DANCING BEFORE THE LORD:
RENAISSANCE LUDICS AND INCARNATIONAL DISCOURSE

by

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Play is a manifestation of overflowing excess. When applied to the study of discourse, this bounty can be understood in terms of figurativeness and depth. If “degree-zero” discourse is the almost entirely unfigured language of an instruction manual, then verse lies near the other extreme: highly figured and elaborate language open to rich interpretive possibilities. I posit a further pole yet on this continuum: the hyperabundant texts of the Renaissance, when ludics were at a height partially quashed by the Enlightenment preference for the plain style. These ludic texts are not merely decorative but rather reflect the incarnational impulse of Renaissance Christian thought; they attempt to praise and to imitate the power of Divine language, in which Word is made Flesh in the West’s master model of superabundance, grace through Christ’s Incarnation and Sacrifice.

This project conducts three case studies of playfully incarnational discourses during the Renaissance: in speech, in imagery, and in verse. First, it analyzes sermons by John Donne that reflect candidly on the power of Donne’s own ludic speech, concluding that his transgressive, gamelike rhetoric was oriented toward stimulating responsive action. Next, it examines period images through the lens of contemporary popular works that conceive of images as puzzles to be decoded, solved, and read, concluding that period anamorphoses and similar works were efforts to infuse images with lively presence in a way that helps to account for iconophobic and iconophilic
strains in English Reformation thought. Finally, it reads George Herbert’s deceptively simple poem, “The Altar,” examining how the piece may be understood as an intervention into the shaped-verse tradition and how it reflects on period debates about Church fabric, concluding that the toylike or tricklike construction evokes the Eucharistic presence of the Divine in Herbert’s worshipful meditation.

At stake are a greater appreciation for Renaissance artistry, a fuller understanding of the complexity of the English Reformation, and a richer vocabulary for play theorists working with ludic discourses. A conclusion considers these implications and explains why Renaissance thinkers might have chosen a ludic mode of imitative worship—God’s grace and creation are themselves forms of play.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


Dedicated with love to the memories of Percy and Leola Jarrell
A broken altar, Lord, thy servant reares
Is it possible from now on, to maintain and defend, or even to reconquer, the right and claims of leisure, in the face of the claims of “total labour” that are invading every sphere of life? Leisure, it must be remembered, is not a Sunday afternoon idyll, but the preserve of freedom, of education and culture, and of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole. In other words, is it going to be possible to save men from becoming officials and functionaries and “workers” to the exclusion of all else? Can that possibly be done, and if so in what circumstances? There is no doubt of one thing: the world of the “worker” is taking shape with dynamic force—with such a velocity that, rightly or wrongly, one is tempted to speak of daemonic force in history.

—Josef Pieper, Leisure: The Basis of Culture (1948)

[T]he highest things, even prayer and belief, require a certain playfulness about them. It is only when we realize that human affairs stand not simply by themselves but relate us to our end—to our transcendent destiny—that we can relax about what we are, indeed, 

become what we are.

—James V. Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs (2001)
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It is a pleasure to account here for some of the many humbling debts that I have accumulated in the process of thinking about, researching, and writing this dissertation and during the years of work and study (graduate and otherwise) that preceded this endeavor.

Meryl Altman, Albert Bades Fernandez, and James Savage initially sparked my interest in the study of literature during my time as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary; the flame that they kindled burns here. Neal Devins introduced me to the world of scholarship during my time in law school and as his research assistant, and he has been a gracious and loyal supporter during the many years since my rewarding work with him. Christopher Opalinski, a friend more than a boss, patiently endured my application of literature to the legal realm and unfailingly stood behind me whenever I needed his aid and wisdom.

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helped me to produce better, more penetrating prose; Dr. Bialostosky also played an instrumental role in the development of Chapter II on ludic speech in the Renaissance. Courtney Weikle-Mills expressed confidence in my teaching and offered generous moral support. Shalini Puri was a consistent source of encouragement and modeled for me what the work of a scholar should look like at its very best. Nancy Glazener, as director of graduate studies, supplied assistance and guidance when it was most helpful, near the completion of this project; Jesse Daugherty, as graduate administrator, was also invaluable. Many colleagues and good friends—Eleni Anastasiou, Cory Goehring, Kerry Mockler, and Javier Vázquez-D’Elía chief among them—stood squarely in my corner, warming and illuminating life with their fond presence.

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Albert Labriola changed my life by introducing me to the metaphysical poets and by setting me on the path of which this dissertation is simultaneously the first and last step; I shall never be his equal, but I pray that my work here would have pleased him. My only regret in connection with this project is that Dr. Labriola’s untimely passing deprived me of the great privilege of working with him as a junior colleague, and this dissertation is inevitably weaker for the immense void that he left behind.
 Needless to say, the members of my committee deserve special mention here. Peggy Knapp merits great thanks for her willingness to step in as a reader at very close to the last minute, with immense enthusiasm and graciousness and with extremely valuable contributions to my thinking. Colin MacCabe inspired me to do some of my best intellectual work during his stirring graduate seminar on film adaptation and offered a much-needed insistence that I finish this project during a time when the task seemed too daunting to contemplate. Jennifer Waldron was a formative early influence on Chapter III on ludic imagery in the Renaissance, and she had confidence in me and in this project even when I did not; in no small measure, her help and support made this dissertation possible. And John Twyning—as my dissertation director, as department chair, and as associate dean—made the years of my intellectual apprenticeship much more meaningful by virtue of his guidance.

I have been richly blessed with a loving and supportive family, whose vibrant spirit I fully hope is incarnated and made manifest in this work, which is for all of them as much as it is for myself. My late grandparents, Percy and Leola Jarrell, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, are largely responsible for who and where I am today; because they generously shared in the task of raising me, I would have been poorer in many ways without them, and not a single day passes for me without many fond memories of their love and care. My mother, Jean Wright, and my aunt, Jane Almond, are much more than family—they are my best friends in the world, and they have always supported me without condition as the greatest cheering section that a person could ever desire; I know that they are overjoyed to see this work completed, and I offer it back to them as a small tribute to all that they mean to me. Finally, my pack is central to my life. This dissertation and the work that preceded it simply would never have come about without Randy Laxton’s unwavering love and generosity; he undertook quite a task in agreeing to share my life with me, including the burdens and
joys of producing these pages, and his light ever shines upon them. Tia (who really should have been here to see this moment arrive), Mya, and Jack made contributions that they can probably understand in their own peculiar ways.

To these and to others whom I may have omitted through an unpardonable degree of negligence:

_Thou that hast giv’n so much to me, / Give one thing more, a gratefull heart._

†
Play is incarnated in this grotesque of a game-board maker composed of the products of his trade. Incarnationally ludic discourse—communicative acts that playfully seek to emulate the perfect creative power of Divine speech, in which Word is made Flesh—is the subject of the pages that follow. Discourse practitioners during the Renaissance, and more particularly during the English Reformation, offered their speech, images, and verse as modes of imitative worship. To understand this phenomenon is to appreciate more fully the relationships between discourse and the English Reformation.
PREFACE

My interests in literature and art—or discourses, as we call them today—fall principally within the traditional realms of aesthetics and formalism, if not entirely under the aegis of the New Criticism. I do not consider myself a New Historian, nor do I conceive of my critical practice as being consistently within the currently dominant mode of cultural studies, although Chapter III is a bit of an exception with its emphasis on popular culture. To see why I tend to resist these movements, take for instance Stephen Greenblatt’s seminal exploration of the relationships between Shakespeare’s King Lear and period discourses on exorcism.1 Despite its status as a brilliant piece of scholarship, and regardless of how enjoyable it might be to read about such a juicy topic, I emerge from the essay feeling as though I have learned altogether too much about Renaissance exorcisms and altogether too little about King Lear. This is not the kind of critical work that I wish to do, for I sense that within his pages—where he takes such great pains to distance himself from the critical tradition that came before him2—Greenblatt has neglected the more interesting and significant text in his concern not to neglect its cultural context: not to be a New Critic. I sense, in other words, that he has missed the trees for the forest. But take on the other hand a monument of the New Critical enterprise,


2 Assuming the position of a New Critic, Greenblatt proclaims, “As a freestanding, self-sufficient, disinterested art work produced by a solitary genius, King Lear has only an accidental relationship to its sources: they provide a glimpse of the ‘raw material’ that the artist fashioned.” Ibid., 89. One wonders what kind of New Critic takes such an extreme position about the hermeticism of literary texts or about their selective impermeability to their sources. My impression is that Greenblatt is erecting a kind of straw man, exaggerating the excesses of the New Criticism in order more powerfully to position himself as doing something new and different.
Cleanth Brooks’ marvelous close reading of John Donne’s “The Canonization.” Despite Brooks’ great gifts for delicacy and nuance, I emerge from his essay feeling that I have learned about . . . what, exactly? To be sure, I now know more, perhaps the very nearly definitive word, about how Donne’s poem works as an artifact of verse language, but the piece in some senses feels like a mere exercise, one in which too little is at stake. Perhaps W. H. Auden was right that “poetry makes nothing happen,” but that is not to say that language does not ultimately matter to history and to other salient pieces of life’s business. In the work that follows, one of my objectives is to balance and bridge the gap between these two modes of critique, paying keen and respectful attention to the pieces of literary and visual art that I consider, which will be of cardinal importance here, but also considering the question of what is at stake in my close readings and analyses for the community of scholars of the English Renaissance and Reformation.

To explore play in our contemporary moment might be considered in some quarters a trivial, regressive, even reactionary move—matters more closely connected with the triad of race, class, and gender seem to be more in vogue. But the spirit of this dissertation is very much in line with the thinking of the period that I am examining, a period during which ludics were at a cultural height that the West has never since regained (although some of the features of postmodern thought come achingly close) and during which play was a matter, as we shall see, of great seriousness. As a result,

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5 See, for example, Teresa L. Ebert, Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism, Critical Perspectives on Women and Gender (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). See also James V. Schall, On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs: Teaching, Writing, Playing, Believing, Lecturing, Philosophizing, Singing, Dancing (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001), 5 (“In times of wars and rumors of wars, which I suppose may be any time in some part of the world, I know it will seem strange, even a bit improper, to talk of play and not of peace or victory or protest”).

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the project that unfolds in these pages might be best conceived as one that carries on the tradition of *serio ludere*: play that sportively engages with serious and even grave affairs, not in order to dismiss them casually as unworthy of conscientious treatment but rather in order to see them from a slanted, creative angle that can be surprisingly productive and also refreshing. The serious play at issue in this dissertation involves the most important matter imaginable for the Christian mind, whether during the Renaissance or today: the nature of the human relationship with the Divine. If my own work is not necessarily playful in its tone or approach, then at least the figures whom I consider can be said to epitomize that ludic spirit in their contemplation of this central question.

This project engages with two distinct yet closely related movements, the Renaissance and the Reformation. I have attempted with great care to distinguish between them, at least insofar as it is possible to separate them at all. Where I refer to the period in general I have used the term *Renaissance* (or occasionally the phrase *early modern*), but where my emphasis specifically pertains to issues of theology or religious praxis I have used the term *Reformation*.

Whenever it has been feasible to do so, I have relied on period versions of the texts that I consider, and in those cases I have elected to maintain those sources’ original spellings, including *v* for *w*, *u* for *v* (and vice versa), and *i* for *j*. I have only altered the long *s* for typographical reasons; were I able to reproduce it in this document, I would have kept it in the interests of purity.

In the perennial debate—footnotes versus endnotes—I have chosen the former. As befits my legal background, my notes are often long and discursive rather than serving as mere citational
apparatus. Accordingly, the balance between advantages and disadvantages seemed to favor footnotes. Although they might occasionally disrupt the formatting of the document and although I run the risk of distracting my reader, footnotes will spare him or her the frustration of having to flip back and forth from text to notes, and they will make my scholarship more readily visible, an important consideration in a document of this nature.

I have followed the citation style and other formatting directives contained in the 16th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, a more mature, complete, and scholarly alternative to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. At appropriate junctures I have departed modestly from *Chicago* style in the interests of clarity, precision, and depth of detail.

My tendency is to quote liberally from my sources, allowing them to speak for themselves as part of the dialogue that I wish to create. This, too, is a part of the tradition of legal scholarship from which I emerge, although I have found the practice to be somewhat less common in the humanities. Because images are central to Chapters III and IV, and because they have been a delight to engage with elsewhere, I have used many of them throughout the following pages. Unfortunately, the result of these choices was that the task of obtaining the requisite permissions became somewhat time-consuming and unwieldy. Many people and rights-holders graciously cooperated in that endeavor, and they receive credit following my bibliography.

With respect to quotations, I have assiduously attempted to maintain each author’s language and to distinguish clearly between my interpolations, ellipses, and emphases and the author’s own.

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6 Consult any law review article and you will immediately notice that the ratio of footnotes to main text is often absurdly unbalanced, with footnotes (even though printed in smaller type) regularly consuming more of each page than the text of the article itself. Composing in this style—in which every observation or claim, no matter how apparently uncontroversial, must be diligently and forthrightly annotated—is an old habit that is dying hard, but I have attempted to extract most of the integral material from my notes and to place it instead in the main text. Where I have been unable to resist (as here in this meta-note), I ask for my reader’s kind understanding and forbearance.
In this regard, please note that all non-original ellipses are bracketed. Bracketed ellipses are used to open a quotation beginning with a capital letter in order to indicate that the capital letter in the original is not the start of a sentence; bracketed ellipses between sentences indicate that I have omitted one or more complete sentences in quoting the original source; bracketed ellipses have generally been omitted before final punctuation where a sentence continues in the original beyond the scope of my quotation. All emphases in bold and italic type are my own; these are to be distinguished from emphases in italics alone: these are the authors’ original emphases when they are seen in quotations, but in my text they are used for identifying words and terms. In all quotations, footnotes have been omitted; citations and source references in quotations are omitted except where in my judgment they may be useful for the reader.

In the interest of clarity, I have shortened long titles of period works sub silentio in the main text and footnotes; in the bibliography, I have used non-bracketed ellipses, in conformance with Chicago style, in order to indicate which titles I have shortened in this fashion.

I made the somewhat unorthodox choice to compose this document on Corel WordPerfect X5, mediated by Parallels Desktop 9 for Mac; the principal alternative is simply not well suited to producing anything more complex than a grocery list, at least not with ease or grace. WordPerfect is responsive rather than dictatorial, intuitive rather than Byzantine, and effortlessly generates footnotes without recourse to a clumsy interface.

Finally, I consider this dissertation not merely as a work of scholarship but also as an expression of my deeply held Christian faith. The process of completing it has been a devotional exercise, and indeed, conceiving of it as such was one of the primary reasons why I was able to complete it at all. The first epigraph that I have chosen for the dissertation, immediately following my dedication page, is the first line of George Herbert’s “The Altar,” a poem which I shall consider
near the end of the project: *A broken altar, Lord, thy servant reares*. It speaks with greater clarity, compactness, and poignancy than I possess in my own words to what this work ultimately represents for me.

†
Figure 2. Francesco Salviati, *David Dancing in front of the Ark*, 1552–54. Sala dell’Udienza d’Inverno, Palazzo Sacchetti, Rome.

Through a choice of sun-drenched colors and a vivid rendering of David’s flowing and billowing garb, Salviati in this image captures something of the Hebrew king’s enthusiasm as he dances exultantly before the ark of the covenant in praise of God. Worship in the Judeo-Christian tradition can be an act of joy, even an instance of play. In this dissertation and in the introduction that follows, I shall explore the implications of playfully worshipful discourse during the Renaissance and more specifically in the English Reformation. As I shall attempt to suggest, an awareness that certain Renaissance discourse practitioners expressed devotion to God through play might provide new insights about how to characterize Protestant discourse during the period.
I. INTRODUCTION

Word/Play

And Dauid daunced before the L ORD with all his might.
—2 Sm 6:14 (AV 1611)

Scripture tells us that David, after his triumphant installation of the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem, danced before it (and therefore before the face of God Himself) in an act that one scholar describes as “extravagant revelry.” Because an analysis of the original Hebrew text reveals that David’s dance was an expression of a specifically ludic impulse, play—as odd or as counterintuitive as it may seem to some observers of Christianity—is a biblically sanctioned mode of worshiping the Divine.

This dissertation is an attempt to illustrate, through an analysis of three discrete yet interconnected case studies, a phenomenon that has long gone unnoticed. Practitioners of many forms of discourse during the Renaissance harness the creative force and pleasures of play in the direction of a very particular kind of worship. They engage in a form of imitatio Christi in which play becomes a means to praise and honor the perfect generative power of Divine discourse: the

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3 David’s wife Michal promptly voiced her disapproval of this dance; “Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no childe vnto the day of her death.” 2 Sm 6:23 (AV 1611).
Word that creates, the Word incarnated as Flesh that re-creates the relationship between man and God, and the Word through which God dispenses superabundant grace upon His Creation. My thesis is that this phenomenon merits close attention from and thorough investigation by scholars of Renaissance discourse, for this widespread pattern has the potential to illuminate the relationships between discourse and the Reformation, particularly as that movement was manifested in early seventeenth-century England.

Beyond concerns relating to English Reformation discourse on a broad scale, I hope that this dissertation will also enlighten us with regard to the less fully historicized question of what the elaborate and beautiful words and images by these discourse practitioners actually mean. Throughout this project, one of my main concerns will be to shine light on the texts themselves, offering a new perspective on them that I hope will be rewarding, interesting, and (dare I say it?) fun. I intend never to forget that this is ultimately a dissertation about play. The works that we shall consider should be enjoyed, and the readings that I offer should bring pleasure. Although I subscribe whole-heartedly to Stanley Fish’s since-recanted formulation that there is a valuable distinction between being “right” and being “interesting” and that sometimes it is more important to be the latter than the former,4 I hope that I can succeed in this dissertation in being both.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an orientation to the central phenomenon that I wish to describe: an explanation of the concepts that are necessary to appreciating it and also to understanding the argument that follows. This introduction will proceed in five phases. In the first section, I shall offer a summary of the literature that exists on the two major strands of my argument—the idea that play was a pervasive force in the Renaissance and the notion that

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4 *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 43.
incarnational discourse was an ideal to which many artists aspired during the period—and I shall begin to knit those two strands together by surveying English Reformed notions of *imitatio Christi*, establishing that an imitative practice links the playfulness of Renaissance discourse together with its ambitions toward incarnational status. The second section will turn to the key task of defining *discursive play*; as we shall see in this section, the field of ludology has advanced several mutually compatible definitions of *play*, but critics and scholars who have thus far considered play in the context of discourse have tended to be somewhat imprecise in explaining what makes a text or an image ludic. Against this gap in our knowledge of play, I shall offer a definition that builds upon prior work in the field but that extends it more specifically to the context of discourse study in a way that I hope will be useful for other scholars interested in ludics. Next, in the third section, I shall examine another phenomenon that has plagued the field of ludology, a tendency toward inexactitude in writing about different types of play; critics in the field all too often use terms like *game* and *puzzle* quite casually, as if those words were interchangeable synonyms or as if they were suitable substitutes for the term *play*. What the field needs, I shall explain in this section, is a workable typology of different forms of play; more specifically, scholars of ludic discourse might benefit considerably from a matrix on which different types of playful discourse can be plotted and compared. I shall construct and present such a matrix in this section, with the goal of demonstrating in the remainder of the dissertation how it might function in actual critical practice. The fourth section introduces a schema of confessional positions during the English Reformation that will guide my discussion of the historical implications of my close readings of individual works and texts. Finally, in the fifth section, I shall transition to my case studies by presenting the methodology that I shall follow in describing the phenomenon in which I am principally interested, explaining also the rationale according to which the case studies will be ordered and arranged.
A. BACKGROUND
The State of the Game

The insight that I am offering in this dissertation—that discourse practitioners during the English Renaissance used play as a form of imitative worship in praising the incarnational capacity of Divine language—is comprised of two threads or strains of thought that have long been part of our knowledge of early modern culture: the notion that Renaissance discourse is capable of extravagant playfulness and the observation that it is at times incarnational in nature, design, or effect. What is new and different in my argument is the recognition that these two ideas are deeply imbricated with each other in ways that might either clarify or add texture to existing scholarly debates; the specific link between the two strands of thought is the practice of imitatio Christi during the period of the English Reformation. All three ideas—play, incarnationalism, and imitation—have developed a massive collection of scholarly and critical literature behind them. The goal of this section is to begin piecing together the components of my argument while at the same time providing the reader with a sense of its relationship with and indebtedness to earlier critical conversations.

1. Play

The pervasiveness of a play-spirit in the Renaissance is a well-established proposition: “the whole mental attitude of the Renaissance,” Johan Huizinga confidently declares, “was one of play.”

Imagining the period as one in which the dominant mode of play was imitation, a “striving, at once

5  *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 180. All further citations to *Homo Ludens (HL)* will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes. See also Frank J. Warnke, “Sacred Play: Baroque Poetic Style,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1964): 455–64, 459 (“the Baroque period [. . .] is also an age in which all art is conspicuously played”).

6  Imitation or “mimicry” is one of the four cardinal categories of play identified by Roger Caillois in his important critique of and response to Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens. Man, Play and Games* (1958), trans. Meyer Barash (1961) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 19–23. All further citations to *Man, Play and Games (MPaG)* will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.
sophisticated and spontaneous, for beauty and nobility of form” in “a gorgeous and solemn masquerade in the accoutrements of an idealized past,” Huizinga argues that the Renaissance in some senses epitomized the ludic: “If ever an élite, fully conscious of its own merits, sought to segregate itself from the vulgar herd and live life as a game of artistic perfection, that élite was the circle of choice Renaissance spirits” (HL, 180).7

In considering this period of play, Alessandro Arcangeli has productively analyzed what he describes as “a distinctive leisure culture” that developed in Europe during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries,8 exploring a number of discourses surrounding recreation and play—medical, moral, and legal, for example—from the flowering of the Renaissance to the dawn of the Enlightenment. Peter Burke has gone so far as to opine that early modern culture saw the beginnings of what we would call leisure, including play and recreation, and has amassed a collection of evidence to support this claim.9 Andrew Leibs would concur with Burke’s analysis, for he argues that the Renaissance was an especially playful period because of its new notions of time: the division of leisure time from time devoted to work along with the advent of time-measuring technologies that enabled this division on a daily scale and that permitted men and women on an

7 The elitism and high-culture bias of this passage are palpable, and many subsequent critics would rightly point out that, beyond the fact that they might give offense in a more egalitarian age like ours, they present distinct conceptual problems. See, for example, Joan-Lluís Marfany, “Debate: The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” Past and Present, no. 156 (August 1997): 174–91, 175 (noting that another critic “seems to be concerned solely with the leisure of those who never worked”). On the issue of labor, a period voice is best suited to respond: “Man would not have needed either play or amusements, had he remained in the blessed state of innocence in which God had created him. In fact, [. . .] his work would have been pleasant for him, far from being a pain [. . .]. Consequently, he would not have needed to relax either his spirit or his body. Therefore, to be accurate, play and amusements have become necessary for us because of sin.” Jean Baptiste Thiers, Traité des jeux et divertissements (1686), quoted in Alessandro Arcangeli, Recreation in the Renaissance: Attitudes towards Leisure and Pastimes in European Culture, c. 1425–1675, Early Modern History (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 10.

8 Recreation in the Renaissance, 1.

annual scale to “count the days until the next holiday or feast day and the revels associated with
them.”

Included among the seven points that Burke presents in order to contend that leisure emerged
during the Renaissance is the fact that treatises on the subject began to flourish. Although he
surveys such works from throughout Europe, several from England in particular are worth noting
here. Roger Ascham’s *The Schole Master* appeared in 1579, and within its pages we see a number
of themes and motifs that recur throughout the literature on play during the English Renaissance.
Indeed, even the text’s title and emphasis on education highlight an important element of Western
discourse on play: The word *school* derives from the ancient Greek *scholé* or σχολή, meaning
*leisure*, so that there is an intrinsic connection at the very deepest conceptual levels between play
and intellectual activity. Ascham alludes to a common trope that had long governed discourse
regarding the *need* for play in human nature, the metaphor of the archer’s bow that must not
constantly be bent lest the string prematurely break (4). He calls wit “a singular gift of God” (7)
and links the proper manner of recreation—be it “playing, dauncing, or doing any thing els”—in

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11 “Invention of Leisure,” 144–46.

appear as parenthetical references in the main text.

involving Western terms for *play* is the case of the Latin pair of words *otium* and *negotium*, meaning, respectively, *play*
and *business*. We are conditioned in the contemporary West to see business, labor, or earnest as the primary element
in this binary, with rest, leisure, or play coming only in the absence of work. Warren Motte, “Playing in Earnest,” *New
Literary History* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 25–42, 25. However, the Latin binary is reversed and positions business, or
*neg-otium*, as the absence or negation of play.

14 The genealogy of this idea, which goes back at least as far as the early Church fathers, is too extensive to
Directions Books, 1970): “The hunter said: If I bend my bow all the time it will break. Abbot Anthony replied: So it is
also in the work of God. If we push ourselves beyond measure, the brethren will soon collapse. It is right, therefore,
from time to time, to relax their efforts.” Ibid., 63.
“weight, measure, & number” to the precision of the way in which “God made the world” (12). Literature is specifically singled out as a source of recreation, because reading is both “pastime and pleasure” (27) and because words are to the mind as “choice meates” are to the body as food (46–47).

The unmistakably Puritan inflection of Samuel Byrd’s 1580 treatise notwithstanding, A Friendlie Communication or Dialogue between Paule and Demas is notable principally for the manner in which the concept of recreation is used: “When we exercise or recreate our selves, our recreation must tend to edificing and to the building up of our faith: for example. When we plaie at tennis, we refresh our wearied spirits and memories, by the which meanes we are better able to studie, and to get knowledge whereby our faith is strengthened.” The sense in which the term recreation is applied to the game of tennis is common enough in contemporary English usage, but during the period the term was also used in the contemporary sense of re-creation or refreshment or

On this score, Glending Olson has produced an illuminating work on the role of literature as an amusement during an earlier period of European history. Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). Olson considers, among other things, the role of literature as a kind of delivery mechanism for moral truth, the Horatian and later Sidneyan idea that literature can both teach and delight, and the role of literature as a curative agent for physical ailments. See also Phillips Salman, “Instruction and Delight in Medieval and Renaissance Criticism,” Renaissance Quarterly 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1979): 303–32.

Samuel Byrd, A Friendlie Communication or Dialogue between Paule and Demas (London: Iohn Harison, 1580), 62 (emphasis supplied). To classify Byrd’s treatise as a text about play is in some senses problematic, precisely because his view of recreation is instrumental—play is directed toward the achievement of some other non-play objective. For Huizinga, for example, play of this type is no play at all. See HL, 13 (play is “an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it”). See also MPaG, 10 (characterizing play as unproductive). On the other hand, the kind of play that I am imagining in this dissertation—play as worship—is not instrumental. Citing figures like Plato and Romano Guardini, Huizinga conceives of play and holiness as inextricably connected (HL, 19). Understood in this fashion, play as worship is not play turned in the direction of some other end; it is play at its purest and play in its highest form.
renewal.\textsuperscript{17} To play, to rest, to relax, or to engage in recreation is to re-create ourselves in a more literal sense. This usage—uncommon or at worst a bad pun for us\textsuperscript{18}—is central to the ideas that this dissertation will more fully develop in the following chapters, particularly in connection with George Herbert’s ludic poem, “The Altar.”

John Harington’s 1597 A Treatise on Playe appears to be the first English treatment of the subject that attempts a comprehensive and disinterested inquiry. Harington defines play by recourse to “the awncient schoolemen, (who were the narowest examiners and suttellest distinguyshers of wordes)” and pronounces that “Ludus, id est, loculus vel operatio in quo nihil quæritur nisi delectatio animalis. [Play, that is to say, the place or process by which nothing is sought other than simple pleasure]. A spending of the tyme eyther in speeche or action, whose onely end ys a delyght of the mynd or speryt.”\textsuperscript{19} Notably, he also sees biblical precedent for “play or recreacion” in David’s dance before the ark of the covenant: “Ludam & fiam vilior [I shall play and become the more vile]” (158). Therefore, it should not be surprising that Harington declares, “for Gods law, I must confess I finde no commandement that says, Thow shalt not play, neyther in precise wordes, neyther yet by

\textsuperscript{17} Etymologically, the terms recreation and, as we would have it today, re-creation are closely linked. Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2nd ed., s.v. “recreation.” The same etymology holds true in other languages. See Burke, “Invention of Leisure,” 146; HL, 28–45; and Laura Kendrick, “Games Medievalists Play: How to Make Earnest of Game and Still Enjoy It,” New Literary History 40, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 43–61, 49–54. We see this parallel between the two concepts throughout the period’s literature on play. See, for example, Richard Flecknoe, A Treatise of the Sports of Wit (London: Simon Neals, 1675), 3 (games and play are for “recreating our Spirits when tired and spent with Worldly businesses”); and John Harington, A Treatise on Playe (1597), vol. 2 of Nugae Antiquae, ed. Thomas Park (London: T. Cadell, 1804), 170 (“worthy persons [. . .] recreate themselves at play”).

\textsuperscript{18} But for a fascinating piece of critique based almost entirely on bad puns, see Giambattista Vico, New Science (1725), trans. Dave Marsh, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2000). Anna K. Nardo points out that both Rosalie Colie and Joan Webber frequently rely upon “The recreate/re-create pun” in their works on literary play, but she does not recognize the etymological histories of the words that render the comparison more than a simple instance of wordplay. The Ludic Self in Seventeenth-Century Literature, SUNY Series: The Margins of Literature (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 221n33.

\textsuperscript{19} Treatise on Playe, 157. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
implicacion; and therfor I sayde at the first, it is in ytselfe a thinge indifferent” (190). Advocating throughout his text the golden mean, a component of Western discourse on play since Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Harington for example notes with regard to gambling “that the wager in play should bee as it wear sawce, and not the substance of it” (177); he warns that those who violate this precept cease to play at all: “Whearfore let them not call it theyr play, but theyr labor, theyr trade, theyr occupacion, that playe only for gayne; for greedines breeds earnestnes, and earnestnes overthrows quite the very nature of all game” (188).

Later English treatises on play, which generally date to the Interregnum or even to the Restoration, include John Denham’s *The Anatomy of Play* (1651), Michael Mayerus’ *Lusus Serius* (1654), Francis Willughby’s *Book of Games* (1672), and Richard Flecknoe’s *A Treatise of the Sports of Wit* (1675).

More germane to the present summary, in terms of period works, are James I’s *Basilikon Doron* (1599) and *The Book of Sports* (1618), the latter revised and reissued by Charles I in 1633, both of which saw the institutionalization of play in affairs of government and politics. *Basilikon Doron* was a treatise on governing and kingsmanship written by James as advice to his first son and then-apparent heir in Scotland. Among the principles that James sets forth is the recommendation that “certaine daies in the yeare would bee appointed, for delighting the people with publike spectacles of al honest games.”

England had a long tradition of Church festival days going back to the medieval period, and those occasions as well as most Sundays were typically marked by games

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20 See, for example, Arcangeli, *Recreation in the Renaissance*, 50–51. Aristotle advocated the virtue of *eutrapelia*, a capacity for wit and amusing oneself moderately, which he set against the vices and extremes of boorishness (or rusticity) and buffoonery. “[T]he notion proved quite influential” during the Renaissance. Ibid., 51.

and sports. According to Leah S. Marcus, James “tended to regard traditional English customs as an integral branch of his power. He viewed any attempt to suppress them as an affront to his prerogative.” As a result, in *The Book of Sports* James directed that these traditional holiday and Sunday pastimes be permitted, although he did not go so far as to require that they be observed. Charles I’s republication and revision of the directive was a gambit to retain power against the growing influence of Puritan forces in the kingdom; “The fostering of old festival pastimes,” Marcus explains, “became very closely tied to the vexed matter of enforcing religious conformity, and the pastimes were increasingly perceived as extensions of liturgical worship. [. . .] The old pastimes were a way of taking the Church out into the world and molding the countryside into an image of ecclesiastical order; they became an extension of sacred space.”

Returning as I conclude this summary to contemporary assessments of play during the Renaissance, an important entry in scholarly and critical discourse on Renaissance play is Anna K. Nardo’s *The Ludic Self in Seventeenth-Century Literature*. Nardo contends that “In the first half of the seventeenth century, England produced an extraordinary array of self-conscious literary players, both fictional and real,” and she proceeds to use that claim to anchor a number of rich readings of period texts, ultimately arguing that play during the Renaissance was a matter of self-creation. And Gregory M. Colón Semenza likewise contends that play, or sport, was a core feature of the English

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23 *Politics of Mirth*, 4.

24 Ibid., 5.

Renaissance: “The practice of sport and exercise was central to Renaissance conceptions of both the ideal English gentleman and the ideal English nation-state.”

The concept of play can be understood in this dissertation as a means to an end for the discourse practitioners whom I consider in the case studies that follow. The end or aim is worship of the Divine, and specifically of the Incarnation, to which I now turn.

2. Incarnationalism

Like the impulse toward play, a theology revolving around the physicality of Christ—both in the doctrine of the Incarnation and in the practice of the Eucharist—was a consistent theme in the Renaissance. Indeed, even beyond that period, the concept of the Incarnation was for Malcolm Mackenzie Ross “the fixed star at the centre of the Christian firmament”; for James S. Baumlin, “the crisis of presence and absence” that the doctrine continually confronts is “one that lies at the center of Western metaphysics.” According to Diarmaid MacCulloch,

> From the church’s earliest days [the Eucharist] has been a way to break down the barrier between the physical and the spiritual, between earth and heaven, death and life. It involves objects made by human beings and therefore part of everyday society: bread and wine, food and drink, which bring earthly joy, and which are

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fraught with danger because they can be enjoyed too much. That is what makes the Eucharist such a potent symbol of offering what human beings bring to God. Yet it is also associated with what Christ offers to humanity through his unique, costly, and painful offering to God: life and joy, which are much more than a full belly and a head full of alcohol.30

Debora K. Shuger explains that a rhetorical tradition emerges during the English Renaissance in which there is a “demand for a vividness enabling the heart to grasp the invisible and distant reality of God”;31 according to Regina Mara Schwartz, as part of an argument very different from Shuger’s, much of the literature of the English Reformation is based on a yearning for the touch and physical presence of the Divine, a desire associated with a critical shift in the era’s doctrine: “the host no longer became the mystical body of God through a miracle, but became a symbol.”32 Moreover, critics readily identify the two major poets of the early seventeenth century, John Donne and George Herbert, with Eucharistic and incarnational practice. Eleanor J. McNees says, “The coexistence of flesh and spirit [...] runs throughout Donne’s writing from his secular songs and sonnets to his divine poems and sermons.”33 And Robert Ellrodt explains that, “With Herbert as with Donne, the Incarnation is more than the center of Christian faith: it commands their vision of

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30 *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), 10


32 *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 14. Huldrych Zwingli, however, “would have been horrified” at this common “caricature” that he converted the Eucharist into nothing more than a symbol: “he saw its celebration as the highest expression of a Christian community, the outward sacred sign of God’s loving purpose for the world.” MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 582.

the world and their inspiration as if it were a structure of their minds.”

Robert Whalen, attending to works of both poets, has mounted a study based on their relationship to the Eucharist and to Reformed sacramentalism.

The three central figures of the continental Reformation shared remarkably similar views of the Incarnation, although they differed sharply on the nature of the Eucharist. With respect to the Incarnation, the full human physicality of Christ—the emphasis on flesh in Scripture’s declaration in John 1:14 that “the Word was made flesh”—is paramount to all three reformers.

Martin Luther’s examination from the pulpit of the implications of John 1:14 stresses the fundamental similarity between Christ’s human nature and ours:

Thus the most precious treasure and the strongest consolation we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that He became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into great glory, that our flesh and blood, skin and hair, hands and feet, stomach and back might reside in heaven as God does. Luther anatomizes the human body and begins this itemization with the terms of the Eucharist in order to emphasize the essential parallels between Christ’s physical form and the bodies of his

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35 *The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). Whalen coins the phrase “sacramental puritanism” to describe the fertile interactions between “the potentially contrary imperatives of sacrament and devotion, an eirenic strategy that allowed for the cultivation of puritan devotional enthusiasm through an internalized yet fully sacramental and sacerdotal apparatus.” Ibid., xii.

auditory. He goes further by explaining that the Scriptures could instead have read that “Word became man” but for the fact that the term flesh “point[s] out its weakness and its mortality. For Christ took on the human nature, which was mortal and subject to the terrible wrath and judgment of God because of the sins of the human race. And this anger was felt by the weak and mortal flesh of Christ” (22:111). Concluding in the same sermon with a reminder of this “inexpressible humiliation” (22:111), Luther attempts to describe the extreme debasement to which the living Word subjected Himself in being reduced to human form.37

Also emphasizing Christ’s corporal commonality with human beings, John Calvin introduces his discussion of the Incarnation by explaining that Christ chose to be “clothed with our flesh.”38 Rejecting heresies that would deny Christ’s full human nature, Calvin like Luther returns to the language of the Scriptures and invokes the term “Son of man,” by which Calvin asserts that God meant “thereby to explain more clearly that he is a man truly begotten of human seed” (475). Calvin exclaims against the heretics, “They thrust upon us as something absurd the fact that if the Word of God became flesh, then he was confined within the narrow prison of an earthly body. This is mere impudence! For even if the Word in his immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that he was confined therein” (481).39

37 Lee Palmer Wandel would disagree; he declares that Luther, as well as John Calvin, “severed the word in the Gospel narrative completely from human experience. For both, the same word, ‘body,’ did not signify the same thing in reference to Christ’s person as it did in reference to humankind.” The Reformation: Towards a New History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 237. Wandel, who turns immediately to the doctrine of ubiquity, seems to be conflating the Incarnation with the Eucharist, closely related concepts that I have chosen to treat separately.


In explaining this mystery of Christ’s dual nature, Huldrych Zwingli relies heavily on the figures of chiasmus and parallelism in order to emphasize that Christ’s physicality is equally central to His being as His identity as the second person of the Trinity:

The mediator Christ is therefore not only God but also a human being; and not only is he a human being, but also God; for if he were only divine, he would not be suitable to act as mediator. [J]ust as human weakness was joined to God through Christ and united with him, we too may be reconciled to God through Christ and united with him, we too may be reconciled to God through his suffering and sacrifice of Christ.  

We see in this passage, once again, the critical importance of Christ’s corporeality and its similarity to that of human beings. Indeed, Zwingli once proclaimed that “It is wonderfully consoling to me, each time I think of it: Christ had flesh like I do.”

With respect to the Eucharist, however, consensus was much more evasive; “The Eucharist,” according to MacCulloch, “was naturally full of opportunities to emphasize difference, all the more because its symbolism spoke of communal unity.” Yet one commonality that existed was the reluctance of these three figures, as Whalen puts it, “to varying degrees, to abandon an instrumental role for sacraments in Christian soteriology and even the carnal understandings it suggested.” Ultimately, for Lee Palmer Wandel, it was the “tiny word,” the mere copula is—in Christ’s scriptural


41 Quoted in Wandel, Reformation, 236.

42 MacCulloch, Reformation, 342.

43 Poetry of Immanence, 6.
commandment from Luke 22:19, “This is my body which is giuen for you, this doe in remembrance of me” (AV 1611)—that “marked the relationship between matter and God.”

Luther, of course, rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and denied that the Eucharist was a sacrifice, for “Christ on the Cross,” MacCulloch explains, “had been the only sacrifice.” Yet as a figure with “deep personal devotion to the Eucharist,” Luther insisted upon “the notion that the body and blood of Christ could be physically or corporeally present in the bread and wine on the eucharistic table.” In the Marburg Colloquy of 1529, Luther declared that “it cannot be proved that ‘This is my body’ is a trope. If God told me to eat a crabapple, I would eat spiritually.” Yet he later invoked the trope of synecdoche in explaining to Zwingli how bread and body could be equated: “For example, when a king tells his servant, ‘Bring me my sword,’ in which case he wants the servant to bring the sheath at the same time even if he did not in so many words command him to do so. So also this form of speech is to be allowed in the sacrament when at times it is called the bread and when nevertheless the body is also meant, and vice versa.”

Calvin, on the other hand, MacCulloch says, “devoted much energy to finding a formulation of the Eucharist to give it due reverence but avoid saying either too little or too much about it.” Refusing to embrace the doctrine of the real presence due to his understanding that it was

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44 *Reformation*, 241. See also Baumlin, *Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse*, 2 (“the Reformation becomes no less than a crisis of language”).


48 Ibid., 47. See also Whalen, *Poetry of Immanence*, 7.

idolatrous. Calvin nonetheless, as Whalen explains, “accepted the conversion of the species to something else.” “For Calvin, then,” according to MacCulloch, “the signs of bread and wine become an instrument of God’s grace in uniting the believer to Christ.” The relationship expressed by the copula is, for Calvin, is an analogical one: “as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul.” But more than that, “why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, except to assure you of a true participation in it?” Instead, God’s grace for the elect elevates them in the sacrament of the Eucharist to the real presence of Christ in heaven.

Zwingli interpreted the words “This is my body” as purely metaphorical and rejected the notion that Christ was in any way actually present in the Host; Christ’s body, Wandel explains, “like all human bodies [. . .] could only be in one place at a time.” He objected, says MacCulloch, “that the physical body and blood of Christ were in heaven and that it was against nature for them to be everywhere in the world in the forms of bread and wine.” For Zwingli, the act of the Eucharist was

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50 Idolatry here is meant in the sense of “fundamentally wrong conceptualizations of the relationship between God and humankind, between God and the material world. Idolatry named a way of thinking about God that misplaced God, located him in things and actions where he was not to be found.” Wandel, Reformation, 227. See also Dixon, Contesting the Reformation, 55; MacCulloch, Reformation, 241; and Waldron, Reformations of the Body, 59.

51 Poetry of Immanence, 9.


53 Institutes, 1363.

54 Ibid., 1371.

55 MacCulloch, Reformation, 243.

56 Reformation, 236.

57 Reformation, 341. In response, Luther, in “a central plank of developed Lutheran eucharistic doctrine,” insisted that the Divine and human natures of Christ, being fused, could partake of one another, so that the ubiquitous quality of the Divine could be attributed to the human, bodily physicality of Christ. Ibid.
memorialistic in purpose, “an attempt,” as C. Scott Dixon characterizes it, “to ‘render present’ Christ’s act of sacrifice.” But the Eucharist was not a sacrifice in itself, or if it was, then MacCulloch says it “was one of faith and thankfulness by a Christian to God—a way of remembering what Jesus had done for humanity on the Cross and the promises that followed in Scripture.”

In England, as on the continent, three distinct Reformed thinkers shared much in common with regard to their views of the Incarnation. To represent the Elizabethan via media, we may take as an example Richard Hooker, who struggles and at times stumbles through a series of awkward phrasings, as if overwhelmed by Christ’s entry into history, in describing the Incarnation in terms that evoke its mystery and paradox:

Wherefore taking to him selfe our flesh and by his incarnation making it his own flesh, he had now of his owne although from us what to offer unto God for us. And as Christ tooke manhood that by it he might be capable of death whereunto hee humbles him selfe, so because manhood is the proper subject of compassion and feeling pittie, which maketh the sceptre of Christes regencie even in the kingdome of heaven amiable, he which without our nature could not on earth suffer for the synnes of the world, doth now also by means thereof both make intercession to God

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58 Contesting the Reformation, 55.

59 Reformation, 143.

for synners and exercise dominion over all men with a true, a natural, and a sensible touch of mercie.\textsuperscript{61}

The Incarnation is thus a complex dialectical exchange in which Christ borrows a fleshly form from humanity only to offer it back in mortified form to God in remission of the sins of humankind. The flesh is again central to this description, as Hooker describes it as the only and exclusive means by which eternal salvation could be effected.

Lancelot Andrewes, fairly considered as a figure closer to the Avant-Garde Conformist pole on the spectrum of English Reformed belief, describes the Incarnation in the following terms during a Christmas sermon in 1609:

\begin{quote}
And so have we here now in one, both twaine his \textit{Natures}. \textit{God sent his Sonne}, There his \textit{Divine: made of a woman}, Here his \textit{humane Nature}, That, from the \textit{bosome of his Father}, before all worlds: this, \textit{from the wombe of his mother}, in the world. So that, as from \textit{eternitie}, \textit{God} his \textit{Father} might say, that verse of the Psalme. \textit{Filius meus es tu, hodie genui te}: Thou art my Sonne, this day have I begotten thee. So, in \textit{the fulnesse of time}, might the \textit{Virgin} his \textit{mother}, no lesse truely say, \textit{Filius meus es to, hodie peperi te}: Thou art my Sonne, this day have I brought thee into the world.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

The transcendent moment of the Incarnation is captured here in the contrast between “all worlds” that represent the Divine nature of Christ and “the world” or \textit{this} world that represents Christ’s localized and historical human form. The emphasis on Christ’s delivery from the mortal womb of


Mary stresses the humble origins which He chose for His entry into the world as well as the fleshly character of His existence here.

Archbishop James Ussher, staunch Calvinist and a man whom Richard Snoddy says was “fêted by English Puritans,” begins his treatise on the Incarnation in rhetorical mode by asking how “that the Father of Eternity should be born in time? And that the mighty God should become a Childe; which is the weakest state of Man himselfe?” The answer is a thing greater than both “the creation of all things out of nothing” and “the resurrection from the dead, and the restauration of all things, the last workes that shall goe before that everlasting Sabbath” (3). Christ’s Incarnation, however, is ultimately too large a mystery for Ussher to address; it “is an inquisition fitter for an Angelical inteliigence, than for our shallow capacity to look after” (13), and Ussher wonders that the fusion of Christ’s two natures did not swallow the flesh in flames like the burning bush in which God manifested himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai: “With what astonishment then may we behold our dust and ashes assumed into the undivided unitie of gods own person; and admitted to dwell there, as an inmate, under the same roofe? and yet in the midst of those everlasting burnings, the bush to remain unconsumed, and to continue fresh and green for evermore” (16). The poetic nature of Ussher’s expression is itself astonishing in its poignant linkage of the ashes and dust that are the symbols of fleshly, human mortality with the flames of Christ’s Divine nature that bestows upon us unending life.

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64 Immanvel, or the Mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God (1638) (London: Leonard Lichfield, 1643), 2. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
On the matter of the Eucharist, however, these figures would likely not reach a consensus, for one was just as elusive in England as it was on the continent. Hooker argued that because the Divine was conjoined with human nature in the Incarnation, the sacrifice represented in the Eucharist possessed a greater force, presence, and efficacy: “because this substance is inseperablie joyned to that personall worde which by his verie divine essence is present in all thinges, the nature which cannot have in it selfe universall presence hath it after a sorte by beinge no where severed from that which everie where is present [. . .] preasence by waie of conjunction is some sort of presence.”

