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# “The minister is *vox*”: The paradox of written voice in John Donne’s *Sermons*

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## Abstract

In a self-referential way, Donne’s *Sermons* repeatedly describe the oral exercise of preaching as a means to reunite man and godhead. The preacher’s voice is the instrument that makes the congregation “adhere” to Christ, a term which can read as encapsulating the promise of an intimate contact or presence (‘ad-here’) through an auditive and vocal process (‘add-hear’ / ‘add-ear’). However, the limits of such a creed arise when the *Sermons* are viewed for what they really are, namely a collection of texts which are not only voiceless by definition, but may never have been oralised in their present form. They do strain to recapture live utterance, but fall short of doing so in these two respects at least. With such a realization, irony sets in. Their self-reflexive praise of the Minister’s voice makes them trip against the paradox of their very written nature. These texts thus lend themselves to a process of self-deconstruction. Against their official grain, the *Sermons* make an undertone heard, by which, in a self-undermining key, they can only call into doubt their ability to achieve the reunion with God they so eloquently promise.

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## I Introduction

Commenting on Donne’s poetry in *The common reader: second series*, Virginia Woolf praises its rich interplay of sound effects, which she believes ranks amongst its most noteworthy features. It makes Donne’s voice so vividly audible, she argues, that it does not only “burst into speech” but “strikes upon the ear” (1932: 24). For Woolf, Donne’s outstanding voice has endured in such a way that its presence in these texts is unquestionable or, in her own words, that “we [...] still hear them distinctly today” (1932: 24). Woolf’s assessment of Donne’s poetry thus contends, against all odds, that these silent texts transcribe and contain their author’s–unaltered–voice through their very verbal fabric, thus rolling *gramma* and *phonè* into one. Both thought-provoking and challenging, this conception of Donne’s poems is also an apt introduction to his *Sermons*, which, although not entirely unheard of, have attracted far less critical attention. Very much as the poems, which often read as miniature plays, the *Sermons* are very dramatic in style. A voice, the preacher’s, seems to be inhabiting them and to make itself heard, wrapped in their pages and echoed in their carefully wrought out sound patterns.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The dramatic quality of Donne’s work has been underlined by studies of his poems (Garland Pinka 1982) and analyses of his *Sermons* in which the preacher blends different–mostly biblical–voices with his own when addressing the congregation (Quinn 1960; Webber 1963; Carrithers 1972). Whereas

This voice deserves to be considered all the more closely as it often brings attention upon itself in a self-mirroring fashion. Such a self-referential quality in the voice of the *Sermons*, and thus in their very text, is a feature which sets Donne apart among Early Modern preachers such as Hugh Latimer (1485-1555) and Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626). As noted by T.S. Eliot in his comparative study of their sermons, Donne's have one singular characteristic: their very dramatic nature deriving from the preacher's tendency to stage his own preaching or writing of the sermon. Commenting in particular on a sermon where Donne expresses the reactions he imagines his talk produces in his audience (see section 3.1 and n13 below), Eliot argues: "Things like this break, now and again, through the close convention of Elizabethan-Jacobean speech; they are rarer in the prose than in the verse," but "you will find," he goes on to say, "in the prose of Donne's age, but seldom, as in this passage, the sense of the artist as an Eye curiously, patiently watching himself as a man" (1919: 1252-1253). Way more often than Andrewes' or Latimer's, Donne's *Sermons* thus read both as homiletic writings and at the same time as self-mirroring comments upon themselves. In them, orality and dramatization go together with self-reflexivity. This link appears all the more clearly when Donne's exegesis of the biblical texts gives pride of place to mankind's separation from God and to the Minister's voice as mediating instrument aimed at restoring a contact between them.

This paper wishes to explore how valid such a self-referential claim can be when it is made by written texts, which, if anything at all, are conspicuously voiceless. Can they be said, as Woolf declared about the poems, to hold in their author's voice or rather to recreate the fiction of this now lost voice? If so, what efficiency in sealing again the union of man and God can these texts and their paradoxical voice boast to have? These questions will be addressed along two lines. First, if the *Sermons* underline man's separation from God, it is only to stress repeatedly, and in a self-referential way, that they can restore their union through the Minister's voice. These self-reflexive remarks will nonetheless need considering in the light of the written nature of these texts. Backfiring upon their praise of voice, it may well disclose in the *Sermons* a very ironical, self-debasing discourse.

## 2 The minister's voice: a self-proclaimed connective medium

Man's separation from God has been inherent in the human condition since the Fall. Throughout his *Sermons* Donne keeps urging the assembled congregations he preaches not to double up the original sin by their own and, thereby, not to entrench further the divorce

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the earlier studies mostly stress that the interplay of different personae and voices Donne creates in his *Sermons* aims at providing the audience with transcendent, exemplary figures to conform to, Paul Harland's more recent analysis of voice considers Donne's dramatic technique in a more dynamic fashion (1986: 709-726). Harland demonstrates that the notion of "human growth" is central to Donne's theology where it is to be understood as a process of betterment. The voices echoed by Donne, Harland argues, are part and parcel of it. The rhetorical strategies Donne makes them use in their silent dialogues with the audience, or in "implied dialogues" with fictional listeners, are meant to prompt, in the congregation, a reflexive process over its condition whereby it will be enticed to improve (1986: 711). No more than previous studies, however, does Harland's illuminating article underline the paradox the present essay aims at highlighting. Indeed, the process of human growth, described by the critic, is one of betterment, of acceptance of God's mercy, and therefore of reunion with Him which results from Donne's use of different voices heard, through his, by the congregation in the course of the sermon. Does their efficacy not become debatable or at least seriously challenged when, as the present study argues, the *Sermons* are considered as a collection of written, silent texts?

