three Roman orators in the rhetorical, I discovered that natural and artificial are not so much the opposite ends of a spectrum as root and flower, or reality and its image in the mirror of humanity. The assumptions underlying the art of memory—that human beings deeply depend on the visual and conceive of the memory as a ‘place’ inhabited by ‘images’ of all that is accessible to the mind—have their source in the natural workings of the human mind.

**III. Donne’s Theology of Memory**

Chapter III offered an analysis of Donne’s own theology of memory as a crossroads of Augustinian and Thomistic assumptions. In the analysis of what I have dubbed his six ‘memory sermons,’ I found a markedly Augustinian influence. Donne’s Trinitarian presentation of the human soul, filtered for him through the work of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, was clearly derived from the latter books of *De Trinitate*, but I also traced the influence of the *Confessions*, whose eloquent Book X, devoted to memory, most likely inspired Donne’s special commitment to and praise of this faculty. An examination of another cluster of sermon passages thematizing memory brought insight into the
Thomistic aspect of Donne’s theology of memory, primarily concerning his recognition that sense-derived phantasmata are central not only to a functional memory, but also to the construction of understanding, and that in lieu of direct divine illumination, the human memory keeps psychosomatic impressions of external reality and works with them, and only them, to construct understanding. This discussion, followed by a brief reflection on sin in the memory and the role of memory in repentance, set the stage for chapter IV, an extended examination of Donne’s appropriation for pious purposes of the secular craft of ars memoriae.

IV. Donne ‘Baptizes’ Ars Memoriae

Chapter IV, divided into three main sections, first treated of Donne’s loci or mental spaces. While the antique rhetorical handbooks I examined spoke of loci exclusively as an interior, mental grid available only to the orator, Donne unabashedly and purposefully publicized his own spaces. With this step, he initiated his audience into a system of visualizing sermon content by taking recourse not only to loci derived from the world of architecture, but to spatial metaphors as varied as clocks and fruit-bearing trees, letters of the alphabet and archipelagos of islands, all drawn from the visible world. His fundamental commitment to the ‘edification’ of his auditory’s memory, both in the architectural and in the educational sense, is evidenced by the care with which he announces his mental spaces made public in the divisio and the faithfulness with which he returns to them throughout the sermon. In my exploration of Donne’simaginées agentes, I selected a novel classification scheme in which the links of the Great Chain of Being (Tillyard) became—metaphorically speaking—my own memory places. This arrangement enabled me to both to
present the full variety of Donne’s sense-based imagery without ambiguity or overlap and to arrive at the conclusion that for his metaphors, Donne enlisted vehicles primarily from the microcosm of man: the human body, domestic life, vocations, and the two large bodies of church and state. His imagery, which has often been termed biblical, was biblical not only by virtue of actual metaphors derived from the Bible, but more deeply so because, like imagery in the Bible, it dealt in the everyday and the intimately familiar. Through the universality of his imagery covering the entire visible cosmos, Donne made sure his auditory remembered and learned of God wherever they turned. A brief examination of a handful of images which may be interpreted as emblems connects Donne’s imagery to the emblem tradition and the emblem to the art of memory to which it, as has been suggested, clearly belongs (Lewalski). The chapter ends with a reflection on Donne’s sermons as psychosomatic journeys involving both body and soul in a sensation of moving towards God.

V. La Corona

In chapter V, I myself appropriated Donne’s sacred *ars memoriae* as a way of reading his lesser-known sonnet cycle *La Corona*. Interpreting the sonnets themselves as proportioned mental spaces, I provided a meditative analysis of the imagery of each poem. The power of these images is rooted in paradoxes eminently memorable because they simultaneously compare holy persons and events both to what they are most like and to what they are not at all like. In the end, the *loci* of the sonnet cycle connect to form a crown, whose shape is both the embodiment of paradox, in that its end is its beginning, and the resolution of that paradox, as all paradoxes are dissolved in eternity.
VI. Conclusion

“The art of salvation, is but the art of memory” Donne wrote in a 1618 sermon on Psalms 38:3 preached at Lincoln’s Inn. This conceit is a powerful link between dialectical and rhetorical memory, between theological and literary considerations of Donne’s sermons, and between theory and practice. Augustine provides the Trinitarian framework and celebrates the mysterious power of memory, Aquinas adds his insight that all contents of the memory are image-based, and in Donne’s hands, a secular rhetorical technique for enhancing the orator’s memory becomes a tool for the sanctification of the auditory. God Himself, Donne would have us know, is an enthusiastic patron of the art of memory:

God is abundant in his mercies to man, as though he did but learn to give by his giving, as though he did but practise to make himself perfect in his own Art, which Art is bountiful Mercy; . . . he delights to give where he hath given, as though his former gifts were but his places of memory, and marks set upon certain men, to whom he was to give more. (VI, 350)  

 Aware of God’s own blessed approval of this mighty faculty of the human soul, Donne developed a syncretic appeal to memory that allowed him—a master of images—to begin to recover in his auditors the image of his Master.

My hope is to carry this project forward and incorporate it into a monograph tracing the entire memory-understanding-will-salvation trajectory in Donne’s sermonic oeuvre. This monograph will treat not only Donne’s theological and rhetorical commitment to memory but will also seek—through

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further reconstruction of Donne’s appeal to the understanding and to the emotions of his audience—to present his sermons as complete spiritual exercises designed to set the entire tripartite soul in motion towards God.
Works Cited


Publications

Book Reviews:


Articles:


Najbauer, Noémi M. “‘By These His Thorns Give Me His Other Crown’: the Typology and Etymologies of Crowning in John Donne’s *La Corona*” (unpublished article).

Najbauer, Noémi M. “Shakespeare, a szonettíró” (unpublished article).

Translations:


The image on the back dust jacket is the last page of “A Sermon of Valediction”
From the Dobell manuscript, in the Houghton Library, Harvard University
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