William Laud for the high-Church party once famously declared that “the altar was the greatest place of God’s residence on earth”: “yea, greater than the pulpit; for there ’tis hoc est corpus meum, ‘this is my body’; but in the pulpit ’tis at most hoc est verbum meum, ‘this is my word.’” Thus, Avant-Garde Conformists and later Laudians would value the sacraments, including and especially the Eucharist, over the ordinance of preaching. Yet Laud was careful to circumscribe exactly what the Eucharist was: it was a sacrifice, to be sure, but one of a memorial sort rather than

65 Waldron, Reformations of the Body, 65.

66 Quoted in Whalen, Poetry of Immanence, 12. Peter Lake has identified Hooker as among the first members of the English Reformed Church to emphasize ceremonialism as essential to worship rather than regarding it as adiaphora; nowhere, however, does Hooker explicitly attack Calvinist thought. See Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterian and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 155–57; and “Calvinism and the English Church,” Past and Present, no. 114 (February 1987): 32–76, 42. Early English reformers, against their conservative counterparts, adopted a position on the Eucharist “not unlike Calvin’s virtualist position, but which was nevertheless an attempt to go beyond the Genevan reformer’s symbolic understanding. While not containing the substance of the body of Christ, the sacramental sign nonetheless is involved in ‘a systematic connection between the virtual, figurative substance and divinity.’” Whalen, Poetry of Immanence, 10 (quoting Judith H. Anderson, “Language and History in the Reformation: Cranmer, Gardiner, and the Words of Institution,” Renaissance Quarterly 54, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 20–51, 40–41).


one in which, as James F. Turrell puts it, “Christ was [. . .] sacrificed again”;\textsuperscript{69} denying the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, Laud nevertheless affirmed a “real presence” in the sacrament, albeit one “after a mysterious, and indeed an ineffable, manner.”\textsuperscript{70}

William Perkins, on the other hand, rejected the doctrine of the real presence and saw the sacraments instead as, in Turrell’s phrasing, “visible words” that confirmed one’s faith:\textsuperscript{71}

[W]e hold and teach that Christs body and blood are truly present with the bread and wine, being signes in the sacrament: but how? not in respect of place or coexistence: but by Sacramentall relation on this manner. When a word is uttered, the sound comes to the eare; and at the same instant, the thing signified comes to the minde; and thus by relation the word and the thing spoken of, are both present together. Even so at the Lords table bread & wine must not be considered barely, as substances and creatures, but as outward signes in relation to the body and blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{72}

The Eucharist was therefore “not an instrument having the grace of God tied to it [. . .] but an instrument to which grace is present by assistance in the right use thereof”; it was a “moral and not a physical instrument.”\textsuperscript{73} Perkins in this regard compared taking the Eucharist to swearing an oath


\textsuperscript{70} Laud, \textit{Works}, 2:323.

\textsuperscript{71} “Anglican Theologies,” 150.

\textsuperscript{72} Quoted in Bryan D. Spinks, \textit{Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day}, SCM Studies in Worship and Liturgy (London: SCM Press, 2013), 326. The sacraments were “an outward seale or instrument to confirme faith.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Quoted in Brian Douglas, \textit{A Companion to Anglican Eucharistic Theology} (New York: Brill, 2012), 1:126.
of loyalty,\textsuperscript{74} and he believed that, although the sacraments were not instruments of conveying grace, they could increase grace in the person receiving them.\textsuperscript{75}

The fields of play and of incarnationalism having been surveyed, it remains to connect those two realms to one another. Imitation is the third member of this triad of concepts that I have been exploring, and it conjoins the ideas of play and the Incarnation in the chapters that follow.

3. Imitation

At first glance, there would appear to be little within the tradition of \textit{imitatio Christi} that could be productively linked to the notions of incarnationalism and play. With respect to incarnationalism, it is metaphysically impossible for a mere human successfully to imitate Christ’s power as the Word spoken at Creation or to imitate the Word incarnated as Flesh;\textsuperscript{76} and, indeed, the tradition of \textit{imitatio Christi} was largely focused not on the imitation of Christ’s Divine nature but rather on his earthly work and ministry as a human being.\textsuperscript{77} With respect to play, most texts in the tradition of \textit{imitatio Christi} are entirely free of any ludic spirit; stressing the mortification of the flesh rather than an exultantly celebratory worship, Thomas à Kempis, for example, includes in his famous volume chapters entitled “That vain hope and elation of mind are to be fled and avoided,” “That we

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Diarmaid MacCulloch, \textit{The Later Reformation in England, 1547–1603}, British History in Perspective (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 75.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Turrell, “Anglican Theologies,” 150.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Christopher Sutton, \textit{Disce vivere, Learne to Live} (London: Cuthbert Borby, 1602), 78 (“for howe could a weake creature any way imitate him who was higher then the heauens as the Apostle speaketh”).
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 74 (“As he was God, hee was he object of our faith, as he was man, the instruction of our life”).
\end{itemize}
should avoid superfluity of words and the company of worldly-living people,” and “Of the profit of adversity.”

The connections that I wish to trace begin, however, as far back as St. Francis of Assisi in the early-thirteenth century. Francis’ imitative practice has been described as less an *imitatio Christi* than “an *imitatio Incarnationis*.“ Key to understanding this idea are the words of Paul in his epistle to the Philippians:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: / Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: / But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. / And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. / Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a Name which is above every name.

For St. Francis, this passage from the Scriptures represented a close link between the Incarnation and the notion of voluntary poverty; when He became Flesh, Christ relinquished an incomparable wealth and richness at the right hand of the Father, and this formed the basis of St. Francis’ renunciation of the world and its trappings in imitation of his Savior. The Incarnation therefore resides near the

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78 *The Imitation of Christ* (1418), trans. Richard Whitford (1530), ed. Edward J. Klein (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), lxi. The chapter entitled “That we should avoid superfluity of words and the company of worldly-living people” would seem to contradict my argument in the next section, in which I rely in part on the concept of superfluity in the rhetorical sense as a way to define discursive play. That chapter, however, treats a different kind of superfluity, the act of speaking instead of more judiciously remaining silent: “I would I had holden my peace many times when I have spoken,” Thomas says. Ibid., 16. There will therefore be no discordance between the definition that I shall offer soon and the notion of *imitatio Christi*.


80 Phil 2:5–9 (AV 1611).

81 Wolf, *Poverty of Riches*, 42.
very center of *imitatio Christi*, and, indeed, we see similar ideas emerge throughout Thomas’ text: “All that is in this world is vanity, but to love God and only to serve him. [. . .] It is therefore a great vanity to labour inordinately for worldly riches that shortly shall perish.”82 “[H]old thyself as an exile and as a pilgrim here in this life, and be glad, for the love of God, to be holden in the world as a fool and a vile person, as thou art” (28). “For all possessors of worldly goods [. . .] all who pursue the delectable things in this world, greedily seeking things that shall not long endure [. . .] be as men fettered and bound with chains” (156).

In England, at least, the *imitatio Christi* tradition becomes thoroughly “Protestantized,” as Elizabeth K. Hudson puts it, by the time of Thomas Rogers’ 1580 publication of a translation of Thomas à Kempis’ work.83 Reformed England even begins to produce original works that build upon that tradition, most notable among them being Christopher Sutton’s *Disce vivere, Learne to Live* (1602).84 Sutton echoes many of the ideas originated by St. Francis and Thomas à Kempis, but they become more Anglicized and much more amenable to a tradition that valued play and recreation. We see first of all the Franciscan idea that the Incarnation is imitable in terms of Christ’s renunciation of riches and status: “he exhorted to be poore in spirit, who is poorer then he, who

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82 *Imitation of Christ*, 4. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.


84 It is “the one original treatise of the period devoted specifically to the subject of Christ as exemplar.” Hudson, “English Protestants,” 543.
became from being equal with God, far lower than the Angels?” Notice, however, that Sutton stresses not material poverty but rather poverty “in spirit”; as he says later in his treatise, “To call in question whether God’s people may possess earthly commodities is an invention more strange then true [. . .] he hath given the earth & earthly things unto the sons of men, but that they should enjoy the same” (380). Sutton distinguishes carefully between “the matter of money” and “love of money, that is, the root of evil,” contending that riches are appropriate to Christian life as long as rich men do not become “so carried away with the love of riches, as they oftentimes forget and forgo the love of God for a little drosse and baggage of the world” (385). Likewise, Sutton’s Savior is a festive Christ: “so it was that Almighty God did permit, nay expressly enjoyn his people to the keeping of the Saboath, and the solemn observance of other Festiuall times, and seasons, both of which might bee as memorialles of some publike benefite receiued from him” (440–41). Sutton reminds his readers that the hereafter is like a “ioyfull Sabboath” that with “festiuall solemnity, they should one day keepe (by the grace of God) in the kingdome of heauen. For very fitly doe the Fastes which are appointed to goe before the Feastes, signifie our condition in the life present, but the feasts themselves our happie estate, be enjoyed in the life to come” (441).

85 Sutton, Disce vivere, 87. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.

86 Taking the opportunity to criticize Anabaptists, and by extension other radical Reformers, Sutton notes that they “wold bring in a mingle mangle [. . .] of affected pouertie,” which “is most dissonant for the state and government of Christians, especially, when God hath given them the blessing of peace, wherein they should honor him with all seemlines in the beautie and holines of his Temple” (383–84).

It is in part on this basis that W. Sears McGee proclaimed that “The puritan relationship with Christ was often intimate, but seldom imitative.” “More optimistic views of human nature caused anglicans, on the other hand, to look to Christ as the exemplar for human behavior.” The Godly Man in Stuart England, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 107. Elizabeth K. Hudson concurs that this view is “well founded.” “English Protestants,” 555. She goes further to state that “It is also likely that meditation upon the life of Jesus and encouragements to emulate his human nature were too closely associated with traditional Catholic piety for puritan minds to be comfortable with that form of spiritual practice.” Ibid., 556.
Alongside the “sacred” tradition of *imitatio Christi*, a “secular” practice of literary and rhetorical *imitatio* existed during the English Renaissance. Not only does this practice have important connections to the *imitatio Christi* tradition, but it also provides further connections between play and incarnationalism in the thinking of the period. “[T]he Incarnation,” Wandel says, “invited both representation and mimesis: the conscious effort on the part of many different Christians to bring the living of their lives into an enactment of something they saw in Christ’s.”

This impulse led to the sorts of “self-fashioning” that we see in the imitation of Christ, and it prompted writers, thinkers, and discourse practitioners of the day to turn their creative artistry to visual and textual representations of Christ and of Christian themes. The points of contact between these two sets of practices—*imitatio* and *imitatio Christi*—are intense and profound.

According to Nandra Perry, “early modern *imitatio* is always, even if at some remove, a religious project, a tribute to and (partial) rehabilitation of humanity’s original creation in the image and likeness of God.” Brian Cummings identifies Desiderius Erasmus’ translation of the Bible as a key moment in reformulating the connections between the two realms: “By performing a reformation in reading practices, Erasmus proposed to reform Christian doctrine and moral life.”

Hermeneutics and sacred devotion are joined in this effort, in which, as Perry says, “*imitatio Christi*:

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87 We should bracket the terms *secular* and *sacred* because—“insofar as [the period’s culture] recognized a sacred/secular binary at all—[it] tended to identify [that binary] as an unfortunate and at least partially reparable consequence of Original Sin.” Nandra Perry, *Imitatio Christi: The Poetics of Piety in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 3.

88 *Reformation*, 8.


90 *Imitatio Christi*, 3.

can be construed as virtually synonymous with literary *imitatio*,” for Erasmus celebrates Christ “as the pre-eminent writer of literature,” according to Cummings, “and literature as his pre-eminent creation.” The trope of God as author of the text of Creation, by means of the spoken Word that is Christ, was common during the Renaissance, and it resonates with this idea of literature as itself a work of Divine authorship—if God is an author and if the Divine is subject to imitation in the person of Christ, then the Divine text of nature is also imitable and there is hope for a redemption of human discourse in the wake of the Fall.

We can witness the dynamic between these two practices by placing the opening epistle of Rogers’ translation of *The Imitation of Christ* into conversation with Philip Sidney’s *A Defence of Poetry*. As Perry has established, Rogers begins his translation by positioning Thomas within the discourse of Renaissance humanism and poetics: “A shame were it therefore for us to imitate so painefulie as manie do in eloquence Cicero; in philosophie Aristotle; in lawe Iustinian; in Physick Galen for worldlie wisedome [. . .] and not to folowe our Sauior Christ in heauenlie wisedome, and in al godlines of manners.” Imitation for Rogers is a distinctly human impulse—“Who entereth into a due consideration of mans nature, shal easilie perceaue that most stranglie it is addicted vnto Imitation”—and it must be harnessed to proper examples in order for it to yield good rather than evil

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93 *Literary Culture*, 105. “Scripture, truth, presence, authorship, are synonymous. Christ is our author; his authorship is present in his words; his presence guarantees truth; the truth is delivered in these words, written in scripture. Scripture presents a living and breathing Christ, ‘almost more effectively,’ Erasmus breathtakingly declares, than when he dwelt among men.” Ibid.

94 Perry, *Imitatio Christi*, 20 (“[. . .] Rogers and Sidney were participating (albeit in different ways) in the same broad cultural conversation”).

95 Ibid., 22.

96 “The First Epistle of the Translator,” in *Of the Imitation of Christ* (London: Henrie Denham, 1580), unpaginated. Because the epistle is unpaginated, further citations, which would be of limited utility to the reader, will be omitted.
results; if we find it proper to imitate the luminaries of classicism in worldly affairs, then it is only appropriate that we strive toward an imitation of Christ in “all godliness.” Imitating Christ is therefore, according to Perry, “as much about good hermeneutics as it is about holiness”; it is “less a time-honored technique of assimilation to the divine than an ex tempore concession to fallen human nature and culture, both of which are too tragically subject to the passions to be ‘moved’ by reason alone.” In the human world of fallen models, fallen nature, and fallen discourse, it is only Christ as a model of behavior that can salvage the human subject.

Sidney, too, in his narratio, emphasizes hermeneutics within the humanist tradition of the Renaissance, reminding his readers that both philosophy and history are indebted to poets and to poetry: “to all them that, professing learning, inveigh against poetry, may justly be objected that they go very near to ungratefulness, to seek to deface that which, in the noblest nations and languages that are known, hath been the first light-giver to ignorance.” It is therefore unsurprising that Sidney turns promptly to the notion of Divine language and discourse; speaking of the poet in terms that evoke the Creation, Sidney proclaims—in what Michael Mack describes as “playful pneumatology”—that “with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forward” (344). Sounding on the theme of imitation, Sidney defines the art in Aristotelian terms as “an art of imitation” and then immediately emphasizes that “The chief” kind of imitation, “both in antiquity and excellency, were they that did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God” (345), principally

97 Imitatio Christi, 22.

98 Ibid., 23.


100 Sidney’s Poetics: Imitating Creation (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 82.
David in the Psalms. The role of nature as an object of imitation does not receive short shrift (342–43), but Sidney’s discussion in that regard is clearly keyed to the following passage: “Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man’s wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry” (344). The difference between God the Creator and the human poet, for Sidney, consists in merely a capital letter.101 Given Christ’s status as a speaker (or more properly the spoken), whose holy name uttered across the dark waters gives life to Creation, Sidney perceives the proper role and task of the poet as that of re-creation or recreation.102

Play, incarnationalism, and imitation: these three concepts are the essential strands of my central argument, and they are pervasive in the thinking of the early modern period to which I am attending in this dissertation. Play and incarnationalism, I contend, are respectively the means and ends of much Renaissance discourse; play was the vehicle through which the Renaissance discourse practitioners that I shall consider here endeavored to achieve in their works a sense of Christ’s incarnational presence. Imitation links these two concepts; through play, masters of speech, imagery, and verse during the period sought to imitate Christ’s Incarnation as the Word made Flesh. In the

101 If Sidney was not “saucy” enough to take explicitly the next logical step—“the conclusion that the poet, being a creator ex nihilo, is like a God” (Cummings, Literary Culture, 266)—then George Puttenham, Sidney’s predecessor, was willing to do so: “It is therefore of poets thus to be conceived, that if they be able to devise and make all these things of them selues, without any subject of veritie, that they be (by maner of speech) as creating gods.” The Arte of English Poesie (London: Richard Field, 1589), 4. On the boldness of this comparison, see Mack, Sidney’s Poetics, 10.

next section, I shall focus more intently on the first of these three concepts, play, from the definitional standpoint, attempting through a review of contemporary scholarly literature on play to extend common definitions of play into the discursive realm. The question of why the discourse practitioners whom I consider might have chosen play as a means of imitative worship is one that I shall defer until Chapter V, the conclusion.

**B. DEFINITION**

**What Is Discursive Play?**

The project of defining play is a surprisingly difficult endeavor, perhaps because, in Huizinga’s famous words, “the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation” (*HL*, 3). Caillois concurs in this assessment: “The multitude and infinite variety of games at first causes one to despair of discovering a principle of classification capable of subsuming them under a small number of well-defined categories. Games also possess so many different characteristics that many approaches are possible” (*MPaG*, 11). These observations can be viewed as somewhat disheartening, for they appear not to bode well for the enterprise undertaken in this section. As a field of inquiry, the study of play is immense both in terms of the quantity of existing research and the number of disciplines with which the field potentially intersects. Indeed, because poiesis itself is a mode of play (*HL*, 104).

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103 Other figures in ludology concur. See, for example, Stephen Nachmanovitch, “This Is Play,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1–24, 15 (“Play is easy to recognize but impossible to define”).

104 See Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction* (New York: Garland Press, 1998), 12 (“the number and variety of studies of play yields a multiplicity that interferes with both definitions and comparative analyses”); Peter Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play* (London: Methuen, 1983), 4 (“play in literature [is] an area which seems to resist the generalizations which can quite easily be applied to sporting as well as to social games”); and R. Rawdon Wilson, *In Palamedes’ Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, and Narrative Theory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 76 (“The play concept’s multiple formulations and pervasive applicability exceed, elude one might say, the boundaries of any single model of literary analysis”).
119), any act of discursive creation may accurately albeit inconsequentially be characterized as ludic.\footnote{105}

Yet these difficulties also suggest a tentative hypothesis. If play in its freedom and abundance does not easily succumb to analytical or taxonomical strictures,\footnote{106} then it is because play, as Brian Edwards explains, is “Associated with movement rather than conclusion, involving action of enquiry and process while resisting resolution”; as a consequence, “its definitions are, by definition, provisional.”\footnote{107} Accordingly, the task at hand requires the avoidance not only of inexactitude but also of facile comprehensiveness, the propounding of an analytical framework too rigid and brittle to withstand the flux and variability that characterize play itself. And because even “provisional clarity,” according to Robert R. Wilson, can render “the concept of game [. . .] a useful analytic concept,”\footnote{108} progress toward defining discursive play depends less upon developing a definitive model of play in its totality than upon obtaining an incrementally more sound approach specifically tailored to the manifestations of the ludic impulse in the study of discourse.

\footnote{105}{But see Warnke, “Sacred Play,” 463 ("however universally applicable the play-concept of art may be, we are left with the fact that Baroque art is playful in a special and particularly intense way").}

\footnote{106}{Game theory, from the disciplines of mathematics and economics, offers a “structure for clarifying strategic issues in plot design and character development that most literary theories do not.” Steven J. Brans, “Game Theory and Literature,” Games and Economic Behavior 6, no. 1 (January 1994): 32–54, 34. However, research in this direction has not been productive because literary scholars—including myself—typically lack the expertise required to conduct meaningful game theory analyses, just as experts in game theory tend not to possess the skills of literary critics. Ibid., 50. See also Elizabeth W. Bruss, “The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games,” New Literary History 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 153–72, 170 (“Many of the qualities of mind, motivation, and individual behavior upon which formal game theory is predicated seem primitive in comparison to literary treatments of these same phenomena").}

\footnote{107}{Theories of Play, 273.}

\footnote{108}{“Rules/Conventions: Three Paradoxes in the Game/Text Analogy,” South Central Review 3, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 15–27, 26 (“denied [a provisional clarity], it will behave rather like a chesspiece transformed, by the exigencies of a child’s informal play, into a mere plaything, or like a gameless shuttlecock”).}
Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* is often cited as *the* seminal work on the study of play as a cultural phenomenon;\(^\text{109}\) it therefore provides a rational point of entry into the definitional enterprise. Huizinga, after an extended analysis of the various features that characterize play, propounds the following definition: “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (*HL*, 28).

The first component in this definition, the idea that play is voluntary, must be dressed further because it proves to be the most common element of scholarly definitions of play, the most widely accepted facet of Huizinga’s investigation. The importance of a sound definition to anchor the analysis contained in the following chapters warrants an extended quotation:

> Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. [. . .]

> [F]or the adult and the responsible human being play is a function which he could equally well leave alone. Play is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent

to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during ‘free time’. Only when play is recognized as a cultural function—a rite, a ceremony—is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty.

Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. (*HL*, 7–8).

As I take it, the crucial portion of this analysis is the notion that “Play is superfluous” (*HL*, 8). One plays because he or she wishes to do so, not because he or she *must*, and in playing nothing tangible is gained—play is unnecessary, and its enjoyment as a kind of surplus activity beyond the needs of mere subsistence is precisely what makes it playful, recreative, or ludic in its spirit. The Renaissance mind in its conception of play also understood this dimension of the phenomenon, as we can see in the remarks of John Harington to the effect that play or gambling for profit is akin to work as well as in his definition of play itself. Moreover, other leading figures in ludology concur in this assessment. Most famously, Caillois has called play “an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money” (*MPaG*, 5–6). Peter Gray has identified this

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110 *Treatise on Playe*, 157, 188.

111 My omission of Jacques Derrida from among the number of play theorists whose works I shall consider in this analysis is not accidental, despite the fact that he has written influential texts relevant to the study of play. See, for example, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), in *Writing and Difference* (1967), trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93. This dissertation is so fundamentally committed to the notion of logocentrism and to the idea that Renaissance discourse does indeed possess a stable center that Derrida’s voice would be decidedly out of place. See Baumlin, *Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse*, 161 (poststructuralist theory “would seem to question the very possibility of an incarnationalism that asserts the unity of speech, meaning, and subjective consciousness—in terms of Christian theology, of the Word made Flesh”); and Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 8 (“in the Incarnation, the sign is identical to its referent”). See also John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Raymond Tallis, *Theorrhoea and After* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); and R. V. Young, *At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999).
element of freedom as the cardinal shared feature among contemporary definitions of play.\textsuperscript{112} And Bruce Michelson, in his suggestion that Roland Barthes’ \textit{jouissance} is an apt critical basis for a theory of literary wit,\textsuperscript{113} points us yet again toward the concept of the gratuitous. For Barthes, “The \textit{brio} of the text (without which, after all, there is no text) is its \textit{will to bliss}: just where it exceeds demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to overflow, to break through the constraint of adjectives—which are those doors of language through which the ideological and the imaginary come flowing in.”\textsuperscript{114}

I pause at this juncture because of my sensitivity to what might seem incongruous in my analysis: applying \textit{contemporary} play theory to \textit{period} discourses. On this score, several points might be marshaled in answering a possible objection.

First, Huizinga, at least, was not attempting just to describe play in the early twentieth century during which he wrote; rather, his objective was to explain what play at a more fundamental level strictly speaking \textit{is}—“The incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe” (\textit{HL}, 3). Although inadequately historicized by today’s critical standards, Huizinga’s point possesses some degree of merit to the extent that play may properly be described as instinctive, a feature of both the animal and the human domains alike.

Second, this potential objection has been addressed before: Burke calls that objection “the discontinuity thesis” and describes it for the sake of argument as “The greatest danger facing historians of our topic”—“to assume continuity and to work with the modern concepts of leisure and


\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Literary Wit} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 3–4.

sport, projecting them back on to the past without asking about the meanings which contemporaries gave to their activities.”

His response to the discontinuity thesis is to counter-object that it is based on a false binary, one that cuts “European history into two slices, pre-industrial and industrial. Unfortunately, the binary opposition between what one might call a ‘festival culture’ and a ‘leisure culture’, like many dichotomies and polarities, is as misleading as it is convenient.”

Third, the objection tends to assume that the Renaissance mind possessed an adequately developed theory of play that could be erected as a model over against contemporary theories, but this simply is not the case. Although Renaissance figures wrote at length about play, nothing as developed as the ideas of Huizinga and other contemporary theorists existed during the period, nor could it by the very terms in which the objection must be framed. Anticipating Burke’s idea of a discontinuity thesis, Jürgen Moltmann explains that “Play has become a theoretical problem only since man has been forced into disciplined, rationalized labor at constantly growing industrial complexes and since playfulness has been banned from the realm of labor as mere foolishness.”

In other words, if the differences between contemporary and period play are sufficiently significant to make us suspicious of applying theories of the former to the latter, then they must also be so different that period play might not have been perceived as adequately problematic even to prompt the generation of a tenable play theory of a native nature.

Fourth, this position takes for granted that there was a monolithic Renaissance position on games and play, a coherent view that could be applied to Renaissance discourses in lieu of contemporary theories. Of course, this was not the case then any more than it is true of today’s play-

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theory landscape: “During the Renaissance period,” Arcangeli says, “there was never such a thing as a universally shared paradigm, a single intellectual or ideological scheme against which pastimes were conceived, organized and valued.”

To conclude, and on my own account, the differences in perceptions of play between the Renaissance and the contemporary era are no more significant than the differences that exist among contemporary play theories themselves, meaning that one could equally well object that I have chosen to base my definition of discursive play on one set of contemporary arguments rather than another. But by relying principally on contemporary works universally regarded as seminal in the field and by focusing on widely shared facets from contemporary views of play, I have been able to guard against that possible objection.

Returning to the notion of *excess* in Barthes, *waste* in Caillois, and *superfluity* in Huizinga provides us with a common element in definitions of *play*, but it remains to extend this idea to the discursive realm. Ronald E. Foust is a critic who both recognizes the need for a theory of textual play and then supplies the demand. His error, however, is in rushing toward a typology of literary games before defining what textual or discursive play is in the first instance. He perceives four types of textual play: first, “the *synecdochical game*,” in which a game actually takes place within the text (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is his cardinal example); second, “the *structural game*,” in which the author constructs an *agon* within the text in order to generate a compelling plot and capture the reader’s attention (8–9); third, “the *logos game*,” in which the author gestures self-reflexively back toward his or her own text (Barth, Coover, Gass, and Barthelme are his prime

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118 Recreation in the Renaissance, 108.

examples) (9); and finally, “the anagogic game, the game that encompasses all the others and toward which each has been tending”—“it is the serious game conducted between the absent author and the present reader, and it is, teleologically, the goal of both literary and critical texts” (9). Peter Hutchinson’s effort in the direction of a comprehensive theory of literary games is also admirable but ultimately suffers from the same neglect, a tendency toward typology over definition. Indeed, Hutchinson’s definition of literary play is intrinsically circular: “a literary game may be seen as any playful, self-conscious and extended means by which an author stimulates his reader to deduce or to speculate, by which he encourages him to see a relationship between different parts of the text, or between the text and something extraneous to it.”120

So, assuming for the moment that play in general can be typified or described as a kind of excess, waste, or superfluity, to what extent does that insight supply us with a basis for defining play specifically in the discursive realm? As it happens, the field of rhetoric supplies a ready conceptual structure onto which the notion of excess may be mapped in order to advance us toward such a definition.

Jeanne Fahnestock has surveyed in extensive detail a wide range of theories of figuration that rhetoricians, and scholars and critics of rhetoric, have invoked to explain the functioning of metaphor in language.121 In her effort to explain those theories to her audience and to situate them with respect to one another, she confronted a provocative set of questions: “Any definition of the figures as formal devices that depart from a norm in linguistic usage begs the question of how that norm should be defined. Is the normal in a language defined as the set of acceptable usages? Or is it defined in

120 Games Authors Play, 14 (emphasis original).
121 Rhetorical Figures in Science (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
the sense of the typical, the most frequently occurring among possibilities?” (15). As one proposed answer to those questions, Fahnestock suggested the hypothetical concept of “an unfigured or degree-zero style,” against which “The figures become markers of the literary text, removed from the world of functional discourse” (20). Although she notes that the idea, as an explanatory tool, “seem[s] inescapably sensible” (20), Fahnestock is careful to register the fact that the tool is a purely hypothetical one, because even “‘flat’ or ‘plain’ or ‘bald’ sentences” apparently free of figuration “can still be said to convey an emotion: the emotion of flatness or calmness, seriousness, steady-eyed contemplation, or straight conviction” (21). In other words, figuration in language is largely inescapable, even in what we might imagine as the epitome of a “degree-zero style,” a telephone book or an instruction manual.

Figure 3. A Continuum of Discursive Figuration.

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If we join with Fahnestock in employing this notion of “degree-zero style” as a useful heuristic toward a definition of discursive play, then we can imagine a continuum of discourses with degree-zero, perfectly flat, and completely unfigured prose at one fixed pole on the spectrum (Figure 3). Ordinary prose and speech—the textbook or the conference paper, for example—would reside near that pole but not at it, for tropes and metaphors are natural and inherent parts of language. Literary prose might be imagined further along this continuum, with verse positioned yet more distant from degree-zero—this is highly figured and elaborate language that opens itself to rich interpretive possibilities. Some thinkers, Paul de Man and Jean Paulhan among them, have approached literary language as “the place,” Michael Syrotinski explains, “where language’s rhetorical energy is most playfully exploited.”

But I posit a further pole yet on this continuum—the hyperabundant text that more conspicuously still revels in its own ripeness of figuration, that is extraordinarily dense with meaning and signification, and that, in short, engages in excessive figuration not only beyond the strict demands of communication but also beyond our expectations for the more aureated language of literary texts. According to Stephen Nachmanovitch, “The opposite of play is not work or seriousness, because work can be play and play can be serious. [. . .] The opposite of play is one-dimensionality or literal-mindedness.”

This notion of ludic discourse as excessive figuration far beyond a hypothetical flat or “degree-zero style” is, of course, not native to the Renaissance, but connate ideas are already nascent in many rhetorical manuals from throughout the period. Thomas Wilson in 1553 describes the art

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124 “This Is Play,” 12.
of figuration by analogy to the clothing of the body, thus imagining rhetoric and figuration to be things in excess of the natural state of language:

If we think it comeliness and honesty to set forth the body with handsome apparel and think them worthy to have money, that both can and will use it accordingly: I can not otherwise see but that this part deserves praise, which standeth wholly in setting forth the matter, by apt words and sentences together, and beautifieth the tongue with great change of colours, and variety of figures.  

More directly, Wilson defines a *figure* as “a certain kind, either of sentence, Oration, or word, used after some new or strange wise, much unlike to that which men commonly use to speak,” expressing in this passage an understanding that figuration is a departure from what Fahnestock describes as a “degree-zero style.” George Puttenham in 1589 writes that “As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so be they also in a sort abuses or rather trespasses in speech, because they pass the ordinary limits of common utterance.” Continuing, Puttenham describes figurative speech as “a novelty of language evidently (and yet not absurdly) estranged from the ordinary habit and manner of our daily talk and writing.” Again, therefore, we see an idea in the Renaissance that is remarkably similar to Fahnestock’s contemporary notion. In around 1599 John Hoskyns states simply that “all metaphors go beyond the signification of things,” but he continues on to note that this transgression of metaphor against the literal is a source of


126 Ibid., 172.


128 Ibid., 132–33.

pleasure. Henry Peacham, too, emphasizes the pleasure to be gained from rhetoric when he offers his treatise for “ease, release, and recreation.” And finally, more than a century after Thomas Wilson’s treatise, Thomas Blount demonstrates for us that this same constellation of ideas still possesses currency during the period.

I must be careful at this juncture, however, to distinguish between the kind of language that I am characterizing as excessive, playful, or ludic and the kind of language that falls within a pre-existing and already very well-discussed category: Erasmian copia. Copia as a term refers to the concept of abundance—“The speech of man is a magnificent and impressive thing when it surges along like a golden river, with thoughts and words pouring out in rich abundance.” But abundance is a thing distinct from excess. “In general,” Angela Locatelli says, copia “meant all the devices that were necessary in order to make discourse more persuasive and elegant.” We see again here the idea of necessity as a baseline against which higher forms of rhetoric can be judged, although the necessities of copia are surely more elaborate than the demands of “degree-zero style.” Excessive or ludic discourse, therefore, can be considered that which goes beyond the needs of copia: the discourse at issue may be “persuasive and elegant” already, yet it proceeds to offer greater richness.

Ibid., 401.

130 Garden of Eloquence (1577) (London: H. Iackson, 1593), i.


132 Ibid., 401.

133 Angela Locatelli, “The Land of ‘Plenty’: Erasmus’ De Copia and English Renaissance Rhetoric,” in Silenos: Erasmus in Elizabethan Literature, ed. Claudia Corti, Studi di letteratura moderne e comparate (Pisa: Pacini, 1998), 41–57, 44. Locatelli also reminds us that a second definition of copia is imitation. Ibid.


135 “Land of ‘Plenty,’” 48 (emphasis supplied).
None of this is to say that excessive, ludic discourse affirmatively violates the Erasmian ideal of *copia* or that the excesses of ludic discourse are merely decorative ornament superadded to the raw content of the discourse. To the contrary, Erasmus was quite clear about how *copia* could be *improperly* exceeded by those who “pile up a meaningless heap of words and expressions without any discrimination, and thus obscure the subject they are talking about, as well as belabouring the ears of their unfortunate audience.”\(^{136}\) “[W]e find that unskilled practitioners of the full style chatter on without restraint, and yet say far too little, omitting a good many of the things that need to be said.”\(^{137}\) The ludic discourse practitioner, rather, provides an excess of content, meaning, and signification, as well as an excess of figuration; the discourse he or she offers is richly multivalent, containing a diversity of parallel ideas superimposed upon one another so that they become mutually reinforcing.\(^{138}\) Just as *copia* itself was not considered by Erasmus to be simply ornamental\(^{139}\)—instead, the style and the substance of the discourse “are so interconnected in reality that one cannot easily separate one from the other”\(^ {140}\)—neither is the excess of ludic discourse.

To summarize, my notion of *ludic discourse* in this dissertation—provisional and tentative as it must be—is based upon the ideas of excess, superfluity, and gratuitousness, the most common elements of definitions of play from the most prominent contemporary theorists in the field:

*discourse that is excessive, both in terms of its use of figuration and in terms of its tendency*
toward surpluses of signification, as judged against the needs of a hypothetical “degree-zero style” discourse, and that is distinct both from Erasmian copia and from the indecorous violation of copia. I expect that this definition will serve for the time being to illuminate the reader’s encounter with the case studies that follow in subsequent chapters and also that those case studies will in turn help to add clarity and substance to the definition.

C. MATRIX

Toward a Typology of Discursive Play

Even as scholars and critics have grown in the direction of taking play seriously, a salutary movement, there has also been a tendency in some quarters toward what Bernard Suits calls “loose talk” about games, a “definitional flaccidity,” in R. Rawdon Wilson’s terms, difficult to avoid because it arises necessarily from the nature of play. In other words, not only have many critical voices been fairly careless with the matter of defining play, but they have also not taken pains to distinguish between and among different types of play. It is the second problem that this section will attempt to address by developing and presenting a typology of playful discourses.

By way of illustration, take Nardo’s statement on the ludic practice of George Herbert: “By creating poetic puzzles, Herbert invites readers to engage in a game that the poet wins only when we...”

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142 In Palamedes’ Shadow, 79.

143 As one example among many, I shall summarize the case of Louis Untermeyer, who long ago embarked upon the promising thesis that “poetry is as playful as it is profound.” Play in Poetry: The Henry Ward Beecher Lectures Delivered at Amherst College: October, 1937 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 4. Yet his definition of play was deeply problematic from the outset: “By ‘playful’ I do not mean merely the outburst of high spirits or the formal light-heartedness of light verse. I mean the essential spirit which unites and intensifies the figures of speech, the hyperboles and similes, all of which represent the poet’s varying use of the invariable impulse to play.” Ibid. To the extent that it is not simply hollow (“the essential spirit which unites and intensifies”), the proposed definition is strikingly circular: He means by “playful” that which represents “the invariable impulse to play.” Ibid.
discover the solution.” In my mind, Nardo here has conflated two quite distinct aspects of discursive play. On one hand, a game is primarily characterized by an active and on-going relationship between or among multiple “players” (an author and his or her reader), while a puzzle is a play occasion with no opportunity for such an interchange, as the poet simply creates an artifact for the reader to decipher. Moreover, a discourse that works like a puzzle is a highly telic one (in general there is only one solution toward which the play action drives), while one that functions as a game does generally admits of multiple possible outcomes (any one of two or more “players” can “win”).

Consider also R. Darby Williams’ study of George Herbert’s poem “Paradise.” The poem that Williams examines is indeed conspicuously ludic in design—relying not merely on the common poetic device of rhyme but also accentuating those rhymes through excessive typography and wordplay—as well as incarnational in aspiration: its construction on the model of pruning described in the piece itself seeks to enact what the words of the poem describe:

I blesse thee, Lord because I GROW
Among thy trees, which in a ROW
To thee both fruit and order OW

What open force, or hidden CHARM
Can blast my fruit, or bring me HARM,
While the inclosure is thine ARM?

Inclose me still for fear I START.
Be to me rather sharp and TART,
Then let me want thy hand & ART.

144 *Ludic Self*, 102 (emphasis supplied).

When thou dost greater judgements SPARE,
And with thy knife but prune and PARE,
Ev’n fruitfull trees more fruitfull ARE.

Such sharpness show the sweetest FREN:
Such cuttings rather heal than REND:
And such beginnings touch their END.146

Williams’ response to the ludic design of the piece is very much in the mold of “lyric cryptography”;147 he arranges the capitalized words at the ends of the first lines of each stanza into a “ROW,” following Herbert’s cue to associate “the ‘trees’ which are said to contain the message (“I GROW / Among thy trees”) with the final capitalized letters”:

IGROWCHARMISTAISTSWAREFREN.148

“From this arrangement,” Williams says,” the gardener-decoder begins to ‘pare’ or ‘inclose’ certain of the letters by cutting and removing them from the series,” revealing a hidden message in the piece:

IGROWCH(A)R(M)IST(S)AREFREN =
I GROW CHRISTS FREN.149

Needless to say, it can be objected that Williams has taken too many liberties with Herbert’s text, interpreting it too aggressively,150 but the larger point for the purposes of this discussion is the way in which he describes what Herbert has done: “to find Christ the reader must play the game. And,

148  Williams, “Two Baroque Game Poems,” 183–84.
149  Ibid., 184.
150  Indeed, this is at least part of the reason that I selected Williams’ interpretation for this example: It is so strong as to be almost grotesquely ludic in itself, and it sets very nearly the outer limit for what might be counted as a credible reading of the poem. Although I shall offer some exceptionally close, and in some cases rather strong, readings in the following pages, I shall not cross the threshold that Williams has established here. See also Roy Neil Graves, “Herbert’s ‘The Collar,’” Explicator 54, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 73–77 (plotting the rhyme scheme of the poem in the standard A, B, C fashion and then reading hidden messages within the letters corresponding to each rhyme).
as in reading so many of Herbert’s poems, by playing the *game* and uncovering the *trick* being used, the reader also comes to discover the hand of God at work.” As I perceive these two key terms, they are diametrically opposed rather than cognate with one another: a game permits engagement between reader and writer, while a trick only permits the reader passively to observe the writer’s ingenuity or to be stunned by his or her unexpected innovation.

Given the need for a more precise typology of discursive play, therefore, the first step in this endeavor should be an attempt to define as clearly as possible the two broad terms that regularly emerge as central in discussions of ludic discourse: *game* and *play*. Huizinga generally speaks in terms of play; Caillois, however, focuses on games. Other forms of play such as puzzles and tricks, as we have seen, are often cited as well. Because *game* and *play* are not necessarily synonymous, and because the distinction between game and play has been described by Wilson as the “most important problem to be solved” in penetrating the definitional morass that can engulf the study of ludics, this inquiry appears to be one that cannot be deferred, and it thus provides a rational starting point for this analysis.

On an intuitive level, the difference between play and games seems to be one that can be easily stated: *play* is a general term that denotes a broader range of ludic activities than the word

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151 “Two Baroque Game Poems,” 184 (emphasis supplied).

152 According to Warren Motte, Caillois’ major critique of Huizinga’s work was Huizinga’s emphasis on *agon* to the exclusion of other types of play. “Playing in Earnest,” 28.


154 *In Palamedes’ Shadow* 72. Brian Edwards considers the potential confusion between these terms as one of the two main problems facing criticism based on concepts of play, ranking on a par with the sheer volume of research that exists on the subject. *Theories of Play*, 12.
*game*, which represents only a particular kind of playing. For example, a child running through a field is engaged in play regardless of whether he or she is pretending to be an airplane or participating in a round of tag, but only in the latter case would one ordinarily characterize that activity as a game. A deck of cards might be used for a hand of poker or to construct a fragile tower on a table-top; both activities could be characterized as playful or as examples of play, but only the former would usually be considered a game. In Edwards’ succinct formulation, “games involve play but play is not bound to games.” But on closer examination, this distinction proves to be less clear. Although the Super Bowl is nominally a *game* of football in which the members of each team *play*, one would be hard-pressed to characterize either the behavior or the attitudes of the participants as *playful*. The game is a serious business—the participants are being paid to take part in an activity which is highly profitable for them (and for others), and thus they are in a very real sense *working*. Whether or not they are enjoying the activity, “having fun,” is entirely incidental; indeed, one can easily imagine that the physical pain and the high stakes involved can make this particular play-experience extraordinarily stressful rather than recreational. These fundamental terms therefore require closer critical attention.

Definitions of *game* are not in short supply. According to Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, a game is “an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition

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155 As Hutchinson explains, *play* is a “wider, all-embracing” term than *game*. *Games Authors Play*, 2. See also Wilson, *In Palamedes’ Shadow*, 76 (“One might suppose that play must be the more general concept and that though all games presuppose playfulness, not all play leads to gamefulness”).

156 *Theories of Play*, 12.

157 This example bolsters Jacques Ehrmann’s critique of the ideas of play developed by Huizinga and Caillois. For Ehrmann, both theorists assume a binary opposition between work and leisure that is not borne out by human experience and that “corresponds to a conception of culture limited to the industrial phase of our civilization.” “Homo Ludens Revisited,” 46. Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning have attempted to create a taxonomy of recreation based upon precisely this objection—that the realm of leisure or non-work is not necessarily coextensive with that of play. *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1986).
between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrial outcome."  

Suits asserts that to play a game is “to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.”  

Taking these definitions as representative of those which other critics and scholars have advanced, three common features immediately emerge as central to the notion of games.

First, games are governed by rules.  Caillois’ seminal definition makes the existence of rules—or “conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts” (MPaG, 10)—a necessary constituent of game-playing.  Huizinga also associates games with “rules freely accepted but absolutely binding” (HL, 28).  

Second, games are directed toward finite outcomes—they are, in other words, telic in the sense that they contemplate some spatial, temporal, or situational point at which the participants are configured in a manner that

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159 The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 34.  In briefer terms, Suits says that “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”  Ibid., 41.  He insists elsewhere that avoiding “loose talk” about games requires “a reasonably clear idea of what a game is, or at least a reasonably clear idea of what the investigator believes a game to be, or at least a clear statement of what the investigator means by the word ‘game.’”  “Detective Story,” 215.

160 The literature on play is rife with observations about the essential connection between rules and games.  See Edwards, Theories of Play, 12 (“As activities that are finite and rule-governed, games involve play but play is not bound to games”); Hutchinson, Games Authors Play, 14 (“Unlike ‘play,’ the word ‘game’ suggests a more developed structure”); and Wilson, In Palamedes’ Shadow, 77 (“If any single thing distinguishes games from mere (or pure, or informal) play, it will be the presence of at least one constitutive rule, a piece of enabling legislation that makes possible precise directions, objectives, and even modes in play”).

161 Both Huizinga and Caillois conflate the notions of game and play by conceiving of games as things that are played and of play as an activity characteristic of games; for example, Caillois states that his project is “to define the nature and the largest common denominator of all games,” but then frames his definition under the rubric of play (MPaG, 9).  Although he acknowledges that “Many games do not imply rules”—his examples of such games include playing with dolls and playing “cops and robbers”—Caillois explains that the component of fantasy or role-playing in such games becomes operationally equivalent to the rules that govern more formal ludic activities:  “the sentiment of as if replaces and performs the same function” (MPaG, 8).
terminates the game. According to Caillois, “the game starts and ends at a given signal. Its duration is often fixed in advance,” and when extensions occur they are permitted only by the participants’ consent or a rule-based judgment; “In every case, the game’s domain is therefore a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space” (*MPaG*, 6–7). Huizinga concurs, noting that “the essence of play” consists in the idea of something being “‘at stake’” or subject to determination based upon a game’s outcome: “But this ‘something’ is not the material result of the play, not the mere fact that the ball is in the hole, but the ideal fact that the game is a success or has been successfully concluded” (*HL*, 49). Finally, games are inherently antithetical; they either implicate or require some form of opposition between or among distinct game participants. For Huizinga, this element of antithesis or “tension” (*HL*, 11) is so central to the notion of game-playing that he declares them to be synonymous: “Play is battle and battle is play” (*HL*, 41). Caillois takes

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162 Unlike other forms of play, games are not “open-ended with respect to outcomes.” Avedon and Sutton-Smith, “Introduction,” 7. The word game can “suggest something which needs to be solved” (Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play*, 14), and solution implies resolution, the successful completion of a finite task. The systematic and rule-governed nature of games gives game-play an impetus in the direction of “absolute goal-oriented behavior.” Robert Chumbley, “Introductory Remarks toward a ‘Polylogue’ on Play,” *SubStance* 8, no. 4 (1980): 7–10, 7–8. As Wolfgang Iser argues, “because of their forms, games must inevitably be limited; in contrast with play, they are designed for endings. The result ends play.” The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 265.

163 Many critics concur. See, for example, Avedon and Sutton-Smith,”Introduction,” 7 (“games imply some opposition or antithesis between players”). “All games imply some interdependence,” at least in the sense that “Competition is an ingredient in most games; the question [. . .] is how intense is the competition and what creates this intensity.” Fritz Redl, Paul Gump, and Brian Sutton-Smith, “The Dimensions of Games,” in Avedon and Sutton-Smith, *Study of Games*, 408–18, 410, 412.

164 Huizinga concedes elsewhere that “‘antithetical’ does not necessarily mean ‘contending’ or ‘agonistic’” and that in some forms of play antithesis may be entirely absent. However, the centrality of competitive antithesis or agon to his approach emerges in his claim that “Tension and uncertainty as to the outcome increase enormously when the antithetical element becomes really agonistic in the play of groups.” He considers as “higher forms of social play” those in which there is some “orderly activity of a group or two opposed groups”; “Solitary play,” he asserts, “is productive of culture only in a limited degree” (*HL*, 47).
Huizinga to task for focusing on competitive games to the exclusion of other ludic forms (*MPaG*, 4), yet his own more elaborate taxonomy also gives a central role to antithesis and agon.\footnote{Motte surely exaggerates in asserting that “when Caillois finally comes to postulate his own model of play, it resembles Huizinga’s point by point.” “Playing in Earnest,” 6. Indeed, the principal feature of Caillois’ study is its classification of games into distinct groups, only one of which is “agôn;” the kind of game built upon the idea of competition. Caillois also identifies *alea* (games such as roulette that are based upon the role of chance), *mimicry* or *mimesis* (games that primarily involve a dimension of role-playing), and *ilinx* or *vertigo* (games in which “one produces in oneself, by rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder”) (*MPaG*, 12). Superimposed on this classification, however, is the separate binary of *ludus* and *paidia*, “not categories of play but ways of playing” (*MPaG*, 53). *Paidia* embraces “spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct” (*MPaG*, 27–28); *ludus* constitutes a more formalized and systematic confinement of that instinct into “arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” (*MPaG*, 13). Yet this continuum is partially defined by the degree to which the forms of play arrayed upon it are agonistic. A child’s movement toward the pole of pure *ludus* involves first the creation of rules and then the making of “all kinds of bets—which [. . .] are the fundamental forms of *agôn*—with himself or with his friends” (*MPaG*, 28–29); eventually the child becomes concerned with the mastery of a skill or the achievement of an objective, a motivation for play that is inherently associated with conflict. Caillois attempts to distinguish *ludus* from *agôn* by asserting that in the latter “the tension and skill of the player are not related to any explicit feeling of emulation or rivalry; the conflict is with the obstacle, not with one or several competitors” (*MPaG*, 29).}

Assuming that these three characteristics of games—the existence of governing rules, telic boundedness, and a component of antithesis or opposition—fairly represent the features that critics have in mind when they compare discourses to games, to what extent are such comparisons apt?
First, although surprisingly little research exists on the subject, we can provisionally declare that discourses are governed, if not by strict rules, then at least by conventions or norms. To articulate the simplest possible example, consider the discourse of love within the genre of verse during the early modern period; the “rules” of that discourse are coextensive with the conventions and norms that grew out of the Italian sonnet. The discourse, in formal terms, must be configured in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, with varying degrees of departure from strict metrical consistency being permitted, and with those lines organized in one of a finite number of possible rhyme schemes. Norms and conventions govern the content of the discourse as well—the beloved must be to some degree inaccessible and the speaker unworthy, her beauty must be described using a certain number of set tropes (“lips like sugar” or “cheeks like roses,” for instance), and the love expressed must be principally platonic in nature albeit romantic or even sexual in aspiration.