between mankind and godhead. However, this warning is always backed up by the hope of a reconciliation, that is of man's eternal partaking of God's glory. An undated sermon on 2. Cor. 5 : 20: "Wee pray ye in Christs stead, be ye reconciled unto God" is particularly telling in that respect. Man's separation from God seems to be its motivating principle and the preacher's role is explicitly defined in it as a means aimed at bridging this gap:

A *Reconciliation* is required, therefore there is an *enmitie*; but it is but a reconciliation, therefore there was a friendship; There was a time when God and Man were friends, God did not hate man from all Eternitie, God forbid. And this friendship God meant not to breake; God had no purpose to fall out with man, for then hee could never have admitted him to a friendship [...]. God therefore having made man, that is *Mankinde*, in a state of love, and friendship, God having not by any purpose of his done any thing toward the violation of this friendship in man, in any man, God continueth his everlasting goodnesse towards man, towards mankinde still, in inviting him to accept the means of Reconciliation, and a returne to the same state of friendship, which hee had at first, by our Ministry. *Be ye reconciled unto God.* (1953-1962: X, 5, 135-136)<sup>2</sup>

What are the theological principles informing the way in which, as in this passage, Donne conceives of the Minister's conciliatory role? Donne was born a Catholic. Recent scholarship, in particular by Denis Flynn, has shown how influential his family ties with John Heywood and the More circle must have been in his formative years, namely the 1580s and 1590s. In addition, Flynn points out, the alliance of Donne's family over two generations with noble Catholic houses which firmly resisted anti-Catholic persecutions left deep and long-lasting marks on Donne (1995: 83-172).<sup>3</sup> Such a background cannot have been totally erased even after Donne's ill-dated apostasy and his ordination in the Church of England in January 1615. However, in his *Sermons*, preached after that date, Donne, who was aware of his religious and, as such, highly political function, mostly appears as a fierce defender of the Anglican Church, its head and doctrinal positions.<sup>4</sup> As shown by P.M. Oliver (1997: 260-265), throughout this work, he relentlessly and violently attacks Catholics and their creed. His "Gunpowder plot sermon" from 1622 is a particularly telling example of the blows the preacher levels at the Roman Church. Accordingly, Donne's theology as developed in the *Sermons* abides by the reformed standards of the Anglican *via media*. This is of particular importance in the essential, and highly contentious, issue of Christ's real presence in the

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the *Sermons* will be arranged as follows: 1953-1962: volume number (Roman numeral), sermon number in the volume (Arabic numeral), page(s).

<sup>3</sup> Denis Flynn highlights in particular Donne's life-long connections with important noble Catholic families (the Percy, later Northumberland, and Stanley families). Their fight against persecutions as well as their opposition to Tudor reform cannot but have played a key role in Donne's apprehension of religious issues even if their influence in the country at large was considerably reduced by the end of the 1590s (1995: 180).

<sup>4</sup> However, in spite of Donne's undeniably Anglican stance in the *Sermons* as a whole, some studies have shown that some passages in this work might read somewhat differently. Thus Daniel W. Doerksen's reading of some of Donne's *Sermons* and religious poems points up what he believes are Puritan features in his theology (1995: 350-365). This view is also held by Paul R. Sellin in his analysis of Donne's sermon preached in The Hague in 1619 in the political and religious context of the reformed Netherlands (1988: 109-134). Sellin's careful and highly-documented examination of this sermon, which Donne committed to writing in 1630 (see section 3.1 of the present study), argues that it "does not present him as essentially in disagreement with Calvinist orthodoxy with respect to either doctrine or discipline" (1988: 123).

Eucharist. As demonstrated by Jeffrey Johnson in his study of Donne’s theological thought, the preacher very firmly rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation. However, Johnson notes:

What Donne affirms in this controversy is that the bread and wine are actual and that to avoid an absurd contradiction of the senses and of reason, these elements must be understood to retain their physical substance. Nevertheless, Donne is quite insistent that Christ is ‘*Res Sacramenti*, The forme, the Essence, the substance, the soule of the Sacrament’, so that for him [...] there is actual bread and wine that feeds the body, there is the flesh and blood of Christ that nourishes the soul. (1999: 141-142)

In the light of such a conception of the Eucharist, which gives pride of place to the symbolism of the “spiritual” flesh and blood, it is hardly surprising that for Donne Christ’s presence should be chiefly a symbolic one, that of the Word (1999: 131-132). As argued by P.M. Oliver, unlike contemporary preachers such as Andrewes who put forward the “eucharistic part of the communion service”, “Donne’s sermons do not suggest that he fundamentally departed from the belief he expressed in *Essays in Divinity* that Christ’s ‘flesh, though dignified with unexpressible privileges, is not so near God as his Word’” (1997: 253). Although the preacher does not call into doubt the value of the Sacraments, he does very frequently stress that it is in the form of signs, in the Scriptures preached by his Ministers, that God mostly presents Himself to man. To that effect, James Baumlín’s study of the *Sermons* argues forcefully that, in them, “Christ’s real presence, the theological ground of the Catholic priest’s essentialist theory of language, retreats into memory and promise as it shrinks to metonymy, becoming [...] a merely figurative presence that heralds absence” (1988: 162).

Paradoxically, since their presence reveals primarily or literally the breach between man and God in this world, the scriptural signs or biblical words are for Donne the “*medicinall correction*” (1953-1962: II, 9, 211), in other words, the remedies which, as he declares in a 1617 sermon on Ps. 55 : 19, are “applied to us out of those Scriptures, by the Church” (1953-1962: I, 4, 235). Their power, which is that of symbols, lies in their ability to renew a lost spiritual tie. The preacher resorts to these sacred words in order to thread again the unravelled link between the congregation and God. But how do the *Sermons* suggest achieving man’s reunion with God? How do they transform the paradoxical signs testifying to God’s presence *in absentia* into instruments meant to restore the lost link between creatures and Creator?

If a communion is possible between man and God in this life, the body plays for Donne a major role in it. Not of course, as in the Catholic Communion, Christ’s body, conceived of as flesh, since in Donne’s reformed creed, that body is an essentially textual and symbolic one or *corpus*. The one corporeal instrument of this reunion is the Minister’s body. Through his sermon, he echoes the text of the Scriptures and actualizes it by breathing his own vocal presence into it. That they should put into contact the congregation and Christ, precisely because they echo Christ’s words through the Minister’s voice, is an idea Donne repeatedly comes back to in the *Sermons*. Insofar as it implies a definition of the homiletic exercise within the very body of the *Sermons*, the question of voice and of its cohesive role spawns a specular discourse in these texts.

It is the case, in particular, of a sermon from 1618 or 1619 on Ezek. 33 : 32: “And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voyce, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they doe them not”. In this sermon, Donne addresses the function of the Minister, whom he compares to God’s instrument. The preacher’s role is to sing God’s peace by paying particular attention to the verbal elaboration of his sermons for his music, he contends, must be harmonious “*in re & in modo*, in matter

and in manner” (1953-1962: II, 7, 167). God’s Minister, Donne adds, “shall not present the messages of God rudely, barbarously, extemporally,” but shall on the contrary, “preach acceptably, seasonably, with a spiritual delight” (1953-1962: II, 7, 167). Such music is indeed of paramount importance as it is meant to draw the congregation closer to God by making it aware of its sins and, at the same time, by pointing at God’s forgiveness. It paves the way for their reunion:

To them, thou shalt be *Tuba*, a Trumpet, Thy preaching shall awaken them, and so bring them to some sence of their sins: To them thou shalt be *carmen musicum*, musick and harmony; both *in re*, in thy matter, they shall conceive an apprehension or an offer of Gods mercy through thee; and *in modo*, in the manner; they shall confess, that thy labors work upon them, and move them, and affect them, and that that unpremeditated, and drowsie, and cold manner of preaching, agrees not with the dignity of Gods service: they shall acknowledge (says God to this Prophet) thy pleasant voice; confesse thy doctrine to be good, and confesse thy playing upon an Instrument, acknowledge thy life to be good too; for, in testimony of all this, *Audient* (saies the text) They shall hear this. (1953-1962: II, 7, 167-168)

Through Isaiah’s words, which make up the verse commented upon and are God’s own, Donne seems to be addressing himself and to be referring to his own preaching in the course of his written sermon. If, by describing the principles that its composition should abide by, this sermon is from the start endowed with a self-referential quality, it spins it on a little further. It indeed highlights the fundamental role played by the preacher’s voice, in other words, by his music, in charge of conveying the Word. Very much as John Baptist, who is said to have been the voice foretelling the arrival of the Messiah in the wilderness, the preacher’s voice is the means to bring Christ’s Word, and therefore Christ himself, to man.<sup>5</sup> Donne thus notes:

Christ is *verbum*. The word; not A word, but The word: The Minister is *Vox*, voyce; not A voyce, but The voice, the voice of that word, and no other; and so, he is a pleasing voyce, because he pleases him that sent him, in a faithfull executing of his Commission, and speaking according to his dictate; and pleasing to them to whom he is sent, by bringing the Gospel of Peace and Reparation to all wounded, and scattered, and contrite Spirits. (1953-1962: II, 7, 172)

Man’s separation from God underlies this passage, which seems to originate in it. Donne indeed describes God’s Minister above all as His delegate (“he pleases him that sent him”), thereby hinting at the distance separating man from God. The preacher’s role and the sermon’s utterance are thus held against a backdrop of absence. However, this extract insists on the sermon’s cohesive value. The parallel statements of the beginning (“Christ is *verbum* [...] and no other”) all bring forth the tight link that binds Christ’s words and the preacher’s sermon. Christ is the Word made flesh, or the incarnate Scriptures. For this Word not to remain absent, for it not to be speechless, it is lent the Minister’s living voice. That voice is the resonant translation of the Word and echoes it faithfully (“speaking according to his dictate”). The connection between the Word and the Minister’s voice is so tight that it seems to participate in a form of ventriloquism. The Minister’s voice, thus lent to Christ, aims at reaching a connective goal that Donne draws attention to at the end of this

<sup>5</sup> In his study of Donne’s *Sermons*, Winfried Schleiner remarks that this passage exemplifies the preacher’s insistence on carefully preparing his sermon along an accurate doctrinal line which fully conforms to Christ, that is to say to the Word. “He sees a functional link between careful preparation and theological conformity,” Schleiner notes (1978: 54).

passage. It reverberates the Word so as to achieve a therapeutic end, to cure and heal spiritual wounds (“wounded”) and to reunify stray, isolated souls (“scattered”). This voice reunites sinners with themselves and with Christ into a harmonious, spiritually healthy bond (“by bringing the Gospel of Peace and Reparation to all wounded”).

By specifying the *modus operandi* of sermons, this passage, itself from a sermon, is self-defining and underlines the principles by which it is informed. Even more so, it is like the reflection or echo of the “pleasing voice” it describes, as suggested, among others, by its accretive syntax, made up of successive glosses and developments, its polysyndetons, and the ternary return of two-syllable words in its conclusion. Self-reflexive, this sermon is seemingly performative too.