166 Eugene Goodheart is one of only a few scholars who have investigated the notion that discourses are rule-bound in the same sense that games are. “Literature as Game,” *TriQuarterly*, no. 52 (Fall 1981): 134–49. However, his essay treats the subject as an entry point for a meditation upon the nature of literary criticism and the value of deconstruction; although interesting, the piece does not meaningfully contemplate the question of what the specific rules of discourse might be. Edwards asks the key question at issue here—“If games are indeed rule-governed, how do rules operate in literary games?”—but he never supplies an answer. *Theories of Play*, 13. Sacvan Bercovitch treats literary and cultural critique as a set of Wittgensteinian “language games,” so his emphasis is simultaneously more narrow than and somewhat different from my own. “Games of Chess: A Model of Literary and Cultural Studies,” in *Centuries’ Ends, Narrative Means*, ed. Robert Newman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 15–57. Herbert de Ley applies mathematical game theory to three specific French texts in ways that seem promising and rewarding, but his analysis of rule-boundness is limited to the rules erected by the plots and characters within those particular texts, so he does not have occasion to consider discursive rules more broadly. “The Name of the Game: Applying Game Theory in Literature,” *SubStance* 17, no. 1 (1988): 33–46. Likewise, Elizabeth Bruss borrows from game theory in characterizing the rules that govern particular texts, but her discussion is not helpful on the subject of discursive rules in general. “Game of Literature.” Finally, Troy Earl Camplin supplies a productive discussion of how rules in literature can be generative rather than confining, but except for examples related to specific texts, his investigation does not extend to the consideration of what the rules of literature might be. “Literature as a Game: Game-Play in Reading, Creating, and Understanding Literature,” *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* 7, no. 2 (August 2006), https://blackboard.lincoln.ac.uk/bbcswebdav/users/dmeyerdinkgrafe/archive/camplin.html (accessed February 17, 2015).

167 This important distinction is one that R. Rawdon Wilson advances: “conventions are looser, less abstract, more resistant to formulation, and altogether more flexible than rules.” *In Palamedes’ Shadow*, 85. But see Robert Rawdon Wilson, “Three Prolusions: Toward a Game Model in Literary Theory,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 79–92, 80 (“It will not do to speak casually about ‘rules’ or to make an easy (but fallacious) equation between ‘convention’ and ‘rule’ in literature”).
But almost as soon as we posit this example, flaws within the game/discourse analogy begin to emerge. A discourse of love that too closely follows the norms and conventions of the sonnet is likely one of two types: a Petrarchan sonnet by the originator of the form or a poor imitation of one. Where we begin to see true artistry, and perhaps even traces of the ludic impulse, is where the discourse’s author selectively tweaks the rules of his or her discourse, playing with the form of the game itself. Consider how William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes”) flouts Petrarchan convention precisely by refusing to extend those norms to the speaker’s beloved. More dramatically still, John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 18 (“Show me deare Christ”) adapts the conventions of the sonnet form to speak of Divine love, using shockingly sexual rather than platonic imagery as a metaphor for the speaker’s desire to know the true Church. Likewise, his Holy Sonnet 14 (“Batter my heart”) adapts the discourses of rape and force to the form, using them to demonstrate the speaker’s yearning for communion with the Divine yet his inability to achieve it through his own action or will. Accordingly, if the discourse of the sonnet is a game, it is a very strange game indeed, one in which the playing field itself is subject to change and manipulation in distinct rounds or hands of play—this kind of metagame is almost as if, analogically speaking, each game in the World Series yielded not a winner and a loser but rather a new configuration of the field for the next game—bases could be added or subtracted, the outfield fence and foul poles moved, and the pitcher’s mound repositioned.\footnote{“[L]iterature,” Edwards opines, “is more playful [than game theory] in its ability to transcend, by mockery, parody, or experiment, its own ‘rules’ or conventions.” Theories of Play, 14.} This is a phenomenon that we shall have occasion to observe throughout the three case studies that comprise the body of this dissertation: discourse practitioners seem less to be playing games than to be playing \textit{with} games—John Donne exceeds the rhetorical norms of sermonic discourse, refusing to play the game of preaching as its rules had previously been set down but
rewriting them instead. Likewise, William Scrots and Hans Holbein exceed the norm of single-point perspective in their visual discourses, creating a different kind of aesthetic that necessitates a different kind of viewer response. George Herbert adapts the conventions of patterned verse to new purposes in “The Altar,” incorporating them boldly into his text but belating them and converting them to his own scheme of play.

There should, on the other hand, seem to be little question that literary discourses, at least, share with games the quality of telic boundedness. With the exception of the rare text that turns back on itself like a Möbius-strip, such as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* with its “commodius vicus of recirculation,” texts have first and final pages, and, except in the *ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges, they do not have a tendency to leak beyond themselves into the “real” world. Therefore, this particular correspondence between games and discourse is arguably a trivial one—it does not allow us to distinguish among genres or the individual works within them. There is also an important sense in which this parallel is simply false, a sense which also reveals problems with ludic metaphors predicated on the notion of rules. “Only semantically impoverished games such as chess or poker, whose rules can generate all conceivable configurations of play, are considered finite,” Peter Swirski says. “It is this feature which, despite an astronomic number of possible permutations, makes

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170 I am thinking, of course, of “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in which the creation of an encyclopedia for an imaginary world called Tlön somehow causes artifacts from that planet to manifest themselves on Earth and ultimately results in the wholesale adoption of its philosophy, science, and history. Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1940), trans. James E. Irby (1962), in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 3–29. The narrator concludes that “A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of this world” and that it is only a matter of time before “The world will be Tlön.” Ibid., 18. But we can understand Borges’ story not merely as a fanciful (indeed, playful) exposition of a fantastic conceit but also as an entirely serious metaphor for the real impact that texts have on their contexts in the outside world. A text, in other words, is not entirely bound by its bindings; it interacts with and works changes upon the contingent and historical world in ways that a game—“essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life” (*MPaG*, 6)—cannot.

them mathematically normalizable. In contrast, literary works are non-finite and non-normalizable.\footnote{172}

If a ludic understanding of discourse based on the existence of rules is basically sound but imperfect, and if the apparent aptness of comparisons based on finitude begins to show strains when subjected to analytical pressure, then the semblance between games and discourses virtually collapses—or at a minimum yields up its problematic complexity—when the element of antithesis or opposition is carefully examined.

The most obvious question that presents itself in this regard is \textit{who or what are set into opposition by the game of discourse?} Because the answer to that question, regrettably, depends on the nature of the discourse at issue, I propose to continue this investigation by addressing the type of discourse that I would argue provides the maximum number of possible answers to this question: detective fiction. Although certainly not a component of Renaissance discourse, except perhaps in a very primitive form,\footnote{173} detective fiction supplies a productive lens through which to view the question currently on the table, and it is possible to analogize at appropriate junctures between the antitheses or oppositions that the detective fiction genre sets into motion and those that we might see in Renaissance discourses.

In attempts to address the current question, the most common answer to have been offered is Marjorie Nicolson’s: that “the detective story is a battle royal between the author and the reader.”\footnote{174} Hutchinson goes so far as to imply that the reader-writer opposition is straightforward

\footnote{172} Ibid.


and incontestable: “The suggestion of a contest between author and reader is evident in any work which contains a mystery to be solved.” But if detective fiction is configured as a game in which the narrative’s author is set against its reader, then we are immediately faced with another question. In what does winning consist? In other words, what state of affairs constitutes the telos or endpoint toward which the game aims? For what purpose do its rules exist? The answer appears to be one that can be easily formulated—the object of the game is, for the reader, to solve the mystery before the author’s detective can do so and, for the writer, to prevent the reader from anticipating that solution while still “playing fair” according to the rules of the genre. However, except in the case of the “stripped-down detective story” that Suits calls “the Minute Mystery,” this answer is entirely unsatisfactory.

175 *Games Authors Play*, 6.

176 John Dickson Carr is often credited as the first expositor of this model of detective fiction as a contest between reader and writer. “‘I dare you,’ says the reader, ‘to provide a solution which I can’t anticipate.’ ‘Right!’ says the author, chuckling over the consciousness of some new and legitimate dirty-trick concealed up his sleeve. And they are at it—pull-devil, pull-murderer—with the reader alert for every dropped clue, every betraying speech, every contradiction that may mean guilt.” “The Grandest Game in the World” (1963), in *The Mystery Writer’s Art*, ed. Francis M. Nevins, Jr. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1970), 227–47, 230. See also Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, “The Reader as Poe’s Ultimate Dupe in ‘The Purloined Letter,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 26, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 311–15, 312 (“for Poe the detective story was a game and the reader his opponent”); *MPaG*, 30 (citing detective stories, and specifically the reader’s attempt “to identify the culprit” as an example of *ludus*); and Heta Pyrhönen, *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*, Literary Criticism in Perspective (Columbia, SC: Camden Press, 1994), 10 (“The writing and reading of the whodunit are supposedly governed by more or less strict rules that involve the reader’s attempt to solve the crime puzzle before the detective does”).

177 “Detective Story,” 201.

178 We can see a similar dynamic in any number of Renaissance literary works that feature narratives; the reader can be imagined as being in opposition to the author in a contest to determine whether the former can anticipate the narrative’s conclusion before the latter has the opportunity to reach it. For the reasons discussed in the following paragraph, however, a literary discourse game in which the reader could conceivably win would likely be considered unsatisfying. The “Minute Mystery” exception has an analogue to Renaissance genres in discourses involving riddles, where we can very clearly see the reader and the writer pitted against each other in a game of wits. See Katelijne Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
A reader’s victory in this kind of competition would be Pyrrhic indeed—a reader who handily solves the mystery before arriving at the final chapter would hardly judge the narrative to be an artistic success within the genre, and he or she would be more likely to experience disappointment than the exultation of success. “For the detective story to have a solution that could readily be guessed by the majority of readers would go clean against the whole nature and character of the genre,” William O. Aydelotte says: “The solution has to come as a surprise.”179 As a result, it is simply not possible for the reader to win a game conceived in this manner. Either the reader fails to anticipate the culprit’s identity and the author emerges triumphant, or the reader proves to be more clever than the author’s detective and makes a loser of both players. Of course, this means that the detective story is not a game, or at least not the kind of game in which the opponents are the reader and the writer: most “detective novels,” Suits explains, “are not written as games to be played at all.”180

Imagining other forms of antithesis between the author and the reader is possible, of course, but in those relationships the agonistic element diminishes and, at least according to Huizinga, so


180 “Detective Story,” 209 (emphasis original).
does the extent to which the relationship resembles game-play (HL, 47). The most common alternative is a model of spectatorship: the antithesis is one in which the author is a performer and the reader is the audience. George N. Dove refers to the “game” of detective fiction as one “in which the reader assumes the role of an interested spectator, who is free to accept or decline the challenges of the story.” This formulation resolves the difficulty created by the fact that few readers attempt to solve the mystery in a detective story, yet allows for the possibility that some may choose to do so. However, by turning the text into “a game that is neither ‘won’ nor ‘lost,’” this understanding of detective fiction seriously undermines the spirit of the ludic metaphor that critics have used in attempting to describe the genre. The result is a completely different type of game, one in which the writer is simultaneously playing with, within, and against the genre itself—the writer must play

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181 Peter Swirski sees the author-reader relationship as a cooperative and collaborative one. “Literary Studies,” 71. George N. Dove suggests the paradigm of “parties to a compact, not contenders for a title.” The Reader and the Detective Story (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 3. Many critics have suggested a hybrid relationship in which author and reader (or reader and text) are both teammates and opponents. See, for example, Robert Champigny, What Will Have Happened: A Philosophical and Technical Essay on Mystery Stories (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 4. According to Bruss, between zero-sum and cooperative games, there lies a range of mixed-motive games in which the players share enough mutual concerns to make it profitable—or at least less dangerous—to refrain from total conflict, while still remaining antagonists to some extent. Diplomacy and bargaining are the paradigms here, and it is here as well that the greater number of literary games is found. An entirely defeated, gullied, or bewildered audience could hardly appreciate the skill or even recognize the triumph of an author.

“Game of Literature,” 159. See also Foust, “Rules of the Game,” 9 (“literary exchange implies both competition and cooperation. The writer must cooperate with the reader in order to communicate at all, but he does not want to be too cooperative, to be understood too easily”).

182 Reader, 19. As Umberto Eco argues in explaining the playful quality of another literary genre, it would be more accurate to compare these books to a game of basketball played by the Harlem Globe Trotters. […] We know with absolute confidence that they will win: the pleasure lies in watching the trained virtuosity with which the Globe Trotters defer the final moment, with what ingenious deviations they reconfirm the foregone conclusion, with what trickeries they make rings around their opponents.


183 Dove, Reader, 20.
within the genre, in the sense that he or she accepts and conforms to its conventions or rules, but plays with the genre by attempting to make those conventions yield an unexpected result, and sometimes plays against the genre by breaking those rules. This a highly unorthodox game, consisting as it does in a single “move” that is not quite a version of solitaire but that nonetheless relegates the reader, an erstwhile player, to the largely passive role of observing a solo performance.

Likewise, it is possible to posit other antithetical pairs at the center of the detective-fiction game, but none of them precisely captures the spirit of the game metaphors used in criticism of the genre. After the reader-author antithesis—whether conceived as a player versus player relationship, a spectator-audience relationship, or some hybrid dynamic encompassing both competition and cooperation—and after a scheme in which the writer and the genre are set against each other, the next antithesis that presents itself is the competition between detective and criminal. However, “if the ‘game’ at issue is one played by (or between) characters in a story, then it is not, of course, really a game that is being viewed by the reader, but, in Aristotle’s sense of the word, an imitation of a

184 Irregular as it may be, however, it is still a mode of play within the models that both Huizinga and Caillois have articulated. “For nonparticipants,” Caillois says, “every agôn is a spectacle” (MPaG, 22), and “theatrical presentations and dramatic interpretations rightly belong in” the play-category of mimicry (MPaG, 21). See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (1960), trans. Joel Weisheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum Press, 1989), 109 (“openness towards the spectator is part of the closedness of play”). “The function of play in the higher forms which concern us here can largely be derived from the two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest for something or a representation of something.” HL, 13. Suits stresses that a text can be considered a game even if it is “treated as a spectator sport rather than as a participatory event” (“Detective Story,” 210), and explains that, even assuming the reader’s passive position, “the game concept is still important in understanding the work, for even in those cases where the reader is not making the indicated counter-move, he sees the work as a move (the author’s) in a game” (ibid., 212).

185 A Renaissance analogue would be a discourse in which the artist’s virtuosity becomes the dominant mode for the reader’s enjoyment of the piece. As a specific example, consider John Donne’s “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” with its famous instances of metaphysical wit and conceits. One does not read the poem with the expectation that he or she can predict the ending; rather, the pleasure derived from the reading process is akin to that of spectatorship: one witnesses with stunned delight Donne’s performance as he generates highly unexpected yet surprisingly apt metaphors for the lovers’ parting and the speaker’s ultimate, promised return.
game.”186 Understood in this way, the work of detective fiction is still a form of play but only in the sense that a play (that is, a drama performed on stage) is also a ludic activity. This observation is not intended to limit the ludic significance of the drama or of the detective story conceived as a similar form of mimesis; rather, it is designed to point out that the game metaphor in detective-fiction criticism cannot be explained or justified by recourse to this model—it does not distinguish, for example, between or among Agatha Christie’s Ten Little Indians as a novel, her adaptation And Then There Were None as a theatrical performance, and the production of any other drama, such as a piece of Renaissance-era dramatic discourse. All three are forms of play in virtually the same sense.187

Noting that detective fiction, as S. E. Sweeney says, “is preoccupied with theory [and] interpretation,”188 some scholars have interpreted the detective-culprit binary as itself a metaphor for another dichotomy: the relationship between the reader and the text. According to Jeffrey T. Nealon:

“The unraveling work of the detective within the story mirrors and assists the work of the reader, as both try to piece together the disparate signs that might eventually solve the mystery. The reader of the detective novel comes, metafictionally, to identify with the detective, because both reader and detective are bound up in the

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187 Suits goes so far as to conclude that “the detective story, thus conceived, has no bearing whatever on the issue of games in literature (or at least no more bearing than anything else in the universe, since anything under the sun and beyond it can be made a literary subject).” Furthermore, he questions whether this understanding of detective fiction can even be viewed as a game at all, “because the fictional detective (and thus the fictional puzzle-solver) is simply not represented as playing a game at all; he is represented as plying a deadly serious trade.” Ibid., 211.

metaphysical or epistemological work of interpretation, the work of reading clues and writing a solution or end.\textsuperscript{189}

Yet this antithesis in some sense duplicates the relationship between the reader and the author—it only substitutes for the writer the textual artifact that he or she has created. Similarly, it repeats the model of spectatorship or \textit{mimesis}; the reader, however, is now the audience not of a game that the author is playing, or of a game that the author is portraying, but rather of an interpretive act which stands as a metaphor for such a game and the act of its reception.\textsuperscript{190} “At the metadiegetic level,” Sweeney says, “the criminal is the author of a crime that the detective must interpret.”\textsuperscript{191} Another difficulty with this model is reflected in Suits’ decision not to consider the reader, along with the author, as a game-maker; to do so would “presuppose a rather controversial critical (and, more generally, aesthetic) principle: the principle that it is the right (or perhaps the obligation) of an artistic appreciator to ‘get out’ of a work of art what \textit{he} finds there, irrespective of the intention (if any) of the artist.”\textsuperscript{192} And, indeed, a reader could play this kind of game with any sort of text—a work of

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\textsuperscript{190} The signal example of a Renaissance-era text that might be said to work in this fashion is William Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, with \textit{The Mousetrap}, its play-within-a-play, as a metatheatrical meditation upon the relationship between audience and performance. The game between Hamlet and Claudius serves as a metaphor for the game between Shakespeare and his reader or viewer.

\textsuperscript{191} “Locked Rooms,” 8. According to Heta Pyrhönen, “at the metadiegetic level the criminal ‘writes’ the secret story of crime, which the detective, at the diegetic level, ‘reads’ by following the clues the culprit has been unable to suppress.” \textit{Murder}, 34. The detective’s reading then becomes an act of writing that produces the text itself; “The criminal as author and detective as reader are engaged in a rivalry over the possession of meaning.” Ibid. Although Robert Champigny asserts that “The criminal, who furnishes problem and clues, is to the detective within the tale as the text is to the reader outside the tale” (\textit{What Will Have Happened}, 41), he later posits a somewhat different relationship: “the conflict between murderer and detective is a conflict between poet and storyteller. In this perspective, the detective’s victory is a victory of narrative sense over poetic sense, or at least a superimposition of the former on the latter” (ibid., 46).

\textsuperscript{192} “Detective Story,” 217.
detective fiction no more or less than the text of a Ben Jonson masque, or a cookbook, or a grocery list.\textsuperscript{193}

The term \textit{game}—at least defined, as it typically is in the literature of play, by the existence of governing rules, telic boundedness, and a component of antithesis or opposition—therefore seems insufficient by itself as a conceptual analogue of, or trope for, detective fiction. Bruss, in fact, anticipates this conclusion with regard to textual works in general: “the notion of ‘game’ itself may eventually prove too narrow, suggesting as it does a finite set of rules, a well-defined playing space, clearly ranked preferences, and conscious calculations.”\textsuperscript{194} Other scholars concur,\textsuperscript{195} and Hutchinson in particular asserts that the few existing studies of literary games have tended to be guided by the terminology and the philosophy of sport. They have readily taken over concepts such as ‘agôn’ [. . .] or even ‘payoff’ (the benefit derived by the player). This, it seems to me, is a rather procrustean exercise. All it can ‘prove’ is that certain forms of literature fit categories which were originally devised for other forms of activity, and it is not an ideal way of classifying processes which are more diverse and usually far more complex than those we find on the playing field or even on the chessboard.\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{193} Some scholars have seen the critic’s work of interpretation as a kind of game. According to Carter Kaplan, for example, critics play games with texts and each critical approach amounts to a game played by its own separate set of rules. “Games Critics Play,” \textit{SubStance} 25, no. 3 (1996): 56–68.

\textsuperscript{194} “Game of Literature,” 170.

\textsuperscript{195} See, for example, Edwards, \textit{Theories of Play}, 20 (“Even though this categorization of games provides a typology that can be used for analysis, it is because Cailliois’s study concentrates on games and considers play in terms of them that it is, finally, so restrictive of the possibilities of play”).

\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Games Authors Play}, 4.
This diversity and complexity explain the central problems which have emerged from the foregoing analysis. First, the rules or conventions of the genre, albeit strict by comparison to those which prevail in other literary discourses, are significantly more fluid than the ones that govern games or sports; they do not mediate the activities of the principal “game” participants, the reader and the author, in predictable ways, and they do not define a telos toward which their actions should be directed. Second, the competitive dimension of games is not well suited to a description of detective fiction: antitheses certainly exist in the genre, in abundance, but they tend not to be agonistic. Interrogating those oppositions by attempting to posit a goal or objective toward which each partner in a pair is striving fails to render a satisfactory telos. The rules of the “game” are not constructed to yield victories and defeats, and because of their inherent instability they cannot serve as a predicate for a reasonably clear objective that could constitute an end game.

Play, on the other hand, the second basic term that confronts scholars and critics who attempt to sort through the complexities of ludic behavior, tends to isolate different features of the ludic impulse than those emphasized in definitions of the term game. These features can supply a necessary adjunct to supplement the notion of game, which is all too limiting with respect to the search for a set of appropriate ludic analogues of discourses. However, I want to suggest at the outset that these definitions of play should not be understood as delineating a field of activities in which games are situated as a mere subset. Instead, I imagine play as a term that addresses a particular type of activity that coexists with games at the same conceptual level within a more general set of acts and behaviors that can collectively be described as ludic.

197 See, for example, Edwards, Theories of Play, 12; and Wilson, In Palamedes’ Shadow, 72.
In defining *play*, particularly as a ludic mode distinct from what the term *game* implies, it is helpful to rely on Wolfgang Iser’s contrast between what he calls “instrumental play” and “free play.” Iser relies on Gadamer’s idea that the play impulse reflects a “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end; [. . .] rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.”198 This impulse is manifested in games to the extent that rules are superimposed upon it,199 but this is “instrumental play,” as Paul B. Armstrong puts it, with “a particular goal—the victory of one side or the determination of a single result.”200 The objective of instrumental play is to close the play space and to terminate the actions in which play consists—according to Iser, “games must inevitably be limited; in contrast with play, they are designed for endings.”201 But “free play” plays “against endings,”202 seeking to perpetuate the to-and-fro movement that Gadamer sees as central to ludic phenomena.203

Traces of the concept of free play are also evident in Huizinga’s theory and to a greater extent that of Caillois, whose taxonomy Iser actually adopts.204 Caillois’ concept of *ilinx* or *vertigo* suggests a certain randomness and disorder that is incompatible with purely instrumental play. In fact, Caillois’ example of *ilinx*—a child “whirling rapidly [until] he reaches a centrifugal state of flight from which he regains bodily stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty” (*MPaG*, 565).
—is one whose *telos* is nothing more than simple pleasure and which admits of no discernible rules or strictures. *Mimesis or mimicry* is a mode of play from which Caillois specifically excludes the element of rule-boundedness: “the continuous submission to imperative and precise rules cannot be observed” and the only rule that can be hypothesized for such an activity is merely that of “fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell” (*MPaG*, 22–23). For Huizinga’s part, he understands the essence of play to be fun or pleasure (*HL*, 3), a *telos* of some sort to be sure, but one whose contours are barely detectable, if at all. He emphasizes this less structured dimension of play by noting that the ludic realm exists apart from the strictures of logic and necessity (*HL*, 3–4) and that play is an activity which is voluntary rather than compelled, disinterested rather than motivated by a *telos* that exists in the “real world” outside the necessary confines of play itself (*HL*, 7–9). What emerges from these elements of play, divorced as they are from the relatively more disciplined realm of games, is something more like Barthes’ notion of *jouissance*.

And this idea—fundamentally text-based as an erotics of reading—leads back to one of Iser’s principal insights: “Free play and instrumental play,” Armstrong explains, “are inextricably intertwined in the games texts play as they range between open-endedness and closure”; Iser says, “the text game is one in which limitation and endlessness can be played to an equal degree.” This suggests that a model of textual play can be constructed based on a continuum. Some texts can be described as completely bounded with respect to a particular *telos*. In the context of detective fiction, an example might be an Ellery Queen novel, complete with its “Challenge to the Reader,” in which the text moves single-mindedly to the revelation of the culprit’s identity. To borrow from

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205 “Politics of Play,” 217.

206 *Fictive*, 265.
the terminology of play, one can refer to texts at this extreme of the continuum with the term **PUZZLE**—a text which poses a discrete problem and that unfolds as the process of discovering a single, unique solution. At the other end of the telic continuum one could hypothesize the perfectly open work, in Eco’s sense of the term, or the work of Derridean *différance*, the unconstrained free play of meaning that renders the text radically unstable or even entirely atelic. Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* is one example of the texts that might tend toward this pole of the telic continuum, texts that can be described by the term **TOY**—a text which is not directed toward a single objective but that seeks to evoke multiple, even incompatible, sets of meanings and to promote a variety of readings, none of which can be deemed incorrect. Most texts will fall somewhere between these extremes; a novel like Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* could be described as more like a toy than a puzzle, for example.

If the element of *telos* can serve as one axis in this model, then the antithesis between a text’s reader and its author can provide the basis for a second. However, the analysis of games implies that the reader-author dynamic is not defined in terms of competition. While there may be cases in which this paradigm prevails and the reader is required to match his or her wits against the author’s, the Minute Mystery for instance, there will be many others in which the reader is essentially a passive spectator. Yet the reader will never be completely uninvolved: works like mysteries “*force* the reader’s speculation,” Hutchinson says: “they encourage him to guess, or rather, to deduce, the identity of the culprit.” Speculation is a form of interaction, for it involves the reader on a more

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“*Games Authors Play*, 24. See also Avedon and Sutton-Smith, “Introduction.” 7 (“Even in solitary games (puzzles) it seems that this same sense of opposition is present. That is, the player contends against impersonal obstacles or against fortune, or he mentally pits one aspect of himself against another”); Helen Hovanec, *The Puzzler’s Paradise: From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), 10 (puzzle-solvers mobilize “their own ingenuity against that of the constructors”); and Hutchinson, *Games Authors Play*, 13 (“Behind much playful writing there is a clear creative zest. It is the sort of writing which, to use the concepts of Roland Barthes, ‘writerly’ (‘scriptible’) rather than ‘readerly’ (‘lisible’); it does not aim to encourage *passivity* on the part of the reader, but rather to draw him in so fully into the process of ‘reading’ that he actually participates in the production of the text”).
active level than does simple observation of a performance, but speculation falls far short of competition. Likewise, the genuine interplay of games is not possible simply by virtue of the fact that reader and author are not present to each other, and at least in Gadamer’s conception of games a necessary element is an opponent or an oppositional force “which automatically responds to [the player’s] moves with a countermove.”

“An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction,” declares Iser, “is the fact that with reading there is no face-to-face situation. A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with.” This axis of the model is defined not by degrees of competition but rather by the extent of a reader’s involvement or participation, and the term I shall use for this axis is *methexis*. The polar extreme at which the reader’s involvement most resembles competition may be designated by the term GAME—the Minute

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208 *Truth and Method*, 105–106. Although games with only two moves rarely occur, “there is at least one class of games whose members appear to be precisely of this kind, namely, puzzles. The truth of this is perhaps made less obvious by the fact that both moves in such games (the move made by the puzzle-maker and the move made by the puzzle-solver) are much more complex than are the moves of a single pitch and a single swing in baseball.” Suits, “Detective Story,” 204.


210 For Huizinga, the idea of *mimesis* does not quite capture the dynamic of some forms of play, like rituals:

The word “represents” [. . .] does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least not in its looser, modern connotation; for here “representation” is really *identification*, the mystic re-*presentation* of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much *shown figuratively* as *actually reproduced* in the action. The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshippers [sic] to participate in the sacred happening itself. As the Greeks would say, “it is methectic rather than mimetic”. It is “a helping out of the action.”


Mystery is the paradigm case of this type of reader participation. On the other hand, texts which do not anticipate, solicit, or require any brand of reader engagement beyond spectatorship can be described with the word TRICK—in texts like this the author’s performance and virtuosity are central to the work, which can be understood as little more than a vehicle or venue for his or her act of self-display.

This model of play can be graphically rendered as in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. A Typology of Discursive Play.

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211 “We may say [. . .] that some detective novels are overridingy games in the required sense, others are games but not overridingly so (that is, they contain character or other elements which are as important to the reader as is the puzzle plot), others are games only subordinately, while others are not games at all.” Suits, “Detective Story,” 208.
I want to stress that this model is not offered dogmatically, but rather heuristically. The foregoing analysis has revealed that textual manifestations of ludic phenomena are extraordinarily complex and that traditional ways of speaking about those phenomena are seriously limiting to the extent that they have been unable to capture those subtleties. Although this model might supply a more nuanced and precise vocabulary for organizing a discourse about modes of textual play, it remains provisional, and we shall see how it operates in the case studies that follow.

D. SCHEMA
A View of the English Reformation

The Reformation is a richly complex historical phenomenon, or rather a set of phenomena, for it unfolded quite differently in the multiple regions of Western Christendom that it affected, and in its broad sweep it left no aspect of culture untouched or unaltered: theology and religion, of course, but also politics, architecture, art, literature, and discourse more broadly were all caught up in its field of cultural change. Nowhere, however, I would suggest, was the Reformation more fecund in its radical reworking of culture—and in its inherent complexity—than in England during the late Tudor and early Stuart periods at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. My aims in this section are, first, to provide a summary account of a key development in the recent history of scholarship on the English Reformation, including a discussion of some of the definitional problems that emerge from efforts to describe this pivotal historical and cultural

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212 MacCulloch, Reformation, xvii (“there were very many different Reformations, nearly all of which would have said that they were aimed simply at recreating authentic Catholic Christianity”).
movement, and second, to introduce and elaborate upon a schematic view of English Reformation belief systems that will guide and inform my work in the case studies that follow this chapter.

Antonio Foscarini, the Venetian ambassador to the Court of James I, reported to Venice in 1616 that twelve different religious parties existed in England during his tenure there: “three of Catholics, three of the merely indifferent, ‘four of the religion of his Majesty, and two Puritan parties.” Two conclusions are therefore unsurprising. First, as Ritchie D. Kendall explains, “The efforts to establish a phylogeny and taxonomy of religious belief in this period have proved almost as divisive as the theological conflicts that they help document.” Indeed, by this stage in the development of period scholarship, the vast array of models of English Reformation belief systems available for the burgeoning critic to follow is mind-boggling. Second, a former era of criticism that tended to perceive the English Reformation in terms of a simple “Anglican”/“Puritan” binary failed


to provide a suitable schema for understanding the period as fully as might be possible,\textsuperscript{216} with the result that scholars have developed more suitable tools and terms for analyzing the history of the period.

Not only does this binary lack the subtle gradations that are necessary for capturing the fine differences among confessional positions that existed during the period, but its two central terms are problematic as well.  \textit{Anglican} is anachronistic, according to MacCulloch: “the distinctive and complex theological approach which Anglicanism represents can hardly be found until the proto-Arminians and Hooker had begun to have their effect on the Church of England’s thinking.”\textsuperscript{217}  

\textit{Puritan}, Gene Edward Veith, Jr., explains, “is so vague in its meaning, so difficult in its application, [...] that many Church historians no longer find it useful.”\textsuperscript{218}  John Spurr’s view is that “many, indeed most, puritans differed from their neighbours in the degree not the kind of their religiosity. To put it another way, they were simply more intensely protestant than their protestant neighbors or even the Church of England.”\textsuperscript{219}  But other scholars perceive that uses of the term during the period

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\textsuperscript{216} As Peter Lake characterizes the state of scholarship several decades ago, “Anglicanism [...] represented the official position of the English church, constituting a sort of \textit{via media} between Rome and Geneva, protestant but not Calvinist, episcopalian yet reformed, sacrament- and ceremony-centred although in no sense crypto-popish.”  

\textit{Anglicans and Puritans?}, 4–5.  Puritanism, on the other hand, “was seen as the radical protestant opposition to that mainstream; Calvinist, presbyterian or presbyterianizing, word-centred and austere in its attitude to the role of ceremony and liturgy in the life of the church.”  \textit{Ibid.}, 5.

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Later Reformation}, 99.  Indeed, MacCulloch elsewhere asserts that it is only after the Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century that it truly makes sense to speak of an “Anglican” Church.  \textit{Reformation}, 513.  See also Milton, \textit{Catholic and Reformed}, 1 (in more recent decades of scholarly investigation, “historians have questioned the existence of an ideologically coherent, unitary and stable ‘Anglicanism’, distinctly of the English Church and dedicated to a self-consciously achieved golden mean between Rome and Geneva”); and Veith, \textit{Reformation Spirituality}, 16 (“For this period it is not necessary, and in fact it is highly misleading, to contrast ‘Anglican’ and ‘Protestant’ as if they were two separate categories”).

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Reformation Spirituality}, 16.  See also Milton, \textit{Catholic and Reformed}, 1 (the term \textit{Puritan} “cannot be used to explain the religious divisions of the period as straightforwardly as past historians have tended to employ it”).

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{English Puritanism}, 4.  See also Lake, \textit{Anglicans and Puritans?}, 5 (describing a group of critics for whom the use of the term \textit{Puritan} is based “on the fact that contemporaries did indeed acknowledge the existence of protestants whose enthusiasm and zeal in the cause of true religion marked them off from their more lukewarm and profane contemporaries”).
ranged from the merely pejorative, on the one hand, to a more sophisticated usage in which leading Conformists, according to Lake, “defined puritans almost exclusively in terms of their attitude toward the power of the prince and to the government and ceremonies of the church, and not in terms of their doctrinal beliefs or style of piety.” Some Puritans, however, embraced the term; William Bradshaw, for instance, “flaunted and gloried in the word,” Lake explains, “using it to denote simply the most godly and zealous of English protestants, as opposed to their corrupt and careerist conformist opponents.” And many respected scholars still find it to be a meaningful descriptor worth retaining.

As this discussion should establish, there was in Anthony Milton’s words a “ubiquity of religious labels in the period leading up to the outbreak of civil war,” and indeed, “The biggest hindrance to a correct understanding of this period,” says Veith, “probably has to do with terminology.” This is of a piece with the fact that, as MacCulloch puts it, “Reformation disputes were passionate about words.” Accordingly, it is essential to establish a clear set of terms to guide

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220 See Lake, Moderate Puritans, 13 (“the term ‘puritan’ was a loaded one, its use charged with ambiguity and polemical edge” as an epithet used against “the godly”).

221 “Lancelot Andrewes,” 113.

222 Moderate Puritans, 13.

223 See, for example, MacCulloch, Later Reformation, 80 (“The term ‘Puritan’ has meaning, albeit an elusive one”). “Puritanism is a label which has proven its usefulness [. . .]. The term could remain useful because people could identify Puritans; despite their dislike of this term, Puritans themselves knew their own, although they preferred such identifications as ‘the godly’.” Ibid., 82. Moreover, even Anthony Milton finds himself constrained to adopt the term in describing the period under consideration. Catholic and Reformed, 8.

224 Catholic and Reformed, 5.

225 Reformation Spirituality, 16.

226 Reformation, xviii. “[W]ords were myriad refractions of a God whose names included Word.” Ibid.
the work that follows. A good place to begin that endeavor is in a schema developed by Daniel W.
Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins, an adaptation of which appears below as Figure 5.

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5.** A Schema of the English Reformed Church. Adapted from “The Late Tudor and Early Stuart English Middle Way,” in Daniel W. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins, eds., *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 24.

The schema, based on scholarship generated since the “Anglican”/“Puritan” binary has fallen out of
vogue, is centered around the critical insight that most members of the English Reformed Church
were Calvinists in confessional belief and practice; the English *via media* therefore hangs suspended
not between Rome and Geneva but “with Geneva and midway between Rome and Amsterdam
(associated with Anabaptists).”

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Given the centrality of this insight to the schema that I am adapting for the purposes of this dissertation, it therefore makes sense to start with a definition of Calvinist; Doerksen and Hodgkins adopt Anthony Milton’s perspective on the term:228 it “is used, in common with current historiography, to denote a general sympathy with the continental Reformed tradition in all its purely doctrinal aspects, and a sense of identification with the West European Calvinist Churches and their fortunes.”229 Calvinism, Doerksen notes elsewhere, “should not be confused with puritanism or with necessarily extremist positions.”230 Defining features of Calvinist belief were a commitment to Word-centered piety and the doctrine of predestination as well as a view of the Eucharist that rejected Luther’s notion of consubstantiation but that saw the sacrament as an instrument for the elevation of the communicant to the real presence of Christ in heaven.

The other central term in this schema is Conformist, and Doerksen and Hodgkins treat it “as a replacement for the former ‘Anglican.’”231 Acknowledging that Conformist is also an imperfect term, Doerksen and Hodgkins define it to include “those people who conformed willingly to the rules

228 Ibid., 23.

229 Catholic and Reformed, 8. However, Milton observes that “[. . .] English Protestants formally resisted the label ‘Calvinist’. This did not reflect an ‘Anglican’ desire to be depicted as independent of the religious divisions on the Continent” but rather a view that the Church represented something more catholic—more universal—than such a limiting term could properly describe. Ibid., 407.


231 Centered on the Word, 25. Although many critics whom I shall cite use the term “Anglican,” which I must therefore retain in these pages to that extent, outside of quotations and paraphrases I have accepted Milton’s advice regarding the term: “The protean character of the Church of England” at around the turn of the century “renders the application of the term ‘Anglican’ to any single group within it essentially meaningless, if not positively misleading.” Catholic and Reformed, 10.
and practices authorized by the Church of England.”

This is distinct from Lake’s usage of the term, according to which it captures a narrower segment of the English Church: “those men who chose to make a polemical fuss about the issues of church government and ceremonial conformity and who sought to stigmatize as puritans, those less enthusiastic about such issues than themselves.”

Certainly, Doerksen and Hodgkins’ category of “Conforming Puritans” would not overlap with Lake’s notion of conformity, and I have adopted the former understanding of this term for the purposes of my work in this dissertation.

_Puritan_ in the following pages is used in a guarded sense and with an understanding that the term is at least somewhat problematic: As Patrick Collinson explains, “There is little point in constructing elaborate statements defining what, in ontological terms, puritanism was and was not, when it was not a thing definable in itself but only one half of a stressful relationship.” Despite its fraught nature, arguably still contaminated by its original polemical contexts, I find the term to be a more established one than the alternative of “the godly,” which is how members of this group would likely have characterized themselves, and there are sound scholarly precedents for embracing the term. Lake in particular uses it in the following sense: “those advanced protestants who regarded themselves as ‘the godly’, a minority of genuinely true believers in an otherwise lukewarm or corrupt

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232 _Centered on the Word_, 25. Elsewhere, Doerksen uses the term in a sense that excludes Puritans from its ambit: “those people in the church who, unlike the puritans, accepted the disputed forms and rites without any hesitation.” _Conforming to the Word_, 25. This formulation is similar to Milton’s in this regard: “a divine who not only conformed to the ceremonies of the English Church, but did so with alacrity, and was prepared both to make an issue of ceremonial conformity and points of church government, and to use the epithet of ‘puritan’ against his opponents.” _Catholic and Reformed_, 8. In the schema that will govern this dissertation, however, exists a category of Conforming Puritans, Puritans who, for whatever reason, were willing to comport with official directives regarding Church government and style of worship.

233 _Anglicans and Puritans?, 7._

mass. It is therefore used as a term of degree, or relative religious zeal rather than as a clear-cut party label.\textsuperscript{235}

The final key term in Doerksen and Hodgkins’ schema is \textit{Avant-Garde Conformist}, a term coined by Peter Lake to account for the fact that some churchmen, like Lancelot Andrewes and John Buckeridge, came before Laud’s ascendancy to power under Charles I and therefore cannot with strict chronological propriety be dubbed \textit{Laudians}.\textsuperscript{236} Apart from that consideration, the semantic content of the two terms is the same, and both designate a highly sacramental and ceremonialist Church practice not entirely consistent with Calvinism yet certainly not in any sense “Anglo-Catholic,” another term that has properly fallen out of favor due to its associations with the much later Oxford Movement.\textsuperscript{237} Another term that has been used to designate this segment of English Reformed belief and practice, \textit{Arminian}, has been rejected here on the grounds that, as MacCulloch argues, it “was a foreign name in allusion to the disputes about predestination that were currently tearing apart the Dutch Reformed Church.”\textsuperscript{238} As Lake defines \textit{Avant-Garde Conformist}, it epitomizes an “insistence on the central role of the sacrament and public prayer in the worship of god, [an] intense concern with external uniformity and the beauty of holiness and [a] revaluation of the value and significance of the traditional feasts of the church.”\textsuperscript{239}

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\textsuperscript{235} \textit{Anglicans and Puritans?}, 7.
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\textsuperscript{236} See generally, Doerksen and Hodgkins, \textit{Centered on the Word}, 25; and Lake, “Lancelot Andrewes.”
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\textsuperscript{237} See Doerksen, \textit{Conforming to the Word}, 16 (“the term ‘Anglo-Catholic’ [. . .] is not particularly helpful in describing \textit{any} significant part of the Jacobean Church”).
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\textsuperscript{238} \textit{Reformation} 497. See also MacCulloch, \textit{Later Reformation}, 94 (“The problems with the label are evident if one realises that the English ‘Arminians’ were already developing their ideas in the 1580s, while their first contacts with Arminius seem to date from the 1590s”).
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\textsuperscript{239} “Lancelot Andrewes,” 131.
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In addition to these terms from Doerksen and Hodgkins’ schema, I shall occasionally use two others. First, I shall occasionally use the term high-Church to refer to people within the Avant-Garde Conformist or Laudian category or to refer to practices that would have been endorsed by those figures. MacCulloch finds the term “High Churchmanship” to be “vague” and asserts that it “begs many questions”; however, by anchoring my usage of the term to a more firmly established definition, I hope to avoid at least the first of these problems. The second term that I shall add to this schema is radical or radical Reformer, which will be used synonymously with the term Non-Conforming Puritan. As Milton observes, radical is a relative term that depends on one’s perspective of normativity, and for many churchmen during the period “the radicals were in fact a small group of anti-Calvinist or ‘Arminian’ divines grouped around Archbishop Laud.” However, this term is consistent with the way in which some scholars have characterized the discourse practitioners that I shall consider in this dissertation.

Finally, although one could conceivably take issue with this schema, arguing that it is insufficiently nuanced to capture fully the confessional positions of the discourse practitioners whom I shall consider, I must note that Doerksen and Hodgkins offer it provisionally, as a heuristic rather than as the definitive, final word on the English Reformed Church: “the situation,” they concede, “was flexible, with a range of views within categories, and some movement even during the Jacobean period.”

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240 Reformation, 493.

241 Catholic and Reformed, 2.

242 See, for example, Richard Strier, “Radical Donne: ‘Satire III,’” ELH 60, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 283–322.

243 Centered on the Word, 24.
E. METHODOLOGY
The Case-Study Approach

My goals in this dissertation are to show that a discernible pattern of thought exists, to explain how it emerges in a number of representative examples, and to suggest some reasons why the pattern might be significant and worthy of fuller scholarly attention. Given these objectives, a case-study approach seemed to be the most appropriate manner of proceeding and the most effective way to begin the kind of investigation that I hope to prompt.

This approach has both advantages and disadvantages. On the negative side, it will leave much unsaid and many questions unanswered. I expect that the ideas that I present will ricochet off one another from one case study to the next in such a way that each phase of my investigation will illuminate the others. If this is the case, then a more finite number of contact points will necessarily limit the things that I can say and the depth at which I can say them. Likewise, the necessarily abbreviated scope of each case study will in turn leave some issues unresolved—the sermons of John Donne, for example, consist in ten hefty volumes, so an exploration of only one of them will, in a relative sense, contribute only marginally to our understanding of his homiletical discourse as a whole; the central portion of George Herbert’s The Temple, entitled “The Church,” contains more than 150 poems, so a close examination of only “The Altar” (along with the handful of other lyrics that I shall explore more briefly) might seem to say little about the volume in its entirety. On the positive side, however, the case-study approach makes possible the beginnings of a critical conversation. An encyclopedic treatment of the phenomenon that I shall consider, which I suspect is pervasive in the discourse of the English Renaissance, is simply beyond the scope of this document’s intended purpose, and to defer even a preliminary examination of that phenomenon in favor of a more complete treatment would likely result in silence.
The following case studies each partake of a different brand of discourse: speech is represented here by the sermons of John Donne; imagery by a number of anamorphic works examined in relationship to contemporary popular texts like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*; and poetry by George Herbert’s “The Altar.” The investigation of other types of discourse (long-form prose, for example, might be considered productively in the context of Izaack Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* and the drama could be explored through Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*) must await another occasion.

We shall commence with Donne and the sermon in Chapter II primarily because my approach to ludic discourse owes considerable debts to rhetorical theory, the lens through which I shall approach the sermons. Because pulpit rhetoric goes hand-in-hand with imagery during the Renaissance, we shall next proceed in Chapter III to the examination of visual discourses: a number of anamorphic paintings and similarly outré works viewed from the perspective of contemporary popular texts on Renaissance imagery. Poetry will follow imagery in Chapter IV because, as James Simpson has noted, “The Herculean struggle for supremacy between Word and non-scriptural image was in England won by the Word, but also by the poetic word and the poetic, verbal image. That victory shaped and energized a grand tradition of English poetry.” Finally, in Chapter V, I shall conclude by outlining some of the contributions that this dissertation will have made to the fields in which it is situated and by offering some personal reflections about why discourse practitioners during the English Renaissance might have chosen play as a mode of imitative worship.

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244 Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 211 (“During the Renaissance, images play an especially vital role in sacred rhetoric because of their capacity to make what is unseen accessible to both thought and feeling”)

Let David’s dance begin.
Dürer’s image reflects the equivocal attitude toward rhetoric that often prevailed during the Renaissance. Eloquence, depicted as a wing-footed Mercury figure bearing a caduceus, ensnares the mortals below, including a cleric, by chains linked to their ears. Yet the term eloquence bears a positive connotation, suggesting a degree of skill in the deployment of the spoken word, as illustrated by the fact that the figure rises from the ground on the power of his speech. We shall observe John Donne grappling with the same tensions in the following case study.
II. A CASE STUDY OF LUDIC SPEECH IN THE RENAISSANCE

“How empty a thing is Rhetorique?”: The Speaking and the Doing Word in John Donne’s Sermons

And if they deride us, for often preaching, and call us foole for that, as David said, He would be more vile, he would Dance more, So let us be more foole, in this foolishnesse of preaching, and preach more.¹

—John Donne

With this gesture toward the concept of Erasmian folly and its implicit reminder that we are commanded to be “foole for Christ’s sake,”² John Donne signals to us with a palpable clarity and with an admirable (if uncharacteristic) compactness the many connections that exist within his sermon practice among three realms of ideas: the ludic; an incarnational discourse in which Word is made Flesh; and the imitation, through play, of Divine recreation and re-creation in the Incarnation.