The unifying function Donne grants to preaching also appears in a 1626 sermon on Mat. 9 : 13, where the preacher discusses Christ’s first coming on Earth. It is to be regarded as a call addressed to mankind by the Saviour in order for the former to join Him. “*Non venit Occurere,*” Donne says, “he came not to meet man, man was not so forward; so he came not to compel man, to deal upon any that was so backward; for *Venit vocare, He came to call*” (1953-1962: VII, 5, 157). This sermon hinges on the concept of call. As an expression of the incarnate Word, Christ’s call to mankind was bound up with a voice. Christ’s first presence on Earth was thus the vocal form of the Word. Having worked out the equation between Christ’s presence and His voice, Donne explores its implications in sermons. Christ being dead and risen to the Father’s side, how can His call, in other words, the offer to be united to Him, be renewed? Donne’s answer is as follows:

Now, this *calling*, implies a voice, as well as a Word; it is by the Word; but not by the Word read at home, though that be a pious exercise; nor by the word submitted to private interpretation; but *by the Word preached*, according to his Ordinance, and under the Great Seal, of his blessing upon his Ordinance. So that *preaching* is this *calling*; and therefore, as if Christ do appear to any man, in the power of a miracle, or in a private inspiration, yet he appears but in weakness, as in an infancy, till he speak, till he bring man to the hearing of his voice, in a settled Church, and in the Ordinance of preaching; so how long soever Christ have dwelt in any State; or in any Church, if he grow speechless, he is departing; if there be a discontinuing, or slackning of preaching, there is a danger of loosing Christ. *Adam* was not made in Paradise, but brought thither, called thither: the sons of *Adam* are not born in the Church, but called thither by Baptism; *Non Nascimur sed re-nascimur Christiani*; No man is born a Christian, but called into that state by regeneration. (1953-1962: VII, 5, 157)

If Christ’s presence by mankind was in the form of a voice calling on men to join Him, there ensues that man can now only be in Christ’s presence again if the latter is mediated by a voice echoing the Word. If this passage is anything to go by, then, for Donne, this voice is the preacher’s, who, by reading and exposing the Scriptures to the congregation, gives the Word a resonant form again. Donne goes here further than just drawing a comparison between Christ’s call and the auditive experience of the sermon. By stating that “*preaching* is this *calling*”, he underlines that the sermon must be perceived as the re-actualization of Christ’s call and hence of His presence by mankind. A presencing aim is thus at stake in preaching. Listening to the sermon entails accepting to be placed in the presence of Christ’s voice through His Minister’s. It involves being reunited to Him as if by a rebirth (“regeneration”) and being drawn again to Him, as suggested by the repetition “brought thither” / “called thither”.

Conversely, if preaching is weak or interrupted, in other words, if the Word falls short of resounding through the Minister’s voice, men are threatened with being separated from

Christ on a long-term basis, and even with losing Him altogether. In contrast, as the last sentence of the passage makes it clear, as soon as Christ's call is uttered out loud by the preacher's voice, it re-opens for man the perspective of being reunited to Him and of taking part of His everlasting glory, in His presence.

As in the previous text, Donne's insistence on the connective power of the Minister's voice is closely linked in this passage with specular comments by the sermon on itself. Discussing the very nature of sermons, this sermon necessarily includes itself in its definition and ends up developing a self-referential and self-programming discourse. But in addition, its self-mirroring quality is also revealed when, at the very end, Christ's words and the preacher's are seemingly fused or superimposed. The phrase "*Come ye blessed into your Master's joy*" may be read, in a first way, as a quote from Mat. 26 : 34 (even if Donne slightly alters this verse), namely from Christ's own words, and as illustrating Christ's call to mankind. However, grafted into Donne's development and its syntax, this clause may also read as the vocal re-enactment of Christ's call by the preacher, at the very moment when he is theorizing on the sermon as voice aimed at bringing mankind and God into contact again. Because they are ambiguously interlocked, Christ's words and the preacher's turn the sermon from a set of abstract remarks into their application, as if by the Minister's voice it was suddenly operating the renewed, promised connection between God and the congregation it addresses directly ("*ye blessed*"). Self-referential because, as a sermon, it describes the unifying quality of sermons in general, this passage also exemplifies this feature in a performative way.<sup>6</sup>

Part of its interest also lies in that it contrasts the private, silent reading of the Word in the Scriptures to its oral and public utterance at Church, in the sermon ("Now, this *calling*, implies a voice, as well as a Word; it is by the Word; but not by the Word read at home, though that be a pious exercise; nor by the word submitted to private interpretation; but *by the Word preached*, according to his Ordinance"). While highlighting the power of the Minister's voice, this sermon therefore contains a *caveat* regarding the voiceless reading of the Bible, which can only loosely unite man and Christ for, in it, the latter "appears but in weakness, as in an infancy". Reading the Scriptures, that is, apprehending the Word through silent meditation over a written text, does not qualify as a proper means of coming into the Lord's presence. Brief though it may be, this remark is like the seed, sown into the sermon, of a self-deconstructing discourse. Indeed the *Sermons*, which advocate the unifying power of the Minister's voice, are written texts, by definition silent, lending themselves primarily to a silent reading. How effective, therefore, can they be in reuniting their fallen readers and God? There remains to figure out whether these written pieces, which read as spearheads of oral discourse, do not by their nature sap the very ground on which Donne's theology of voice is built. Self-defining, are they not also "self-consuming artefacts"? This now famous phrase might in part be borrowed from Stanley Fish for the study of the *Sermons*. The American critic coined this notion and applied it to the dialectical text. According to him, "by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer," this curative text "becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment" (1972: 3). A "self-consuming" text is therefore self-erasing precisely because, when achieving the conversion of its reader, it ends up being forgotten. It "signifies most

<sup>6</sup> In addition to these examples of self-mirroring sermons putting forth the cohesive role played by the Minister's voice as echo of Christ's, see also a 1621 sermon on 1. Cor. 16 : 22 (1953-1962: III, 14, 292), a 1624 sermon on Mat. 3 : 17 (1953-1962: VI, 6, 134) and a sermon on Mark 4 : 27, dating back from 1627 (1953-1962: VII, 16, 400).

successfully when it fails, when it points away from itself to something its forms cannot capture” (1972: 4). Self-referential as they so often are, Donne’s *Sermons* cannot be said to point away from themselves and, as such, they do not conform with this feature in Fish’s definition. However, the critic’s concept does provide a relevant entry point into the *Sermons* in that they, too, may well be involved in a self-sapping process whereby they also “fail”. Indeed their self-attention leads them to reveal that, as written, silent texts, they can barely read as holding the voice that will reconcile mankind and the divine.

### 3 Questioning the connective power of silent, written sermons

#### 3.1 Oral discourse mimicked: Donne’s *Sermons* as mock prosopopeia

Fascinated as he was with death, Donne preached repeatedly on the Resurrection. Central to this event is the sound of a voice, that of Christ in the shape of an archangel, calling bodies to be reunited before man’s ultimate and eternal reunion with God. As the preacher declared in a 1622 sermon on I. Thes. 4 : 17, preached on Easter Day:

Then, when the dead in Christ are first risen, and risen by Christs comming down from heaven, in clamore, in a shout, in the voice of the Archangel, and in the Trumpet of God, Then, when that is done, We that are alive, and remain, shall bee wrought upon, and all being joyned in one body, They, and we together, shall be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the ayre, and so shall we be ever with the Lord. (1953-1962: IV, 2, 64)

Christ’s powerful and loud voice triggers the connective process of the bodily Resurrection. Remarkably, voice and resurrection are also tied up in another body, namely that of the *Sermons*, where, however, their polarities are inverted. If indeed a resurrection is sought after in this whole work, it is that of Donne’s own voice.

For all their theatrical vividness, the *Sermons* essentially differ from other oralised writings, such as dramatic texts, customarily written and then performed, in that they were, for most of them, first preached by Donne and only to be cast in a written form later. Originally intended as oral discourses, they came to be texts in a second stage only. In their introduction to the most complete edition of Donne’s *Sermons* available today, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter provide noteworthy evidence suggesting that these texts were penned by Donne (sometimes long) after their oral public delivery (1953-1962: I, 1-3). In a 1625 letter sent to Sir Thomas Roe, as he was staying with Lady Danvers, during an outbreak of plague, Donne explicitly explains having revised earlier notes from which he preached and having fleshed them out into eighty sermons which he intended to be of “some use” to his son (Gosse 1899: II, 222-225). In an unusual and brief introduction to a sermon on Mat. 4 : 18-20, written in 1630 at his daughter Constance’s home, Donne specifies having preached on those same verses in The Hague in 1619. He compares the revision of his notes to a digestive process after which he came up with not one but two sermons: “At the Haghe, Decemb. 19, 1619. I preached upon this Text. Since my sicknesse at *Abrey-hatche* in Essex, 1630, revising my short notes of that sermon, I digested them into these two” (1953-1962: II, 13, 269). One last testimony comes as a letter dated November 17, 1664, and printed in the “Life of Donne” chapter of Izaak Walton’s *Lives* (1670). Its author is Henry King, a close friend of Donne’s, whom the late Dean had appointed as his literary executor. He confesses having constantly encouraged Donne to revise his preaching notes into sermons intended for publication, which, he asserts, the preacher gave him on his death bed (1953-1962: I, 1-3). On the basis of these converging elements, and with reference to an

earlier study (Sparrow 1931), the American editors of *The sermons of John Donne* conclude that:

[...] The sermons as we have them in the Folios are not word for word the sermons as Donne preached them. For many of them Donne had merely short notes; for others, a copy which had been “exscribed” [...]. Sparrow shows from the example of Hall, Ussher, Dr. More, Baxter, and others that Donne’s practice in preaching from notes a sermon which he carefully thought out and memorized was the usual method of seventeenth-century preachers. (1953-1962: I, 3)<sup>7</sup>

If this evidence is reliable, then its implications for the question of voice in the *Sermons* branch out into several, closely related threads. They point at the deceitful quality of these texts which, while written following their delivery, strain nonetheless to keep up the appearance of oral discourses. Except for the 1630 palimpsest—if such a term may be used—of a sermon preached in The Hague some eleven years before, the *Sermons* do not draw attention to their deferred writing. On the contrary, they mostly appear preceded by references to the dates and places of their preaching. Far from hinting at a subsequent writing, let alone re-writing, such peripheral references blur the boundary between the oral sermons and their written versions, suggesting that they are identical. Thus, whereas they are based on past oral talks, the *Sermons* conceal this oral origin and the secondary nature which applies to any text and to theirs in particular. Such a secondary status of the written signifier might best be underlined with reference to what Jacques Derrida remarks in *Of grammatology*. As noted by the philosopher, the written word derives from language, which is uttered by voice and is a representation of the soul’s intimate *logos*. The text is thus the representation of a representation. “All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense,” Derrida stresses (1976: 11). Interestingly, Donne’s *Sermons* conform to this taxonomy (the written *Sermons* derive from the oral discourses voiced by Donne), but at the same time most of them hide the *différance* (‘deferred status’) which affects their composition.