Desiderius Erasmus, one of the most playful minds of the late medieval period and no one’s meager rhetorician,³ famously links the Incarnation to a form of play in his notion, expressed by

¹ John Donne, The Sermons of John Donne, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 5:43. All further citations to Donne’s sermons (S) will be to volume and page number of this edition and will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.

² 1 Cor 4:10 (AV 1611). “For the preaching of the Crosse is to them that perish, foolishnesse; but vnto vs which are saued, it is the power of God.” 1 Cor 1:18 (AV 1611).

Folly herself, that Christ “in some manner became a fool when taking upon him the nature of man.”

As Christ’s representative in the pulpit, Donne the preacher must assume the same role, one reinforced by his analogy between preaching and David’s exultantly ludic praise of God before the ark of the covenant. Donne’s insistence on the cardinal importance of the ordinance of preaching, especially in this era when the sermon begins to fall out of favor under the influence of William Laud’s more sacrament-centered theology, is itself a marker of ludic extravagance echoed by Donne’s call for more, for preaching in excess. And his adamant challenge that we follow the model of David as set forth in Scripture represents a form of imitation, of following and hearkening to the Word.

On this brief passage, which so neatly encapsulates the threads of my central argument, David’s dance pivots into my first case study: an examination of the playful speech of one of the key ludic figures in the English Renaissance, speech from a site where some might least expect to find play in action, the Reformed pulpit of the Stuart dynasty’s United Kingdom. I hope to demonstrate or suggest the truth of two propositions in the following pages: first, that the vigorous debates about preaching that prevailed during this tumultuous period were remarkably fertile ground for Donne’s playful mind; and second, that his ludic and incarnational sermon practice, rarely noted or fully appreciated by scholars of English Reformation *ars praedicandi*, can complicate and enrich our understanding of period discourses. More specifically, conceiving Donne’s homiletics as playful and incarnational is helpful not only in positioning Donne among his contemporaries in terms of where

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5 See Ramie Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 158. Given the fact that Donne tended to resist the temptation to use the pulpit for polemic, as Jeanne Shami has argued, his unusual flouting of Laud’s decrees is all the more noteworthy. *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit*, Studies in Renaissance Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003).
they stood on the vexed status of preaching in the English Reformation but also in locating Donne’s perspective about the proper role of rhetoric in the discourses, sermonological and otherwise, that surrounded the English Reformed Church.

Central to the methodology of this case study is Donne’s frequent tendency toward self-reflexivity in his sermons—he commonly speaks about speaking. Most of the texts that I shall examine are examples of this Donnean practice, and the strategy of this case study will be to examine Donne’s sermons in terms of both substance and style. In other words, what Donne says about preaching, the content of his discourse, will be no more important than how he says it, the manner of his discourse. As we shall see, the two strands of his speech are not always necessarily consistent, for Donne as a preacher remains a stubbornly slippery and evasive force, likely owing to the great need for delicacy during a transformative and turbulent period during which he positioned himself squarely within a number of what we might consider to be minority factions.

The case study will unfold in five overlapping phases. I shall begin with an overture of sorts, a close look at a significant instance in which Donne comments on the art of rhetoric. This section will establish through an analysis of his commentary some preliminary evidence for the claim that Donne’s sermonology is both ludic and incarnational. The next section of the chapter will turn to a more detailed analysis of one particular sermon in which Donne considers the art of rhetoric in order to illustrate more fully how (and how much) Donne plays with his discourse. My argument in this section will be that Donne’s sermon language is excessive to the degree that I have defined as playful. In the third section, I shall establish a connection between the ludic nature of the sermons and their incarnational dimension, arguing for my central proposition that recreative discourse during the period effectively imitated the power of the divinely incarnated Word. The fourth section of the chapter will consider some of the implications of my analysis, attempting on one hand to position
Donne along a complex and non-linear continuum of period debates on *ars praedicandi* and on the other hand to crystallize Donne’s notion of what rhetoric is for homiletical purposes. This section will further support my contention that Donne’s sermonology is distinctly ludic, and it will also explain that what is at stake in my analysis for the work of other Renaissance scholars is a fuller and better understanding of Reformed English sermonology during the period. A brief coda in the form of a fifth section will extend my observations into the realm of Donne’s verse and serve as a transition point to my next case study.

A. OVERTURE
A Donnean Meta-Rhetorical Commentary

At St. Paul’s on the morning of Easter Sunday in 1622, John Donne preached a sermon in which he emphasized to his auditory the richness of the reward awaiting the saved. Finding words inadequate to express the overwhelming abundance of this reward, Donne turned instead to the subject of his own mode of addressing the assembled congregants. He exclaimed:

> How barren a thing is Arithmetique? (and yet Arithmetique will tell you, how many single graines of sande, will fill this hollow Vault to the Firmament) How empty a thing is Rhetorique? (and yet Rhetorique will make absent and remote things present to your understanding) How weak a thing is Poetry? (and yet Poetry is a counterfait Creation, and makes things that are not, as though they were) How infirme, how impotent are all assistances, if they be put to express this Eternity? (*S*, 4:87)

In considering this passage, there are three things to which we should pay particular attention. First, Donne is *using* the rhetorical art of which he speaks, and he is doing so adeptly. We see *ecphonesis* in his exclamations framed as questions; *anaphora* in the sets of repeated words that
begin each rhetorical question and each interposed answer; *parenthesis* in the asides that qualify those outbursts of wonder; *erotesis* in the framing of rhetorical questions; *apophasis* in the ironic affirmation of the power of rhetoric, which Donne at least on the surface seems to reject; *antithesis* in the pairings of questions and answers that contrast one another; *hypophora* in his use of the question-answer pattern to structure the discourse; and *isocolon* in the rhythmic sets of repeating and balanced sentence structures. This is not simply an example of Erasmian *copia,* for what we see even in this very small passage is an excess of tropes piled and mounted so heavily upon each other that, despite the soaring nature of the discourse itself, the passage seems to teeter under the overwhelming weight of words arranged and deployed systematically and with utmost care. It is a

6 For definitions of the tropes referenced in the main text, see Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms,* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). All further citations to *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms (HoRT)* will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes. In most instances later in this case study, rhetorical tropes in the principal texts under review will be identified and defined in the footnotes accompanying my close readings. The existence of a vast number and variety of rhetorical devices in Donne’s sermon is an important piece of evidence supporting my argument, but relegating this work to the footnotes will spare the reader significant potential distraction from the consistent interruptions of *apposito.*

Lanham’s *Handlist* provides an invaluable guide for navigating the various taxonomies and systems of nomenclature that have emerged from the study of rhetoric since fifth-century Greece. Another useful source—in narrative rather than glossary form—is Arthur Quinn, *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1993). Gideon O. Burton of Brigham Young University has created a searchable and well indexed database of rhetorical tropes entitled “Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric” at rhetoric.byu.edu (last modified February 26, 2007); it is especially useful for the scholar who wishes to identify the names of unknown or unfamiliar tropes according to the known or recognized functions that they serve in a text under examination. For the seminal guide to rhetoric written during the period under consideration, see Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577) (London: H. Iackson, 1593). All further citations to *The Garden of Eloquence (GoE)* will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.

Donne’s use in the quoted passage of *antithesis* coupled with a cumulative three-stage parallelism or *isocolon* is part of a pattern that has been observed in many of his sermons. Jerome S. Dees, “Logic and Paradox in the Structure of Donne’s Sermons,” *South Central Review* 4, no. 2 (1987): 78–92, 82. See also Evelyn M. Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 257 (“A carefully balanced antithesis marks many of Donne’s sentences”).

microcosm of the complete panoply of rhetorical superabundance available to exceptionally well trained speakers during the Renaissance and an example of ludic discourse.⁸

Second, Donne is strikingly, even confusingly, ambivalent about the power of his art.⁹ Not only does he use at least half a dozen rhetorical figures (and probably more) in order to express doubts about the efficacy of figured speech,¹⁰ but he also undercuts his own skepticism by implying that language, despite its shortcomings, can be remarkably potent. Poetry is not, or not just, mimesis but an imitation of the Divine act of creation ex nihilo. Although, according to Raymond-Jean Frontain, “it is God’s linguistic power—His creation ex verbo—that fascinates Donne” more than any other theological concern,¹¹ Donne argued on at least one occasion that God’s role in preaching was even more noteworthy than the Creation itself. In a sermon delivered at St. Paul’s in January 1626, Donne said:

the Creation, (which was a production of all out of nothing) was not properly a miracle: A miracle is a thing done against nature; when something in the course of nature resists that worke, then that worke is a miracle; But in the Creation, there was

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⁸ Ibid., 89–90. Characterizing several other examples of Donne’s sermons as having “a taste of exuberance, of delighted play,” Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., suggests that this dimension of the sermons “might well reward separate treatment.” Ibid., 89. This chapter is, in part, an effort to accept Carrithers’ invitation to explore this element of Donne’s homiletic discourse.

⁹ Taking into account the possibility that Donne’s ambiguity was intentional, we might characterize his use of language here as a case of skotison, purposeful obscurity (HoRT, 141–42). See also John Stubbs, John Donne: The Reformed Soul (New York: Norton, 2007), 361 (noting that it was in Donne’s interest to remain ambiguous on controversial issues of doctrine). James S. Baumlin discusses Donne’s equivocation in the quoted passage at length in John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 40–41.


no reluctation, no resistance, no nature, nothing to resist. But to doe great works by small means, to bring men to heaven by Preaching in the Church, this is a miracle. (S, 7:300–301)\(^{12}\)

In both passages, Donne suggestively describes rhetoric and the power of language in terms that evoke the Eucharist and the perfect creative power of Divine speech.\(^{13}\) In short, we see significant evidence here already for the proposition that Donne’s interests in incarnational rhetoric are apparent throughout the work of his pulpit speech, not only in sermons before sophisticated audiences at Court but also in sermons for the general public at St. Paul’s.\(^{14}\)

Finally, Donne is talking about the art of rhetoric, turning the fabric of his sermon inside out by foregrounding discursive method, by making the manner of his speech part of the matter of his speech. Donne uses rhetoric to discuss rhetoric as part of the rhetorical act of preaching. This aspect of Donne’s preaching is perhaps the most significant in establishing Donne as a master of prose rhetoric and as a preacher who was both willing and eager to use the most elaborate devices of the arts of language in his sermons: “Such a studied exploration of dilemmas as we find here,” Walter H. Beale says, “seems clearly to presuppose a close acquaintance with the workings of a notoriously tricky rhetorical (or poetic) device, and at least partly a desire to exhibit one’s skill at composing

\[^{12}\] In this passage, Donne uses \textit{asynedeton}, the omission of a conjunction after the penultimate item in his list of negating words and phrases (\textit{HoRT}, 25; \textit{GoE}, 52); \textit{exergasia}, the multiple defining explanations of the miraculous (Burton, \textit{Silva Rhetoricae}); \textit{parenthesis}, the insertion of an aside into a sentence complete in itself (\textit{HoRT}, 108; \textit{GoE}, 198); and \textit{paradiastole}, the forcefully repeated words of negation (Quinn, \textit{Figures of Speech}, 13–15).


such a scheme.” Manfred Pfister refers to this kind of self-reflexivity as a key mode of performative language, and it also exhibits a distinct form of playfulness. Donne’s metarhetorical commentary on the act of preaching in this passage is not an isolated self-referential gesture. Just as Donne the poet manifested in his verse an acute consciousness of his art and a propensity toward self-reflexivity, Donne the preacher was keenly aware of language as he prepared and delivered his sermons and unusually candid in using those homilies to address issues of homiletics. He commonly preached what he practiced by using rhetorical concepts as metaphors or topoi, and several of his surviving sermons grapple with the subject of preaching. In this regard, Donne is unusual among preachers of the period whose sermons have survived in written form. For Renaissance theorists of rhetoric, according to James S. Baumlin, “to speak or write is [. . .] to speak about the possibility of speaking,” but Donne, if we may properly consider him a theorist, was also

15 “On Rhetoric and Poetry,” 382. See also Herbert H. Umbach, “The Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” PMLA 52, no. 2 (June 1937): 354–58, 354 (“Donne’s sermons best display his mature ability as a man of letters, wherefore as a master of English homiletic style Donne deserves his place among the leading writers of his day”).


18 “Sermons directly on the preacher’s calling, and incidental references to preaching, abound, and his language reaches great heights as he considers the preacher’s vocation.” Frederick A. Rowe, I Launch at Paradise: A Consideration of John Donne, Poet and Preacher, The Fernley-Hartley Lecture (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 171. “Donne’s sermons are interlarded with remarks about the proper manner and matter of preaching.” William R. Mueller, John Donne: Preacher (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 80. Perhaps the best evidence of Donne’s extensive self-reflexivity in his sermons, however, is the fact that he said so much about preaching, rhetoric, and language that an entire volume of these statements has been assembled: P. G. Stanwood and Heather Ross Asals, eds., John Donne and the Theology of Language (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986). “[T]he passages gathered here display Donne thinking self-consciously about the nature of his task as a theologian and writer [. . .] [I]t is a ‘text’ on the nature of the written word, sacred, but also at times secular.” Ibid., 2. This source has been a remarkably useful digest and finding aid in connection with my work here.

19 Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse, 5.
a practitioner of rhetoric—an orator who at least once a week nearly every week, from his ordination in 1615 until 1631 when he delivered what soon came to be considered his own funeral sermon, distilled the theories of his art into public discourse.

These three closely related features, as I have suggested, possess a dual significance. Initially, they begin to establish that Donne’s sermons are ludic acts, a proposition that finds further support in existing research and commentaries. For example, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, in their introduction to the final volume of their collection of Donne’s sermons, conclude among other things that “he found in the great Christian doctrines a perpetual fountain of life on which the light of his mind could play in many diverse colours” (S, 10:3). Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., has suggested in his study of Donne’s sermons that we see a playful mind at work when we hear Donne preaching to his congregations. John S. Chamberlin’s approach to Donne as a homiletician refers to the wit of the sermon, its playing with the Word, as “play that is delightful and

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20 “Donne’s last sermon—‘Death’s Duel,’ as it has come to be called—is his own funeral sermon and more. It is a distillation of his preaching of sixteen years, a summation of the pulpit oratory of England’s most famous preacher.” Mueller, John Donne: Preacher, 4.


22 Donne at Sermons, 89. Although Walter Ong disagrees with Carrithers’ observation in this regard (“The sermon is not fiction, poetry, drama, ‘play’ in Huizinga’s sense, something set off from ‘life’”), he concedes that the sermon and the liturgy in broader terms “of course may include aesthetic or ‘play’ elements, which do not however constitute it but rather relate to it dialectically (and in this sense do help define it).” “Gospel, Existence, and Print,” 68. Moreover, Ong concurs with Carrithers’ emphasis on the sermon—and, indeed, on “Christian life itself”—as a free challenge, “a free response to grace offered freely by God.” Ibid., 67. This element of freedom is, of course, central to Johan Huizinga’s definition of “play” (HL, 7–8; see also MPaG, 6 [“There is [. . .] no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity”]).
redemptive.” Anita Gilman Sherman has pronounced Donne’s pulpit language to be “gloriously ludic.” And Anna K. Nardo has productively treated the corpus of Donne’s sermons exclusively from the standpoint of ludsics.

Moreover, these three dimensions of Donne’s commentary on the power of rhetoric point toward his interest in incarnational discourse, another well established idea among the critical community of Donne scholars. For example, as Dennis Quinn observes:

This preaching of God’s word, Donne often says, is an ordinary means of “manifesting Christ” (e.g., II, 253–254). This manifestation is a kind of incarnation—“caro et verbo, he that is made flesh comes in the word, that is, Christ comes in the preaching thereof” (II, 251). Just as the Son was made flesh in Christ, and just as He was incorporated in the Bible, so He is once more incarnated in preaching the words of the Bible. Christian eloquence, like Biblical eloquence, has more than natural power.

Likewise, Anna K. Nardo discusses “the union between Word and Flesh” in connection with Donne’s Devotions upon Emergent Occasions. Ramie Targoff’s biography of John Donne explains

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25 The Ludic Self in Seventeenth-Century English Literature, SUNY Series: The Margins of Literature (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 59–69. “The ars praedicandi (art of discourse) of the Church Fathers offered a tradition congenial to Donne’s skills as a player.” This tradition “produced a sermon style in which the preacher played out the significations of his text, weaving an intricate, often fanciful, network of associations. [ . . . ] Playing thus with the Word, the preacher brought the congregation into his sacred game.” Ibid., 63.


27 Ludic Self, 59.
that “Writing is Donne’s experience of making the word flesh.” And Horton Davies, establishing and investigating a category of preachers whom he describes as “metaphysicals,” finds incarnational rhetoric to be a defining feature of the sermonology of the members of this group, which of course includes Donne: “As in the Incarnation where the Word of God took flesh, so at a humbler level their words must take flesh too; otherwise, their words will only be insubstantial abstractions, mere ghosts that fade in the memory and in the light of daily duty.”

Beyond the secondary sources on these two propositions, we see Donne himself pronounce upon them both in a sermon preached before Charles I at Whitehall on the first Sunday of Lent in 1626:

> Never propose to thy self a God, as thou wert not bound to imitate: Thou mistakkest God, if thou make him to be any such thing, or make him to do any such thing, as thou in thy proportion shouldst not be, or shouldst not do. And shouldst thou curse any man that had never offended, never transgrest, never trespast there? Can God have done so? Imagine God, as the Poet saith, *Ludere in humanis*, to play but a *game of Chesse* with this world; to sport himself with making little things great, and great things nothing: Imagine God to be but at play with us, but a gamester; yet will a

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28 *Body and Soul*, 24. Targoff’s central thesis is that the principal preoccupation of Donne’s career as a writer is the relationship between the body and the soul.

gamester *curse*, before he be in danger of losing any thing? Will God curse man, before man have sinned? (*S*, 7:360–61)\(^{30}\)

Not only do we see again in this passage subtle references to Erasmian folly (in the paradoxical notion that God makes the great small and the small great) and the idea, exhibited by 2 Samuel 6:14, that the Divine provides precedent for recreative forms of worship, but we also see Donne urging his auditory to imitate this playful God, the substance of my argument in this chapter and throughout this dissertation.\(^{31}\)

Having preliminarily established that the two elements of my central claim in this case study are tenable on the basis of a few short passages, it remains to link those two elements together, an enterprise that will begin with a more detailed analysis not of isolated excerpts but of an entire sermon.

\(^{30}\) Donne in this passage uses a modified form of *antimetabole* or *chiasmus* in a repetition that inverts his initial ordering of words and concepts in “little things great, and great things nothing” (*HoRT*, 14, 33; *GoE*, 164). The variation, arguably a form of *anacoluthon*, is the substitution of “nothing” for the expected term in the sequence, “little” (*HoRT*, 10). *Anaphora* is in evidence in Donne’s choice to repeat the opening phrase “shouldst not” in “shouldst not be, or shouldst not do,” when he might more simply and directly have said “shouldst not be or do”; the repetition of the phrase “Imagine God” is an example of the same trope in action (*HoRT*, 11). And we once again see favorite Donnean devices like *erotesis* in the framing of rhetorical questions (*HoRT*, 71) and *asyndeton* in the omission of a final conjunction at the end of the series of ideas marked by the words “never offended, never transgress, never trespass” (*HoRT*, 25; *GoE*, 52).

\(^{31}\) It is only fair at this juncture to observe that, on another occasion in the pulpit, Donne’s attitude toward play was anything but positive: “How much happier had that man beeene, that hath wasted thousands in play, in riot, in wantonnesse, in sinfull excesses, if his parents had left him no more at first, then he hath left himselfe at last?” (*S*, 10:99). Yet in this passage, Donne appears to be speaking about play in the peculiar terms of the vice of gambling: he also addresses excess—a defining feature of play—of a particularly sinful variety, qualifying the term “play” with the ideas of riot and wantonness, as opposed to the example of the godly excess of abundant grace. However, the two quoted passages constitute the entire corpus of Donne’s explicit sermon commentary on ludics. See Brigham Young University, Harold E. Lee Library, John Donne Sermons, http://lib.byu.edu/collections/john-donne-sermons/ (accessed May 21, 2014) (a search engine, keyed to the Simpson and Potter edition of Donne’s sermon texts, that is an invaluable resource for a scholar and far superior to the indices in the edition volumes themselves). We should therefore, on the whole, judge Donne’s attitude toward play as ultimately positive and favorable.
B. A CLOSE READING
Donne as a Playful Preacher

In this section, I shall attempt to demonstrate that Donne’s pulpit discourse is playful in the sense that it uses the tools of rhetoric aggressively and extravagantly, more than mere Erasmian copia would require. For this purpose I have chosen the first part of an undated two-part sermon probably delivered late in Donne’s career during the reign of Charles I. Not only is the sermon fairly indicative of Donne’s usual technique in the pulpit, as I have come to understand it from the sermons that I have encountered, but it also confronts directly and explicitly the role of rhetoric in Christian ministry.

As a preliminary matter, however, there are at least two respects in which this sermon cannot be considered typical of Donne’s pulpit oratory. First, because the sermon was preached before the Court at Whitehall, it is, at least according to Peter Mack, more likely to exhibit rhetorical polish than the sermons that Donne would have delivered at St. Paul’s. Second, as Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter explain in their introduction, the sermon represents an unusually vigorous defense of the English Reformed Church against Roman Catholicism for the very reason that it was delivered at Court instead of St. Paul’s: “it was largely in Court circles that the Church of Rome made most headway, while Donne’s audience at St. Paul’s were more likely to be influenced by the Puritan attacks” against the English Church (S, 10:14).

32 Simpson and Potter discuss their dating of this sermon (Sermon No. 6 in Volume 10 of their edition) in their introduction to that volume (S, 10:14–17).


An additional consideration in presenting this sermon as an example of Donne’s pulpit oratory presents a problem of a more fundamental nature but ultimately one that is unavoidable: “As early modern preachers liked to point out,” Arnold Hunt reminds us, “*vox audita perit, litera scripta manet*—the spoken word perishes, and only the written word remains.” It goes without saying that Donne’s spoken words have not survived and that we must instead rely on his written versions of his sermons, which might have been heavily edited—and perhaps made more baroque—before being published after his death by his son. As Donne himself said in a dedicatory letter accompanying a transcription of one of his sermons for the Countess of Montgomery, “I know what dead carkasses things written are, in respect of things spoken” (S, 2:179).

Although this question has not been ignored by Donne scholars, the general consensus is that the matter cannot productively be explored in depth. Resignation is the prevailing attitude among most critics. The majority view, however, appears to be that of Herbert H. Umbach: “The modern reader can [...] rest reasonably assured that in the printed word we have, though perhaps not always an exact transcript, a faithful record of what was said in the pulpit.” Because Donne prepared his sermons for publication by his son, and because some of his sermons were published during his lifetime, “We can assume that Dr. Donne is represented as he would wish to be,” William R. Mueller


36 See Carrithers, *Donne at Sermons*, 168 (“We are unlikely ever to know exactly [how Donne prepared his original sermons], since no foul papers have come to light”).

37 See Mueller, *John Donne: Preacher*, 208 (“A twentieth-century critic must, of course, depend on Donne’s written sermons, and even then with the knowledge that the written discourse does not accord exactly with the sermon as it was preached”).

38 “Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” 356.
says, “that we possess the sermons which he esteemed most highly, and that we possess them in a
text which bears him imprimatur.”

The text of the sermon is Ezekiel 34:19, “And as for my flock, they eate that, which yee have
trod with your feet, and they drink that which yee have fouled with your feet,” which, as Donne
explains, relates to a period during Israel’s captivity in Babylon when “their own Priests joyned with
the State against them, and infused pestilent doctrines into them, that so themselves might enjoy the
favour of the State” (S, 10:140–41). At least, Donne says, this is “literall sense,” one that is more
obvious to him and his auditory than to the ancients because “that which was Prophecy to them, is
History to us” (S, 10:141). The “figurative and Mystical sense is of the same oppressions, and the
same deliverance over again” in the persecution of the primitive Church (S, 10:141), and again in
“the oppressions and deliverance of our Fathers, in the Reformation of Religion, and the shaking off
of the yoak of Rome, that Italian Babylon” (S, 10:142).

With this background, it is possible to describe the overall structure of the sermon. Donne
relentlessly divides his text into ever-narrower binary sections, after the fashion of Petrus Ramus,
and clearly signals each division to his auditory. This method of organization by bifurcation is best
illustrated by first providing a purely schematic outline and then adding a more detailed explanation:

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39 John Donne: Preacher, 89. Whether these assurances are convincing or glib is a question beyond the scope
of this chapter. Materials with which the reader might begin an independent exploration of this issue may be found in
Carrithers, Donne at Sermons, 168; Mueller, John Donne: Preacher, 208–9; Rowe, I Launch at Paradise, 174; Simpson,

40 The figure or schema that Donne uses here may be described as antithesis by virtue of two facts: the future-
oriented term “Prophecy” is being opposed to the past-oriented term “History,” and the third-person word “them” is
being opposed to the first-person term “us” (HoRT, 14; GoE, 160). Donne uses this figure again, twice, later in the same
paragraph: “In Babylon they were a part, but in Rome they were all; In Babylon they joyned with the State, but in Rome
they were the State” (S, 10:142). In turn, in this second example, this repeated use of antithesis becomes embraced
within the trope of isocolon, the balanced use of similarly structured items of the same approximate length in a series
(HoRT, 93).
I.

A.

1.

a.

b.

(1)

(2)

2.

a.

b.

B.

1.

2.

a.

b.

II.

I. **Pastores concurrebant:** “the greatest calamity of those sheep in *Babylon,* was that their own shepherds concurred to their oppression” (*S,* 10:142). Properly speaking, this division constitutes the entirety of the first part of the sermon, dealing with the behavior of the priests—“the behaviour of the sheep,” Donne indicates in his conclusion, “must be the exercise of your devotion another day” (*S,* 10:158).\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Donne’s suspension of his thought in this regard is, of course, another figure.
A. **What the shepherds befouled**

1. **Gramen / Grasse:** Donne argues that grass represents “spirituall food”—the Scriptures and sacraments—and notes that in this division “make we onely these two stops, that the sheep are to eate their grasse *super terram*, upon the ground; And they are to eate it *sine rore*, when the dew is off” (S, 10:144).
   
   a. **Super terram:** “that is, where the hand of God hath set it; which for spirituall food is the *Church*” (S, 10:144).
   
   b. **Sine rore:** “The word of God is our grasse, which should be delivered purely, simply, sincerely, and in the naturall verdure thereof” (S, 10:145). Donne explains that “this *treading* down” of the grass—by adulteration of foreign matter, or dew—“will be pertinently considered two ways. Tertullian in his Book *De habitu muliebri*, notes two excesses in womens dressing; one he cals *Ornatum*, the other *cultum* [. . .] the first is a *superfluous diligence* in their dressing, but the other an *unnatural addition* to their complexion; the first he

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42 Although Donne does not make this division explicitly in his sermon, its existence is clear by implication.

43 To define a word or term, as Donne often does in citing Scriptures in their original languages, is called *distinctio* or *epexegesis* (*HoRT*, 59, 67; *GoE*, 191). Peter McCullough stresses that Donne was less likely to engage in this practice in Court sermons than in homilies preached to the general public, but this particular sermon is rife with examples of explicit translation. “Donne as Preacher,” 168. See also Nelson, “John Donne’s Pulpit Voice,” 51.

44 Donne does not mean in this passage that preaching should be in the plain style: “The *Dews* which we intend, are *Revelations, Apparitions, Inspirations, Motions*, and *Interpretations of the private spirit*” (S, 10:145).
pronounces to be always *ad ambitionem*, for *pride*, but the other, *ad prostitutionem*, for a worse, for the worst purpose” (*S*, 10:146–47).

(1) **Ornatum**: “mingling of too much *humane ornament*, and secular *learning* in *preaching*” (*S*, 10:147).

(2) **Cultum**: “mingling *humane Traditions*, as of things of equall value, and obligation, with the Commandements of God” (*S*, 10:147). Donne introduces his next division by saying, “in this treading down this grasse, this way, this suppressing of it by traditions, be pleased to consider these two applications” (*S*, 10:150).

(a) **Sicut Porcus**: “some traditions doe destroy the word of God, extirpate it, annihilate it as when a *Hog* doth root up the grass” (*S*, 10:150).

(b) **Sicut Talpa**: “The other sort of Traditions, and Ceremonies, doe not as the Hog, root up the grass, but as a *Mole*, cast a slack, and thin earth upon the face of the grass” (*S*, 10:150).

2. **Aqua / Water**: Donne contends that water represents “The endowments of heaven [. . .] Joy, and Glory” (*S*, 10:152), and announces his next division by explaining, “the shepherds, in our text, troubled the waters; and more then so;

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45 Here we see an example of *occultatio* in Donne’s refusal to provide an explicit translation of the Latin term, which nonetheless clearly alludes to (and would have been understood by his auditory to refer to) prostitution (*HoRT*, 104).

46 This is a further instance of *asyndeton*. 

100
for we have just cause to note the *double* signification of this word, which we translate *Trouble*, and to transfer the two significations to the two Sacraments, as they are exhibited in the *Roman Babylon*; The word is *Mirpas*” (S, 10:152–53).

a. **Conturbationem / Muddling**: “in the Sacrament of *Baptisme*, they had *troubled* the water, with *additions* of Oile, and salt, and spittle, and exorcisms” (S, 10:153).

b. **Obturationem / Interception**: “in the *other* Sacrament they came [. . .] to a stopping, to an intercision, to an interruption of the water, the water of life [. . .] in *withholding the Cup* of salvation, the bloud of Christ Jesus from us” (S, 10:153).

B. **How the shepherds befouled it**: Donne reminds his auditory that the grass and water in his text were corrupted and troubled with the priests’ feet, then proceeds to his next division: “Now, in the Scriptures, when this word, *feet*, doth not signifie that part of mans body which is ordinarily so called, but is transferred to a *Metaphorical* signification, (as in our text it is) it does most commonly signifie *Affections*, or *Power*” (S, 10:154).

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47 The invention of arguments based upon etymologies or multiple senses of a single word is a common rhetorical method (see HoRT, 167). See also Davies, *Like Angels*, 62 (“An interest in etymology was, of course, not only an echo of the schooling of the preachers, but a necessity for a learned biblical expositor”).

48 Another figure of thought that Donne commonly uses in his sermons is this development of an argument based upon a word’s multiple significations.
1. **Pes potestatis:** Donne discusses the Roman Church’s abuse of its power, using the image of feet “trod upon the necks of Princes and people” (S, 10:155–56).

2. **Pes superbiae:** Donne uses the image of one compelled to kiss another’s feet to address the scorn of the Roman Church, and then presents his final division: “And this oppressing with scorne, this proceeding without any respect of fame, we note (for hast) but in two things, in the Italian Babylon Rome; first, in the Book, their Taxa Camerae, and then in that doctrine, their Reservatio Casuum” (S, 10:156).
   a. **Taxa Camera:** “an Index, a Repertory for all sinnes, and in which every man may see beforehand, how much money, an Adultery, an Incest, a Murder, a Parricide [. . .] will cost him” (S, 10:156–57).
   b. **Reservatio Casuum:** “their Reservation of Cases; that though all Priests have an equall power of remitting all sins, yet are some sinnes reserved onely to Prelates, some only to the Popes Legats, some onely to the Pope himselfe” (S, 10:157).

II. Donne begins the second part of the sermon by recapitulating the text: “we have considered these words, as they concern the iniquity and oppression of the shepheardes [. . .] so now in this exercise are we to consider, the behaviour of the sheep” (S, 10:159).

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49 In addition to two tropes that we have seen before—*asundeton* and *anaphora*—Donne here also deploys the figure of *zeugma*, the omission of a verb from clauses after the first, in the phrase, “yet are some sinnes reserved onely to Prelates, some only to the Popes Legats, some onely to the Pope himselfe” (*HoRT*, 159–61; *GoE*, 51).

50 To return in this fashion to one’s text or thesis by recapitulating it is *anacephalaeosis*. Burton, Silva Rhetoricae.
This structural overview of the sermon reveals that Donne is operating in an aggressively and conspicuously rhetorical mode on the large scale of its organizing framework. He openly announces and carefully explains the basis of each division or *diaeresis*, and this technique provides him with an elaborate set of extended metaphors for amplifying and explicating his text. Expanding upon the commonplace of preacher as shepherd and congregation as flock, Donne imbues a series of associated ideas and images with symbolic meanings—the grass and water of the pasture, the manner in which the sheep are to graze, the ways in which the grass may be adulterated, and the effects of different animals upon the wholesomeness of the grass, to trace only one path through the intricate network of metaphorical connections that Donne establishes. Indeed, this outline does not even capture the full extent to which he exploits this device. In just one of the parts of Donne’s sermon, corresponding to section I.A.1.b.(1) of the outline, he compares pastures to orchards ("in sheep-pastures you may plant fruit trees in the hedge-rowes; but if you plant them all over, it is an Orchard; we may transfer flowers of secular learning into these exercises; but if they consist of those, they are but Themes, and Essays” [S 10:148]), and introduces other farm animals with their own symbolic significations to the metaphorical and rhetorical pasture ("After an Oxe that oppresseth the grass, after a Horse that devours the grass, sheep will feed; but after a Goose that stanches the grass, they will not” [S 10:149]). All the while Donne is applying these metaphors simultaneously to three sets of historical events in the life of the Church: the Babylonian captivity of Israel, the Roman persecution of the early Christian Church, and the Protestant Reformation. And he adds a

51 There is an even larger-scale binary division apparent to the extent that the sermon itself was delivered in two parts on two separate occasions.

52 A diaeresis is a method of division by partition (*HoRT*, 50; *GoE* 125). Other terms that might be used to describe Donne’s method in this regard include *diallage* (the bringing together of multiple arguments to illustrate or defend a single point) and *dinumeratio* (a figure of amplification in which the components of an argument are enumerated to enhance their cumulative effect) (*HoRT*, 51–52, 55–56).
fourth—“the little ground that our Separatists can have, for their departing from us, either by Israels departing from Babylon, or our Fathers departing from Rome”—in his final sentence, promising to develop it more fully in the second part of his sermon (S, 10:158), a promise which he duly keeps (S, 10:173–77). The intricacy, complexity, and richness of Donne’s organizational strategy for this sermon can be considered as excessive—indeed, contrary to his own advice in the sermon, Donne runs a distinct risk of confusing even his rather sophisticated auditory with the multitude of ideas and comparisons that he presents—but it is as if his playful mind cannot resist the overwhelming temptation to trope and to figure his language ornately.53

Donne’s sermon is equally revealing on the smaller scale at which we can see specific references to rhetoric in preaching. Although he speaks against “the mingling of too much humane ornament, and secular learning in preaching, in presenting the word of God, which word is our grasse” (S, 10:147), it could not have escaped the notice of Donne’s auditory that he had just cited Tertullian’s De habitu muliebri in order to establish a distinction between this type of “treading down the grasse” and the other type, “mingling humane Traditions [. . .] with the Commandements of God” (S, 10:146–47). One could fairly characterize a classical text “on womanly dress”—which in some versions is joined with a book entitled De cultu feminarum (“On Women’s Fashion”)54—as a case of secular learning. “But why insist we upon this?” Donne asks, in another example of hypophora:55 “Was there any such conformity between the two Babylons as that the Italian Babylon can be said to have troden down the grasse in that kinde, with overcharging their Sermons with too

53 Donne once publicly chastised himself for this ludic tendency, explaining in a sermon that he was even guilty of involuntarily punning during prayer (S, 10:56).


55 Hypophora is a trope in which the speaker asks and then answers a rhetorical question (HoRT, 87; GoE, 107).
much learning[?]” (S, 10:148–49). His fascinating answer is that, in this case, there is no parallel between Israel’s priests in Babylon and the priests of Rome:

I laid hold of this consideration, the treading down of grass, by oppressing it with secular learning, there by to bring to your remembrance, the extreme ignorance that damp’d the Roman Church, at that time; where Aristotle’s *Metaphysicks* were condemned for Heresie, and ignorance in generall made not onely pardonable, but meritorious [. . .]. This was their treading down of grass, not with over-much learning, but with a cloud, a dampe, an earth of ignorance. (S, 10:149)\(^56\)

I presume that Donne would therefore not consider Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* to be either heretical or a text of which a preacher could remain pardonably ignorant.

Given Donne’s comments on the use of secular learning in sermons, it is hardly surprising that he allows “*humane ornament*” a role in the pulpit as well. In his pasture metaphor, ornamentation is likened to “rare and curious flowers, delightfull onely to the eye, or fragrant and odoriferous hearbs delightfull onely to the smell.” If “these specious and glorious flowers, and fragrant, and medicinall hearbs, be not proper nourishment for sheep, this is a *treading down* of the grass”; likewise, if in preachers’ homilies you exact of us more secular ornament, then may serve [. . .] to convey, and usher the true word of life into your *understandings*, and *affections*, (for both those must necessarily be wrought upon) more then may serve *ad vehiculum*, for a chariot for the word of God to enter, and triumph in you, this is a *treading down* of the grasse [. . .].

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\(^56\) Donne’s technique here is remarkably elaborate and sophisticated. He has contradicted his own advice by using secular learning in connection with a condemnation of the same practice, and then recalls this gesture very explicitly by asserting that it was done merely for the purposes of demonstration! This might be dubbed an example of *paromologia*, “Conceding a point [. . .] to use it to strengthen one’s own argument; giving away a weaker point in order to take a stronger” (*HoRT*, 110; see also *GoE*, 173).
If your curiosity extort more then convenient ornament, in delivery of the word of God, you may have a good Oration, a good Panegyrique, a good Encomiastique, but not so good a Sermon. (S, 10:147)

Donne’s willingness to accept metaphorical thinking even extends to some of the ceremonial traditions that he considers in his next division. It is only those ceremonies that “doe utterly oppose the word of God, without having under them, any mysterious signification, or any occasion or provocation of our devotion” that he would not tolerate (S, 10:150). And then the preacher must explain to his congregation the “good and usefull significations” underlying those practices by unraveling the physical or gestural metaphors of which they are composed—“shew them the grass that lies under’” (S, 10:151), he urges, again suggesting that the preacher is properly an expert on tropes, not only creating them and using them to illuminate the Word of God but also explaining them to his potentially less-sophisticated auditory.

We have seen ludic excess in this sermon both at the macro-level scale of structure or organization and at the intermediate-level scale of Donne’s substance or his commentary on rhetoric; at the micro-level scale of individual prose techniques (as most of the footnotes accompanying the foregoing analysis have attempted to illustrate) we can observe the same brand of rhetorical overabundance. To dissect the entire nineteen-page sermon at this finest grain of detail would consume an entire dissertation in itself. Therefore, I shall present only a sampling of these techniques by considering two sharply limited segments of the sermon, beginning with the first sentences of Donne’s exordium, or his presentation of the sermon’s text, which are especially noteworthy for their interesting rhetorical flair:

Those four Prophets, whom the Church hath called the great Prophets, Esay, and Jeremey, Ezekiel and Daniel, are not onely therefore called great, because they
writ more, then the lesser Prophets did, (for Zechariah, who is amongst the lesser, writ more then Daniel who is amongst the greater) but because their Prophecies are of a larger comprehension, and extent, and, for the most part, speake more of the comming of Christ, and the establishing of the Christian Church, then the lesser Prophets doe, who were more conversant about the temporall deliverance of Israel from Babylon, though there be aspersions of Christ, and his future government in those Prophets too, though more thinly shed. Amongst the four great ones, our Prophet Ezekiel is the greatest. (S, 10:140).

Donne embarks upon his discourse with an excessively long and flowery periodic sentence that contains an overabundance of qualifiers and asides in the Ciceronian style (HOrT, 35, 112–13). Although the sentence’s meaning, unlike that in most periodic sentences, is not suspended until its final words—ininstead, Donne’s central point becomes clear by the time of the “but because” clause—it nonetheless takes multiple twists and turns before giving up its full content some fifty words later.57 Along the way, however, we see a kind of polysyndeton in Donne’s unusual dual pairings of his four prophets with two conjunctions rather than one, “Esay, and Ieremy, Ezekiel and Daniel” (HOrT, 117; GoE, 53); a further instance of parenthesis (GoE, 198); and embedded within the parenthesis another case of anaphora. Yet the most significant feature of this passage is what happens next: Donne switches abruptly from the Ciceronian and elaborate period to a radically plain Senecan style with a sentence of only eleven words and—as far as I can ascertain—not a single

57 Because of this feature, Lanham might rather characterize the sentence as a case of circuitus or “round composition” (HOrT, 113).
trope.\textsuperscript{58} We therefore see in Donne’s opening gambit in this sermon the full range of styles available to a classical rhetorician,\textsuperscript{59} a fact which supplies an argument that Donne is, at a minimum, adhering to the Erasmian mandate of copiousness in discourse if not engaging in the ludic mode of superabundant excess.

But this distinction raises an important question: to what extent are we merely seeing \textit{copia} in Donne’s sermon and to what extent is his oratory exceeding that threshold? According to John S. Chamberlin, the “most important task of the Renaissance preacher” was itself defined by the concept of \textit{copia}—“turning up an abundance of appropriate and effective commonplaces or topics from the literal sense of a scriptural passage.”\textsuperscript{60} And this task was surely practical rather than decorative in nature, oriented toward enlightening one’s auditory and illuminating Scripture in a meaningful and more fully understandable fashion.\textsuperscript{61} Yet what we see in Donne is, occasionally, the voice of a man who is speaking for his \textit{own} pleasure. The first sentence of his exordium is clearly not calculated to engage or capture the listener’s attention immediately and directly—it is rather dry and pedantic compared to the dynamism that we have seen elsewhere in the sermon—and it is remarkably difficult to follow even in the frozen form of printed text; imagine trying to understand Donne’s point from spoken words hanging in the air. As we shall see later in this chapter, Donne’s

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item If a trope can be named to describe this brief sentence, it must be \textit{brachyologia}, from the Greek for “brevity in speech or writing” (\textit{HoRT}, 30), or Peacham’s term for the trope, \textit{brachiepia} (\textit{GoE}, 182).
\item On this score, I am constrained to disagree with Horton Davies’ claim that the “metaphysical preachers,” including Donne, favored a Senecan style. \textit{Like Angels}, 68. Although Davies concedes—as we see in the example that I have analyzed in the main text—that “Donne combines both” Senecan and Ciceronian modes of discourse in his sermons, on the basis of the passages that we have seen thus far, it does not seem entirely accurate to characterize Donne, as Davies does, as “dominantly Senecan.” Ibid., 69.
\item \textit{Increase and Multiply}, 67.
\item See Ong, “Gospel, Existence, and Print,” 69 (the preacher’s “ultimate purposes are practical [. . .] he wants to convince a real audience of some particular thing”).
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style in this regard is excessive precisely to the extent that it transgresses upon the homiletician’s chief commandment: to be readily understood by one’s auditory.⁶²

Picking up with Donne’s very next sentence, we see him return to the Ciceronian style in full force:

I compare not their extraction and race; for, though Ezekiel were de genere sacerdotali, of the Leviticall and Priestly race; (And, as Philo Judæus notes, all nations having some markes of Gentry, some calling that ennobled the professors thereof, (in some Armes, and Merchandise in some, and the Arts in others) amongst the Jews, that was Priesthood, Priesthood was Gentry) though Ezekiel were of this race, Esay was of a higher, for he was of the extraction of their Kings, of the bloud royall. (S, 10:140)

Two significant features of rhetoric, beyond its Ciceronian nature, characterize this passage. The first and most obvious is the extended aside in the form of a double parenthesis; it is really two asides, one nested inside the other. This is such an aggressive rhetorical move that I can find no term in the field’s lexicon to describe it—Donne does not merely elaborate upon the idea of a priestly class but also expounds within that elaboration on the ways in which different classes or tribes within Jewish society asserted claims to status. The second feature is a jarring case of reeditus ad propositum, or returning to one’s main proposition after a digression (HoRT, 129). With Donne’s lengthy aside omitted, the sentence reads ungrammatically because Donne must pick up his train of thought in a most conspicuous fashion: “I compare not their extraction and race; for, though Ezekiel were de genere sacerdotali, of the Leviticall and Priestly race [. . .] though Ezekiel were of this race,

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⁶² As Chamberlin notes, overly ornamental techniques like Donne’s “were disparaged by both humanists and reformers” alike. Increase and Multiply, 84.
Esay was of a higher, for he was of the extraction of their Kings, of the bloud royall.” This case of anacoluthon, or an ungrammatical construction (Hort, 129), shocks us with its abruptness and signals Donne’s zeal for elaborate and playful rhetorical flourishes.

A closer look at micro-scale features of rhetoric in another portion of the sermon will permit this section of close readings to come to a close. I turn now to a passage, corresponding to section I.A.1.b.(2) of the outline, in which Donne considers those preachers who sully the Word of God not by decorating it with secular learning but rather through their ignorance:

Of which times, if at any time, you read the Sermons, which were then preached, and after published, you will excuse them of this treading down the grass, by oppressing their auditories with over-much learning, for they are such Sermons as will not suffer us to pity them, but we must necessarily scorne, and contemne, and deride them; Sermons, at which the gravest, and saddest man could not choose but laugh; not at the Sermon, God forbid; nor at the plainness, and homeliness of it; God forbid; but at the Solœcismes, the barbarismes, the servilities, the stupid ignorance of those things which fall within the knowledge of boys of the first forme in every School. This was their treading down of grass, not with over-much learning, but with a cloud, a dampe, an earth of ignorance. After an Oxe that oppresseth the grass, after a Horse that devours the grass, sheep will feed; but after a Goose that stanches the grass, they will not; no more can Gods sheep receive nourishment from him that puts a scorne upon his function, by his ignorance. (S, 10:149)

Once again, Donne provides a rich variety of sentences. As is typical for him, he introduces his topic with a long period in the Ciceronian style. Afterward he shifts into a mode of address featuring
shorter sentence lengths, first with a sentence that is an example of *brachyologia* but that has some moderate complexity, next with a sentence of medium length and complexity.

The long opening period begins with a surprising bit of language called *antanaclasis* (*HoRT*, 12; *GoE*, 56). Although not quite using a pun or an example of *paronomasia* (*HoRT*, 110; *GoE*, 56), as most *antanaclases* can be considered, Donne leads into his theme by equivocating upon the term “times” or “time”: “Of which times, if at any time, you read the Sermons, which were then preached, and after published, you will excuse them of this treading down the grass.” The first use of the term refers to eras in which ignorant sermons were common; the second use refers to the occasions on which those sermons might be read by members of Donne’s auditory. This is an admittedly subtle shift in meaning, but it produces a distinct effect. In the span of just a few words, we are swept from past time to the present or even the future, braced by variations on the same word, which is delivered twice with a chiming kind of sound. It is an altogether unusual way to signal a shift in subject matter, and Donne could certainly have accomplished this objective more directly, albeit with substantially less charm and variety.