In addition, the body of the *Sermons*, whilst unable to conceal its textual nature, reads as an unrelenting attempt at mimicking its oral version and, in the process, at making the reader believe that it faithfully transcribes it. Such artificiality is underlined by P.M. Oliver who suggests that it is a feature Donne’s *Sermons* and poems have in common:

When Donne revised sermons for the press, he in effect set out to create new texts which give readers the illusion of being listeners. [...] Readers are thus given the impression of eavesdropping on someone preaching in much the same way that in the poems they seem to be eavesdropping on a lover addressing the object of his attentions or an anxious Christian speaking to God or his soul. (1997: 238)

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<sup>7</sup> In a more recent article, in which he notes that “of Donne’s one hundred and sixty extant sermons, probably not one which we read is in the same form as when it was preached” (1978: 313), Paul G. Stanwood compares some sermon notes found in a notebook belonging to John Burley (a contemporary of Donne’s) with the corresponding published *Sermons*. The notes may either have been copied from Donne’s autograph notes, as the two men knew each other, or transcribed after hearing Donne preach. Stanwood’s study does show similarities in themes and imagery, but also reveals the published *Sermons* to be way more copious and periodic in style.

The fake, transcribed orality of the *Sermons* appears in different ways.<sup>8</sup> Donne thus often justifies studying such or such a verse as it is appropriate to the day of the sermon's delivery.<sup>9</sup> He frequently refers to the duration of his sermon, measured by an “*heure glasse*” (1953-1962: VII, 8, 444), and sometimes openly hurries on to the remaining stages in his development for fear of having too little time left.<sup>10</sup> On other occasions, when discussing one verse over two distinct sermons, he refers to his previous words and underlines their connection with his topic of the day, or calls off additional remarks to an unspecified date.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the *Sermons* also abound in direct addresses to the congregation. Whether sweet, as when Donne turns to those he calls “Beloved”, perfunctory, as when he announces the end of his talk,<sup>12</sup> or full of rebuke,<sup>13</sup> such remarks all sustain the illusion that the *Sermons* duplicate an oral talk given by the preacher.

Behind such artifices aimed at recreating oral utterance, there hide two lies. To state the obvious, the *Sermons* are texts and, as such, they are confined to silence. But above all, they never were voiced, at any rate not under the form in which they were printed. The evidence from the letters and the sermon mentioned earlier shows that, in preparing the *Sermons* for the press, Donne worked from sheer notes which he transformed and lengthened, thereby certainly considerably altering the once preached sermons. However, at first sight, the *Sermons* appear as the echo chamber of a spectral voice resurrected from the

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<sup>8</sup> In her book *Contrary music: The prose style of John Donne*, Joan Webber dedicates one entire chapter to the study of the preacher's voice in the *Sermons* (1963: 90-122). Her analysis does point at a number of rhetorical ploys used by Donne to recreate oral discourse in these texts and at the ensuing sense of “self-dramatization” they build (1963: 117). Webber's comments, to which this study is indebted, bring forth such important features in Donne's style as his “humor, his irony, his use of horror, his immediacy, and his theatricality” (1963: 90). She demonstrates very convincingly how, through them, Donne often stages himself as “mediator” between God and the congregation (1963: 115-120) and how they “give the sermons urgency and provide a setting for immediate meditation” (1963: 120). However, the present study is at variance with Webber's approach which, as it turns out, centres on “the *tone of voice* that we seem to hear when we read the sermons” (1963: 90). Remarkably, she neither comments on Donne's own developments about the question of the preacher's voice nor on the ironical discrepancy between the written nature of the *Sermons* and their repeated praise of the Minister's voice.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, a 1624 sermon preached at St. Dunstan's on Trinity Sunday. In Donne's view, this date suits perfectly the study of Mat. 3 : 17 (“And lo, a voyce came from heaven, saying, this is my beloved sonne, in whom I am well pleased”) as this verse is particularly telling about the mystery of the Holy Trinity (1953-1962: VI, 6, 132-133).

<sup>10</sup> A case in point is provided by a sermon commemorating the death of Lady Danvers, preached in July 1627, in which Donne apologises for not paying full justice to the deceased's social merits as he has already too little time to pay tribute to her spiritual worth (1953-1962: VIII, 2, 90).

<sup>11</sup> Such a reference to earlier developments and to possible future comments appears in a sermon on John I : 8, preached on Midsummer Day, 1622, after a Christmas sermon on that same verse. In the conclusion, Donne traces again the steps he has followed in these two sermons and adds that subsequent remarks on this text will need making on a later day (1953-1962: IV, 5, 162).

<sup>12</sup> See this brief passage from an undated sermon on Ps. 38 : 2: “To end all, and to dismisse you with such a re-collecion, as you may carry away with you; literally, primarily, this text concerns *David*” (1953-1962: II, 1, 69).

<sup>13</sup> In an outstanding passage from an undated sermon on Job 19 : 26, preached at Lincoln's Inn, Donne imagines and explicitly “voices” the reactions elicited by his talk in the congregation, which he simultaneously chides for its flimsy attention (1953-1962: III, 3, 110).

pulpit where it was formerly heard. This voice has faded into silence and, along with it, the oral discourse it carried has passed away. Therefore, to resuscitate them in written texts, as the *Sermons* pretend to do, is akin to making ghosts appear, or to making the dead speak. The *Sermons* seem to be the outcome of a self-applied form of ventriloquism and, since the dead words creep back on the page in a written form, they are similar to a large-scale *prosopopeia*. Or mock *prosopopeia* as they seemingly transcribe the original sermons delivered by Donne, but result in fact from their re-writing.

Even if they seem to call back to life a voice and its live discourse, the *Sermons* actually replace them with words that were never uttered in the same form. In short, try as they might to hide it, these texts are strikingly voiceless. They are deprived of a voice first because they are written texts, but also because the voice they try to make pass off as theirs is one that never had any self-same existence in the first place.

Such built-in voicelessness cannot but read as a paradox when it is seen as the actual background against which the *Sermons* so strongly assert time and time again the efficiency of the Minister's voice in reuniting mankind and God. This also entails that the mirror-like quality they often display is certainly two-edged. Indeed, it might well be regarded as the cornerstone of a self-deflating discourse in which the *Sermons* point at their own inability to perform as texts any presencing of mankind and God.

### 3.2 Self-debasing discourse

The impossible resurrection of voice appears as a particularly potent form of self-subversion in the Easter 1622 sermon on I. Thes. 4 : 17 earlier hinted at. It underlies this sermon as a negative watermark or soundtrack above which Donne's main discourse, namely the Resurrection of the dead, is played out.

As shown by the preacher in an analysis he carefully buttresses with reference to the two preceding verses (I. Thes. 4 : 15-16), the Resurrection is a connective process. It reunites those whose died in Christ into one community and everlastingly binds them to Him: "[...] *and so shall we be ever with the Lord,*" he points out (1953-1962: IV, 2, 64). Remarkably, this unifying process is set into motion by the acoustic power of Christ's loud voice or, as Donne notes, "*by Christs comming down from heaven, in a clamore, in a shout, in the voice of the Archangel, and in the Trumpet of God*" (1953-1962: IV, 2, 64). In this sermon, Donne reasserts his belief in voice, and more precisely in Christ's voice, as antidote against man's separation from Him and even as motivating principle of their reunion at the Last Day. However, the power of voice, in which Donne displays such faith, is not reserved for the Resurrection alone. From his scrutiny of the biblical discourse and the future it portends, he passes on to its implications in the present. He exposes the theological content of the verse under study before applying it to the congregation. From the next world to this, there is but one step which the preacher makes in his next development. Cast in the form of an analogy, the latter gives pride of place to the one voice heard here by the congregation, the preacher's:

All these pieces, that it is *In clamore, In a cry, in a shout*, that it is *In the voyce of the Archangell*, that it is *In the Trumpet of God*, make up this Conclusion, That all Resurrections from the dead, must be from the voice of God, and from his loud voyce; It must be so, even in thy first Resurrection, thy resurrection from sin, by grace here: here, thou needest the voice of God, and his loud voyce. And therefore, though thou thinke thou heare sometimes Gods sibilations, (as the Prophet *Zechary* speaks) Gods soft and whispering voyce, (inward remorses of thine owne; and motions of the Spirit of

God to thy spirit) yet thinke not thy spirituall resurrection accomplished, till, in this place, thou heare his loud voyce; Till thou heare Christ descended from Heaven, (as the text sayes) that is, working in his Church; Till thou heare him *In clamore*, in this cry, in this shout, in this voyce of Penetration, of perswasion, of power, that is, till thou feele in thy selfe in this place a liquefaction, a colliquation, a melting of thy bowels under the commination of the Judgements of God upon thy sin, and the application of his mercy to thy Repentance. (1953-1962: IV, 2, 70)

The voice heard at the Resurrection has an equivalent in this life in the voice of the preacher, sounding from the pulpit and heard by the congregation. It resurrects the sin-dead souls of those who attend holy service just as Christ's voice resurrects the dead. The minister's voice, as an echo of Christ's, has a similar cohesive function. It conveys the threat of God's judgement and provides the assurance of His mercy. Its therapeutic effect ("a liquefaction, a colliquation, a melting of thy bowels") is the rebirth of the sinner's soul ("thy resurrection from sin"), that is to say the restoration of its own unity, of its alliance with the Church and, above all, of its so far unravelling union with God.

This sermon is blatantly self-referential. First of all, it addresses the unifying effect of preaching in general ("thinke not thy spirituall resurrection accomplished, till [...] thou heare Christ descended from Heaven, (as the text sayes) that is, working in his Church") in the course of a supposed preaching exercise, thereby defining its own operative mode as oral discourse and pointing at its potency. But more importantly still, the self-reflexive nature of this passage appears in its closely knit string of deictics. The latter build a fictional situation of utterance (which is not acknowledged as such) in which the sermon keeps pointing at itself. These few lines are thus fraught with direct addresses to the congregation ("thy first Resurrection, thy resurrection from sin" / "thou needest the voice of God" / "though thou thinke thou heare" / "inward remorses of thine owne" / "to thy spirit" / "yet thinke not thy spirituall resurrection accomplished, till, in this place, thou heare his loud voyce; Till thou heare Christ" / "Till thou heare him" / "till thou feele in thy selfe" / "thy bowels" / "thy sin" / "thy Repentance"). Moreover, the sermon explicitly draws attention to the place in which it is delivered, to be understood both as this world and as the church filled by Donne's voice ("thy resurrection from sin, by grace here: here, thou needest" / "yet thinke not thy spirituall resurrection accomplished, till, in this place, thou heare his loud voyce" / "working in his Church" / "till thou feele in thy selfe in this place"). Above all, with the repetitive use of the demonstrative article ("this"), the sermon defines itself as the one powerful and cohesive voice that it discusses ("*In clamore*, in this cry, in this shout, in this voyce of Penetration, of perswasion, of power"). It comments on the Minister's voice as echo of Christ's and claims at the same time to be its actualization. Describing in its very body the preacher's voice as the medium capable of joining again the congregation and the Almighty, this sermon pretends to be the enactment of this voice.

However, because such a self-definition is constructed by the words of a written, voiceless text, it immediately traps itself into self-denial. The fallacy of the oral discourse, and of its power to effect the communion of the congregation with God, may well be orchestrated with great care, it is uncovered as fallacy when pitted against the reality of this discourse's form: that of a silent piece of writing. Once revealed, this forgery makes the text's claim to a mighty, unifying voice read ironically. The repetitions, the gradations and the alliteration ("in this cry, in this shout, in this voyce of Penetration, of perswasion, of power"), intended as illustrations of this powerful voice, become but the ineffectual adornments of its silence. Whereas it asserts the contrary, this sermon, as a written text, constantly heralds its voicelessness. Its reflexivity thus makes it run the gauntlet of irony. Not only does the text

pretend to unite mankind and God through a voice it is deprived of, but it also exhibits this very deprivation. Running against its official grain, what it seems to confess in voiceover is its failure to connect mankind and godhead in its body. If it is self-reflexive indeed, it is above all because, beneath its surface, it saps its own pretence and relegates to pure fiction the resurrection of its voice, as well as its so-called ability to perform with it the union of man and God.