Only a few lines later, Donne comes to a rhetorical technique that is odd even for him, given his propensity toward using *asyndeton*; we see *polysyndeton* or the use of multiple conjunctions (*HoRT*, 117; *GoE*, 53), in the phrase, “we must necessarily scorne, and contemne, and deride them.” Whereas an instance of *asyndeton* tends to speed us along as we read or hear, *polysyndeton* slows us down and emphasizes each element in the sequence, in this case adding to Donne’s condemnation of those preachers who fail to rise above a minimum level of scholarly knowledge in their sermons. In contrast, Donne later returns to his more favored method of *asyndeton* in the phrase, “at the Solœcismes, the barbarisms, the servilities, the stupid ignorance of those things which fall within the knowledge of boys of the first forme in every School.” The speeding effect of *asyndeton* is
augmented here by an obvious failure of parallelism among the items in the list: the first three (and *asynedtons* are commonly composed in triplets in Donne’s sermons) are each composed of two words, an article and a noun; the fourth item, already excessive in terms of Donne’s typical practice, adds an adjective between the article and the noun but then continues on with an entire dependent clause much lengthier than any of the items listed before it. The ultimate effect is one of piling-on, with Donne tossing out repeated examples in a kind of obvious contempt that allows him virtually to spit the final item in the list—with the alliteration of “first form” for emphasis—in a vinegary tone of distaste.

Returning to the first sentence of the quoted passage, the repetition of the interjection, “God forbid,” implanted within two consecutive phrases, is a rare form of parallelism called *mesodiplosis*. The obviously emphatic nature of this trope is largely unnecessary to Donne’s point—it would have sufficed for Donne to interject only once in order for him to ensure that his auditory did not misunderstand the nature of his critique of some other sermons—but Donne the player pairs two interjections together, not merely repeating an admonition but also allowing its repetition to reinforce an additional parallelism where it would not have otherwise been as noticeable, between the phrases, “not at the Sermon” and “nor at the plainness, and homeliness of it.” These two components of the sentence, introduced by their paired negative terms and including a *anaphoric* and grammatically superfluous repetition of the preposition, “at,” come to echo each other in a way that at least appears to soften or moderate Donne’s rather harsh critique.

The next sentence is primarily characterized by another instance of *asynedton* at the end of the tripartite list, “not with over-much learning, but with a cloud, a dampe, an earth of ignorance,”

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63 Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae.*
and by the device of *anaphora* in the repeated initial preposition, “with,” at the head of both phrases. We see the same pattern of these two accompanying tropes at the beginning of the final sentence in the passage, “After an *Oxe* that oppresseth the grass, after a *Horse* that devours the grass, sheep will feed,” followed by the exceptionally vivid and distasteful image of “a *Goose* that stanches the grass,” which with its unusual choice of the term “stanch” might be deemed a kind of *enargia* or visually powerful description (*HoRT*, 64).

At each level of this sermon, we have seen excess going well beyond the requirements of Erasmian *copia*.64 Whereas Erasmus insists that you “include the essential in the fewest possible words so that nothing is lacking,”65 Donne *never* uses the fewest possible words. Indeed, this sermon, at nineteen rather dense pages, is substantially longer than the sermons of another leading “metaphysical preacher” known for his playful and exuberant language in the pulpit, Lancelot Andrewes.66 Whereas Erasmus insists that you “enlarge and enrich your expression [. . .] that even so nothing is redundant,”67 a key feature of the sermon considered in this section is redundancy, a plethora of tropes and figures not strictly necessary to the substance of his discourse. Yet Donne never violates the key Erasmian concern about excess, a poverty of ideas: “we find that unskilled

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64 Although Erasmus’ text was designed primarily for students who were learning Latin, it came to be used as a source of advice for rhetoricians more generally, and Erasmian guidance for preachers was remarkably similar to that offered to secular speakers: the best way for the preacher to accomplish the task of moving his auditory was “by focusing on some general idea or commonplace drawn from the meaning of a biblical passage and by developing that with all the resources of ancient forensic rhetoric for the copious amplification of a topic.” Chamberlin, *Increase and Multiply*, 74.

65 Copia, 301.


67 Copia, 301.
practitioners of the full style chatter on without restraint, and yet say far too little.” To the contrary, Donne’s sermon is a strikingly rich and polysemic example of pulpit oratory that provides an extensive commentary on and a thorough exegesis of his principal text. Donne’s excess here is the exuberance of a man who loves language, who reveres Divine language, and who revels in the arts of language to an extent that we can code as ludic. In the following section, I shall consider the question of why Donne so insistently and playfully uses the full pallette of rhetorical tools at his disposal; that discussion will support an analysis of what we can learn about Renaissance discourse from attending to Donne’s playful and incarnational uses of the rhetorical art.

C. CONSEQUENCES
Donne’s Rhetoric as Incarnational

Excerpts from other sermons that Donne delivered over the course of his pulpit career offer at least three possible explanations for why the art of rhetoric might have been accorded such a prominent role in his oratory and ministry. In turn, each potential explanation points toward the conclusion that the playfulness of Donne’s rhetoric, its extravagance and overabundant bounty, is not simply ornamental or decorative; rather, because style is substance, it is a mode of imitating the Divine, incarnated Word.

First, the use of rhetoric in the pulpit was a matter of reverence or decorum: “God speaks to us in oratione strictâ, in a limited, in a diligent form; Let us speak to him in oratione solutâ; not pray, not preach, not hear, slackly, suddenly, unadvisedly, extemporally, occasionally, indiligently” (S, 2:50). The careful and conscious use of language is a theme that Donne relies upon frequently in his sermons. If the Word of God is honey, then “chosen words, studied, premeditated words,

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68 Ibid.
pleasing words [...] are as a Hony-combe” (S, 8:271). Donne even uses rhetorical terms to reinforce the importance of well crafted speech when he says, “Our communication with God must not be in Interjections, that come in by chance; nor our Devotions made up of Parentheses, that might be left out” (S, 9:303). In the second part of his sermon on the text of Ezekiel, he explains that the failure of a preacher to take sufficient care in designing, or premeditating, his homily can actually cause harm:

the lesse we study for our Sermons, the more danger is there to disquiet the auditory; extemporall, unpremeditated Sermons, that serve the popular eare, vent, for the most part, doctrines that disquiet the Church. Study for them, and they will be quiet; consider ancient and fundamentall doctrines, and this will quiet and settle the understanding, and the Conscience. (S, 10:174)

If words are the clothes that ideas wear, as Donne suggests elsewhere, then the use of rhetoric in religious settings can be considered a form of donning one’s Sunday best, a way to show respect on the occasion of worship and a way to prepare for or to meditate upon the importance of the act of worship. “Religion is a serious thing, but not a sullen; Religious preaching is a grave exercise, but not a sordid, not a barbarous, not a negligent” (S, 2:170). Because “The style of the Scriptures is a diligent, and an artificial style” (S, 2:171), Donne “considered that texts contrived by the Holy Ghost deserved the best of human skill.”

69 “Language must waite upon matter, and words upon things. [. . .] [T]he matter is the forme; The matter, that is, the doctrine that we preach, is the forme, that is, the Soule, the Essence; the language and words wee preach in, is but the Body, but the existence” (S, 10:112).

Indeed, James Biester has suggested that the occasional moments of baroque obscurity in Donne’s work can be accounted for by esoteric traditions which “connected obscurity to reverence.” There is certainly evidence that Donne adhered to the Augustinian view of metaphor as simultaneously concealing and revealing and of Scripture as simultaneously simple and profound. And Samuel Johnson’s use of the word *occult* to describe the resemblances in a *discordia concors* is not coincidental—“he seems to be recalling,” according to K. K. Ruthven, “earlier theories about the transcendental origins of metaphor and the status of conceits in times when the universe was imagined to be a vast net-work of symbolic correspondences.” For Donne and many of his contemporaries, both in the Church and in the secular realm, those symbolic correspondences were real and not merely remnants from a remote, superstitious past. As Donne himself says, “The world is a great Volume, and man the Index of that Booke” (S, 7:272).

Second, language arts serve the fundamentally communicative purposes of preaching. As Donne explains in his sermon on Ezekiel 34:19, ornamentation and secular learning can be effective

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72 Biester, *Lyric Wonder*, 141.


74 See also Felecia Wright McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then: Body as Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne* (New York: Continuum Press, 2005), ix (“In Donne’s imaginative universe, the human person lies at the center of the great interconnected web of God’s signs and acts that is the created order”); Simpson, *Study of the Prose Works*, 57 (“to Donne [. . .] anything in heaven or earth could be used to illustrate anything else”); and Webber, *Contrary Music*, 123 (for Donne “almost everything in the world made by God is a word of God”).
conveyances for ideas and concepts that might otherwise not be completely understood (S, 10:147).75 Indeed, Davies has described sermon audiences as “an assemblage of prisoners” by virtue of the fact that their attendance was mandatory and became a way of publicly gauging one’s orthodoxy;76 it only makes sense that preachers would be challenged to maintain attendance and even to entertain their auditories. But many critics have gone even further by suggesting that the kinds of preciosity and wittiness we see in Donne’s homiletic practice are responses to the fundamental problem in the Christian West of adapting language to the task of describing a God considered to be ineffable and a set of religious doctrines considered to be mysteries or paradoxes.77 According to Donne, the imprecise nature of language and the lack of perfect correspondence between word and referent—what Carrithers calls “the failure of iconicity”78—are products of man’s fallen nature, and “metaphorical language has the greatest potentiality in the fallen world for equivalence to the reliability of unfallen language.”79

75 See Maria Salenius, “True Purification: Donne’s Art of Rhetoric in Two Candlemas Sermons,” in John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives, ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 314–34, 324 (“the metaphor, for Donne, is clearly a tool for precise expression and apt argumentation”).

76 Like Angels, 10.

77 Webber, Contrary Music, 26. Webber cites Walter Ong and Leo Spitzer as specific examples of critics who argue that “the baroque writer recognized that words are not enough.” Ibid. See also Chamberlin, Increase and Multiply, 155 (“In the *ars praedicandi* an assumption that a combined unity in the order of reality corresponds to the syntactical completeness of the scriptural statement seems to be implied in the rules by which a preacher is to divide his theme”).

78 Donne at Sermons, 82.

79 Ibid., 76. “The Fall subverted the intention of Creation to people heaven, leaving man himself unable to redress the damage or anesthetize the pain. The Incarnation, accordingly, acknowledged the needs of the full human composite, participating in both the human and the divine to restore the purpose of Creation.” Terry G. Sherwood, Fulfiling the Circle: A Study of John Donne’s Thought (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 94. “Indeed, a belief in the sacredness and inerrancy of revelation would tend to lead to the notion that the words of Scripture conform more immediately to reality than does the rest of language.” Chamberlin, Increase and Multiply, 157.
Most important, however, is the existence of both Divine and biblical precedent for the use of rhetoric in religious contexts, a point which Donne makes again and again throughout his career as a preacher. In an especially famous passage, for example, Donne says that

There are not so eloquent books in the world, as the Scriptures: Accept those names of Tropes and Figures, which the Grammarians and Rhetoricians put upon us, and we may be bold to say, that in all their Authors, Greek and Latin, we cannot finde so high, and so lively examples, of those Tropes, and those Figures, as we may in the Scriptures: whatsoever hath justly delighted any man in any mans writing, is exceeded in the Scriptures. (S, 2:170–71)

Simpson and Potter cite this passage as being particularly valuable because it “shows an emphasis unusual for the early seventeenth century (though not, to be sure, unique) on the literary qualities of Scripture” (S, 2:22). While this passage comes from a sermon delivered fairly early in Donne’s career, Donne only becomes more rhapsodic on this theme toward the end of his life and ministry:

there are not so eloquent books in the world as the Scriptures. [...] The Holy Ghost in his Instruments, (in those whose tongues or pens he makes use of) doth not forbid, nor decline elegant and cheerfull, and delightfull expression; but as God gave his Children a bread of Manna, that tasted to every man like that that he liked best, so hath God given us Scriptures, in which the plain and simple man may hear God speaking to him in his own plain and familiar language, and men of larger capacity, and more curiosity, may heare God in that Musique that they love best, in a curious, in an harmonious style, unparalleled by any. [T]here is no secular Authour [...] which doth more abound with perswasive figures of Rhetorique, nor with musical cadences and allusions, and assimilations, and conformity, and correspondency of
words to one another, then some of the *Secretaries of the Holy Ghost*, some of the authours of some books of the Bible doe. (S, 10:103)

In addition to being a rhetorician, God takes pleasure in His play with language: “the Holy Ghost in penning the Scriptures delights himself, not only with a propriety, but with a delicacy, and harmony, and melody of language; with height of Metaphors, and other figures” (S, 6:55). God, in fact, “was well-known for his wit” during the seventeenth century, according to Ruthven, and the idea of the metaphysical conceit has been linked to this view of “the Holy Ghost’s fondness for puns and paradoxes.” Support for this suggestion is close at hand, for, in Donne’s estimation, the elaborate series of metaphors around which he organized his sermon on Ezekiel 34:19 were not his creations; they were the “metaphors of the holy Ghost” (S, 10:142). Donne’s God, in other words, is “radically communicative,” Felicia Wright McDuffie says, and He “continually writes on the pages of nature, history, the human community, and each individual life.” As Donne puts it, “God is a declaratory God. The whole year is, to his Saints, a continuall *Epiphany*, one day of manifestation.

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80 According to W. Fraser Mitchell, this passage “may be regarded as an *apologia* for the rhetorical preaching of the seventeenth century, and as an explanation of its chief *raison d’être*, which seems to have been a desire to imitate the manner of an author who was not man but God. For Donne and his contemporaries, as for generations of preachers before them, the vehemence and copiousness which they attributed to the Holy Ghost were things to be imitated.” *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of Its Literary Aspects* (1932) (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 189.

81 *Conceit*, 45–46.

82 “To the literary skill of the Holy Ghost, who inspired the human hands which penned the words of Scripture, Donne responds with an enthusiasm befitting a poet.” Mueller, *Donne at Sermons*, 68.

83 *To Our Bodies*, ix–x.
In every minute that strikes upon the Bell, is a syllable, nay a syllogisme from God” (S, 10:111). “All language,” Chamberlin proclaims, “is a gift” from God.84

Beyond the fact that he considered God to be a kind of rhetorician,85 Donne never neglects an opportunity to remind his auditory of the even more intimate relationships between God and language that are suggested by the Scriptures. The creation was not only ex nihilo but also ex verbo because God’s speech created the cosmos, to borrow J. L. Austin’s terminology, in the ultimate performative utterance.86 Scripture refers to Christ as Logos, the Word, a highly self-reflexive gesture in light of Donne’s interpretation of these references:

Christ spoke Scripture; Christ was Scripture. As we say of great and universall Scholars, that they are viventes Bibliothecae, living, walking, speaking Libraries; so

84 Increase and Multiply, 157. No less an authority than Henry Peacham concurred:

Now lest so excellent a gift of the deuine goodnesse (as wisedome here appeareth to be, and is) should lye supprest by silence, and so remaine hid in darknesse, almightie God the deep sea of wisedome, and bright sunne of maiestie, hath opened the mouth of man, as the mouth of a plentiful fountaine, both to powre forth the inward passions of his heart, and also as a heavenly planet to shew foorth, (by the shining beames of speech) the priuie thoughts, and secret conceites of his mind. (GoE, iii)

85 In attributing rhetorical skill to God, Donne is of course engaging in a rhetorical act of his own. The rich implications of this idea are beyond the scope of this chapter, but there is certainly a basis for scholarship considering, among other issues, the power relationships that preachers established, maintained, and negotiated by comparing themselves explicitly or implicitly to a Divine power which speaks. See, for example, Biester, Lyric Wonder, 21 (preachers “sought to cloak themselves in the reflected aura of the divine” by using obscure language).

Christ was *loquens Scriptura*; living, speaking Scripture. Our Sermons are Text and Discourse; Christ’s Sermons were all Text; Christ was the *Word*; not onely the Essentail Word, which was always with God, but the very written word too. ([S, 7:400])

Donne even extended this appellation to all persons of the Trinity: “God that created thee was *Verbum*, The Word, [. . .] God that redeemed thee was *Verbum*, The Word, [. . .] God that sanctified thee is *Verbum*, The Word” ([S, 8:52]).

As a result, the preacher as expositor of God’s Word has an affirmative obligation to emulate the Divine model.87 “Preaching is potentially a kind of parallel on a lower plane to divinely efficacious language, to words of Godly comfort,” says Carrithers. “By implication, the preacher’s great task (at the tactical level) is to mobilize positively all the random and wayward ‘affections’ of his congregation.”88 This is not a peculiar understanding that we can attribute to Donne; it parallels the official policy of the English Reformed Church with respect to the duties of parishioners. Peter Mack, quoting the Church’s *Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches*, says: “Through diligent reading and pondering, in what amounts to a form of imitation, the Christian in some sense becomes the book. The one who benefits most from the Bible is ‘he that is most turned

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87 Dennis Quinn speaks at length about this notion. “The preacher cooperates in the sacramental application of Christ’s methods to men’s souls by imitating the divine process visible in Scriptures.” “Donne’s Christian Eloquence,” 359. “In their very structure,” therefore, “the sermons re-enact the truth which Donne sees in the texts, with the result that the sermons are actions imitative of or analogous to the Biblical action.” Ibid., 372.

88 *Donne at Sermons*, 13. “Just as, in the beginning, God’s word created the world and, through the person of Christ, not only communicated salvation, but actually brought it about, so is the sermon a continuation of these salvational events in our own present.” Fetzer, *Performances*, 61. See also McDuffie, *To Our Bodies*, 47 (“Donne implies that in his use of metaphor he is following the example of the ‘metaphorical God,’ the God who loves to use metaphors in his actions and his Word”); and Nelson, *Holy Ambition*, 87–88 (“Donne, the preacher of the Word, emulates the methods of the divine author of the Word”).
into it, that is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in his heart and life altered and changed into
that thing which he readeth.”

And this is the final sense in which Donne’s rhetoric becomes incarnational. For Donne,
“The best words are but words, but they are the fore-runners of Deeds” (S, 8:342), and “speaking is
not Doing, but yet fair speaking prepares an acception before, and puts a value after, upon the best
actions” (S, 8:338). According to Carrithers, the single most important fact to bear in mind when
considering Donne’s sermons is that the liturgy of the English Reformed Church “engages a
congregation understood as a local element of the body of Christ in closely communal acts of
worship in response to, or dialogue or unison with, the priest.” Calling Donne’s homiletic practice
“fundamentally dialogic,” Carrithers argues that each sermon seeks to initiate a series of actions:
“the action of faithfulness in moving the speaking self (1), and hopefully the listener (2), from static,

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89 Elizabethan Rhetoric, 261–62. Thomas O. Sloane contends that rhetoric for Donne “is a process of in-
the process of making “absent and remote things present” and making “things that are not as though they were” (S, 4:87),
“this parodying of God is unquestionably meant to include creating the reader by informing him with the text—any text,
poem or sermon, spoken or written.” End of Humanist Rhetoric, 206. “[T]he external world and the interior of the
understanding that man’s union with Christ is not effected by the Lord’s agency alone but relies on the individual’s
adequate response.” Fetzer, “Re-enactments of the Word,” 3. Fetzer invokes the concept of imitatio Christi to elaborate
on her thesis. Ibid., 10.

90 This evokes the idea that Donne (and perhaps other preachers of his time) might have viewed the efficacy
of sermonic discourse as a function of the extent to which that discourse is dialogic—in a Bakhtinian sense:

A passive understanding of the meaning of perceived speech is only an abstract aspect of the actual whole
of actively responsive understanding, which is then actualized in a subsequent response that is actually
articulated. Of course, an utterance is not always followed immediately by an articulated response. An
actively responsive understanding of what is heard […] can be directly realized in action, or it can remain,
for the time being, a silent responsive understanding […] with a delayed reaction.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres” (1979), in Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, trans. Vern W.
McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series (Austin: University of Texas

91 Donne at Sermons, 14.

92 Ibid., 18.
atomistic nonattachment (3), to (4) a dynamically inclusive attachment (5). This action works out in contest with all kinds of adversities (6); that is, apathy or inattention, confusion or error, and willful or sinful counteraction." Therefore, what fulfills or perfects or completes the sermon is, in Bakhtin’s terms, its closure as an utterance by the congregation’s responsive act or responsive speech, in a form as immediate, sincere, and dynamic as possible. "[S]ince God, in all the three Persons, is Verbum, The Word to thee, all of them working upon thee, by speaking to thee, Be thou Verbum too, A Word, as God was; A Speaking, and a Doing Word’ (S, 8:52).

The rhetoric of a sermon is therefore like an opening move in a GAME—“a partnership game,” Carrithers calls it, “played in utmost seriousness (though not, of course, unwavering solemnity) with his congregation”—and is performative in multiple senses. A preacher not only communicates to his auditory but also works upon them, stimulating them to responsive speech or action and simulating the efficacy of Divine rhetoric. Even the rhetorical question which gives this chapter its subtitle is a figure of thought, a gesture struck in words, something that is done as much as said—a speaking and a doing word. And that question—paraphrased, in essence, as is rhetoric style or substance?—is answered by Donne’s self-reflexive use of rhetoric as both substance and style, paralleling and enacting the idea that the two are inextricably linked. Speech is effective only

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94 Bakhtin’s thinking is remarkably pertinent to the speech genre of the sermon as Carrithers understands it: “The sermon may well of all generic forms be the most fundamentally open-ended or inconclusive or contingent […] either because all will have to be done over again, or there will be a continuing, incremental effect.” Donne at Sermons, 30.

95 Ibid., 89–90.
in proportion to the response it generates, the action or the further speaking that it prompts.96 “[D]o something,” Donne urges, “that I may hear thee!” (S, 4:823). Word must be translated into action.97 Word must be made Flesh.98

D. IMPLICATIONS
“The Sermon of the Sermon”: Donnean Rhetoric in the English Reformation

“It is hard for us to comprehend the importance of the sermons” of the English Reformation of the early to middle seventeenth century,99 the period which Davies dubs “the golden age of Anglican eloquence.”100 They were, according to John Stubbs, “the most effective medium through which official policy and wisdom could be expressed and indeed contested, and public opinion moulded.”101 Yet, for Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, because sermons are considered “one of the most lifeless, ancillary aspects of Renaissance literary culture,” they have “suffered an indulgent, even

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96 In commenting upon the sermon that gives this chapter its subtitle, David L. Edwards notes that it is ultimately about “the power of preaching and poetry to describe a world which, however, actually exists only in the responses of readers.” John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit (London: Continuum Press, 2001), 32.

97 Others have commented upon Donne’s propensity to convert word into action in his sermons. Daniel Derrin, for example, emphasizes the ways in which Donne transmutes emotional responses into constructive directions and community-building. “Engaging the Passions in John Donne’s Sermons,” English Studies 93, no. 4 (June 2012): 452–68. John Stubbs similarly notes that “The most important thing for Donne was that everyone took their place, involved themselves in society.” Reformed Soul, 323. And Anna K. Nardo has emphasized Donne’s imperative that “the Word must not remain in the memory alone; the hearer must write it in his life.” Ludic Self, 64.

98 For an extended treatment of this idea as a mode of understanding Donne’s sermons, see Whalen, “Sacramentalizing the Word.”

99 Davies, Like Angels from a Cloud, 10.

100 Ibid., 8. On the importance of the sermon, Mitchell has spoken eloquently: “To the Englishman of the seventeenth century, whether Puritan, Laudian, Platonist, or whatever we may choose to call him, the sermon was intimately bound up with the Oracles of God, whether he believed those to be derivable from the Scriptures, the Church, or certain philosophers; it was the explication of these Oracles, a message promulgated by God Himself, and consequently of the most infinite importance.” English Pulpit Oratory, 42.

101 Reformed Soul, xviii.
condescending neglect.” Understanding period attitudes toward rhetoric is, in turn, enormously important for understanding sermons and other features of the age: “Rhetoric is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors,” C. S. Lewis writes; “Probably all our literary histories [. . .] are vitiated by our lack of sympathy on this point. If ever the passion for formal rhetoric returns, the whole story will have to be rewritten and many judgments reversed.”

During the early seventeenth century, Debora Shuger reminds us, the rhetoric of sermons is “the only kind still supported by a living and culturally significant oratory. It is also the only large body of rhetoric designed for adults.” It therefore occupies a central space in the era’s discourse. Moreover, as many scholars have observed, rhetoric and theology during this period—and particularly in the English Renaissance and Reformation—are not readily compartmentalized on discrete sides of a hermetically impermeable disciplinary boundary: to engage with one is necessarily to comment on the other.


104 Sacred Rhetoric, 12.

105 Shuger argues that sermonic discourse “offers a window on the process by which the Christian West transformed its Classical heritage and a model for how theories of language relate to the larger concerns of a society, to its religion, psychology, and politics.” Ibid., 13. See also Carrithers, Donne at Sermons, 4 (“The Renaissance preachers attempted to remobilize classical oratory in biblical terms”).

106 “The problem of how to speak of God appropriately could not fail to present itself to a preacher during the seventeenth century. It was a question of rhetoric and also of theology.” Winfried Schleiner, The Imagery of John Donne’s Sermons (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1970), 45. “For Donne the phenomenon of human speech cannot be separated from its paradigm—the language of God.” Stanwood and Asals, Theology of Language, 11. “Human discourse [. . .] remains thoroughly an aspect of creation and a reflection of its own fallen (or, at best, partially redeemed) nature; in this radical sense, rhetoric is always, we shall find, no less than a theology of language, and Renaissance theological controversy is itself implicated in the conflict among competing rhetorics.” Baumlin, Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse, 44.
Maria Salenius goes so far as to call the Reformation “a linguistic phenomenon,” and it would be difficult to charge her with exaggeration. After all, one of the key points of contention was the nature of the Eucharist, essentially a hermeneutic controversy about the words of Matthew 26:26, “this is my body,” and what the meaning of *is* is—one’s religious affiliation was largely determined by whether one interpreted Christ’s words literally or viewed them as a metaphorical and thus rhetorical act. As a consequence, an understanding of Donne’s sermons—including their ludic and incarnational nature—is critical for a fuller appreciation of the period’s theological debates, a subject of great interest to many scholars of English Reformation discourse.

Any effort to situate Donne within those debates, however, must necessarily be a tentative one, for critics are sharply divided over Donne’s attitudes to the incipient Laudianism in the English Reformed Church of his day. Part of the reason for these deep rifts among scholars is that the state of historical knowledge about the period remains disturbingly unsettled. For example, there exists surprisingly little consensus on the seemingly foundational question of whether Elizabeth approved of preaching. Doreen Rosman asserts that Elizabeth disliked the practice, at least the extemporal variety of “prophecying,” whereas Targoff insists that it was “central to church piety” under both Elizabeth and James; a third view, McCullough’s, is that “James liked sermons more than his

107 “True Purification,” 316. She also notes that Richard Mallette has described English Protestantism in the immediate aftermath of the Reformation as “a religion of words.” *Spenser and the Discourses of Reformation England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 12.


predecessor: Elizabeth had tolerated them, James revelled in them.\footnote{112} Another problematic issue is that Donne himself is extraordinarily reluctant to take sides as a polemicist in period debates;\footnote{113} if it is difficult to position Donne among the various factions in which the English Reformed Church consisted, then that is “probably how he wanted it,” Stubbs concludes.\footnote{114} Some scholars have therefore given up on the enterprise of attempting to ascertain Donne’s religious politics. Margret Fetzer, for example, says that “Pronouncing a verdict on John Donne’s religious allegiances is problematic” because of the fact, perhaps surprising to some, that “the denominational factions in early modern England were by no means as distinct from one another as might be expected, considering the heated, sometimes bitter arguments Donne and his contemporaries were both involved in and exposed to.”\footnote{115} And Brent Nelson even questions the value of the endeavor, saying that “We are on much safer, indeed more fertile ground, when we look for the rhetorical motives of the preacher rather than for his absolute theological position.”\footnote{116}


\footnote{113} Targoff, Body and Soul, 158.

\footnote{114} Reformed Soul, 361.

\footnote{115} Fetzer, Performances, 18. In light of this difficulty, Fetzer’s approach was not to assign Donne “to any particular religious confession,” instead approaching his works as neutral performances. Ibid., 271.

\footnote{116} Holy Ambition: Rhetoric, Courtship, and Devotion in the Sermons of John Donne, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 5.
Venturing a general account of period views on preaching, we can say in a necessarily schematized fashion that there were three broad schools or families of thought within the English Reformed Church. However, an important prefatory note is in order: contemporary historical scholarship establishes that “there was no great gulf,” as David L. Edwards puts it, between Puritans and high-Church figures about the centrality of preaching to Protestant doctrine. Rather, he says, “what united these two movements was far larger than any division.”

With that caveat in place, we can begin to generalize with the conservative end of the spectrum, the Laudians—Archbishop William Laud and his followers led a movement to suppress preaching late in James’ reign—and, before them, the Avant-Garde Conformists. For this faction, as for Laud personally, who was also known for his emphasis on a beautiful and highly

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117 Although there is certainly no dearth of research on preaching during the English Reformation, I have not found any source that provides a much-needed general overview of the positions that were in play during the period. With the exception of instances in which I provide citations to other sources, the following account is indebted to, and is a synthesis of, the following materials: J. W. Blench, Preaching in England in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: A Study of English Sermons, 1450–c. 1600 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Chamberlin, Increase and Multiply; Daniel W. Doerksen, Conforming to the Word: Herbert, Donne, and the English Church before Laud (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1997); Hunt, Art of Hearing; McCullough, Sermons at Court; Milner, Senses and the English Reformation; and Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory.

118 Man of Flesh and Spirit, 109. See also Hunt, Art of Hearing, 30 (“The traditional opposition between ‘radical’ Puritanism and ‘moderate’ Anglicanism has now been decisively discredited”). For important contributions to contemporary scholarship in this regard, including the notion that Richard Hooker was the founder of “Anglicanism” rather than its epitome, see Peter Lake, Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

119 Edwards, Man of Flesh and Spirit, 109. I have omitted the Roman Catholic position as beyond the scope of this chapter; for treatments of issues related to Donne’s former Catholicism, see Nelson, “John Donne’s Pulpit Voice”; and Stubbs, Reformed Soul.

120 See generally Hunt, Art of Hearing, 43 (Laudianism “amounted to a radical downgrading of the role of preaching which went far beyond anything previously seen in the Elizabethan or Jacobean Church”).

121 Mitchell considers a category of Anglo-Catholic preachers, a group into which he places Donne. English Pulpit Oratory, 180. The term “Anglo-Catholic,” however, has since been recognized as problematic to the extent that it bears associations with the much later Oxford Movement; moreover, recent scholarship based on a more refined understanding of English Reformed Church history has shunned this category, rather than embracing it, and would certainly not situate Donne within this realm.
ceremonial liturgy, Davies explains, “the altar was more important than the pulpit”:\textsuperscript{122} “a greater reverence, no doubt,” Laud himself said, “is due to the Body than to the Word of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{123} But on the basis of the sermons that survive to this day, Davies has classified Laud as a “metaphysical preacher,” one who exhibited great wit in the pulpit, albeit perhaps not to the same extent as Donne or even Andrewes.\textsuperscript{124} Although these high-Church figures often defended the use of secular learning and wit in pulpit discourse,\textsuperscript{125} the belief that preaching in the English Reformed Church eschewed rhetoric is not without a foundation. Many manuals on preaching published during Donne’s era emphasized the importance of the preacher maintaining a proper distance from the conventions of secular oratory.\textsuperscript{126}

On the left end of the spectrum, likely the largest contingent of preachers during the period,\textsuperscript{127} Reformed theology becomes one primarily of homiletics, to such an extent that the sermon tends to rival even the Eucharist in terms of its ritual importance.\textsuperscript{128} The ordinance of preaching was central to their views of Church piety, but their sermons were often dry and brittle, with a tight focus on the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{122} Like Angels, 192.
\bibitem{123} Like Angels, 192–95. John Tillotson, with his “simple presentation of reasonable piety and everyday morality,” and Andrewes himself, who was skeptical about the value of preaching in the parishes (“he thought that most of the clergy would talk nonsense if they preached too often”), might also be placed within this family of positions. Edwards, \textit{Man of Flesh and Spirit}, 113–14. See also McCullough, \textit{Sermons at Court}, 161 (“Few passages in Andrewes’s court sermons cackle with more righteous indignation than those against infatuation with sermons”). O. C. Edwards, Jr., also classifies Donne (along with Andrewes) as a “metaphysical preacher.” History of Preaching, 344. Although he notes that “the metaphysical style was not confined to one ecclesiastical party,” Edwards opines that “it was more characteristic of Anglo-Catholics than of any other group.” Ibid., 370.
\bibitem{125} Like Angels, 269–70.
\bibitem{126} Umbach, “Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” 355.
\bibitem{127} Edwards, \textit{Man of Flesh and Spirit}, 111.
\bibitem{128} Fetzer, \textit{Performances}, 28.
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biblical text, with an insistent moralizing tone, and without the use of secular anecdotes or obscure references to the Church Fathers.\textsuperscript{129} Noted Puritan homiletician William Perkins is perhaps a figure most representative of this movement; he had no objection to the preacher’s reliance on scholarship and other secular knowledge—“the Minister may, yea and must privately use at his liberty the arts, philosophy, and variety of reading, whilst he is in framing his sermon,” he said—“but he ought in public to conceal all these from the people,”\textsuperscript{130} maintaining a preaching voice that was much more plain and transparent to the members of his presumably less-educated auditory.\textsuperscript{131}

Somewhere in between these two poles of the spectrum might be situated the positions of moderate Conformists.\textsuperscript{132} The ordinance of preaching, central to Protestant doctrine, was clearly an important element of the liturgy for these figures, but the preaching that they favored tended toward


\textsuperscript{130} \textit{The Arte of Prophecying} (London: Felix Kyngston, 1607), 133. This passage of Perkins’ text is discussed at some length in Winfried Schleiner, \textit{The Imagery of John Donne’s Sermons} (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1970), 58; and Bryan Crockett, “The Act of Preaching and the Art of Prophecying,” \textit{Sewanee Review}, no. 105 (1997): 39–52. David L. Edwards argues that Perkins was one of the most influential preachers of the period, Puritan or otherwise. \textit{Man of Flesh and Spirit}, 111.

\textsuperscript{131} The homiletical critics among the Puritans […] objected to the word-play in quips, puns, and paronomasia as trivializing the encounter between divine communication and human response mediated by the preacher. Gravity rather than levity should characterize sermons. They also deplored the pedantic citation of the Church Fathers in the original Greek or Latin, and the historical narrations and “unnatural” natural history employed, not to mention the elaborate rhetorical ornamentation of style, since all this drew attention to the preacher, not to the treasure (the gospel) in the earthen vessel (the preacher).

Davies, \textit{Like Angels}, 46.

\textsuperscript{132} “[…] Laudianism can be seen as an outgrowth of the existing conformist position. […] More specifically, it can be seen as a development of some lines of thought begun by Richard Hooker in his classic defence of the Elizabethan settlement, \textit{Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity}.” Hunt, \textit{Art of Hearing}, 43.
a plainer style than that employed by the “metaphysicals” whom Davies identifies. In particular, says Hunt, Conforming Puritan preachers

were clearly worried by the Laudian attempt to demote preaching to a lesser position, and one might have expected them to respond by reasserting the primacy of preaching as the essential duty of the godly minister. But what one finds instead is a search for compromise, and an increasingly agonised attempt to mediate between the two opposing positions by avoiding any comparison between preaching and prayer.133

Moderate preaching, especially among those homileticians who were influenced by the work of Ramus, was generally, according to Chamberlin, “extreme in its plainness,”134 yet Calvinist Conformist preachers were still invited to deliver sermons at Court, particularly under James.135 Many moderate and learned Puritans supported the display of secular learning in the pulpit, but the more common position was that witty performances based on that kind of knowledge were better reserved for secular oratory.136

In positioning Donne’s sermon practice among this array of competing views, it is important first to note that his preaching style was by no means typical of the period: Edwards explains, “most

133  Ibid., 53.

134  Increase and Multiply, 89. Nonetheless, Davies identifies a number of Calvinist homileticians among his category of “metaphysical preachers.” See Like Angels, 133–87. Those ranks are dominated, however, by Avant-Garde Conformists and high-Church figures. Ibid., 189–265.

135  Davies, Like Angels, 28 (“Calvinists he approved, but not Puritans”).

136  Ibid., 268–69. See also Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory, 367 (the “rhetorical sermon” was also a feature of “those Calvinists who were not so puritanically affected as to adhere to the precepts of strict Scriptural exposition laid down by Perkins”).

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of the preachers were not major poets, deep thinkers or magnificent orators. To the contrary, we can consider Donne’s pulpit oratory to be in some senses transgressive, at odds with nearly every fixed point on this continuum. His insistence upon the centrality of preaching to Protestant doctrine finds him allied with the left pole of the spectrum, but his florid and heavily rhetorical style is, “of course, highly unpuritan,” Salenius writes, “and to that extent anti-reformational.”

Likewise, Donne’s appeal as a preacher to the Crown and his ludic practice in the pulpit might by some accounts seem to ally him with the conservative pole of the spectrum, but his differences with Laud—both in style and on theological matters—prevent us from classifying him unproblematically at the point on the continuum that would intersect with official Church policy. The key preliminary point to keep in mind is that, in both senses in which Donne was transgressive against period

137 *Man of Flesh and Spirit*, 111.

138 Although Donne was a favorite of James, this fact does not mean that he can be considered a mainstream figure. The monarch’s appointed preachers did not, of course, comprise a majority of preachers during the period, and sermons at Court were not necessarily representative of pulpit discourse more broadly. See generally McCullough, *Sermons at Court*.

139 “True Purification,” 324. See also Ruthven, *Conceit*, 58 (“conceits have been regarded sometimes as a Papist extravagance, a stylistic disease contracted during periods of monkish ignorance and intolerable among members of a Reformed Church”).

140 Thomas Fuller once used the term “mirth”—clearly a ludic descriptor—to characterize James’ tastes in preaching. Davies, *Like Angels*, 126. See also McCullough, *Sermons at Court*, 156 (“James’s brusque elevation of sermon over service focused and fueled a debate over the efficacy of preaching versus prayer that had simmered in England since the Reformation”).
orthodoxies—his Puritan focus on the centrality of preaching and his generous use of tropes and figures—we see markers of excess and therefore of the ludic.141

Yet some ambivalence about preaching was necessary for survival in his age,142 during which, Carrithers explains, an “uneasy balance of power obtained between proponents [. . .] of the conviction that language is a part of creation, a component of reality glorious in itself, and proponents of the notion that language serves only as a beggarly handmaiden to some more fundamental reality.”143 That ambivalence becomes institutionalized in what Jerome S. Dees calls “a paradox inherent in the Protestant conception of the ordinance of preaching”:144 the preacher has a duty to deliver, and his auditory a duty to hear, the Word of God, and yet salvation is ultimately a matter of Divine grace extended directly to the individual without an intervening mediatory role

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142 Fetzer, Performances, 45. Shami notes that Donne tended to have a tolerant attitude, one which took pains to avoid controversy. “Anti-Catholicism in the Sermons of John Donne,” in Ferrell and McCullough, English Sermon Revised, 136–66, 139, 151. Byron Nelson studies Donne’s debut sermon at St. Paul’s and explains the “daunting set of challenges” that Donne had to face on that occasion, all of which required him to walk some extremely fine doctrinal lines. “John Donne’s Pulpit Voice,” 53. According to Stubbs, Donne’s “refuge [. . .] lay in circumspection”; he “smudged over” issues that were deeply controversial. Reformed Soul, 376.

143 Donne at Sermons, 79.

144 “Logic and Paradox,” 82.
for the preacher.\footnote{\textit{John Donne: Preacher}, 99. For example, “Services in reformed churches including the Anglican were to be conducted in a ‘language understood of the people’ yet—as we have heard Donne urge and practice—not without occasional touches of specialization.” Carrithers, \textit{Donne at Sermons}, 76.} This institutional tension was further exacerbated by deep divisions among those identifying themselves as Protestants, and even among fellow Conformists, about the proper use of rhetoric in sermonic discourse, a matter that Mueller says was “debated with frequency and with heat.”\footnote{One of the editors of Donne’s sermons describes his style as “carefully wrought and artfully varied,” and notes that “conceits are found in Donne’s best prose as well as in his poetry. [W]here he is most truly himself, as in the Devotions or the greater sermons, the far-fetched images which displeased Dr. Johnson make their appearance once more.” Simpson, \textit{Study of the Prose Works}, 257, 57.} The fact that these debates were inconclusive is illustrated by Donne’s success and acclaim as a preacher despite his own intensely rhetorical style and his use not only of metaphors but also of the kinds of elaborate conceits for which his verse is justly known.\footnote{Thomas O. Sloane, “The Crossing of Rhetoric and Poetry in the English Renaissance,” in \textit{The Rhetoric of Renaissance Poetry: From Wyatt to Milton}, ed. Thomas O. Sloane and Raymond B. Waddington (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 212–42, 214. For more on the effects of this merger, see ibid., 230–31.} In short, Donne preaches during years when rhetorical and devotional theory were converging and radically transforming each other,\footnote{\textit{John Donne: Preacher}, 101. For a further discussion of the historical significance of Donne’s sermons in relationship to “the great stylistic reform linked with the Royal Society’s crusade in behalf of a simpler manner of expression,” see Umbach, “Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” 354.} and in the years after his death the movement in favor of plain style culminates in what Mueller calls the Royal Society’s “attack on eloquence.”\footnote{\textit{John Donne: Preacher}, 101. For a further discussion of the historical significance of Donne’s sermons in relationship to “the great stylistic reform linked with the Royal Society’s crusade in behalf of a simpler manner of expression,” see Umbach, “Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” 354.}

“Since the word is heard only through preaching, then logically the preacher is necessary for salvation. Yet this idea flatly contradicts the central reformed doctrine that salvation is an unmediated grace given freely and directly to the individual’s heart. Reduced to the lowest common denominator, the preacher is both absolutely necessary for man’s salvation and yet utterly useless as a causally effective agent in it.” \textsc{Ibid.}

We can see this conflict between fundamental Protestant doctrine and the high-Church concept of preaching most acutely in one of Donne’s own sermons:

\begin{quote}
All the Sermon is not Gods word, but all the Sermon is Gods Ordinance, and the Text is certainly his word. There is no salvation but by faith, nor faith but by hearing, nor hearing but by preaching; and they that thinke meaniest of the Keyes of the Church, and speake faintliest of the Absolution of the Church, will yet allow, That those Keyes lock, and unlock in Preaching; That Absolution is conferred, or withheld in Preaching, That the proposing of the promises of the Gospel in preaching, is that binding and loosing on earth, which bindes and looses in heaven. (\textit{S}, 7:320)
\end{quote}
The playfully incarnational nature of Donne’s sermons therefore has the potential to enlighten us about how the role of rhetoric in intellectual and cultural life was perceived during the English Renaissance. In other words, how empty a thing was rhetoric? If Vickers is correct, then should we understand seventeenth-century rhetoric as, in his words, “a persuasive affective process,” or were the tropes and figures we see in the texts of that period merely intended as “things of beauty in themselves”? Was rhetoric a way to make ideas attractive or the means for making them intelligible? Or perhaps, as Mueller suggests, the age belonged to Horace, Philip Sidney, and the idea that “a discourse is effective in proportion to its ability to teach and delight.”

Although Donne’s volubility in the pulpit on the subject of rhetoric may be unusual, there is reason to believe that the substance of his comments on these questions was not entirely

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150 See Webber, *Contrary Music*, 3 (“in the pulpit Donne achieved his fullest artistic expression, and came even closer than in his poetry to reflecting the spirit of his age”).

151 There is a surprising dearth of scholarly work on this question. According to Winfried Schleiner, Donne’s sermons were for a long time used “chiefly as a mine from which to extract passages that might serve as a commentary to his poems.” *Imagery of John Donne’s Sermons*, 3. Although there are certainly worthwhile parallels to be drawn and connections to be made between Donne’s prose works and his verse, the richness of his sermons is such that they should not be overlooked either as literary or as cultural artifacts valuable in themselves. More recently, scholars have complained that the substance of Donne’s religious thought has dominated criticism on the sermons to the exclusion of “his rhetorical purpose for his audience.” Nelson, *Holy Ambition*, 3. Salenius concurs. “True Purification,” 314–15. Yet, even though Nelson is correct that examining a speaker’s rhetoric might be a more certain task than inquiring into his theological position (*Holy Ambition*, 5), it would be unfortunate to stop there. Rhetoric is a fundamentally social and cultural practice, and the manner in which it is deployed in a given context can therefore tell us about much more than an individual orator’s intentions and objectives. See, for example, Don Bialostosky, *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 221 (suggesting that rhetorical devices may “be understood as analogous rhetorical exploitations of . . . distinct sorts of expectations . . . which are produced socially by historically specific institutions that regulate verbal practices”).

152 Edwards, remarking on complaints (both period and contemporary) that the metaphysical and heavily rhetorical style of preaching was hollow or “less than serious,” boldly asserts that such a view requires “an uncommon lack of imagination” and “an extraordinary capacity to miss the point.” *History of Preaching*, 377–78.


154 *John Donne: Preacher*, 105.
idiosyncratic: “The ideas expressed in Donne’s sermons [. . .] are not so much original as eclectic,” P. G. Stanwood and Heather Ross Asals say, and they represent “seventeenth-century thought, borrowed from the past and individually fashioned.”\footnote{Theology of Language, 9. See also Fetzer, Performances, 45 (“[. . .] Donne had an integrative approach to diverse opinions”). It is also significant that Donne’s sermons represent the fruit of Donne’s own schooling in “the sophistical uses of the tropes and schemes of the traditional rhetoric, which had been perhaps the most important aspect of his education.” William Rockett, “Donne’s Libertine Rhetoric,” English Studies 52, no. 6 (December 1971): 507–18, 514. Accordingly, a close examination of Donne’s rhetoric in the pulpit might be instructive in connection with studies of late sixteenth-century pedagogy.}

Moreover, the nature of the congregations to and for whom Donne preached makes his sermons a useful touchstone for gauging the attitudes toward rhetoric held by contemporary intellectual elites, those whose own discourses possessed the most influence and power. Brent Nelson explains that

Donne’s most frequent audiences all had in common an involvement in the world of affairs (be it at court or in the marketplace), and it is to this aspect of his audience that his sermons consistently speak. Donne was a learned preacher, both in the arts and in worldly affairs, and he used his learning to full advantage. At court and at Lincoln’s Inn, Donne preached to an audience that was similarly educated. And the same could be said for a large portion of his congregation at St. Paul’s and St. Dunstan’s, both parishes in the heart of London which included a diversity of people.\footnote{Holy Ambition, 24–25. “Although Donne carefully tailored his sermons to the needs of his audience, his sermons are not easily grouped along traditional ad clerum / ad populum lines.” Ibid., 24. “[T]he most striking feature of his inventio is his infusing of the message of Scripture with his audience’s common experience in the world outside the church walls. Much of Donne’s interpretation of Scripture, in fact, bears the marks of his and his congregation’s cultural experience.” Ibid., 23.}

This inquiry should be guided by a note on the way that Donne characterized his own pulpit oratory: “we are not upon a Lecture, but upon a Sermon” (S, 2:320). Donne spoke these words as Reader of Divinity at Lincoln’s Inn, to an auditory of lawyers and law students who likely knew
without explanation the significance of the distinction Donne was positing. Seven years later, as Dean of St. Paul’s before a congregation for whom an elaboration might have been necessary, Donne explained the difference:

a Sermon intends *Exhortation* principally and *Edification*, and a holy stirring of religious affections, and then *matters of Doctrine*, and points of *Divinity*, occasionally, secondarily, as the words of the text may invite them; But *Lectures* intend principally *Doctrinal points*, and matter of *Divinity*; and matter of *Exhortation* but occasionally, and as in a second place. (*S*, 8:95)

By associating the work of the homily with the stirring of passions or affections, or *pathos*, Donne invokes the Aristotelian tradition and positions the preacher as an orator, a practitioner of rhetoric.\(^{157}\) Indeed, this passage suggests not merely that rhetoric was considered to be a legitimate part of the sermon, but that preaching was inherently, or necessarily, a mode of figured speech. Carrithers asserts that Donne “seems to have meant by *lecture* what we mean by straight exposition: practical discourse which can conform to the shape of its container,”\(^{158}\) what Jeanne Fahnestock has referred to as a hypothetical “unfigured or degree-zero style.”\(^{159}\)

Assuming that Carrithers is correct, his analysis of this passage raises serious questions about Shuger’s claim that “Donne’s sermons often mention rhetoric, but only to disparage it,”\(^{160}\) and about

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\(^{157}\) “The Preacher stirres and moves, and agitates the holy affections of the Congregation” (*S*, 8:43).

\(^{158}\) *Donne at Sermons*, 3.

\(^{159}\) *Rhetorical Figures in Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20.

\(^{160}\) *Sacred Rhetoric*, 110–11.
the contentions of other scholars who have described Donne’s preaching style as plain or terse,\textsuperscript{161} in
sharp contrast with the often baroque rhetoric displayed in his verse and his other prose.\textsuperscript{162}
Moreover, given Donne’s prominence, this view of his sermons also casts doubt on broader claims
about pulpit discourse during the period, such as Peter Mack’s assertion that “Few of the sermons
delivered outside the court make great use of the repertory of figures of speech, though many have
short passages of amplified language at key points.”\textsuperscript{163}

To the contrary, based on the readings that I have presented in this chapter, Chamberlin’s
assessment seems to be more correct: “A sermon must move the hearts of its hearers, and for that
purpose the resources of ancient rhetoric can also be utilized.”\textsuperscript{164} The word \textit{rhetoric}, then as now,
possesses two senses: it is a technical term describing the formal arts of language, and it is a coded
way for the critic of a discourse to disparage it as hollow or empty. Shuger and others seem to be
recognizing the second sense of the word in Donne’s references to \textit{rhetoric}—or \textit{Rhetorique}—whereas I understand him to be using the term in its first sense, particularly in light of

\textsuperscript{161} For example, Umbach argues that
Donne sought to edify, not to mystify, his hearers; hence it was necessary to speak more plainly in the
pulpit than it was his wont to write to his correspondents. Mere cleverness, the bane of his \textit{Juvenilia}, the
\textit{Paradoxes and Problems}, as also of his worst poems, he had now outgrown. For in these sermons his style
is terse, elliptical, and vivid. His customary sentence, though seldom truly short, is brief; the favorite
device most in evidence is a combining of any number of short sentences into a cumulative paragraph.
“Rhetoric of Donne’s Sermons,” 358. Umbach does not contend that Donne entirely dispensed with the flourishes of
rhetoric, but rather that they were “directed more strictly to religious ends [and] brought into use less for display of
certain devices than for better management of the subject.” Ibid., 355.

\textsuperscript{162} See, for example, Mueller, \textit{John Donne: Preacher}, 114 (“From his poetry Donne carries over into his prose
a startling and exciting metaphoric skill, and with no loss of either intensity or comprehensiveness”).

\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice}, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2002), 279.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Increase and Multiply}, 72.
the fact that Donne’s style, too long neglected in scholarly work on the sermons, is overtly, floridly, even playfully rhetorical.

To be sure, Donne himself advocated that, at a minimum, rhetoric be used judiciously “lest because he is able to make any thing seem probable and likely to the people, by his eloquence, he come to infuse paradoxicall opinions, or schismaticall, or (which may be beleeved either way) problematicall opinions, for certain and constant truths” (S, 10:148). Indeed, citing the Divine model, he warns preachers that “The Holy Ghost is an eloquent Author, a vehement, and an abundant Author, but yet not luxuriant; he is far from a penurious, but as far from a superfluous style too” (S, 5:287). Elsewhere, Donne exhibits an outright—if ironic—skepticism about the propriety of rhetoric: “Invention, and Disposition, and Art, and Eloquence, and Expression, and Elocution, and reading, and writing, and printing, are secondary things, accessory things, auxiliary, subsidiary things; men may account us […] as of Orators in the pulpit, and of Authors, in the shop; but if they account of us as of Ministers and Stewards, they give us our due” (S, 6:103–4). In a later sermon, Donne elaborates: “He that brings any collaborall respect to prayers looses the benefit of the prayers of the Congregation; and he that brings that to a Sermon, looses the blessing of Gods ordinance in that Sermon; hee heares but the Logique, or the Retorique [sic], or the Ethique, or the poetry of the Sermon, but the Sermon of the Sermon he hears not” (S, 7:293). The implication of this last statement is that, while logic, rhetoric, and poetry may be parts of a sermon, they are not at its heart—the soul of homiletic discourse lies elsewhere.\footnote{Even though the statement provides a crucial qualification on the role of rhetoric in sermonic discourse, it is nonetheless remarkable evidence that rhetoric did have such a role, if not a paramount one.}

Where, then, is the sermon of the sermon, that which prevents rhetoric from being an empty thing? The brand of rhetoric that Donne condemns in his sermons is “fanciful and mindless
eloquence,” 166 and Donne denounces this “Oration of Flowres, and Figures, and Phrases without strength” 167 (S, 7:329) because preaching is “a vain activity unless the hearers of the Word become also doers of the Word.” An interesting possibility is that Donne’s anti-rhetoric rhetoric was actually directed at the sermon practice of the Puritans, whom he called “Rhapsoders, and Common placers, and Method-mongers” (S, 1:256), on account of what Chamberlin calls their “legalistic reductionism and topical procedures.” 168 Donne, says Chamberlin, “was to look instead to patristic and medieval means of developing the scriptural text as alternatives to the arts-of-discourse methods of the Puritan textmen.” 169 If this is an argument worthy of exploring in more detail, then a reevaluation of many scholars’ perspectives is definitely in order, if only because the Puritans themselves had a rhetoric of their own. 170

“There is an excess in [. . .] self-effusion, this pouring of a mans self out, in fair, and promising language” (S, 8:341). Indeed there is, and this excess can be considered as a marker of the ludic in Donne’s language, but this final quotation from one of his sermons leaves in question the extent to which Donne recognized and appreciated his own pulpit play.

166 Webber, Contrary Music, 23.
167 Mueller, John Donne: Preacher, 81.
168 Increase and Multiply, 91.
169 Ibid.
One form of play that we have encountered in Donne’s sermons is a tendency toward equivocation—a taste for making words and phrases have two completely distinct yet simultaneous meanings. When Donne asks, for example, “How empty a thing is Rhetorique?” (S, 4:87), he seems on one hand to be disparaging the art even while he undercuts his statement through a particularly effective use of it. To see the two meanings requires the reader to change his or her perspective, to look directly and then to look askance, in a figurative sense.

This kind of perspective-shifting becomes literal in the next case study, in which I shall explore, among other things, Renaissance images in the anamorphic style: distorted images that require their viewers to see from two different angles in order to understand fully the images’ bivalent content and rhetoric. I am not the first to make a connection between these kinds of images on the one hand and Renaissance-era texts on the other, but that connection is deeply relevant to my mission here, and it is worth explaining for transitional purposes how Donne uses what Anna Riehl calls the “anamorphic game” in one particular, seldom-considered piece, “Song: Sweetest Love I Do Not Goe”:

Sweetest love, I do not goe,
    For wearinesse of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
    A fitter Love for mee,

But since that I
5    Must dye at last, ’tis best,

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172 “Eying the Thought Awry,” 150.
To use my selfe in jest
    Thus by fain’d deaths to dye;

Yesternight the Sunne went hence,
    And yet is here to day,
He hath no desire nor sense,
    Nor halfe so short a way:
    Then feare not mee,
But beleeve that I shall make
15  Speedier journeyes, since I take
    More wings and spurres then hee.

O how feeble is mans power,
    That if good fortune fall,
Cannot adde another houre,
    Nor a lost houre recall!
    But come bad chance,
And wee joyne to’it our strength,
    And wee teach it art and length,
    It selfe o’r us to’advance.

20  When thou sigh’st, thou sigh’st not winde,
    But sigh’st my soule away,
When thou weep’st, unkindly kinde,
    My lifes blood doth decay.
    It cannot bee
30  That thou lov’st mee, as thou say’st,
If in thine my life thou waste,
    Thou art the best of mee.

Let not thy divining heart
    Forethinke me any ill,
35  Destiny may take thy part,
    And may thy feares fulfill,
    But thinke that wee
Art but turn’d aside to sleepe;
    They who one another keepe
40  Alive, ne’r parted bee.\textsuperscript{173}

Critical commentary on the poem, although sparse, is nearly unanimous in declaring its speaker to be sincere. Deborah Aldrich Larson has noted his “obvious respect” for the woman he addresses; Wilbur Sanders has explained that the speaker “faces the woman’s grief at parting and searches his soul for the wholly tactful, tender, yet manly way of meeting it.” These readings, however, are flawed because they are based upon a failure to account credibly for the fact that the sentiments in the first stanza are so difficult to take seriously. Having explained to his lady that he is not leaving her to search for another love, the character who speaks these lines (on a literal level, at least) claims that he goes because the experience of separation is like death and will thus inure him to the inevitable fact of his own mortality. If we assume that he is sincere and intends to be taken literally to any degree, then his assertion is so histrionic that it makes him appear foolish and his lady—if she believes him—foolishly naive. Because neither conclusion comports with what we expect from Donne’s verse, critics have sought interpretations that tend to preserve his sincerity rather than to question his literalness. For example, Patricia Garland Pinka has argued that the speaker, in order to reassure his beloved, “comically rationalizes his departure as a feigned death,

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174 Izaack Walton’s claim that the poem was addressed to Donne’s wife, however, does not require more than an aphoristic refutation: Walton was “most unreliable about many things.” John T. Shawcross, “Some Rereadings of John Donne’s Poems,” *John Donne Journal* 15 (1996): 45–62, 49.


but his jest evaporates into a bit of ghastly self-mockery.”\textsuperscript{177} This reading, however, only exacerbates the problem: the use of such a macabre joke as consolation would be self-mockery so ghastly that we would have to judge Donne’s representative in the poem to be a tactless oaf—a high price to pay for sincerity. Another response, that of Sanders and Murray Roston, has been to invent a context within which these remarks seem more fitting or to read into the blank lines between the stanzas a set of reactions from the beloved that makes any tonal incongruities disappear.\textsuperscript{178} The problem, of course, is that the poem’s text does not provide evidence sufficient for these significant interpolations to be offered on any more than a purely conjectural basis.

Accordingly, a better approach to the problem of the first stanza is to suspend judgment on the issue of sincerity and instead to question whether Donne intends to be taken literally at all. If his character is speaking figuratively, then the opening lines could be paraphrased rather like this: “Because I must die someday, the best way would be to use up or consume my life in carnal sport so that death finally comes as a result of the little [or feigned] death of sexual release, which is to be preferred [or ‘fained’] over real death and over any other way I could die.” Of course, this reading changes the entire poem, converting it into an ode to promiscuity for a licentious beloved who appreciates how the speaker mockingly uses the conventions of romantic verse to express a diametrically opposed view of love.

\textsuperscript{177} This Dialogue of One: The “Songs and Sonnets” of John Donne (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 117.

\textsuperscript{178} Sanders speculates that the speaker is responding to “reproachful questions the woman has asked.” John Donne’s Poetry, 11. Roston argues that the speaker begins by “posing as the gallant” but that between the second and third stanzas “the facade suddenly collapses” when he realizes that his brave roleplaying has left his beloved unconvinced. The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 120. Pierre Legouis goes even further, suggesting that the speaker “alters his tone according to the effect produced upon her by what he has just said,” and that “the reader must fill the logical gaps.” Donne the Craftsman: An Essay upon the Structure of the “Songs and Sonnets” (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 54.
Considerably more textual evidence exists to support this reading than can be mustered for the prevailing interpretation. Indeed, the poem’s first word—significant for this and for the fact that it represents the speaker’s description of his partner—is “Sweetest” (“Song,” 1), suggesting that she stimulates his senses rather than his mind or soul, and that his song has a strong sexual undertow beneath its placid and conventional surface. The fact that “sweet” and “sweat” were homophones in Donne’s era, and that the song’s first word could therefore have been pronounced “sweatest” or “sweatiest,” also sets the bawdy scene for this interpretation of the poem.

Continuing in the first stanza, the speaker truthfully asserts that he does not go “for wearinesse” of his partner (“Song,” 2)—he intends to return at some point if only for the purpose of receiving further sexual gratification—nor does he go “in hope the world can show / A fitter Love for mee” (“Song,” 3–4). Again, he is being truthful but not literal. First, he does not want genuine love, only love as a euphemism for carnal delight. Second, he does not go in search of a partner whose chastity would make her a more appropriate or fitting choice than his libidinous addressee and whose virginity would provide a tighter fit in the act of coupling. Instead, Donne’s speaker is interested in seasoned and experienced lovers who can deliver more pleasure than can the untutored.

In the second stanza the speaker compares himself to the sun, which returns each day even though it “hath no desire nor sense” (“Song,” 11). Implicitly, then, he possesses both qualities: desire (obviously) and sense (although he does not mean only to ascribe to himself the power of cognition). He will therefore make “speedier journeyes” than the sun (“Song,” 15)—both away from

The formal characteristics of the poem also corroborate my argument. Donne’s unusually short trimeter lines possess a rhythmic regularity uncommon in his verse, evoking both the cadence of sexual intercourse and his character’s haste to have as much of it as possible. And this jangling, sing-songy rhythm is jarringly inconsistent with the usual characteristics of Donne’s verse, for which Ben Jonson said Donne “deserved hanging.” Quoted in Ben Jonson’s Literary Criticism, ed. James D. Redwine, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 170. Clearly, something more is going on than what critics have thus far been willing to acknowledge.
his lover to his next encounter and then back again for more of the same—because his cupidity gives him “more wings and spurreys” (“Song,” 16). More tellingly, the third stanza is structured around the homophonic pair “houre”/“whore” and thus takes on a double meaning. Mocking convention, Donne rehearses the commonplace that man’s power is feeble because he cannot lengthen good fortune when it befalls him. But his incongruous use of the verb “fall” (“Song,” 18) to describe the action of good fortune reveals his speaker’s punning intention to say that when death ends a man’s pursuit of pleasure he is powerless to acquire the favors of another sportive woman or even to “recall” or remember the pleasures “lost” (“Song,” 20) to him in his grave.

Another sexual reference couched in romantic terms begins the fourth stanza: “When thou sigh’st, thou sigh’st not winde, / But sigh’st my soule away” (“Song,” 25–26). Her sighs, however, have come during the throes of passion rather than of sadness and they take the speaker’s soul away in the figurative death of sexual ecstasy. She would therefore be an “unkindly kinde” (“Song,” 27)—an unnatural type—were she to cry at his departure, an act that would betray the normal human tendency toward promiscuity. Alternatively, “weep’st” in this line can be understood as a vaginal rather than a lacrimal reference, in which case his “lifes blood” would indeed “decay” (“Song,” 28) if his partner were producing an unhealthy discharge symptomatic of venereal disease, potentially fatal to him and thus unpleasant (or “unkindly”), yet a natural (and thus “kinde”) result of their sexual profligacy. This interpretation also resonates with the balance of the fourth stanza:

It cannot bee

That thou lov’st mee, as thou say’st,

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180 The sun “returns each day precisely because it has no desire or sense”; as an inanimate object it cannot succumb to “accidents of mortality.” Roston, Soul of Wit, 120.
If in thine my life thou waste,

Thou art the best of mee. (“Song,” 29–32)

If she has passed a life-wasting illness to the speaker, and particularly if she had ever claimed that she could make love to him without doing so (a claim that under such circumstances “cannot bee [. . .] as thou say’st”), then she has certainly gotten the best of him.181

Donne’s bawdry and mockery continue in the final stanza when the speaker asks his lover not to “Forethinke me any ill” (“Song,” 34), which in the context of the previous lines can be understood as a request that she not worry about his health while he is engaged in sexual sport with other partners. Having thus subverted the tradition of romantic verse by which the departing man asks his lady not to fear for his safety while he is gone, Donne ridicules the related idea that the lady’s fears may, through the power of sympathy, arouse the winds and rains to do her beloved harm: “Destiny may take thy part, / And may thy feares fulfill” (“Song,” 35–36). Donne’s speaker cleverly suggests that undue concern by the addressee about his health may cause fate to claim her private anatomy for infection, because any disease he could contract in his wanderings would ultimately be passed along to her when he returns. Another pun on the word “part” concludes the poem: “They who one another keepe / Alive, ne’r parted bee” (“Song,” 39–40). With this final gibe at chastity, the poem’s voice asserts that lovers who keep each other alive by being constant and faithful when separated—or by foregoing the figurative death of orgasm when together—are effectively sexless because they neither use their own parts as nature intended nor receive the gift of each other’s parts in the act of sexual union.

181 I do not suggest that the poem’s addressee is actually afflicted with disease, that she has ever given an assurance of her health, or that Donne’s speaker is even concerned about such matters. Rather, my argument is that the speaker is making a bawdy joke that would be at his lover’s expense were he not simultaneously reveling in their mutual wantonness and mocking the conventions of courtly love by making them give voice to base and vulgar ideas.
To look at “Song: Sweetest Love I Do Not Goe” from a second angle or perspective is to see a key facet of Donne’s wit and playfulness, for the poem is more than it initially seems; it is a double-sided verbal artifact that simultaneously projects two different sets of meanings, each fundamentally at odds with the other.\textsuperscript{182} This anamorphic reading of Donne’s ludic tour de force prepares us for the next case study, an examination of visual discourse in the Renaissance—via contemporary popular texts—with a focus on playful and multivalent imagery that aspires to incarnational status.

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\textsuperscript{182} For Riehl, this is the essence of an anamorphic reading: “The possibility of two opposing readings, each readily supported by the text.” “Eying the Thought Awry,” 152.
Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait (1434) has been fragmented for the cover design of this book in order to emphasize the status of separate objects within the image as clues that can be deciphered and read. Reinforcing the words hidden and secret in the book’s title, the image fragments have been canted to reveal a black space beyond, a space which suggests that the mysteries that lie behind the painting will be illuminated by the text that occupies the space behind the cover. The following case study investigates the terrain from which that black space emerges.
III. A CASE STUDY OF LUDIC IMAGERY IN THE RENAISSANCE

Decoding the Legible Image:
Picture as Puzzle in Contemporary Popular Texts on Renaissance Art

God, we see, was the first, that made Images; and he was the first, that forbad them; he forbad them in danger of adoration. [...] There is no more danger out of a picture, then out of a history, if thou intend no more in either, then example.¹

—John Donne

Beyond his extensive commentary on the role of rhetoric in sermonic discourse, John Donne used the pulpit to expound on other important theological issues of his day, and in this provocative passage he turns his attention to the vexed Reformation question of images. With the parenthetical aside, “we see,” Donne summons a common visual metaphor in which the power of sight is likened to the ability to understand. To appreciate the fact that Divine precedent exists for the creation of images is to see this fact, to envision not only a concrete and particular image but also the more general and abstract concept of images themselves. These two small words, therefore, encapsulate effectively the complexities that inhere within English Reformed discourse on imagery. Despite the centrality of vision to our cognitive capacity as human beings, we must not descend into idolatry; despite the fact that God has sanctioned the production of images through His own imitable example, we must not fashion images for purposes beyond the didactic or pedagogical.

¹ S. 9:76.
The discourse of preaching is itself made the subject of an image in this 1527 woodcut of a Lutheran minister delivering a sermon on Christ crucified (Figure 8). Although not obviously ludic, the image is notable for its prominent use of perspective, accentuated by the tiled floor of the preaching space, and shows Lucas Cranach the Elder deploying without hesitation the visual technology of his day to craft an emblem for evangelical preaching and to illustrate a segment of the Lord’s Prayer. The woodcut’s original gloss by Philipp Melancthon, “That is, your name should be

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Figure 8. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, 1527. Staatliche Kunstatmlungen, Dresden.

Reproduced courtesy of © Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstatmlungen Dresden, Photo: Herbert Boswank.

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rightly known through right teaching and faith, and thereby honoured and praised.”  adds depth to
the woodcut, explaining that the figured preacher is focused on the name or Word of God, which is
incarnated within the picture as the crucifix toward which he gestures. Because the crucifix itself
is an image, we might not expect to see it placed within this Reformed context; it “does not quite
belong,” Joseph Leo Koerner says, and it “casts its shadow on the ground.”^{4} But there is a potential
explanation for its presence in Martin Luther’s notion that the act of hearing the Word preached
imprints an image of the crucifix on the auditory’s hearts: “For whether I will or not, when I hear of
Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face
naturally appears in the water when I look into it.”^{5} Cranach’s meta-image—his image of the image
of the crucifix—is intended figuratively to visualize this other figurative process of internal image
formation. In other words, the crucified form of Christ is not physically present in the preaching
space being depicted but rather stands as a metaphor for the image being metaphorically developed
within the hearts of the gathered congregants. The internal or tropic image here is being literalized,
incarnated like the figured Christ Himself, for the same instructional purposes served by preaching.

This surprisingly rich and complex use of imagery in a Reformed, evangelical context is
trumped, however, by the even more challenging depiction of Luther’s imprinting concept in the
frontispiece of Luke Milbourne’s 1697 English translation of Thomas à Kempis’ *De imitatione

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3 Ibid., 252. The woodcut’s use of a gloss or caption is one of many examples of Protestant “reliance on
language to contain the visual representation.” James A. Knapp, *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (New York:


5 Quoted in John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (Eugene,
OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1986), 65. See also Siri Sande, “Conclusion: Iconoclasm in History and Present-Day
Use of Images,” in *Iconoclasm from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Kristine Kolrud and Marina Prusac (Surrey, UK:
Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 171–88, 183 (“In contrast to his colleague Karlstadt, who shared Calvin’s view that images
gave rise to idolatry, Luther argued that painted and sculpted images were not dangerous in themselves. What counted
were the images one had in one’s heart”).
Christi (Figure 9). Inspired by the Word of God, represented in the frontispiece by the crucified form of Christ, the foregrounded artist figure reproduces the crucifix within a heart shape to symbolize Luther’s notion that the Word imprints a crucifix upon the hearer’s heart. But this metaphor is radically literalized in the frontispiece—the Word is again incarnated for visual purposes by the image of the crucifix, and the imprinting process itself becomes physicalized in the act of generating another meta-image, the artist’s creation of a crucifix embedded within a heart. Although a member of the high-Church party rather than a Puritan, Milbourne is demonstrating through the use of this image an extremely subtle, and perhaps even ludic, understanding of how visuality may be properly used in the exercise of Protestant devotion.

The case study presented in this chapter is an effort to explore some of the consequences of this nuanced thought as it emerges in Renaissance imagery, both secular and sacred, and in contemporary popular works, particularly *The Da Vinci Code*, on images from the period. More specifically, I shall examine another metaphor that has become strikingly literalized in many forms of contemporary discourse: the idea that Renaissance images are somehow legible, albeit deeply encoded in the playful fashion of puzzles. These ludic readings are revealing to the extent that they point toward a similarly playful tendency in many instances of Renaissance visual discourse. However, they are deeply problematic in the sense that they consistently privilege the verbal over the visual, treating Renaissance images as if they were texts containing letters and words that can be non-metaphorically *read*. This pervasive phenomenon, I shall ultimately argue, is one of the legacies of iconoclasm: a scar that marks the wound of centuries, if not millennia, of iconophobia within the Western tradition. That iconophobic tradition, particularly as it manifests itself in the Reformation, can therefore be more fully appreciated when we situate this contemporary discursive phenomenon within an understanding that many types of Renaissance images are playful efforts to imitate the Divine Incarnation.

In the first of five sections in this chapter, an overture, I shall set the stage for the analysis to come by defining two key terms—*the trope of the legible image* and *the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics*—that will be key to the argument of the case study as a whole; this section will also establish that the interpretive strategies embraced by these terms are rooted in a fundamentally ludic impulse. The next section will endeavor to explain why these contemporary approaches to pictures merit closer attention: first, interpretive practices of this nature, despite their occasionally wild or exorbitantly ludic nature, are not confined merely to marginalized voices within the conspiracy-theory branch of popular culture but rather exist within the loftier realms of art historical
criticism and therefore deserve to be taken more seriously; second, there are many cases in which the legible image trope and the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics parallel actual representational practices during the Renaissance, cases in which hidden images actually exist—playfully implanted—within canonical works of period art; finally, the playful nature of these images can be understood as a way of physically implementing a set of incarnational strategies for endowing images with presence, a mode of worshiping the Divine image-maker through an imitation of His Creation and by the generation of lively images. The third section proceeds to close readings of popular culture texts that adopt the interpretive approaches discussed thus far in the chapter, including but transcending and pre-dating Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, in order to identify an astonishingly regular pattern in these works: they literalize the metaphor of the legible image not by teasing out meanings from components of images themselves but rather by seeking (and finding) textuality—words and letters—within the images that they investigate. In the fourth section, I suggest some possible explanations for this unusual pattern; I shall focus principally on how the Western legacy of iconoclasm and iconophobia, particularly its manifestation in the English Reformation, becomes a kind of master trope in these texts, and I shall position those works within a broader discursive matrix, concluding that they represent a significant strand in that matrix, one that is important to our full comprehension of English Reformation views of images and icons. Finally, the fifth section will provide a brief coda and a transition to the next case study by examining anamorphosis in a sampling of verse by George Herbert.
A. OVERTURE
Reading and Decoding Images

In his best-selling 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown describes his protagonist, symbol expert Robert Langdon, as someone who “viewed the world as a web of profoundly intertwined histories and events. *The connections may be invisible,* he often preached to his symbology classes at Harvard, *but they are always there, buried just beneath the surface.*” Judging by the success of *The Da Vinci Code* as a popular culture event—not only the novel but also the 2006 film version directed by Ron Howard, at least a dozen basic-cable documentaries, and scores of commentaries and similarly themed works that supported an entire segment of the publishing industry—the general public shares Langdon’s fascination with secret connections and occult truths hidden within the fabric of everyday appearances. More particularly, *The Da Vinci Code* and its popularity suggest that our culture finds one notion to be irresistibly compelling: the possibility that canonical images might contain concealed meanings that offer ways of understanding those works and the discourses surrounding them more fully, deeply, and authentically. This is the central phenomenon that I shall attempt to illuminate in this chapter, and it has two distinct components.

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8 For representative examples of the media coverage surrounding this phenomenon, see Bob Minzesheimer, “‘Code’ Deciphers What People Want to Read,” *USA Today*, December 11, 2003; Carol Memmott, “Similarly Themed Books Vie for Piece of ‘Da Vinci’ Gold,” *USA Today*, January 17, 2006; and Carol Memmott, “‘Da Vinci’ Legacy Is Genre’s Success,” *USA Today*, March 16, 2006.
1. The Trope of the Legible Image: Reading Visuality

One manifestation of this phenomenon is the metaphor of the legible image—the idea that visually oriented but non-linguistic artifacts can be understood and interpreted, or read, in a manner analogous to the literal reading of verbal or textual works. The trope of the legible image is a common yet problematic feature of the discourse surrounding “word and image.” As a metaphor, the notion of “reading images” implies a semblance that is only figuratively true, a likeness between this and that; it therefore both reinforces the sense that “word” and “image” are distinct categories and at the same time bridges the gap between those two concepts by suggesting a fundamental affinity between them.

Questions about the relative value of words and images also become vexed in the workings of this metaphor. For example, according to Pope Gregory the Great’s seminal formulation of the trope in 599, “what a book is to those who can read, a picture provides to even the unlearned who look at it carefully, for in it the unlearned see what they should follow, and those who cannot read books read it. Hence a picture especially serves as a book to the common people.” Although Gregory’s statement was hardly the first in which the interpretation of images was compared to the reading of texts, the frequency with which it is quoted in the scholarly literature on word and image, and its historical importance in terms of debates over the proper role of images in devotional and

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ecclesiastical practices, suggest that it merits a central position in the genealogy of this trope. But while Gregory’s proclamation amounted to a defense of ecclesiastical images against suspicions of latent idolatry, it also privileges words over pictures by using the text as a normative baseline in relation to the image, the alien Other that stands in need of explanation and justification, and by positioning the image as an inferior albeit salutary mode of pedagogical expression, suitable for those who occupy a plebeian space of deficiency vis-à-vis the ability to understand the written word.

Even the role of this metaphor within the discipline of art history and criticism is plagued by ambiguity, if not ambivalence: “It is a paradox,” Hubert Damisch says, “that, while making iconography a privileged weapon in its methodological arsenal, art history has never ceased in practice—and this quite innocently—to adhere to the logocentric model which it claimed to be denouncing.” Elaborating on the paradoxical nature of this dichotomy, Damisch explains that images can only be read iconographically to the extent that their “figures and/or signs [. . .] allow themselves to be identified and indicated,” usually by reference to a text (in the broadest sense of that term) external to the image itself; “a textual reference will carry the day by providing a ‘key’ which allows the image to be interpreted,” a fact which requires “introducing into the analysis of the picture the authority of the text from which the picture is supposed to derive its arrangement through a kind

References:

11 Alain Besançon, The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm (1994), trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 149. As Hubert Damisch notes, “the metaphor of reading, as applied to works of art, was introduced long before semiotics emerged as a specific discipline, implicit as it was from the beginning in the practice of iconography.” “Semiotics and Iconography” (1975), in The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, ed. Donald Preziosi, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 236–42, 237. According to Liselotte Dieckmann, the analogy dates back to the Renaissance, during which popular fascination with the printed word went “so far that the term ‘reading’ was carried over into the fields of painting and music.” Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol (St. Louis: Washington University Press, 1970), 66. Of course, Gregory’s defense of pictures as educational texts for the illiterate indicates that the metaphor was in circulation as much as a millennium before the Renaissance.

12 “Semiotics and Iconography,” 236.
of figurative and/or symbolic application, in which each pictural element corresponds to a linguistic term.”

But not all critics would choose to denounce this model. Nelson Goodman, in his aptly titled *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, uses the metaphor of legible images quite unselfconsciously in discussing the essentially conventional and contingent nature of perspective: “Pictures in perspective, like any others, have to be read; and the ability to read has to be acquired.” In other words, if a viewer “accustomed solely to Oriental painting does not immediately understand a picture in perspective,” that is at least in part because perspective is a part of the rhetoric, or an idiom, of a different pictorial language. Significantly, E. H. Gombrich—a scholar who has sharply disagreed with Goodman’s position that visual perception is socially and culturally conditioned—is no more averse than Goodman to invoking the trope of the legible image: “We read a picture, as we read a printed line, by picking up letters or cues and fitting them together till we feel that we look across the signs on the page at the meaning behind them.”

Not surprisingly, other critics have difficulty accepting Goodman’s strictly analogical view of the relationship between words and images. As W. J. T. Mitchell observes, “The trope of *ut pictura poesis* seems, in Goodman’s work, to have achieved its verbal apotheosis. Pictures, like

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13 Ibid., 237.

14 See, for example, Alberto Manguel, *Reading Pictures: A History of Love and Hate* (New York: Random House, 2000).


16 Ibid., 14–15.

paragraphs, have to be read as an arbitrary code.”¹⁸ Yet even Mitchell finds himself unable to
dispense altogether with some version of the trope: “a picture is normally ‘read’ in something like
the way we read an ungraduated thermometer. Every mark, every modification, every curve or
welling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential.”¹⁹ And
art historians who are suspicious of the accuracy of the cognitive model that is implied by this trope,
like James Elkins, are constrained to concede that the ideal “of a perfect ‘notational system’—an
image that functions in a reasonable, rational way in its dealing with symbols and the world—is
behind the informal approaches we all take to works of visual art.”²⁰ According to Göran
Hermerén’s succinct account, “there is good reason to be sceptical about analogies between art and
language. But it is difficult to deny that there are certain general similarities.”²¹ Indeed, Mitchell
goes so far as to assert that the trope represents a “commonplace of modern studies of images,” an
assumption that pictures “must be understood as a kind of language.”²²

The persistence and pervasiveness which characterize the metaphor of the legible image are
remarkable at least in part because the kinds of conceptual slippage that I have been discussing seem
to arise unbidden whenever the trope is marshaled as part of a discourse on the relationship between

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.
²² Iconology, 8.
words and pictures.\textsuperscript{23} Most prominent, however, is the simple fact that comparing the act of apprehending a visual image to the act of reading a verbal text tells us surprisingly little about how we actually understand pictures. “Pictures,” as Elkins explains in *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity*, a central text for this chapter, “have no words, and therefore they do not ‘say’ anything.”\textsuperscript{24} Even if they can be imagined as constituting or containing symbols, those signs “don’t spell anything” and are therefore “fundamentally meaningless,” at least in the limited sense that only languages can really convey meaning: “if they were not, they would not be pictures—they would be texts” (*WAOPP*, 256). Yet the idea of image as text has lost none of its potency or currency; despite its obvious shortcomings, the metaphor remains sufficiently compelling to support its continual use.

2. **The Decipherment Model of Visual Hermeneutics: Decoding the Language of Images**

If this fact resists explanation, the trope’s persistence may itself account for the prevalence of another metaphor, an extension of the idea that pictures are legible: images must be translated, even decoded, before they can yield up the secondary meanings or messages that lie hidden within them.

\textsuperscript{23} The highly equivocal nature of the trope is likely associated with some of the difficulties which Mitchell has found to be implicit in the idea of a word/image binary, which “is not likely to be definitively stabilized by any single pair of defining terms or any static binary oppositions. ‘Word and image’ seems to be better understood as a dialectical trope. [. . .] It resists stabilization as a binary opposition, shifting and transforming itself from one conceptual level to another, and shuttles between relations of contrariety and identity, difference and sameness.” “Word and Image,” 53.

\textsuperscript{24} *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 255. All further citations to *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? (WAOPP)* will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.
As an example of the type of interpretation that I mean when I refer to this phenomenon, the
decipherment model of visual hermeneutics, consider the unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* (Figure
10), which has been explained by Lynn Pickett and Clive Prince as an instance of “the secret code
of Leonardo da Vinci.”\(^{25}\) According to this view, the painting is only putatively—on the surface—a
visual rendering of Matthew 2:1–11, a standard image from Christian iconography depicting the

\(^{25}\) *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster,
Touchstone, 1997), 23. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
arrival of gift-bearing eastern kings before the newborn Christ. The first clue to the latent meaning of the work is the upward-gesturing figure to the right of the Madonna, standing beneath what these writers claim is a carob tree. In Leonardo’s works, the painting’s interpreters assert, this gesture is always associated with John the Baptist (27). The second clue is the carob tree itself, which they also take to be an attribute of John (28). Finally, the group of worshipers behind the Madonna is significant: “These are much healthier and more normal-looking [than those in the foreground]—but if one follows their eyelines it is obvious that they are not looking at the Virgin and child at all, but seem instead to be revering the roots of the carob tree” (27). The authors take these features of the painting to be evidence that Leonardo adhered to a heretical belief in the superiority of John the Baptist to Christ.

Although this notion of images converts pictures into “a freakish kind of writing,” as G. E. Lessing characterized allegorical painting, there is a sense in which it is an inevitable consequence of the way we perceive artworks as objects of attention and study. According to Richard Wollheim, to perceive an image that is part of a differentiated surface—such as a painting on a canvas, a fresco on a wall, or a photograph on a piece of glossy paper—is already to experience a form of double vision which he calls “seeing-in”: “I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind, something else.” Moreover, seeing-in “appears to be biologically grounded” (114) and “precedes representation: it is prior to it, logically and historically” (106). However, it is important to note that Wollheim would

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27 “What the Spectator Sees,” in Bryson, Holly, and Moxey, *Visual Theory*, 101–50, 105. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text. See also Mitchell, *Iconology*, 17 (“an image cannot be seen as such without a paradoxical trick of consciousness, an ability to see something as ‘there’ and ‘not there’ at the same time”).
probably not concede that the concept of seeing-in explains the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics:

any information of which the spectator has need must be information that affects what he sees when he looks at the picture: because it is only through what can be seen when the picture is looked at that the picture carries meaning. What is invariably irrelevant is some rule or convention that takes us from what is perceptible to some hidden meaning: in the way in which, say, a rule of language would. (144–45)

Of similar import is Erwin Panofsky’s argument that the notion of a work of art as a “man-made object demanding to be experienced aesthetically” creates a distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences. Whereas the scientist “can at once proceed to analyze” a natural phenomenon or an artifact, the humanist has to engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character: he has mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations. […] For it is obvious that historians of philosophy or sculpture are concerned with books and statues not in so far as these books and statues exist materially, but in so far as they have a meaning. And it is equally obvious that this meaning can only be apprehended by reproducing, and thereby, quite literally, “realizing,” the thoughts that are expressed in the books and the artistic conceptions that manifest themselves in the statues.²⁸

In other words, because the work of art is the product of a human mind, it must be associated with a human intentionality, if not an actual message. And if the intent or meaning of the work is not immediately apparent on the work’s surface, then it must somehow be buried or even concealed beneath that surface. The viewer, therefore, is required to ascertain the latent semantic content of the work by examining its patent surface features; that is, to decipher it.

A more eloquent statement of this idea comes from an unlikely source, Winston Churchill:

The canvas receives a message dispatched usually a few seconds before from the natural object. But it has come through a post office en route. It has been transmitted in code. It has been turned from light into paint. It reaches the canvas a cryptogram. Not until it has been placed in its correct relation to everything else that is on the canvas can it be deciphered, is its meaning apparent, is it translated once again from mere pigment into light. And the light this time is not of Nature but of Art.

If we are delightedly taken aback to hear a figure like Churchill expound this theory, then is not surprising at all that this view of art should be articulated by Panofsky, usually credited as an early

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29 Of course, not all scholars would concur. “It is a truism that many works of art are created in order to achieve something, and that they usually have effects on the beholders. But this does not mean that the meaning of works of art or of motifs in works of art can be defined (merely) in terms of intentions and effects.” Hermerén, Representation and Meaning, 18.

30 Quoted in E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (1960), Millennium ed., Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 39. Gombrich himself uses both the decoding metaphor and the metaphor of the legible image when he says, “I am not sure we are ever quite sufficiently surprised at our capacity to read images, that is, to decipher the cryptograms of art.” Ibid.
leader in the modern study of iconology. As Damisch characterizes both Panofsky’s practice and Cesare Ripa’s 1593 text *Iconologia*, they both insist “on dealing solely, to the exclusion of all others, with such images as were meant to signify something different from what they offered to view,” which is simply another way of saying that iconology focuses on hidden meanings that must be decoded.

Like the idea that images are legible, the notion that artworks contain hidden meanings that can or must be deciphered is far from being an isolated sentiment peculiar to iconologists. It is already nascent in Gregory’s claim that a picture can be a book for those who take the time to look at the image **carefully**. A casual viewing, he implies, is not sufficient; the text conveyed by (or contained within) the image is not immediately manifest, but becomes apparent only with effort and attention.

Moreover, this notion has long been a component of the popular imagination, and it can be considered to be an example of a ludic impulse. For example, Salvatore Settis uses a firsthand account of reactions to Guiliano de’ Medici’s banner for a 1475 jousting tournament in order to illustrate the “taste for cryptic images” that was common during the Renaissance. The observer

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31 Panofsky defines ‘iconography’ as “that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.” “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art” (1939), in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 26–54, 26. “Iconology,” on the other hand, is concerned “with the work of art as a symptom of something else [. . .] and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as more particularized evidence of this ‘something else.’ The discovery and interpretation of these ‘symbolical’ values [. . .] is the object of what we may call ‘iconology’ as opposed to ‘iconography.’” Ibid., 31.

32 “Semiotics and Iconography,” 239.

33 According to Göran Hermerén, works like Ripa’s *Iconologia* “are a kind of code system with signs and labels for different ideas.” *Representation and Meaning*, 15.

34 Of course, there is an argument that the desire to discern and to make concrete an image’s latent or hidden content is actually anti-ludic: it is, in those terms, an impulse against a playful multivalence or even a “free play” of meaning. I would beg to disagree with that argument, simply because a latent or hidden meaning is always already an example of multivalence—the effort, in other words, is not necessarily to fix a single interpretation over against another but rather to find a surplus of signification residing beyond a single surface meaning.
“emphasized that his pleasure in admiring it was largely due to guessing its secret meaning,” and that it became the subject of a lively and ludic discussion “more delightful than the pictures themselves.” 35 The Renaissance image, according to Settis, is more than an object of aesthetic enjoyment: “it is also a stimulus to discussion of the very image it presents, which passes from the picture to the eyes of the observer, to their various learned and ingenious interpretations, to the hidden intentions devised by artist and patron, like an image in an elegant game of mirrors.” 36

In the twentieth century, we can see this playful mind-set again in connection with the 1911 theft of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa from the Louvre. Darian Leader’s account of the incident notes that hundreds of letters to a Parisian newspaper offering opinions about the location of the stolen painting gave essentially the same explanation: “the Mona Lisa had never left the Louvre but must have been hidden behind some other painting in the collection.” 37 The popularity of this theory strikingly bespeaks the ludic power of the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics: if Leonardo’s masterpiece—the archetype of canonical images—was stolen, then the crime could only have been a prank or a TRICK involving concealment and disguise.

Noting the enthusiastic reception that greeted The Da Vinci Code’s release in 2003, Michael Hall hasboldly speculated that “this sort of search for meaning in an image draws on a natural,


36 Ibid.

37 Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops Us from Seeing (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 81. According to Leader, “This strange congruence of voices demonstrates less a shared rationality than a belief that there must be something ‘beyond’ the painted surface of a work of art. In Freud’s terms, if the object we search for does not exist, we’ll keep looking, and if a painting or a work of art can evoke for us the idea of something hidden, we will be even more interested.” Ibid.
universal way of looking at pictures that art historians often underestimate or downplay.”

But if scholars dismiss this mode of understanding images when it is presented in popular literature, then one can nonetheless fairly say that they practice a similar, and similarly ludic, method of visual hermeneutics within the pages of their own books and journals. Indeed, Elkins’ *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* is probably the seminal (if not the only sustained) examination of the widespread tendency by contemporary art historians and critics to view images as complex semantic structures with meanings that must be teased out through an intricate process of reasoning that resembles playful decryption or PUZZLE-solving.

Given the centrality of Elkins’ work to this case study, it is important to pause for a moment in order to establish its connections to the realm of ludic theory in which this dissertation is itself grounded. Three elements of Elkins’ work lend themselves to being understood through the lens of play. First, Elkins defines his inquiry into the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics by reference to the concept of excess (WAOPP, 1). Readings of images in the disciplines of art history and criticism tend to exhibit both “extensive and intensive writing,” the first characterized by the length of critiques as well as their sheer mounting numbers, and the second by the minute levels of

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38 “So Where Is the Holy Grail?,” *Apollo* 163, no. 531 (May 2006): 13. See also Jerry Cullum, “Secrets of the Code: Do Dan Brown’s Readers Learn Something Real about Art?,” *Art Papers* 29, no. 3 (May–June 2005): 35 (*The Da Vinci Code* “suggests that already existing buildings and works of art, some of them famous, are codes conveying a specific message. Once again, the public longs for implications deeper than those borne out by the text.”). This zeal for hidden meanings, as Cullum implies, is not limited to those which may reside in images: “believers in the Gospel of the Hidden Meaning [. . .] have plenty of company. The world is full, it sometimes seems, of people who think that what writers do is encode secret messages, and what readers, therefore, should do is decipher them.” Alan Jacobs, “The Code Breakers,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, no. 165 (August–September 2006): 14–17, 14. And, as anyone who has ever taught an introductory-level literature class knows all too well, this model of reading is so resilient that one can easily despair of ever disabusing one’s undergraduates of the belief in the ubiquity of “hidden meanings.”

39 Of course, some works of art either lend themselves to or tend to stimulate this method of interpretation more than others. “A superficial acquaintance with the scholarly literature reveals that although [Hieronymus] Bosch’s work has almost universally been acknowledged to be enigmatic, one author after another has approached it as if it were a puzzle that needed solving or a code that should be broken.” Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 110.
detail which scholars see in visual artifacts and the lengths to which they are willing to go in order to explain those features of images (WAOPP, 27). Elkins highlights such terms as complexity, wildness, and intricacy as part of his argument that writing in his field often “attracts attention” to itself (WAOPP, 46). These dimensions of much scholarly work on imagery signal that the field is operating in the hyperabundant mode associated with ludic minds in action.

Second, Elkins often frames his own investigation in the language of play, reflecting a consciousness that the phenomenon that he describes is inextricably linked to ludology. Asking, for instance, “Why are our accounts of pictures intellectual games [. . .]?” (WAOPP, 50), he likens the interpretation of visual images to puzzle-solving through a detailed examination of, among other ludic items, double-sided jigsaw puzzles (WAOPP, 80–81). Viewing, understanding, and writing about an image, Elkins implies, is similar to the process of assembling arbitrarily distinct picture components for the exclusive purposes of recreation.

Finally, in making the claim that “Virtually all contemporary art history [. . .] treats images as if they were puzzles of some sort,” Elkins also speculates that there might be a fundamental human “desire that drives us to willfully hallucinate the trappings of puzzles where there are none” (WAOPP, 248). This assertion is consistent with the work of ludologist Marcel Danesi, who posits the existence of a puzzle instinct within human nature, an inborn tendency to look for or even crave that which is mysterious or enigmatic. If this claim is accurate, then this inherent human drive might be linked to the biologically grounded practice of “seeing-in” that Wollheim describes.

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As I explain in the next section, the questions that Elkins pursues in his book—“What makes us behave this way? Since a picture is an object that is manifestly whole and complete, why would we want to experience it as if it were hiding something?” (WAOPP, 248)—are worth asking.

B. SALIENCE

Studying Ludic Modes of Visual Interpretation in Popular Culture

Materials that might support an examination of these questions as they relate to popular culture—a counterpart or companion to Elkins’ undertaking with regard to academic and scholarly contexts—are so abundant that the absence of such a project is a striking feature of existing scholarship. Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is only one example of the kinds of popular texts that could be seriously examined in a study like Elkins’, a study that is long overdue.

Following in the wake of *The Da Vinci Code*, of course, are texts that directly or indirectly seek to capitalize upon the commercial success of Brown’s novel. As of June 2004, little more than a year after its publication, *The Da Vinci Code* had already spawned more than twelve responsive texts in the non-fiction category, and the shelves and tables of booksellers testify to the fact that publishers did not stop there.42 Some of these books (like *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code*43) offer to expose the errors or exaggerations in Brown’s best-seller;44 others


44 According to one author’s count, nearly sixty refutative works on *The Da Vinci Code* were published within three years of the novel’s initial release. Eric Plumer, *The Catholic Church and American Culture: Why the Claims of Dan Brown Strike a Chord* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009), viii.
take a more sympathetic attitude toward their subject and attempt to support or supplement Brown’s most marginal positions. Less explicitly founded upon the success of *The Da Vinci Code* are dozens of fiction knockoffs, including Raymond Khoury’s *The Last Templar*, Neil Olson’s *The Icon*, Steve Berry’s *The Templar Legacy*, Jim Hougan’s *The Magdalen Cipher*, and Gregg Loomis’ *The Pegasus Secret*, all of which to a greater or lesser extent involve the interpretation of arcane symbols in objects of art or religious artifacts. Finally, at least two popular art guides, so-called “coffee-table books,” have been marketed specifically in order to appeal to readers who enjoy *The Da Vinci Code* and similar works. Book-jacket copy for one of these works explains that “a knowledge of the meaning of symbols was indeed often truly perilous in times past, for the visual codes that made up the vocabulary of sacred or esoteric languages were born of desperate necessity, being developed as a way of communicating covertly with fellow persecuted initiates.” An exhortation to prospective readers—“Discover how to spot, and then decipher, all manner of hidden clues”—invites them into this dangerous but exciting world by appealing to their understanding of the same model of visual

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48 Clare Gibson, *The Hidden Life of Art: Secrets and Symbols in Great Masterpieces* (Glasgow: Saraband, 2006), inside front dust jacket. See also Figure 7.