#### 4 Conclusion

Accounting for the irony that overshadows the *Sermons* with respect to the issue of voice can only be left to hypotheses. One of them is to see these texts as endowed, beyond appearances, with a playfulness that is not alien to other parts of Donne's literary production. Indeed, such a paradox as that of written voice and the self-derisive, unvoiced discourse it brings in its wake cannot have been overlooked by such a fine wit as Donne. This is evidenced by many a poem of his where the self-mirroring of words goes hand in glove with puns and twists overturning the intended purport. From that vantage point, the *Sermons* would come into line with the poems.

Another hypothesis may be to qualify this irony. Donne may not have so completely and radically undervalued the connective power of the written word. Such a reassessment of the value of the written sermon appears in an April 1619 letter Donne sent along with a copy of a previously preached sermon (on Mat. 21 : 44) to the Countess of Montgomery.<sup>14</sup> This letter suggests that in Donne's view the oral sermon and its written form have equal spiritual qualities as they are inspired by the same "Spirit of God":

I know what dead carcasses things written are in respect of things spoken. But in things of this kind, that soul that inanimates them receives debts from them. The Spirit of God that dictates them in the speaker or writer and is present in his tongue or hand meets himself again (as we meet ourselves in a glass) in the eyes and hearts of the hearers and readers, and that Spirit, which is ever the same to an equal devotion, makes a writing and a speaking equal means to edification. In one circumstance my preaching and my writing this sermon is too equal: that that your ladyship heard in a hoarse voice then, you read in a coarse hand now; but in thankfulness I shall lift up my hands as clean as my infirmities can keep them, and a voice as clear as His spirit shall be pleased to tune in my prayers for your Ladyship in all places of the world, which shall either sustain or bury—  
Your Ladyship's humble servant in Christ Jesus, J.D. (Gosse 1899: II, 123)

Donne asserts here that the written sermon he humbly describes as ill-written will contain his voice or, at any rate, that in reading this written text, his addressee will supply her own (perhaps silent) voice and substitute it to his. The written text will thus have as efficient a spiritual effect as the oral sermon. Interestingly, this letter does not completely do away with voice. Even if Donne grants his written and oral sermons an equal value, he returns to the power of voice, his own (preserved in textual matter), or the reader's, which is to echo or reverberate the former. The written word is not reduced to speechlessness as long as Donne's voice endures or as another voice can give it life again. Donne thus throws here the self-debasing stance of the *Sermons* into corrected focus and softens their irony. However, while qualifying the self-deconstructing discourse of the sermon on I. Thes. 4 : 17, and of others, this epistle does not for all that utterly root out such irony. Indeed these written texts highlight the connective value of spoken words and pretend to duplicate them while remaining, in the reader's apprehension, textual and silent objects.

<sup>14</sup> I am very grateful to Dr. Pascal Caillet for drawing my attention to this letter.

Present in this letter to the Countess of Montgomery, the positive revaluation of the written, silent word, which may not be as lame and ineffectual as it may seem, also links *Sermons* and poems, albeit in a different way. In a 1623 sermon preached on the Penitential Psalms (Ps. 6 : 8-10), Donne conjures up again the question of human voice with reference to David’s words: “For the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping”. Considered literally, the voice of the text does not come from man’s usual vocal organs, but from silent liquid drops: David’s tears. They may be soundless, they are nevertheless eloquent, Donne argues, and speak volumes to God’s almighty ear, which in them hears discourse, in particular disarray:

Here is an admirable readinesse in God, that heares a voyce in that, which hath none. They have described God by saying he is all eye, an universall eye, that pierceth into every dark corner; but in darke corners, there is something for him to see; but he is all eare too, and heares even the silent, and speechlesse man, and heares that in that man, that makes no sound, his teares. (1953-1962: VI, I, 47)

The paradox of silent voice resurfaces in this sermon, but in a completely different and positive form. If, in most places, the silence of the *Sermons* disqualifies them as sound instruments to achieve the reunion of man and God, this particular text shifts the perspective by highlighting the power of God’s well-pricked ear. If human silence is discourse to God, then, unvoiced though it may be, this written sermon—along with the others—may be heard by the Almighty too and, through its silent words, reunite preacher and Creator. As an echo of Donne’s written text, the reader’s paradoxical, silent voice, elicited by the very act of reading, will in turn be heard by the divine ear and thus seal again an alliance between man and God. This communion may be mediated by the written text precisely because it no longer results from the divine voice being reverberated to the congregation through the preacher’s, but from the reader’s silent voice being received by God through the preacher’s silent text. In this sermon, the paradox of the eloquent silence heard by God is reminiscent of stanza XXIII of “A Litany”, a poem Donne wrote in 1608 or 1609. Referring to God’s own self-reflexive nature this time, the speaker asserts that the divine ear, rightly attuned, transforms despaired human silence and tears into voice, turns speechlessness into articulated discourse for it hears in them God’s own voice:

Hear us, for till thou hear us, Lord  
We know not what to say  
Thine ear to our sighs, tears, thoughts gives voice and word.  
O thou who Satan heard’st in Job’s sick day,  
Hear thyself now, for thou in us dost pray. (1986: 324 ll203-207)

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