49 Ibid.
hermeneutics on which *The Da Vinci Code* is based. A similar work uses the same marketing strategy:

We may never know what the Mona Lisa is smiling about, but we do know that there’s more to the masterpieces of Renaissance art than the beauty that meets the eye. There are layers of significance below the surface [. . .] a store of secrets even more fascinating than fiction. This magnificently illustrated guide by an expert art historian gives you the key to unlock those secrets for yourself.\(^{50}\)

Although *The Da Vinci Code* is never explicitly mentioned, this dust-jacket copy is clearly calculated to appeal to the novel’s fans and readers.

But *The Da Vinci Code* itself is only an entry in a pre-existing subgenre of detective fiction in which works of art, real or invented, serve as clues to a mystery or as sources of concealed information. Examples of such texts include Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*; Peter Watson’s *Landscape of Lies*; Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s *The Flanders Panel*; Lewis Purdue’s *The Da Vinci Legacy* and *Daughter of God*; and a series of seven interrelated novels by Iain Pears: *The Rafael Affair, The Titian Committee, The Bernini Bust, The Last Judgement, Giotto’s Hand, Death and Restoration,*

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\(^{50}\) Richard Stemp, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance: Decoding the Hidden Symbolism of Italian Art* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2006), inside front dust jacket. I have been unable to confirm the claim that Richard Stemp is “an expert art historian”; his only published contribution to the discipline seems to be this very book. Patrick de Rynck, on the other hand, has a more substantial record in the field, and his contribution to the popular art guide genre contains some similarities to those by Gibson and Stemp. In a discussion of Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait,* de Rynck explains that, “In spite of their naturalism and exceptional detail, Van Eyck’s works also contain numerous symbols and clues as to how they should be interpreted on a deeper level.” *How to Read a Painting: Lessons from the Old Masters,* trans. Ted Alkins and Elise Reynolds (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 28. Yet despite this rhetoric of cryptography, de Rynck’s treatment of Andrea Mantegna’s *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* makes no mention of the horse and rider concealed in a cloud in the upper-left corner of the painting. de Rynck, *How to Read a Painting,* 64–65. See also Figure 22.
and *The Immaculate Deception*. The wide variety of texts in this list is significant. Peter Ackroyd, for example, is an author whose works are routinely discussed in academic journals and assigned in upper-level college literature courses without controversy. Lewis Purdue is not. The relative quality of the prose and the apparent depth of thought in their respective novels provide a ready explanation for this difference. Iain Pears is an art historian as well as a popular novelist; Arturo Pérez-Reverte has, as far as I am aware, no specialized knowledge or training in art history or criticism. One would naturally expect the two writers to take rather different approaches to the works of art that they treat in their novels, and one would be correct to do so: Pears’ novels have a sophistication with regard to this subject matter that Pérez-Reverte’s *The Flanders Panel* (although carefully researched and finely written) does not. The point is that these works register at a wide range of different points on the hypothetical continuum between high culture’s literature and serious scholarship on one end and popular culture’s pulp novels and pseudo-scholarly, sensationalist non-fiction on the other. At least for the purposes of understanding the dynamics of the decoding trope in the popular imagination, the latter can be taken just as seriously as the former even though its substantive and stylistic value may be a matter of question.

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In addition to novels, several works of popular non-fiction, such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *Key to the Sacred Pattern: The Untold Story of Rennes-le-Château*, include analyses of artworks that operate according to the same decoding metaphor on which Brown relied in *The Da Vinci Code*. Of course, this is no coincidence, for Brown has recognized these texts as important sources for his own work. In fact, two of the three authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, sued Brown for damages under the theory that *The Da Vinci Code* was merely a novelized version of their own work. They were unsuccessful at least in part because their book’s claim to be non-fiction (*i.e.*, historical fact) rendered its subject matter fair game for novelization—history is not subject to private ownership via copyright. Lewis Purdue sued Brown for copyright infringement based on the claim that *The Da Vinci Code* reworked themes, stories, and characters originally presented in *Daughter of God* and *The Da Vinci Legacy*. His suit also ended in a victory for Brown.

Rounding out the list of popular non-fiction that relied on the legible image trope and the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics before Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is a sequence of books by Wilson Bryan Key—*Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media’s Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America*, *Media Sexploitation*, and *The Clam-Plate Orgy: And Other Subliminals the


54 See Seth Mnookin, “The Da Vinci Clone?,” *Vanity Fair*, July 2006, 100–102. Victoria Nelson notes archly that the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* never sued Purdue, implying that the reason was the relative lack of commercial success for *Daughter of God*. “Faux Catholic,” 96.
Media Use to Manipulate Your Behavior\textsuperscript{55}—that finds words and images concealed in television and print advertisements as well as in consumer products themselves. As is often the case in the works that I have been describing, Key presents these hidden images and words as nefariously threatening; they mark traces of conspiracy, and they are tools through which the corporate and political domains attempt to manipulate or control the general public’s actions.

Methodologically these pre-Brown texts are more interesting than those released after The Da Vinci Code, texts which may well have more to do with that novel’s commercial success than with the persistence of the trope of the legible image and the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics themselves. The Da Vinci Code itself is less significant than the approach to artistic imagery that it is part of its premise.

The absence of any sustained and serious treatment of the decoding metaphor in popular culture is therefore not attributable to a shortage of sources to examine. Rather, it may be due to the tendency of most authorities either to ridicule these works or to dismiss them altogether.\textsuperscript{56} The Da Vinci Code has drawn the exasperated ire of art critics and museum curators,\textsuperscript{57} not to mention the Roman Catholic Church and other religious organizations,\textsuperscript{58} and Holy Blood, Holy Grail has been

\textsuperscript{55} Subliminal Seduction: Ad Media’s Manipulation of a Not So Innocent America (New York: Signet, 1974); Media Exploitation (New York: Signet, 1977); and The Clam-Plate Orgy: And Other Subliminals the Media Use to Manipulate Your Behavior (New York: Signet, 1981). Notice that the titles of these texts become progressively more outré and provocative as Key’s career progresses; the tone of the books evolves in this direction as well, with Key sounding ever more hysterical in his quest to be believed.

\textsuperscript{56} According to Ivanovitch, studies of The Da Vinci Code have in common the position that the novel “contains unforgivable errors, of technique as well as fact, and whatever the paradigm adopted, all commentaries come to resemble lists of howlers.” “Dan Brown,” 308.


characterized by Eileen Harris as “a best-selling masterpiece of mumbo-jumbo.” Jerry Cullum, who refers to Brown’s “interpretive illiteracy,” is actually among the more measured and judicious of the novel’s critics, because he at least acknowledges that *The Da Vinci Code*’s perceived shortcomings warrant “more than passing interest.” However, referencing Elkins’ 2004 book, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, even Cullum sees Brown as an important figure only insofar as Elkins demonstrates that “emerging American artists are equally uncomprehending of the many functions of religious symbols” (37). With palpable disappointment, he notes that “Dan Brown represents the presuppositions of most Americans” and sees the fact of renewed public interest in art arising from the success of *The Da Vinci Code* as an opportunity to educate (or reform) its readers (36).

What Cullum gets right, however, is sufficient to demonstrate why the balance of his presentation is wrong. The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* and similar works does indeed provide insight about the public’s values, beliefs, and assumptions vis-à-vis artworks, images more generally, and the manner in which images can or should be interpreted. And the evidence suggests that the public’s understanding of images has been remarkably consistent for several centuries, at least, with regard to the expectation not only that images are legible but also that this legibility must attend an act of decipherment. Entirely apart from the normative question of whether these values and beliefs are correct or incorrect, sophisticated or naive, the fact that those values and beliefs govern most of our responses to and interactions with images is of independent relevance.

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60 Cullum, “Secrets of the Code,” 37. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
Because both words and images are human constructions, the relationship between the two is a contingent rather than an intrinsic one. That is to say, word and image as products of the human imagination can only be said to have a relationship to the extent that such a relationship is itself created and perceived within the lived experience of those who encounter or create verbal and visual texts. Although a metaphysics of word and image is conceivable, a genuine understanding of word and image that does not somehow account for popular tastes and practices is not. Moreover, the growing significance of images in public discourse in our media-saturated, globalized culture makes an empirically accurate foundation for the study of discourse an essential precondition to any normative or prescriptive critique of discourse. Mitchell says that “instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded [in academic circles] as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparence concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.”

If, as Goodman declares, “Nothing is seen nakedly or naked,” then an account of how we see must precede an analysis of what we see.

These arguments for a serious examination of popular culture texts in which the decoding trope is operative assume the validity of objections to those texts based upon their perceived lack of merit from art historical or literary critical perspectives. However, we need not concede this field because these texts have more in common with orthodox scholarship than they have usually been given credit for. This is the first of three reasons why a detailed study of contemporary popular approaches to image analysis might be valuable.

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61 Iconology, 8.
62 Languages of Art, 8.
1. “Paranoiac-Critical Interpretation”: Not Just Marginalized Voices

Wild, exorbitant interpretations of visual discourses are not the sole province of conspiracy theorists, as authors who decode works of art in popular non-fiction are sometimes characterized. Three examples involving Nicolas Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds* (Figure 11) will demonstrate that the boundaries between popular-culture crackpot and serious scholar, between paranoid attention to minutiae and sophisticated attention to detail, can be difficult to define.

![Figure 11. Nicolas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, 1637. The Louvre, Paris.](image)

*Figure 11.* Nicolas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, 1637. The Louvre, Paris.
Poussin himself adopts the trope of the legible image when encouraging a patron to “Read the story and the painting in order to see how each thing is proper to its subject.”\textsuperscript{63} And art historians have taken Poussin up on that invitation by writing profusely about \textit{The Arcadian Shepherds}, one of the most commonly analyzed works in the canon of French Renaissance images.\textsuperscript{64} Mainstream art critics who consider the painting typically concern themselves with such issues as the relationship between the foregrounded figures and the pastoral landscape beyond; the significance of the inscription on the tomb and whether it renders the image into a kind of \textit{memento mori}, a reminder that death dwells even in paradise; and more abstruse and perhaps unanswerable questions like the identity of the entombed person, the nature of the shepherds’ activities before they discovered the tomb with its inscription, and whether the painting depicts a scene at dusk or at dawn. Other commentators, however, go much further in their inquiries.


At one extreme, we have something like a case of what Salvador Dalí called “paranoiac-critical interpretation” (*WAOPP*, 223). Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger look so closely for signs of sacred geometry within Poussin’s painting—signs that they characterize as “quite clear”65—that the work itself is effaced by arbitrary shapes and lines that intersect at apparently insignificant angles (Figure 12). The fact that shapes like squares are canted rather than parallel with the outlines of the work is not taken as evidence that those shapes are fabulations but rather that the

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angles of deviation themselves possess special significance. And in their approach to another Poussin work on the same theme, shapes that are not even geometrically regular supply Andrews and Schellenberger with a 1½° angle that they contend is an intentional deviation from rectilinearity crucial for identifying the precise location where the remains of Jesus Christ have been secretly deposited and preserved (Figure 13).

Henry Lincoln, a co-author of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, has written an account of the investigation and research that preceded and ultimately culminated in that 1982 best-seller. While examining an x-ray of Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds*, Lincoln noticed that “the staff held by the right-hand shepherd is overpainted by the roof of the tomb,” a fact which implied to him “that the staff was painted first. Poussin appears to have worked backward from the foreground details—which seems an odd procedure. He has apparently fixed the placing of the staff before completing the painting of the tomb and the shepherd’s head.”66 “Time and time again,” Lincoln says, “I have returned unavailing to this problem. But I am learning ‘not only to look, but to see’” (108). By attempting to make the simplest statement he can about the shepherd’s staff—“If one sets out on a hunt for complexities, then those very complexities may obscure a simplicity which is crying out for attention” (108)—he notices that the staff is cut precisely in half by the shepherd’s arm, a discovery that sends him searching for other potentially significant geometrical anomalies or mathematical ratios in the painting. Working with Christopher Cornford, later the Dean of the Royal College of Art, Lincoln obtained a detailed analysis of the painting’s geometry (Figure 14). According to Cornford, Renaissance artists like Poussin often constructed their works on the basis of number systems that were considered “a kind of invocation of the divine, inasmuch as the building

66 *Key to the Sacred Pattern: The Untold Story of Rennes-le-Château* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 70. Subsequent citations in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.
or painting became a microcosmic rehearsal of the primal act of creation” (109–10). Although not drawing more specific conclusions, Cornford determined that Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds* was clearly constructed around a pentagonal geometry, based on the painting’s format: “The dimensions are [. . .] 120cm x 87cm = 1:1.3793—a discrepancy of only .0033% [. . .] from the rectangle 1:1.376, which has a very particular and strong relationship with the regular pentagon” (110). Based in part on Cornford’s analysis, Lincoln advances the hypothesis that the units of English length measurement (like the foot, yard, rod, and mile) might have originally been derived from the geometry of locations considered to be sacred by ancient Europeans, including the site near Rennes-le-Château that Lincoln believes is memorialized in Poussin’s painting. Even though this theory could fairly be considered just as speculative, and likely as false, as that advanced in Andrews and Schellenberger’s *The Tomb of God*, the two main differences are that Lincoln never characterizes his conclusions as historically demonstrable fact and that some of the evidence for those conclusions bears the imprimatur of a member of the art historical and critical establishment. The basic strategy behind the two works—an effort to decode *The Arcadian Shepherds* by ascertaining the painting’s latent geometrical structure—is the same.67

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67 One art historian and critic, in the course of providing an analysis based on just such a set of geometrical structures within a painting, bemoans the fact that “geometrical lines are anathema” to most scholars in the discipline. John North, *The Ambassadors’ Secret: Holbein and the World of the Renaissance* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 73. For a detailed defense of this methodology and some of the more prominent objections to it, see ibid., 73–78.
A third reading of the painting appears in some respects to share more in common with Andrews and Schellenberger’s than Lincoln’s. According to this interpretation, it is significant that the kneeling shepherd points to the letter R in the inscription *ET IN ARCADIA EGO* because Cardinal Guilio Rospigliosi was the patron who commissioned *The Arcadian Shepherds* and also the inventor of the phrase used in the inscription. Similarly, the standing shepherd directs the viewer’s eye not only to the word *EGO* but also to a crack in the face of the tomb which splits the word in two.

That “pun,” right in the center of the painting, indicates what is at stake in it: a gap between two gestures, between the initial of the name of the Father (of the motto and the painting) and the splitting of the writing-painting Ego, the *ego* of the representation of Death in Arcadia; a scission of the absent name of the painter, who
nevertheless has made the painting and who signifies that he too is in Arcadia, but as one absent from that blissful place which is nothing else than the painting itself.

One could argue that, although at least one respected scholar agrees that the phrase “Et in Arcadia ego” can be appropriately ascribed to Rospigliosi, the ancient and extensive elegiac tradition from which both the painting and the phrase emerge renders that question too far from being settled to support this particular reading of the painting.\textsuperscript{68} Moreover, it is possible to claim that this reading places far too much weight on the exact positions of the shepherds’ fingers to be credible; given the fact that the painting depicts an inscription which is being indicated by the two figures, their fingers will inevitably intersect with some portion of that text, and an arcane significance could be attributed any part of the inscription that happened to line up with the pointing gestures.

One could advance these claims—and one would probably do so if this interpretation were part of the argument in \textit{The Tomb of God} or in \textit{Key to the Sacred Pattern}—but because this is Louis Marin’s reading of \textit{The Arcadian Shepherds} from a seminal essay on that painting,\textsuperscript{69} we choose rather to admire his ingenuity. Of course, Marin’s own rhetoric facilitates our reaction in this regard: he concedes that he does not offer his reading as a “conclusive explanation; it will be only a step further into the indeterminable area which is ultimately the contemplative reading of a painting—that area between proving and dreaming, vision and fantasy, analysis and projection, that Poussin calls delectation.”\textsuperscript{70} But if this serves to distinguish Marin’s interpretation from that of Andrews and Schellenberger, it only makes more problematic the relationship between Marin and Lincoln, who


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
also takes pains to characterize his findings as hypothetical rather than conclusive and whose theory is, frankly, more credible and better supported than Marin’s. In fact, Elkins asserts that Marin’s *To Destroy Painting*, in which his essay on Poussin’s painting was originally published, “has a Doppelgänger, a wild shadow-text that mocks it even without knowing of its existence: [. . .] *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*” (*WAOPP*, 231). “In both,” Elkins explains, “there is an insistent—at times, overwhelming—sense that the painting must be legible, and in both the kind of legibility turns out to be extremely dense, infolded with half-revealed meanings [. . .]. The desire to understand, and the magnetic pull of complexity, are identical in both works” (*WAOPP*, 232).71

These similarities are not isolated occurrences. Salvatore Settis, who has offered a decipherment and reading of Giorgione’s *The Tempest* (c. 1507), has coined the term *indulgent iconography* to describe exorbitant interpretations by established art historians and critics.72 Carlo Ginzburg, a scholar whose work has led one observer to describe him as a detective,73 complains that “any odd conjecture may be permissible” in contemporary art historical writing, and cautions against approaches in which “The work itself ends up [. . .] by becoming a pretext for a series of free associations.”74 And, of course, the supply of bizarre readings of artworks by scholars and academics

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71 Elkins’ of-the-cuff suggestion that *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* unknowingly mocks *To Destroy Painting* has a more serious echo in at least one response to Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*: “Perhaps the irritation that the book provokes in so many scholars is partly a recognition that there is a joke there somewhere, and that it strikes uncomfortably close to home?” Hall, “So Where Is the Holy Grail?,” 13.

72 Giorgione’s *Tempest*, 55.


74 Ginzburg, preface to *The Enigma of Piero*, xxv.
is sufficiently large to support Elkins’ book-length treatment of the subject.\textsuperscript{75} As a consequence, the works of more marginalized voices outside the community of scholars and critics merit serious study and reflection.

2. Hidden Images: Renaissance Anamorphoses and Other Playful Paintings

A second reason for according serious and respectful treatment to these voices is that their approach of looking for hidden meanings in images is not self-evidently suspect in light of the existence of artworks that contain concealed information. Elkins considers three major ways in which contemporary art historians respond to pictures: seeing images as puzzles (Settis’ reading of Giorgione’s \textit{The Tempest} falls into this category), searching for ambiguities within pictures (the proliferating interpretations of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling [1508–12] are his paradigm case), and what he designates as the “wildest” of the three, “the purposive and sometimes uncontrolled use of what used to be known as \textit{fantasia} and is now generally called hallucination,” including the search for hidden objects within images (\textit{WAOPP}, 13). Because encryption is etymologically a process of hiding or concealing, this response to images is particularly relevant to the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics. The act of searching for hidden images in a picture, however, need not be considered fantastic or paranoid. It can instead be explained as a rational

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?} contains abundant descriptions of interpretative frenzy on the part of art historians and critics. Of particular relevance here is Elkins’ detailed analysis of Birger Carlström’s \textit{Hide-and-Seek} (1989). Carlström identifies hidden words and symbols in works by Renoir and argues that they encode the artist’s political positions regarding the Suez and Panama Canals (\textit{WAOPP}, 1–11). Yet Elkins is able to conclude—with utter sincerity—that Carlström “fits right in” with trends of art historical scholarship in the late-twentieth century (\textit{WAOPP}, 9).
response to the fact that many pictures, particularly those produced during the Renaissance, actually do contain hidden images; they are works that affirmatively require acts of decipherment.76

With La practica della perspettiva (1559), Daniele Barbaro gave Renaissance artists a guide for creating a particular kind of hidden image, an anamorphic projection in which the technique of linear perspective is used to create a picture that is only comprehensible from a single viewing position, typically requiring the viewer’s line of sight to approach the work from an oblique angle very close to the image, or a picture that manifests two distinct images, one being apparent from one angle and another emerging when the viewer’s line of sight changes. These images can be typed as PUZZLES.77 There is, of course, a sense in which any work of visual art may be considered ludic or playful,78 but anamorphoses seem to fall especially clearly into that category. Mid-seventeenth-century publishers, for instance, produced dozens of popular recreational guides that nearly always included anamorphic images.79 Consider as an example Jean Leurechon’s 1624 French treatise of mathematical games that later crossed the Channel to be translated into English.80 Leurechon provides detailed instructions for how to construct a kind of camera obscura that could be used to generate distorted images, presumably because the exercise of tracing those images might be

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76 See, for example, Dieter Jung, “Holographic Space: A Historical View and Some Personal Experiences,” in “Holography as an Art Medium,” ed. Louis M. Brill, special double issue, Leonardo 22, no. 3–4 (1989): 331–36, 332 (anamorphoses “can only be decoded by the viewer at a certain viewing angle”).

77 See Danesi, Puzzle Instinct, 73–74; and Frances Terpak, “Anamorphosis,” in Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen, by Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 235–48, 235 (calling anamorphic images “visual puzzles”).


intrinsically fun or entertaining for readers. Manuals such as his thus featured “virtual play” and were sometimes described as games of cunning.

Figure 15. Emmanuel Maignan, Untitled Anamorphic Fresco of St. Francis di Paola, 1642 (frontal view). Santa Trinità dei Monti, Rome.

Photograph copyright © Mauro Coen. Used by kind permission.

Barbaro’s second type of anamorphic projection is best illustrated by Emmanuel Maignan’s 1642 fresco in a corridor of the Santa Trinità dei Monti monastery in Rome (Figure 15), the largest documented anamorphosis in existence. When the viewer stands facing the fresco, it assumes the character of a landscape with a low grassy field in the foreground, a placid bay on which ships are sailing in the middle, and a threatening swirl of turbulent clouds in the background. But when seen at an oblique angle from the entrance to the corridor, the clouds collapse into the face and arms of St. Francis di Paola at prayer, and the bay and field coalesce into his robes (Figure 16). To be sure, this kind of image-making is less concerned with maintaining concealment than it is with revealing

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its own secret; the point of the fresco is for both of its constituent images to be seen and appreciated. Yet the idea of mystery is still very much in play. Maignan himself—a Minim monk, professor of mathematics, and noted theologian—compared the visual deception that takes place in ordinary perspective painting “to the way our senses are ‘deceived’ in the mystery of transubstantiation . . .,” and Barbaro’s philosophy of anamorphism stressed the technique’s status as a “beautiful and ‘secret’ part of perspective.” These remarks point to a way in which anamorphic images were profoundly relevant to matters of faith. Particularly for Roman Catholic believers, the instance of this kind of anamorphic image, in which two pictures subsist as one, might well have evoked the doctrine of transubstantiation, in which the physical materials of the Eucharist were co-present with Christ’s body. For Christians more broadly, anamorphoses like Maignan’s could have served as reminders of Christ’s paradoxically dual and therefore anamorphic nature: He was at once fully human yet fully Divine.

On the similar subject of trompe l’oeil paintings, Michael Leja notes that the images “cannot conceal their status as painted illusions, nor do they try.” “Trompe l’oeil Painting and the Deceived Viewer,” in Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects, ed. Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd, Histories of Vision (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 173–90, 176. Instead, “the paintings introduce themselves as good-natured efforts to deceive, all the while acknowledging that they cannot trick a reasonably sober spectator with binocular vision.” Ibid., 177. This dynamic registers at high points on both the methexis and telos axes, suggesting that it could form the basis of a GAME/PUZZLE hybrid typology for anamorphic images.


Ibid., 30.

Terpak, “Anamorphosis,” 237 (“Anamorphosis carried spiritual and symbolic overtones for other makers and audiences as well”).

See ibid., 239 (Maignan’s anamorphosis “would have accorded well with the tenets of the Catholic Church. Faith is hedged in by mystery, doubleness, and fleeting glimpses of the truth”).
In the English tradition of anamorphosis, Hans Holbein the Younger’s 1533 painting *The French Ambassadors* (Figure 17) is the most familiar example of the type of anamorphic projection that conceals an image by making it visible only from a single point of view. Although the blurry foreground object is not itself hidden, it only becomes visible as a human skull—a *memento mori* to complement the symbols of worldly success arrayed between the central figures—when viewed from an extremely oblique angle. Less familiar, however, is the hidden crucifix which is barely
visible in the upper-left corner of the piece, behind the parted curtain which serves as the painting’s backdrop.90

Figure 17. Hans Holbein the Younger, *The French Ambassadors*, 1533. The National Gallery, London.

Photograph copyright © The National Gallery, London.

The image is therefore at a deep and fundamental level about the problems associated with seeing and visibility, which is precisely why it might have attracted so much commentary. Two Leader interprets the crucifix as a dialectical companion to the anamorphic skull, the latter suggesting death and the former signifying salvation and eternal life, and also suggests that it “indicates the function of the painting itself: the relation of the curtain to the crucifix is parallel to that of the painted surface and what lies beyond. Holbein’s picture thus emphasizes the screen-like quality of the visual image.” *Stealing the Mona Lisa*, 136–37.
especially provocative readings of *The French Ambassadors* warrant mention, for both fall within the class of interpretations that Elkins explores in such detail in *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?* Hagi Kenaan starts from the proposition that *The French Ambassadors* is a work that seems to cry out for a figurative interpretation, its enigmatic features and character leaving us unsatisfied with an explanation of the painting that remains at the literal level.\(^91\) Because it “is a painting that hides by showing” (68), Kenaan explores the potential secrets that lie within plain sight in the image, concluding that the relationship between the two pictured ambassadors was an “intimate” one “of a kind that could not be openly expressed” (71). More extravagant is John North’s book-length treatment of the painting, *The Ambassadors’ Secret*. As Andrews and Schellenberger and as Lincoln do with Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds*, North attempts to deduce *The French Ambassadors*’ latent geometric structure, and he credibly discovers many hexagonal patterns, including a Star of David, in the image. But North’s reading is simultaneously more sustained and more intense, including a close analysis of every object depicted in the work, some of which prove to disclose surprising levels of detail and fodder for interpretation, and an explanation of the painting’s allusions to figures as diverse as Geoffrey Chaucer, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Hrabanus Maurus. Yet, despite the fact that North adopts an interpretive strategy that can fairly be considered ludic, despite his acknowledgment that the skull can be understood as a punning artist’s signature (“*hohles Bein*” in German means “hollow bone”),\(^92\) and despite his conclusion that the *accoutrements* of Renaissance humanism featured in the painting are “introduced in ways that were highly

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\(^91\) “The ‘Unusual Character’ of Holbein’s *Ambassadors,*” *Artibus et Historiae* 23, no. 46 (2002): 61–75, 61. Indeed, surveying the history of critical commentary on the image, Kenaan concludes that it “unavoidably inflames one’s desire to understand it.” Ibid., 63. This is a striking reminder of the principle that there might be an innate human desire to understand and decipher puzzles. Danesi, *Puzzle Instinct*, 2. Subsequent citations to Kenaan’s article in this paragraph appear as parenthetical references in the main text.

contrived, “contrived,” he declares that the placement of the anamorphic skull in the painting “can hardly be described as a playful gesture” on Holbein’s part. Nonetheless, North wisely notes that seemingly excessive interpretations like his bear a direct relationship to early modern visual practices: “It is as well to remember how extremely sophisticated medieval and Renaissance theories of artistic and literary purpose and exegesis were.”


Photograph copyright © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Another anamorphic image associated with the English Reformation is William Scrots’ mistitled *King Edward VI* (Figure 18), which depicts the young prince during the reign of his father, Henry VIII. We know very little about Scrots, or Guillim Stretes as he was sometimes called, aside from the facts that he was the best-paid painter during the reign of Edward VI (suggesting that his distinct style was a popular one); that he, like Holbein, was a Dutchman; and that he likely held a

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93 *Ambassadors’ Secret*, 72. Contrivance is, of course, a marker of the ludic. See, for example, *MPaG*, 31.

94 *Ambassadors’ Secret*, 7. Kenaan sees a ludic element in Holbein’s use of the skull but understands its role in the painting as *transcending* mere play; the anamorphosis is “daring” but is transformed “into a serious and meaningful artistic device.” “‘Unusual Character,’” 65.

95 *Ambassadors’ Secret*, 188–89.

96 See, for example, ibid., 126.
position as an artist at court, probably fleeing England at about the time of Mary’s ascension to the throne. While scholarship on the image is exceptionally sparse, it is an easy picture to describe. It consists of two paired elements, a background landscape in normal perspective patriotically evoking the rolling, green hills of England and a foregrounded anamorphic oval in the form of a seal containing the date, Edward’s age (ætatis suæ 9), and his distorted likeness surrounded by the initials E P for Edouardus princeps. When viewed through a notch in the right-hand side of the image’s frame, the oval resolves itself into a circle and Edward himself comes into perfect focus (Figure 19).

![William Scrots, King Edward VI, 1546 (lateral view). National Portrait Gallery, London.](figure19.jpg)

The playful technique of anamorphosis would surely have delighted the young prince, but it is fitting in another sense as well. Through the anamorphic image, the piece plays upon period views of childhood, emphasizing that Edward was as yet unformed and incomplete but insisting that,

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as Michael Witmore says, “With the addition of time and motion,”98 the young boy would mature into a man fit to be king and to reign over the land which his corrected perspective skews and therefore comes to dominate. Apart from the fact that Edward never had that opportunity to mature fully, the central irony of the painting is that its subject became the greatest of the Tudor iconoclasts, a Reformed king in whose name images were made suspect and often destroyed because of precisely the same power that we see exhibited in Scrots’ anamorphic portrait. If, in other words, the distorted fresco of St. Francis di Paola lends itself well to the Roman Catholic audience for which it was designed, the anamorphic image of Edward is not at all what we might ordinarily expect to see in a Protestant context.

More common in England than the anamorphoses inspired by Daniele Barbaro, the “turning picture” was a painting rendered on a pleated or corrugated panel so that it would display one image from the right and another from the left.99 Few of these objects survive outside of frequent literary references to them, particularly in the works of Shakespeare,100 but one example is strikingly reminiscent of Holbein’s The French Ambassadors. From the left, it presents the image of a woman, once thought to be Mary, Queen of Scots (Figure 20);101 from the right, the image appears as a death’s head, a memento mori and a reminder of the transience of physical beauty (Figure 21).


The ingenuity of the device can be understood as a very early effort in the direction that modernists like Pablo Picasso only achieved several hundred years later, an attempt to capture the dimension of duration in a fixed image. Giving us a God’s-eye view of the pictured woman—we see her as she is now and as she is destined to be after her death—the anonymous artist has used the visual technology of his age to accomplish a serious purpose in a playful manner.  

Figure 20. Anonymous Corrugated Anamorphosis of Woman and Skull, c. 1590 (view from the left). Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

Figure 21. Anonymous Corrugated Anamorphosis of Woman and Skull, c. 1590 (view from the right). Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

102 Cooper, Searching for Shakespeare, 40 (referring to Scrots’ image as “a playful perspective device”). See also Boyle, Anamorphosis, 12 (“image technologies that incur new openings and possibilities for perceptual and sensorial experience become crucial sites for investigating how the ‘idea of God’ becomes incorporated in new ways”).
As a final example, consider a non-anamorphic work which nonetheless contains a hidden image, Andrea Mantegna’s *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, which features a horse and rider concealed in the cloud at the upper-right corner of the painting (Figure 22). “Though the horseman,” like Holbein’s crucifix, “was certainly not meant to be seen by everyone, it is not easy to say how thoroughly hidden Mantegna intended it to be” (WAOPP, 184). Wollheim interprets the hidden image as an example of Renaissance artists’ attempts to represent the act of seeing-in “directed on to natural phenomena. [I]n order to represent this activity, they had to represent that which, on their account of the matter, this activity presupposes: they had to display nature as an album of well-
contrived but also well-concealed representations.”103 Of course, the notion of God’s creation as a legible book of symbols was an important trope (or, indeed, a belief) during the Renaissance.104 And the hidden image is also a commentary on the Divine image-maker. Keith Christiansen refers to Mantegna’s interest in “Nature” as a creator of images,105 but given that this is a painting about the ultimate triumph of a peculiarly Christian vision over paganism, we must necessarily see Mantegna’s horse and rider as a creation of the Divine, the first maker of images. If, as Christiansen contends, Mantegna was interested in achieving a perfect imitation of nature,106 then what better model was there for him to follow than God Himself?

What these examples establish is that there is ample precedent and justification—particularly in the case of Renaissance-era images—for the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics, for the practice of analyzing pictures as if they contained hidden or encoded information. In the next subsection, I shall turn to a third reason why this model of interpretation ought to be taken more seriously. Artists, like Mantegna, who conceal images within their works are engaged in an attempt to imitate, and thereby to worship, God.

103 “What the Spectator Sees,” 115.


105 The Genius of Andrea Mantegna (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 46 (“In the upper left Mantegna drew an intentional comparison between his creative skills and those images that Nature makes on occasion in passing clouds: images made by chance”).

106 Ibid.
3. Incarnation and Presence: The Lively Ludic Image

Marginalized voices outside the academy that posit images as puzzles to be deciphered and then read are also worthy of investigation for a third reason, one that is especially germane to this particular study and one that pertains to a quality of the images that were considered in the previous subsection, images that through anamorphosis or other kindred techniques encode hidden information within them. I argue that these ludic pictures are incarnational in design; they seek to emulate Divine images by producing representations that possess life and presence.

Christ’s Incarnation is central to early image theory in the West.\textsuperscript{107} God’s second commandment in the Old Testament book of Exodus explicitly forbade the making of images of the Divine: “Thou shalt not make vnto thee any grauen Image, or any likenesse of anything that is in heauen aboue.”\textsuperscript{108} We see in this Hebraic prohibition both a suspicion of human artifice and, more important, the idea that God as a non-physical and atemporal being is incapable of being represented. But when Word becomes Flesh in the New Testament—when Christ assumes humble, human form on behalf of His Creation yet retains His fully Divine nature—the possibilities for image-making suddenly and dramatically change. Whereas God cannot be represented by human artifice, a man can be, Marie-José Mondzain notes, so “from now on, God, who had lent his invisible image to his human creation, will in turn receive his own visibility thanks to that creation.”\textsuperscript{109} Hans Belting says that, while it remained “to postulate the indivisible unity of the invisible God and the visible human

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being seen in a single person,””110 “The reality of Christ’s incarnation [ . . . ] thus was linked to the possibility of Christ’s representation, and the image was thereby promoted to a criterion of orthodoxy.”111 Further support for rendering images of Christ came from the text of the New Testament itself, which declared Christ to be “the image of the invisible God.”112 Early Church theologians, therefore, had ample basis for justifying the creation of images of Christ, the ultimate sanction for creating an image of the Divine, and according to Michael O’Connell, “The effect of this renewed emphasis on the humanity of Christ is what may be called an incarnational sense of religious experience, [ . . . ] an aesthetic in which the spiritual is incarnated in forms immediately accessible to human senses and emotions.”113

This “incarnational aesthetic,” as Jennifer Waldron calls it,114 takes on greater importance during the Reformation, with its emphasis on word (and Word) over image and with its distinct strain of iconoclasm. As John Twyning has explained, certain images seemed to be exempt from the iconoclastic zeal of radical Reformers, particularly in England. For example, the elegant stained-glass windows depicting the story of Christ at St. Mary’s Church in Fairford were not destroyed during the waves of image-breaking fury that swept England during the Reformation, most likely because the images in those windows possessed a “quickness,” life, and vividness that transcended


111 Ibid., 152. But see Koerner, Reformation of the Image, 13 (“Christ’s incarnation was iconoclastic: the pagan idols crumbled before the infant Jesus; Christ’s humble birth and humiliating death overturned the equation, made concrete in classical art, of the beautiful with the true and the good; his disciples martyred themselves rather than honour the emperor’s portrait; his suffering mortified vision itself”).

112 Col 1:20 (AV 1611). See O’Connell, Idolatrous Eye, 10 (“The words ‘icon’ and ‘likeness’ are used in the Bible to explain the relationships between God and his Son and between the believer and Christ”).

113 Idolatrous Eye, 47.

the flatness of dead iconicity. Instead, we see in those images “a Christ who inspires worldly compassion, one whose body has heft and presence [...] Christ is not made into a monument, not cast as a graven image or idol, nor depicted as an abstract or superstitious icon”; the figure of the Savior possesses “somatic vitality and materiality.”

In short, these images of Christ possessed a quality known in image theory as *quickness* or sometimes *presence*, which Marina Prusac describes as follows:

The metaphysical aspect of images is usually referred to as *presence*, or *prototype*, and happens when images are perceived as matter animated by spirit; when images or idols are believed to inhibit a prolonged existence of the individual they represent. The *presence* is sometimes explained as a symbolic representation or even as something magical, which cannot be translated as *spirit* or *soul*, which are Christian terms, and terms such as *force* or *power* express something physical and would be misleading. It can perhaps be understood as a phenomenological quality which was believed to connect the portrait or image to the represented individual or deity in a way which demanded respect.

If this notion sounds vaguely superstitious, then it is well to remember that, as Andrew Harrison notes, “All sorts of attitudes and beliefs that fail to pass our own intellectual censors have played a

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116 Ibid., 52.

117 “*Presence* and the Image Controversies in the Third and Fourth Centuries AD,” in Kolrud and Prusac, *Iconoclasm*, 42–56, 42. In the seminal work on this idea in the West, Hans Belting defines the notion more briefly as follows: “Authentic images seemed capable of action, seemed to possess *dynamis*, or supernatural power. God and the saints also took up their abode in them, as was expected, and spoke through them.” *Likeness and Presence*, 6.
part within the history of other cultures.” Moreover, it is not strictly necessary to define presence by reference to the mystical idea that the person depicted in an image actually somehow exists within it; rather, presence is a form of response to an image as well. Harrison continues: “a sense of ‘presence’ in response to representational works of art, pictures or sculpture, is the feeling that what they represent, or aspects of it, do not just appear to be present to the beholder but are present to the beholder ‘in’ the picture or sculpture itself.” The concept also describes an artistic technique, one first theorized by Michael Psellus in the eleventh century—another iconoclastic age—as “living painting” (empsychos graphê). In Belting’s account of that term, it first serves to defend painting against the old charge of being dead matter that in vain pretends to provide the illusion of life. In addition, the term equates painting, which is not mute but capable of speech, with poetry, which touches the feelings by arousing persons and events to life. That which has a soul can speak to the soul. A “live” quality of expression, the goal of poetry, was now expected of the icon as well.

In order to see how the images that I explored in the previous subsection possess this quality of quickness or presence, it might be helpful first to examine a “dead” image, one that lacks this added incarnational dimension of depth or soulfulness. A primary example of such a painting within

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119 Ibid., 161.

120 Likeness and Presence, 261. The concept of liveliness or quickness is also central to Jennifer Waldron’s account of embodiment and English theatrical practices during the Reformation: “the human body is one of the most effective material forms through which to assert various kinds of ‘real presence,’ or nonarbitrary relationships between sign and thing.” Reformations of the Body, 39. “[D]ead’ idols [. . .] have no necessary link to the divine image that they falsely claim to represent.” Ibid., 40. For more on “quick” images in the theater, see Theodore K. Lerud, “Quick Images: Memory and the English Corpus Christi Drama,” in Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Wim Hüsken, Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 213–37.
the English tradition is Nicholas Hilliard’s *The Pelican Portrait* of Queen Elizabeth (Figure 23). The most striking feature of the portrait is its flatness. The monarch’s face lacks any real trace of modeling or mass; her nose and brow are created by the faintest of lines, and neither the cheekbones nor the chin bears any sign of curvature or depth. The effect is one of seeing a mask. Moreover, the foreground of the piece is nearly without shadow, except for the wispy suggestion of one cast by Elizabeth’s poised left hand on her bodice and a somewhat more substantial one cast by the pearl that lies upon her breast. To be sure, her figure casts a shadow on the curiously abstracted black and gray background behind it, but this fact contrasts sharply with the crowned rose and fleur-de-lis emblems framing her face; they cast no shadows at all, implying that they exist beyond the space of the painting and that they are merely superimposed upon the canvas. Elizabeth’s red curls are, upon close inspection, drawn on top of one another in identical, repeated patterns rather than depicted as receding from her brow in perspective, and the ruff of her collar is rendered in the same manner, having the same thickness where it curves around the back of her neck as it does at her throat. The angle of the bodice as it approaches her waist is curiously straight and exaggerated, and the waistline itself is unrealistically narrow, idealized even given the fashions of the period.

What we have in *The Pelican Portrait*, in other words, is a secular icon, but to characterize the image in this way is not to diminish it—that is clearly its chief purpose, for it is part of a discourse of royal power, the monarch linked through the manner of her depiction to the religious

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121 For a close analysis of this image that has keenly influenced my own perception of the piece, see Virginia Chieffo Raguin, “You Are What You Wear (and Use, and See): The Form of the Reform in England,” in *Art, Piety and Destruction in the Christian West, 1500–1700*, ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin, Visual Culture in Early Modernity (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 65–89, 75–76.

122 Portrayals of Elizabeth, like Hilliard’s, often depict her in heavy, white make-up, and this is surely one reason for the features that I have noticed. However, other portraits that I have examined do not exhibit the same degree of flatness that I have mentioned here.
iconography that represents the ultimate source of her authority to rule England. Hilliard’s portrait is justly praised, but it is not an image with life, quickness, or presence.¹²³


Courtesy National Museums Liverpool.

¹²³ There are references to a lost anamorphic work by Nicholas Hilliard. See Shickman, “‘Turning Pictures,’” 70. To be able to contrast it with *The Pelican Portrait* would be a fascinating exercise.
At this juncture, with my reference to Hilliard’s piece as a “secular icon,” I must parenthetically acknowledge that I am treating works of secular art by the same criteria and in the same fashion as one might treat religious imagery and vice versa. The line between the two, however, is exceptionally fine, for the category of “art” is ultimately one that is generated in the iconoclastic pressures of the age—“Calling church pictures ‘art’ often saved them from destruction,” Koerner says. Moreover, Kristine Kolrud and Marina Prusac remind us that “The idea that idolatry or iconolatry may be related also to non-religious imagery, especially portraits of emperors or kings, is not new.” Iconoclasm may pertain to art of almost any kind,” Thomas F. X. Noble says, “and may have many motivations whereas iconodulia pertains only to sacred art and is characterised by particularly intense habits of worship.” And finally, Hilliard’s iconic portrait of Elizabeth was of a sort that was beginning to replace images of Christ and the saints in Reformed churches throughout England during her reign: the spaces cleared by the iconoclastic impulse were often reassigned to such purposes, so it is not surprising that his piece would present distinctly iconic qualities.

By contrast, consider again William Scrots’ anamorphic portrait of Prince Edward (Figures 18 and 19). Michael Witmore describes the effect of the image well:

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127 Raguin, “You Are What You Wear,” 76.
That act of resolving the anamorphic projection is one of vivification, a motive form of \textit{enargeia} [. . .]. What viewers marvel at in such an image is its apparent \textit{agency}—its ability to bring to life that which, strictly speaking, is inert. [. . .] 

There is something in the portrait’s power to animate and vivify its child subject that confirms the Tudor iconoclasts’ worst anxieties about the seductive power of images.\footnote{128}{\textit{Pretty Creatures}, 3–4. Witmore’s concluding remark is, of course, profoundly ironic given Edward’s own status as a Tudor iconoclast.}

Scrots and other anamorphic artists of the Renaissance force their images to do the work of embodiment and Incarnation by compelling their viewers to \textit{move} and to experience the works actively and physically; the images are in a very real sense painted upon the body itself.\footnote{129}{See Boyle, \textit{Anamorphosis}, 1 (“A crucial aspect of the anamorphic experience, then, is the way in which it requires that the experience be written on the body, that the body carry with it the cognitive and autonomic traces of having been unmoored from perceptual anchors and pushed into a mode of spectatorship caught up in affective intensity and perceptual uncertainty”).} An anamorphic image is what Koerner has described in a somewhat different context as a “corporealization of the communicative act.”\footnote{130}{\textit{Reformation of the Image}, 256.} And if the quick image is, as Thomas Aquinas posited, a vital link between visual \textit{sensibilia} and the believer’s understanding,\footnote{131}{See Lerud, “Quick Images,” 214–15.} then an image that includes components not immediately, or at least not in a typical fashion, subject to apprehension by the senses might be said metaphorically to possess a soul, an element of the Divine \textit{invisibilia} that dwells within us all as a marker of our status as images of God.
Having established that playful interpretive strategies are salient to our understanding of images during the Renaissance and Reformation, it remains to embark on a prolegomenon to the kind of study that these readings merit. A full study devoted exclusively to such interpretations is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but in the next section I suggest that keen attention to contemporary popular works of image interpretation can reveal an enticing pattern, one that can add to our understanding of visual discourses during the English Reformation.

C. CLOSE READINGS
The Legible Image Trope in The Da Vinci Code and Other Popular Texts

In light of the images and the readings of images that we have encountered thus far, one would expect that an examination of popular texts about Renaissance images would simply reveal more of what we have already seen—measurements of lines and angles to identify a painting’s underlying geometrical design, searches for images that have been concealed or disguised within a painting, or investigations into a painting’s symbolism or iconography. To a certain extent, one would not be disappointed in these expectations; all of these fairly obvious themes are indeed woven into both the fictional and the non-fictional texts that I have examined. However, among the patterns that I have

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Iain Pears’ The Titian Committee (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991) provides an example of the type of plot one might expect to find in a novel of this sort, and it is a useful contrast to what might be considered unsophisticated treatments of imagery in other works. The story revolves around the murder of a Titian scholar in the greenhouse of a Venice garden. She is found clutching in one hand a crucifix that she has apparently ripped from a gold chain around her neck and in the other a bunch of lilies from a nearby planter. It appears that she was killed because she discovered and threatened to go public with a scheme by two other members of the committee of Titian experts: they would convince other members of the panel to deny a Titian attribution to a painting and then supply an attribution based on their own authority in exchange for a large percentage of the resulting inflated sale price. In reality, however, the discovery she was on the eve of announcing was “the fact that she’d deciphered an intricate and personal account of a long-hidden scandal that excited her” (187): Titian had used a series of panels depicting events in the life of St. Anthony to tell the story of how he had poisoned Pietro Luzzi as revenge for murdering Giorgione’s mistress and causing Giorgione himself to die from a broken heart. Although the crucifix and the lilies found clutched in the victim’s hands represent attributes of St. Anthony, they were her attempt to identify her killer, an annoyingly pious member of the committee nicknamed “St. Anthony” who murdered her based on the false assumption that she knew about his role in the attribution scheme.

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been able to identify in these works, the most unexpected and even striking thing that many of them have in common is the fact that they do not proceed according to this model. To the contrary, the pictures that are read or deciphered in these works often become legible only by virtue of the fact that they contain words; the purely visual aspects of the image play little or no role at all.

As the focal point of contemporary popular discourses on the legibility of images, The Da Vinci Code is a sensible place to begin examining this pattern. The novel revolves around the adventures of Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon, who is enlisted by Paris police to assist in the investigation of the brutal murder of the Louvre’s curator, Jacques Saunière, who succeeded before his ultimate death in leaving cryptic clues to his murder scattered throughout the museum. Implicated in the murder, Langdon and Saunière’s granddaughter, Sophie Neveu, take flight from police as they pursue in turn Saunière’s clues, which prove to lead to a secret of even greater magnitude than the true killer’s identity: Saunière, as grandmaster of the secret society, the Priory of Sion, guarded the millennia-old secret that Christ was a mortal man who married Mary Magdalene and left behind a string of descendants, the Merovingian founding dynasty of France, which survives to this day. Representatives of a Roman Catholic extremist group, Opus Dei, have committed the murder, have framed Langdon and Neveu, and are attempting to assassinate the pair as part of an effort to continue oppressing this secret of the sacred feminine. Neveu is ultimately revealed to be a direct descendant of Christ, and Langdon decides to maintain the Priory’s secret knowledge.

Early in the novel, Brown takes pains to mark his protagonist as a master of decoding images. Langdon, in fact, is in Paris in order to deliver a lecture on “pagan symbolism hidden in the stones of Chartres Cathedral” (DVC, 7). When police discover the nude corpse of Saunière—the author of “books on the secret codes hidden in the paintings of Poussin and Teniers” (DVC, 16)—laid out on
a gallery floor in the shape of the figure in Leonardo’s famous sketch, *Vitruvian Man*, they summon Langdon to the museum. Although this provides an opportunity for exposition describing Leonardo as “a prankster” who amused himself by incorporating “in many of his Christian paintings hidden symbolism that was anything but Christian” (*DVC*, 50), Brown does not provide specific examples, and the bizarre position of the murder victim does not result in any analysis or discussion of hidden symbolism. Instead, the most salient feature of the crime scene is a series of inscriptions apparently scrawled by Saunière in his own blood on the floor of the gallery:

- 13-3-2-21-1-1-8-5
- **O, Draconian devil!**
- **Oh, lame saint!** (*DVC*, 48)

Neveu, a police cryptographer and Saunière’s estranged granddaughter, arrives on the scene in order to assist Langdon, whom she has learned is being wrongly targeted as a prime suspect by police investigators. Although she identifies the numbers in the inscription as scrambled members of the Fibonacci sequence, it is ultimately Langdon who realizes that the rearranged numbers are a sign that the letters in the rest of the inscription must also be reordered; they are an anagram for “Leonardo da Vinci! The Mona Lisa!” (*DVC*, 103). Faking Langdon’s escape from the Louvre in order to give themselves an opportunity to investigate the mystery themselves, he and Neveu discover that this coded message leads to an inscription written on the *Mona Lisa* in invisible ink:

- “So dark the con of man” (*DVC*, 131). Of course, this is another anagram and it leads the pair to Leonardo’s *Madonna of the Rocks*, behind which they find a key (*DVC*, 141–42). Up to this point, Brown has used the paintings in his novel only as stations on a kind of scavenger hunt, sites on which words foreign to the images themselves have been inscribed. The pictures, their iconography,
the codes which we as readers have been led to expect the characters to find within them—none of these has proven important to the protagonists’ discovery of the key. In fact, the only real analysis of these paintings is offered in exposition, and even then it is not relevant to the main line of the plot. Brown has Langdon articulate the recent view that the *Mona Lisa*’s enigmatic smile hints that the painting, a self-portrait, is Leonardo’s inside joke, and in further exposition he explains the title of the work as yet another anagram: “Amon L’Isa,” the names of the Egyptian male and female fertility deities (*DVC*, 126–28).

The key leads Langdon and Neveu to a Swiss bank and a safety deposit box which contains a cryptex, a cylinder of marble and bronze around which are five wheels, each bearing the letters of the alphabet. The device, allegedly designed by Leonardo, protects a written message inside and can only be opened without destroying the message if the wheels are arranged to spell the correct password (*DVC* 203–209)—again, word trumps image. Fleeing from the police, the protagonists take refuge at the estate of Leigh Teabing, an English expert on the mythology surrounding the Holy Grail, or *San Greal*, who has emigrated to France in order to facilitate his search for the Grail itself. Teabing and Langdon explain to Neveu and to the reader that the identity of the Grail is encoded within Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. They allege that the figure to Christ’s right is Mary Magdalene and that she was His wife and the mother of His child; the Holy Grail, the cup said to have contained the blood of Christ, is actually her womb, and *San Greal* should actually be read (in another anagram of sorts) as *Sang Real*—royal blood (*DVC*, 249–61). Despite the fact that this scene provides some opportunity for a discussion of the *Last Supper*, including the claim that the ancient symbols for male and female are hidden within its structure, even here Brown foregrounds the notion of text concealed inside the painting. The shape of “Mary Magdalene” and Christ, Teabing claims, forms the letter
M—“Conspiracy theorists,” he explains, “will tell you that it stands for Matrimonio or Mary Magdalene. To be honest, nobody is certain. The only certainty is that the hidden M is no mistake” (DVC, 254).

With Teabing joining the pair of fugitives, they discover an inscription hidden inside the box that contains the cryptex. It is a riddle in the form of two verse couplets whose answer will unlock the device and reveal the message within:

An ancient word of wisdom frees this scroll.
And helps us keep her scatter’d family whole.
A headstone praised by Templars is the key.
And Atbash will reveal the truth to thee. (DVC, 311)

Atbash is identified as a simple substitution code using the vowelless Hebrew alphabet (DVC, 312); the “key” is Baphomet (or B-P-V-M-Th in Hebrew), whose image the Templars were accused of worshiping (DVC, 323–25); and when decoded using Atbash, B-P-V-M-Th becomes Sh-V-P-Y-A, or “Sofia,” an ancient word meaning “wisdom” and, of course, Neveu’s own first name (DVC, 327).

Although this word opens the cryptex, they discover inside a smaller cryptex accompanied by yet another textual riddle:

In London lies a knight a Pope interred.
His labor’s fruit a Holy wrath incurred.
You seek the orb that ought be on his tomb.
It speaks of Rosy flesh and seeded womb. (DVC, 342)

Ultimately, a textual pun in the riddle proves to be the key to its decipherment: “a Pope” must be read as “A. Pope” or “Alexander Pope,” who wrote Sir Isaac Newton’s epitaph and presided over
his interment at Westminster Abbey (*DVC*, 393–94). Brown’s final opportunity to use an image as a substantive clue in the mystery goes unexploited. Although Neveu and Langdon must examine the tomb, they are searching for an orb that the image does not represent. The tomb is not legible or subject to decipherment because the key to unlocking the cryptex is the word for that which is invisible, not by virtue of being hidden within an image but rather by virtue of being excluded from it: the word *apple* opens the second cryptex and leads to the solution of mystery (*DVC*, 425).

Although *The Da Vinci Code* provides the best and most extensive set of examples of the privileging of word over image in popular texts of its ilk, several other works demonstrate that Brown’s reliance on anagrams in particular is a common technique throughout the genre.

With respect to works of art, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* is centrally concerned with Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds*. The actual image is important to the authors to the extent that the landscape depicted in the background is alleged to resemble the vista around the site of a similar tomb near Rennes-le-Château, but the only other attention given to Poussin’s painting is speculation that the inscription *ET IN ARCADIA EGO* could be an anagram for a Latin phrase meaning “BEGONE! I CONCEAL THE SECRETS OF GOD.”

The mystery in *The Pegasus Secret* surrounds a copy of Poussin’s painting in which the inscription reads “ET IN ARCADIA EGO SUM,” an anagram for *Arcam Dei Jesu Tango*, “I touch the

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133 Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, 18. It is worth noting at this juncture that Brown’s evident fascination with anagrams extends even to his characters’ names. “Leigh Teabing” is an homage to Richard Leigh and Michael Baigent, whose surname is an anagram for “Teabing.” Mnookin, “The Da Vinci Clone?,” 103. The name “Jacques Saunière” is an allusion to Bérenger Saunière, a priest from Rennes-le-Château whose discovery of coded parchments in his church is pivotal to the argument of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. Ibid.

tomb of God, Jesus.” The painting’s geometry plays only a minimal role in the novel; a monk explains that because the shepherds’ staffs are held at angles that create an equilateral triangle, and because the third leg of that figure would have the tomb at its center, “That means that the painting [. . .] directs the observer to the tomb itself.”

*The Flanders Panel* concerns a 1471 painting by the fictional artist Pieter van Huys, who “was always interested in symbolism, and [whose] paintings are packed with parallel readings.” Entitled *The Game of Chess*, the painting depicts two figures in the foreground at a chessboard whose pieces are rendered with the careful detail and realism typical of Netherlandish artists from the Renaissance. In the background sits a female figure dressed in black, who is identified by inscriptions on the painting as Beatrice, the wife of one of the players, the fictional Duke Ferdinand of Ostenburg (*FP*, 2–7). The other player is Roger de Arras, a knight in the Duke’s service who had been assassinated two years before the painting’s completion (*FP*, 21–22). Significantly, his name connotes a wall hanging decorated with an image and behind which characters in Renaissance dramas, most famously Polonius in *Hamlet*, often conceal themselves. Both the mystery and the

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135 On an unnumbered acknowledgments page, Loomis thanks Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger for “the suggested translation of the Latin puzzle in Poussin’s painting.” He does not, however, express gratitude to Dan Brown for the name of his protagonist, “Langford Reilly,” which evokes the name “Robert Langdon” too strongly to be a mere coincidence. Perhaps it is Dan Brown’s turn to sit in the plaintiff’s chair in a copyright infringement suit.


137 Victoria Nelson has also noticed connections between *The Flanders Panel* and *The Da Vinci Code*. “Faux Catholic,” 98.

138 Pérez-Reverte, *Flanders Panel*, 27. All further citations to *The Flanders Panel* (*FP*) will appear as parenthetical references in the main text.

139 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd ed., s.v. “arras.” Although *The Flanders Panel* was originally written in Spanish, the word “arras” derives from the name of a Flemish town in which the fabric often used for arrases was manufactured. Given the centrality of Flanders to the novel, the character’s name is probably not a coincidence peculiar to the English translation of the text.
novel begin in the present day when an art restorationist who is working on the painting discovers through radiography an inscription that has been painted over: “QUIS NECAVIT EQUITEM” or “Who killed the knight?” (FP, 2). It is only by virtue of this text that the main character discovers the painting’s status as a puzzle to be solved. Despite the importance of verbal text to the novel’s plot, its author hints that images themselves will need to be deciphered in order for the picture to be read and understood—the name “Roger de Arras” and the description of Pieter van Huys’ symbolic and multi-layered artworks both serve as tantalizing hints in this regard.

Although the heroine notices that Arras’ head is “placed exactly at the intersection of lines known in painting as the golden section” (FP, 26), which leads her to conclude that he is the subject not only of the painting but also of the hidden inscription, this only confirms knowledge that the character already had by virtue of the painting’s textually explicit identification of this figure as a knight (FP, 19). The book that the Duchess is reading in the image, an anonymous love poem attributed to Roger de Arras, allows the characters to surmise correctly that he had been having an illicit affair with her and thus to suspect that the Duke had him killed as revenge. But this particular detail proves to be nothing more than a red herring. The solution to the mystery lies in the chess game being played in the foreground—one white knight has been captured, or “killed,” and the characters must deduce from the configuration of the board which piece made the fatal move. In this sense, the painting is less a puzzle than the depiction of one, and the image does not need to be read; rather, the chess game which it contains must be played. And this mystery is solved halfway through the novel; the second half relates to murders in the present day to which the contents of the painting itself are irrelevant. In fact, the role of the painting in the story is accurately paralleled by the sentiments of the protagonists’ cynical employer: “A picture is just canvas, wood, paint and varnish.
What matters is how much it leaves in your pocket when it changes hands. [.] The rest is just fairy tales” (FP, 13).140

My final example is Javier Sierra’s *The Secret Supper*, a novel set in 1497 during Leonardo’s work on *The Last Supper* at Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan. Having heard rumors that Leonardo is encoding heretical messages into the mural, Church officials send a Dominican priest to investigate. Although both *The Last Supper* and Leonardo’s *Maestà* are subjected to symbolic and iconographical analysis during the course of the novel, it is ultimately the written word, Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, which allows the question of Leonardo’s rumored heresies to be solved and which reveals that *The Last Supper* is itself legible as a text. In *The Golden Legend* each of Christ’s disciples is given a descriptive attribute. Bartholomew, for example, is designated *Mirabilis* or “He Who Is Miraculous,” and Peter is *Exosus* or “He Who Hates.”141 When the initial of each disciple’s Latin attribute is positioned relative to his placement in *The Last Supper*, and Christ designated by the letter A based on his shape in the image, the painting spells out “MUT NEM A LOS NOC” (Figure 24). This phrase means nothing until the protagonist recalls Leonardo’s unusual habit of writing backwards, so that *The Last Supper* spells out the word “CONSOLAMENTUM,” the name of the sacrament practiced by the heretical Cathars, and which the image of Christ symbolically extends to all those who pass through the door beneath it.


As these examples demonstrate, popular texts which operate according to the trope of the legible image or the decipherment model of visual hermeneutics frequently devalue the purely visual and non-linguistic dimensions of images in favor of an approach that presents the image as a repository for a latent or concealed text, by virtue of which the image acquires its ability to be read. We could perhaps attribute this pattern to nothing more than a familiar privileging of the verbal over the visual, what Mitchell refers to as “a tacit assumption of the superiority of words to visual images.”[^142] But this explanation seems not only too facile to account for the unusual frequency with which this phenomenon emerges in popular texts but also too little like an explanation at all: in the manner of a tautology, it merely affixes a shorthand term to the pattern, dismissing it by naming it rather than determining its fundamental causes. We could also interpret these examples as merely evidence of a failure of the imagination on the part of writers who, being much more familiar and

[^142]: “Word and Image,” 55.

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comfortable with words than with images, have taken the legible image metaphor too literally and too far—if images can be read, these texts seem to say, then they must be legible in the same sense that texts are.\textsuperscript{143} This account would certainly be consistent with the fact that Iain Pears, for example, does not do this sort of thing in his novels whereas writers without training in art history and criticism do. But it fails to explain the intersection between this phenomenon in popular texts and a similar move that has become common in contemporary scholarship: “pictures provoke art historians merely because they are less familiar than texts. All art historians write, but relatively few draw with any relevant degree of facility” (\textit{WAOPP}, 15).\textsuperscript{144}

Two other patterns in the texts that I have examined point toward a better explanation, or at least toward the beginnings of one. First, the overwhelming majority of popular works within this genre focus on Renaissance images. With the exception of Lewis Purdue’s \textit{Daughter of God}, in fact, \textit{every} text that I have examined for the purposes of this study has had one or more Renaissance artworks at its center. Out of the works that I have identified as part of the genre but not studied, only Peter Ackroyd’s \textit{Chatterton} and Wilson Bryan Key’s works on advertising seem to deal with

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\item[\textsuperscript{143}] “[I]t is much easier to read, or to tell stories, than to stare at the peculiarities of a stubbornly silent and senselessly wordless object.” Elkins, \textit{On Pictures}, 267. Alan Jacobs adopts a similar explanation for the popular idea of hidden meanings in a more general sense that includes the interpretation of literary texts as well: “these fanciful tales appeal to what I can only call our plain laziness. The interpretation of literary texts is actually hard work. [. . .] But the code breakers offer a much more consoling message. They tell us that we don’t need to read carefully or think hard or labor for years on end. All the work that needs to be done they have already done. Understanding is nothing more than putting the right key in the right lock.” “The Code Breakers,” 16–17. Albeit in the same vein, a more charitable explanation might be supplied by James A. W. Heffernan’s claim that ekphrasis or language itself “releases a narrative impulse which graphic art restricts.” “Ekphrasis and Representation,” \textit{New Literary History} 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 297–316, 302.
\item[\textsuperscript{144}] Mitchell sees the same trend, but does not make the connection as explicitly as Elkins does. On one hand, Mitchell asks, “What is art history, after all, if not an attempt to find the right words to interpret, explain, describe, and evaluate visual images?” “Word and Image,” 48. But he also says that “One of the more depressing sights in contemporary art history is the rush to fix on some master term (discourse, textuality, semiosis, and culture come to mind) that will solve the mystery of visual experience and representation and dissolve the difference between word and image.” Ibid., 49.
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post-Renaissance images. This pattern might be independently explicable by virtue of the fact that “In many respects the Renaissance is the origin of our ways of writing about art: it is the period in which pictures first became the objects of intensive intellection, and were first able to bear the weight of philosophic and critical concepts” (WAOPP, 22). Moreover, what Panofsky calls the emblematic spirit of the age\textsuperscript{145} led to a sort of fusion of word and image as “Renaissance art,” according to Liselotte Dieckmann, “became flooded with hieroglyphics”\textsuperscript{146} and cryptomorphic and anamorphic images acquired what Leader describes as a “curious vogue.”\textsuperscript{147} Marguerite A. Tassi, focusing specifically on images from the English Renaissance, offers a more extended explanation:

> It seems logical to conclude that Elizabethan pictorial artists adopted anti-illusionist painting techniques in response to reformed views of images. They often inscribed paintings with texts, names, and dates, and depicted their sitters as pallid, unexpressive figures set in flat, linear spatial arrangements. Their pictures appear to have been designed as texts for reading; indeed, many portraits, with their allegorical features and inscriptions, must have struck viewers forcefully as representations or symbols conveying specific information and ideas, rather than as aesthetically pleasing likenesses.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{145} “Titian’s Allegory of Prudence: A Postscript,” in Meaning in the Visual Arts, 146–68, 159.

\textsuperscript{146} Hieroglyphics, 44.

\textsuperscript{147} Stealing the Mona Lisa, 135.

\textsuperscript{148} Scandal of Images, 52–53.
In any case, the period’s belief that hidden truths can be read out of both images and texts, according
to Gombrich, “still lingers as an undercurrent of European thought”\textsuperscript{149} and serves as a foundation
for the iconographical approach to images, which Damisch says “is theoretically founded on the
postulate that the artistic image (and indeed any relevant image) achieves a signifying articulation
only within and because of the textual reference which passes through and eventually imprints itself
in it.”\textsuperscript{150}

The second pattern is a recurrent religious subtext coalescing around the theme of heresy.\textsuperscript{151} Almost without exception these works and their characters revisit the historical origins of
Christianity and encounter narratives that tend to contradict orthodox belief. Christ was married and
fathered a child by Mary Magdalene. Christ’s death at the Crucifixion was a hoax perpetrated to
allow Him and Mary to escape from charges of anti-Judaic heresy in the Holy Land, and the
Resurrection is therefore merely a myth. The notion of Christ’s divinity originated in a rigged vote
at the First Council of Nicea, orchestrated by the emperor Constantine. Christ was Divine, but
subordinate in importance to John the Baptist. Christ was Divine, but so were other messiahs who
came after Him, including women. All of these heretical narratives, and others, play central roles
in the plots of most of these works.

\textsuperscript{149} “\textit{Icones Symbolicae},” 169.

\textsuperscript{150} “Semiotics and Iconography,” 237.

\textsuperscript{151} See Nelson, “Faux Catholic,” 106 (“the populace has a strong appetite for heresy that \textit{The Da Vinci Code}
and other works of popular fiction help to feed”).
These two patterns, the themes of the Renaissance and of heresy, point us singularly toward the Reformation, with its “insistence,” O’Connell says, “on *scriptura*, on what is written—and only what is written.”

**D. IMPLICATIONS**

**Iconophilia in the English Reformation and Iconophobia Today**

During the Reformation, the image becomes associated with the ritual and spectacle of the Roman Catholic Mass, in which the spiritual Word is reduced to mere matter not by an act of Divine will but by the priest in the non-scriptural and sacrilegious act of transubstantiation. Just as Roman Catholics came to be seen as idolaters, many Protestants adopted a position that O’Connell has dubbed *logolatry*: “a heterodox identification of the *Logos* with the word of scripture, rather than with the preexistent Christ.” And this “crisis in the relation of image and word” culminates in iconoclasm, the destruction of images that threaten to consume the text, the word, and the Word.

Indeed, the actual destruction of an image is a key plot point in *Daughter of God*, in which the mystery’s answer is literally “behind the image”; the physical layers of paint conceal a gold ingot, and uncovering this secret requires that the image be effaced, a task which is unceremoniously completed in a brief operation involving a rag and a bottle of turpentine. Peter Watson’s *Landscape of Lies* focuses more explicitly on the Reformation and the Protestant aversion to images.

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154 “Idolatrous Eye,” 287.

155 Ibid.

156 Purdue, *Daughter of God*, 238.
The premise of the novel is that a Roman Catholic monastery during the reign of Henry VIII managed to hide its valuable assets—including a silver reliquary, a jewel-encrusted map of the True Cross, an ivory crosier, and a silver communion chalice—before they could be seized by authorities charged with the task of dissolving Roman Catholic institutions in England. In order to preserve the memory of the location where these objects were hidden, the monks created a painting that could be iconographically read like a treasure map. It was one of the only items left in the monastery when Henry’s Visitor arrived, and one of his descendants enlists the aid of an art dealer to help her decipher the painting. Significantly, the clues to the monks’ hiding place simulate a descent through hell, an added layer of symbolic detail designed to deter the unworthy from pursuing the search.

If, as Mitchell suggests, “Texts present, in general, a greater threat to concepts of the ‘integrity’ or ‘purity’ of images than vice versa,” then the contemporary works of popular literature that I have been examining in this case study—works that imprint words upon images, reducing them to texts that are literally legible—can be said both to represent and to reenact the iconoclastic movement of the Reformation. This section, therefore, has two phenomena to explain. First, in reenacting Reformation iconoclasm, how do these works speak more broadly about the effects of Renaissance-era discourses on contemporary life? Second, in representing the iconoclasm of the Reformation, and of the Reformation in England more particularly, what do these contemporary

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ludic interpretations of images—if we can somehow read backward in time—tell us about discourses of word and image during that period?

My answers to these questions focus upon the twinned concepts of iconophobia (or a fear of images) and iconophilia (or an attraction to images). I suggest that the two sentiments were deeply entwined with one another during the English Reformation, and that they remain so today, with the result that a strict binary is of only limited utility in describing a culture’s reactions to images. The site at which the ludic and incarnational image is positioned is also a point of intersection between iconophobic and iconophilic reactions; these images simultaneously repel and attract us, for their complexity and richness are, on one hand, visually appealing and even fun while, on the other hand, they are reminders of the frightening power that images can hold over us. In *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?* Elkins offers nine possible explanations for the widespread attitude among art historians and critics that pictures are densely complex and therefore need to be solved. What I am suggesting here is a tenth hypothesis, one that Elkins has not explored.

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158 [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.


159 Thomas F. X. Noble places iconophobia and iconophilia on a hypothetical continuum between the extremes of iconoclasm (the destruction of images) and iconodulia (the worship of images). “Neither Iconoclasm Nor Iconodulia,” 95. James A. Knapp adopts a binary in which iconophobia is associated with the Reformation and iconophilia is associated with Roman Catholicism. *Image Ethics*, 4.
1. **Iconophilia in the English Reformation**

As I have been arguing, contemporary, ludic interpretations of Renaissance-era images bear traces of early modern interpretive and representational practices. It is where those interpretations may seem least credible and most torturous that they point most directly to a similarly playful and extravagant facet of a certain class of pictures created during the English Reformation: Holbein’s *The French Ambassadors* (Figure 17), Scrots’ *King Edward VI* (Figures 18 and 19), and the anonymous corrugated anamorphosis of a woman and a skull (Figures 20 and 21).

These images, however, are not at all what we might expect to see during the English Reformation. First, like Maignan’s anamorphic fresco of St. Francis di Paola (Figures 15 and 16), these works seem to be more acceptable to a Roman Catholic sensibility than to a Reformed one. Not merely incarnational, they also tend to evoke the doctrine of transubstantiation in the way that they present one thing as almost magically consisting of two essences. Scrots’ anamorphic portrait of Prince Edward is similarly out of place given its sitter’s deep distrust of images and the fact that images were vigorously broken in his name as part of the English Reformation’s most determined phase of iconoclasm. The sheer novelty of the corrugated anamorphic *memento mori* positions that

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160 Except where I have cited to other sources, my account of the history of images in the English Reformation is indebted to John Phillips’ *Reformation of Images*. Throughout this account, the reader should remain sensitive to Phillips’ wise cautionary note: “iconoclasm itself is too complex a phenomenon to be identified simply with a type of religious thinking.” Ibid., 7. Waldron also observes the complexities inherent in attempts to generalize briefly about the theology of images during the period: “the differences among ‘Anglicans,’ ‘puritans,’ and others during this period were often those of emphasis and degree rather than kind—a sliding scale of temperature within the same current of Protestant culture.” *Reformations of the Body*, 11.
piece as mannerist in execution and design,\textsuperscript{161} therefore associating it more closely with Counter-Reformation tendencies than with those of the Reformation.\textsuperscript{162}

Moreover, these works are strikingly inconsistent with even the fairly liberal and tolerant views of Martin Luther toward images; although images were acceptable for use in teaching, “Luther’s mandate hardly changed images for the better,” Koerner says. “Didacticism required that the image become less rather than more: less visually seductive, less emotionally charged, less semantically rich.”\textsuperscript{163} Little commentary is required to demonstrate that the images examined above do not fit this description.

If these images from the English Reformation do not square with Lutheran sentiments about images, then they are certainly well beyond what English Calvinists might have been expected to tolerate. Calvinists’ views on images were much more radical than Luther’s,\textsuperscript{164} and they were much more influential on the iconoclastic movement in Reformed English thought. What James Simpson calls “legislated iconoclasm” was official state policy in England for over a century, from 1538 to 1643, “despite periods of respite and image-making within those years,”\textsuperscript{165} and this state-sanctioned


\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Reformation of the Image}, 28. Koerner also describes the “formal blandness” and “semantic transparency” of Lutheran images. Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{164} See ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Under the Hammer}, 5.
destruction of images principally drew from Calvinist doctrine,\textsuperscript{166} although images were broken first in the name of Lollardy and later in that of Puritanism. Although it is important to note that Calvin distinguished between quick and dead images, so that “Liveliness” became what Waldron calls “the defining attribute for lawful channels of communication with the divine,”\textsuperscript{167} Calvin’s emphasis on Christ as the “true ‘lively image’ of God” renders human bodies, rather than painted images, the cardinal lawful means for expressing devotion.\textsuperscript{168}

Quite typically, Elizabeth was more moderate in her position on images, although she did acquiesce at one point in her reign to the destruction of the remaining crucifixes in English Reformed churches.\textsuperscript{169} The doctrine of the Elizabethan settlement was primarily a functional one, focusing less on the content and style of an image than on how it was used, yet it almost insistently refused to define with precision what constituted proper and improper use.\textsuperscript{170} We know, however, that Elizabeth came to replace forbidden icons with images of royal power, like her portrait or coat of arms, and the result of this move was often a rather flat rendering of the monarch—in an iconic style—more similar to what we saw in Hilliard’s \textit{The Pelican Portrait} (Figure 23) than in the other images that I have analyzed in this case study.

Indeed, it is only with the advent of the Stuart dynasty and later of William Laud’s archepiscopacy—well after the composition dates of the images in question here—that we begin to

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\item According to Hans Belting, Karlstadt’s views about images were similar—removing them was “an opportunity for activism.” \textit{Likeness and Presence}, 459. Zwingli advocated “a middle position” of removing images in an orderly manner. Ibid., 460.
\item \textit{Reformations of the Body}, 29.
\item Ibid., 48.
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see a shift in attitudes that might comport with the style of those images.\footnote{Although Richard Hooker did not explicitly mention images in his works of Reformed theology, “he sets the stage for their acceptance and re-entry into churches.” Ibid., 137.} James continued the ambiguous terms of the Elizabethan Settlement in public statements, but in actual practice he relished the comeliness that accompanied his adornment of royal chapels with, in John Phillips’ account, “gilded figures of apostles and patriarchs.”\footnote{Ibid., 141.} Laud advocated a liturgy that appealed to all of the senses, not excluding the visual, and Charles advanced his program in that regard, perhaps even more aggressively than Laud himself would have desired. Sympathetic preachers included John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes. For Donne, the identification of a practice with Roman Catholicism, such as the use of images to decorate a service, did not render that practice inherently illegitimate in a Reformed context: “It is a perverse way, rather to abolish Things and Names […] because they have been abused, then to reduce them to their right use.”\footnote{S, 7:325.} McCullough has compared Andrewes’ vision to Luther’s in its “composite logo-iconophilia.”\footnote{“Lancelot Andrewes’ Transforming Passions,” Huntington Library Quarterly 71, no. 4 (December 2008): 573–89, 583.} But the fact remains: Holbein, Scrots, and the anonymous painter of the corrugated anamorphosis were, in at least this sense, ahead of their time.

A logical counter-argument—that those images are secular rather than religious in purpose and design—is not quite tenable. First, granting the objection that Scrots’ anamorphic portrait of young prince Edward is principally secular in nature, Holbein and the anonymous creator of the corrugated anamorphosis are quite evidently communicating religious content in their works. Holbein’s half-concealed cross converts his image of two state officials into a meditation on the
hiddenness of God, and the corrugated anamorphosis (perhaps even more so than Holbein’s similarly themed painting) seems intended as a private devotional reminder of the sitter’s mortality, a memento mori that prompts the sitter and other viewers to recall the centrality of non-earthly concerns to their lives. Second, the images with which I opened this case study cannot be considered flat or impoverished when they are considered carefully: Cranach’s Hallowed Be Thy Name (Figure 8) and the anonymous frontispiece to Milbourne’s The Christian Pattern Paraphras’d (Figure 9), although didactic and religious in nature, are notably rich in design despite the fact that they are neither anamorphic nor designed to contain concealed images.

As a consequence, there must be a thread of iconophilia woven into the iconophobic tapestry that constitutes iconoclastic thought during the English Reformation. Indeed, Simpson has noted just that such a phenomenon is nearly inevitable: “Even as evangelicals insisted on the utter lifelessness of the image, their attack evokes the spectral presence of the image.” Such a theory might explain the popularity of two other genres of discourse during the period: rebuses, what Koerner calls “verbal-visual picture puzzles” in which “evangelical polemic and pedagogy [were] often couched,” and emblems, which married word and image into a single, fused unit. In other words, the superimposition of the verbal upon the visual that we saw in contemporary popular texts

175 Knapp approaches this theory in advancing his thesis that, although “early modern English culture was predominantly antivisual,” “the period’s literature reveals an obsession with visual experience.” Image Ethics, 1–2.

176 Under the Hammer, 70.

about Renaissance images is not a new phenomenon at all; it merely continues a Reformation-era strategy for managing anxieties about purely visual discourses.\textsuperscript{178}

2. Iconophobia Today

Reformation iconoclasm was simply one manifestation of the West’s long tradition of iconophobia, “a fear of imagery,” as Mitchell puts it, traceable to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews and still very much a part of contemporary consciousness.\textsuperscript{179} “Everyone knows,” he says, “that television is bad for you and that its badness has something to do with the passivity and fixation of the spectator. But then people have always known, at least since Moses denounced the Golden Calf, that images were dangerous.”\textsuperscript{180} Fear of the image expresses itself in the Platonic and Christian idea of the uncertainty of appearances and what Jurgis Baltrušaitis calls “the inconstancy and vanity of the world.”\textsuperscript{181} It parallels the association of the self with a speaking and thinking subject and of the

\textsuperscript{178} Koerner, for instance, discusses the unusual emergence of altarpieces that consisted not of images but of framed \textit{words}, in which language was “Materialized for display.” Ibid., 289. As Koerner explains, “where one expects to find a subordination of all external codes—images, writing, ritual, etc.—to the signified, to inner sense, to the message in the heart, one instead discovers \textit{language}.” Ibid.

I am indebted to James A. Knapp for the idea that early modern English culture exhibited “an anxiety over the use of images.” \textit{Image Ethics}, 32. As he explains, the common “interjection of words into visual images” was a way to “contain visual excess.” Ibid., 35. But see also Huston Diehl’s study of Reformation-era English theater, in which he argues that language, for the Calvinist mind, sanctified the naked visuality of the Roman Catholic sacraments. \textit{Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 103–105.


\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Picture Theory}, 2.

\textsuperscript{181} \textit{Anamorphic Art}, 70. See also Tassi, \textit{Scandal of Images}, 38 (“The plentiful tirades against spectacle and spectatorship [during the English Renaissance] reflect a Platonic distrust of the world of appearances, which is apprehended primarily through the eyes”).
Other with, as Mitchell puts it, “a silent, observable object, a visual image.”\textsuperscript{182} And it resonates with another “longstanding binary opposition” that Tassi has noted: the privileged realm of mentation and reason versus the inferiority of sensual, bodily, erotic existence.\textsuperscript{183}

I suspect that iconophobia is also a force in the texts that I have analyzed in this study, and particularly in those which seem to make images legible by transforming them into words. The kinds of paintings which these works typically feature are not merely images but objects of monetary and cultural value. They are things that the wealthy buy and sell, display in their homes, or donate to museums; they are things that the educated study, visit, and understand; they are artifacts of a history that is rarely taught and that therefore seems distant, alien, and intimidating, whose language we can neither speak nor understand. They are associated, in other words, with status. Contemporary popular texts simultaneously appeal to, or perhaps exploit, our fear that we are outsiders (\textit{i.e.}, that we do not understand these images) and our desire to be considered insiders (\textit{i.e.}, that we \textit{do} understand them).\textsuperscript{184}

This conclusion resonates with the existence of an elitist aura that has long been associated with objects of art; the greatest Renaissance paintings, as Edgar Wind says, “were designed for

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  \item \textsuperscript{182} “Word and Image,” 55. Mitchell has also argued that an \textit{idol} can be considered as “an image overvalued (in our opinion) by an \textit{other}: by pagans and primitives; by children or foolish women; by Papists and ideologues.” Iconology, 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{183} Scandal of Images, 22 (“painting belongs to the realm of the senses, the eyes, the body; poetry belongs to the realm of the mind, reason, understanding”).
  \item \textsuperscript{184} Dan Brown’s \textit{The Da Vinci Code} “gives the reader the misleading impression of being fully initiated into the history of ‘high’ art and literature, of being an \textit{Übermensch} of literary and artistic culture.” Ivanovitch, “Dan Brown,” 315. Mexal argues that “it reveals a deep longing, in a global, transnational public, for a coherent master historical narrative.” “Realism,” 1091–92.
\end{itemize}
initiates; hence they require an initiation.”*185 Keith Moxey argues that the hermetic quality of
Hieronymus Bosch’s work, for example, has been “interpreted as a device by which meaning could
be hidden from those who were regarded as socially (and morally) inferior.”*186 The vogue for
hieroglyphics and emblems, according to Panofsky, was fueled in part by the appeal of “an
ideographic vocabulary independent of linguistic differences, expansible ad libitum and intelligible
only to an international elite.”*187 There existed during the Renaissance what Settis has described as
an “elitist delight in the inexplicit which only the ‘initiated’ few could understand.”*188 Art “strove
for a code of iconographic ambiguity, and served the private learning of the few people who could
understand it.”*189 This constellation of ideas has roots in the Western tradition going back at least
as far as Christian Rome and On Christian Doctrine, in which St. Augustine wrote that the Holy
Spirit contrived ambiguities within Scripture in order “to conquer pride by work and to combat
disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become
worthless.”*190


*186 Practice of Theory, 113.

*187 “Titian’s Allegory of Prudence,” 159.

*188 Giorgione’s Tempest, 127.

*189 Ibid., 137.

for the present study, St. Augustine also identifies a ludic dimension to scriptural obscurity: “in a strange way, I
contemplate the saints more pleasantly when I envisage them as the teeth of the Church cutting off men from their errors
and transferring them to her body after their hardness has been softened as if by being bitten and chewed.” Ibid. St.
Augustine does not venture an explanation for the pleasures of obscurity, instead describing them as “a problem for
another discussion.” Ibid., 38 (2.6.8).
My tentative conclusion is also consistent with an “anxiety to interpret” postulated by Alberto Manguel—“even the absence of language becomes language in the eye of the beholder.” Elkins, in particular, suggests that even art historians and critics write so much because we fear not writing, where “not writing” is understood in absolute terms as not speaking, not teaching, not knowing what to say, and ultimately, not understanding. Art history and criticism would then be driven by an inverse perversity, speaking continuously in order not to spend time thinking about the fact that visual objects have nothing obviously or simply to do with speaking. The incessant claims to knowledge would be the symptoms of a low-level ineradicable anxiety about understanding artworks. (WAOPP, 249)

“Art history as a whole,” Elkins continues, “may be a collection of ways of coping with a feeling of helpless bewilderment—a feeling that grows whenever we take the time to attend to the persistent, senseless silence of images” (WAOPP, 249). Jean Baudrillard offers a similar explanation for Renaissance iconoclasm. The iconoclasts’ “metaphysical despair” resulted from “the overwhelming, destructive truth” that icons suggest:

that ultimately there has never been any God, that only the simulacrum exists, indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum, [. . .] the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images [. . .] but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the divine referential has to be exorcised at all cost.192

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191 Reading Pictures, 29 (quoting Giovanna Franci, L’anza dell’interpretazione [Modena: Mucchi, 1989]).
192 Simulations, 8–9.
If iconophobia is a product of our recognition that mute and powerless images, in Mitchell’s words, “may be in the process of taking power, appropriating a voice,” then contemporary popular texts suggest that it also results from our recognition of the possibility that we may lack power ourselves.

Yet the instability of the word/image dialectic means that iconophobia never exists without a dimension of iconophilia, and vice versa. According to Moshe Barasch:

Even the most enthusiastic champion of pictures acknowledges, by the very fact that he or she has to defend the image’s validity, that the object of his or her veneration is problematic. On the other hand, the student also knows that the philosophers, religious or political leaders, or simply fanatical believers who rejected sacred images as lies, as appearances lacking in substance, rarely merely neglected or ignored them, as one would perhaps expect if something is believed to be devoid of truth and vigor.

God forbade the Jews from making idols, but then directed them to make an ark topped by images of cherubs. If Plato’s suspicion of the sensory world makes him “the father of iconoclasm,” as Alain Besançon calls him, he is also “the father of iconophilia, since he completely justifies man’s desire to contemplate divine beauty.” And one of the principal arguments against idolatry—the non-physical and therefore unrepresentable nature of the Divine—leads to the conclusion that when the Scriptures say that God made humanity “in His image” what they mean is that the human mind and

193 Iconology, 151.

194 Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 1–2. Similarly, Baudrillard says that “the iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth, unlike the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove.” Simulations, 9.

195 Forbidden Image, 36.
soul, traditionally more highly valued in the West than the body, are *themselfs* images, created in the likeness of the Divine essence, the Logos, the Word.196

This ambivalence toward the image, a simultaneous repulsion and attraction, is as much a part of the Western tradition as either iconophobia or iconophilia alone, and it can also be seen in the texts that this chapter has explored. Although heresy is a consistent theme in these works, they position Church orthodoxy as the true province of the heretic, and the heroes of those texts tend to be engaged in a struggle to reveal a truth that the Church would suppress as heretical; even the priest sent to investigate Leonardo’s heresy in *The Secret Supper* becomes a Cathar. Although the image is presented as a site of danger—to possess it or to know its secret is to become a target for murder—the denouement inevitably presents the image as a source of truth and virtue; the act of deciphering and reading it yields a victory over evil and a return to normalcy.

The idea that images possess hidden meanings which can be deciphered and read in textual terms might therefore be a strange way of ascribing value to those images, of appropriating them, or of inscribing the value of the written word upon them. Even assuming that this approach represents an imperfect or unsophisticated understanding of how images function (an assumption, of course, which is not to be cavalierly made), it nevertheless constitutes an attempt at comprehension, a gesture in the direction of finding within the inaccessible Otherness of images something that can be appreciated and known. As a result, to understand the image as a vessel of verbal or textual meaning is not necessarily to privilege the latter over the former. The image is a

196 Ibid., 93. See also Barasch, *Icon*, 134–35.
code which conceals, and in this sense its virtue is to be mysterious, as well as a code which communicates, and in this sense its virtue is to be clear.197

According to Martin Jay, “we may well be entering a new period of distrusting vision, an era reminiscent of the other great iconoclastic moments in Western culture.”198 Mitchell, on the other hand, interprets this anxiety about the visual as “a sure sign that a pictorial turn is taking place.”199 Regardless of which view is ultimately correct, popular texts like The Da Vinci Code are critical evidence of our culture’s attitude toward both words and images. O’Connell says that “Iconoclasm was an important social aspect of the Reformation in Europe, far-reaching in its impact on the national cultures it touched.”200 I contend that iconoclasm and the fear of images that animated it were such powerful forces during the period that their echoes are still audible today.201


198 “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism,” Poetics Today 9, no. 2 (1988): 307–26, 313. See also O’Connell, Idolatrous Eye, 4 (“It is a striking fact that over the past two decades our own suspicions and anxieties about the image have surfaced, apprehensions that, if not iconoclastic in their result, are pervasive in the culture”).

199 Picture Theory, 13.

200 Idolatrous Eye, 4.

201 For a book-length treatment of a similar argument, see James Simpson’s Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition. Simpson contends that “iconoclasm is not ‘somewhere else.’ Instead, it lies buried deep within Western modernity, and especially deep within the Anglo-American tradition.” Ibid., 11–12. “The effects of the century long, ferocious repression of the pre-Reformation visual regime by early modern evangelical English and Scottish clerics are profound. They continue to ripple through Anglo-American culture.” Ibid., 15.
E. CODA
Herbert’s Play in Anamorphic Perspective

Like John Donne, George Herbert, whose insistently visual poem “The Altar” is the subject of the next case study, plays in a mode that might be productively linked to anamorphism. Given Herbert’s penchant for experimenting with the relationships between words and images—not only in “The Altar” but also in “Easter-Wings,” “Coloss. 3.3,” and “Paradise”—it should not come as a surprise that he would incorporate such a popular visual technique into his verse. I shall consider in this coda, which serves as a transition to the next chapter, three short lyrics in which Herbert plays anamorphically.

The bivalence of anamorphosis is a key element of “Redemption,” a central dimension of how the poem operates upon its reader by forcing him or her, along with the poem’s speaker, constantly to shift perspectives:

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancell th’ old.

5 In heaven at his manour I him sought:
They told me there, that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight return’d, and knowing his great birth,
10 Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth

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202 See Eric B. Song, “Anamorphosis and the Religious Subject of George Herbert’s ‘Coloss. 3.3,’” Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900 47, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 107–21. Song describes “Coloss. 3.3” as a “visual puzzle” (ibid., 108), and asserts that “the incarnation lies at the heart of the poem” (ibid., 116).

203 Ibid., 107 (“George Herbert experiments in clever and often profound ways with the interplay between visual and literary traditions”).
The reader’s experience of perspective-shifting begins in the poem’s title and its first line. Given the obvious Christian theme of *The Temple*, we expect when we encounter “Redemption” to be reading a poem about *redemption* in the religious sense, but the speaker’s immediate reference to himself as a “tenant” (“R,” 1) suggests *redemption* in a legal sense, the “buying back of something offered as security, [especially] mortgaged property or a pawned item” or “The action or fact of discharging or paying off a debt, obligation, or charge.” Later references in the poem confirm that the title is anamorphic in its bivalence. “Lord” (“R,” 1) can reference Christ or allude to a feudal land-owner; the “new small-rented lease” that the speaker seeks as a replacement or substitute for “th’ old” (“R,” 4) is simultaneously another reference to a redemption transaction at law and an allusion to a different kind of contract, the Old Testament covenant of law that is transcended and fulfilled in Christ’s New Testament covenant of grace; and the speaker’s reference to the Lord being “lately gone / About some land, which he had dearly bought / [. . .] to take possession” (“R,” 6–8) captures both a literal, legal sense of *redemption* as well as the term’s Christian context, in which Christ through the Incarnation reclaims the Creation generated by His spoken name.

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204 George Herbert, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), 60. All further citations to “Redemption” (“R”) will appear as parenthetical references to line numbers in the main text.


Not just a whimsical set of quibbling puns, the use of a bivalent legal term as the poem’s principal structuring device is essential to the work that “Redemption” performs. “Redemption” in its final moment is ultimately about Christ’s replacement of the covenant of law with the covenant of grace. To have the poem pivot on the two senses of its cardinal legal term is to enact within the body of “Redemption” the process by which God rejects the legalistic order that had prevailed under the Old Testament. The fact that the reader must move back and forth between a legal and a Christian sense of the word redemption provides him or her with a devotional reminder of the similar shift in God’s relationship with His Creation. “Redemption,” therefore, does not quite consume itself in its closing line, as Stanley Fish might argue, but instead stands as rather concrete and self-subsistent memento of the powerful effect of the Incarnation.

It is not only the reader who must change perspectives in order to perceive aright but rather the speaker as well. Critical commentary on “Redemption” has emphasized the speaker’s muddled understanding of his proper relationship to Christ, and Esther Gilman Richey has even gone so far

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207 According to Esther Gilman Richey, the poem’s reliance specifically on terms from the law of property is the key to understanding “Redemption.” “The Property of God: Luther, Calvin, and Herbert’s Sacrifice Sequence,” English Literary History 78, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 287–314.

208 Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature, Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994). Fish does not consider “Redemption” in his masterful analysis of poems from The Temple. I would grant that there is a sense in which the poem fulfills itself in the final line—in much the same way that Christ’s Sacrifice fulfills the harsh demands of Old Testament law—but I resist the notion that Herbert’s concluding gesture in this regard is one of self-consumption.

as to claim that he “walks through heaven blind.” He fundamentally misconceives the nature of Christ when he goes in search of the Savior “In heaven at his manour” (“R,” 5) and “in great resorts; / In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts” (“R,” 10–11), instead finding, “At length” (“R,” 12), his Lord suffering on the Cross in the wretched company “Of theeves and murderers” (“R,” 13). The jarring shift in perspective required by the speaker’s realization that, in the Incarnation, the Son of God becomes fully and abjectly human is emphasized by the enjambment between stanzas three and four: “At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth // Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied, / Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, & died” (“R.” 12–14). It is the “theeves and murderers” from whom we expect to hear “ragged noise,” and it is from Divine that we expect the sound of “mirth”—instead, we are suddenly prompted to hear, with the completion of the final sentence, the harsh sounds of misery associated with the Crucifixion and an allusion to the sounds of mirth from those who mock the Savior’s suffering on the Cross. Again, the divergent Old Testament and New Testament perspectives come into conflict here, “Redemption” mediating between them while the poem’s speaker, with the reader, undergoes “trials of interpretation” until the anamorphic bivalence of the poem resolves itself, through the perfect power of Christ’s intervening Divine language, into a complete picture.

Herbert’s anamorphic art works differently in “Jesu” and “Heaven,” in which the focus is less on the readers’ or speakers’ perceptions than on the bivalences that become evident in the

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210 “‘Small Rent’: Seventeenth-Century Parable and the Politics of Redemption,” *Studies in Philology* 92, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 102–17, 110. She has come, however, to reject or at least to qualify that assertion: “He is not a dolt, [ . . .] or naïve, or a fool.” “Property of God,” 302.

interactions between Divine and human language. In “Jesu,” the Christian speaker undergoes a conversion experience when he realizes that Christ’s name bears hidden significance:

J E S U is in my heart, his sacred name
Is deeply carved there: but th’other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev’n all to pieces: which I went to seek:
And first I found the corner, where was J,
After, where E S, and next where U was graved.
When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart he was I ease you,
And to my whole is J E S U.  

As we have already seen, this nearly cabalistic attribution of obscure meanings to etymologies and to the letters within words is a fairly common source of Renaissance-era linguistic play. In this particular instance, Herbert reflects on the fact that Christ’s name—quite literally the Word of God—incarnates that which Christ does, providing “ease” (“J,” 9) or comfort to the weary who suffer “great affliction” (“J,” 3), when seen from a different metaphorical angle or perspective, one that requires us to perceive the name “Jesu” as a set of distinct and discrete letters. Significantly, a fact that as far as I have been able to ascertain has gone unnoticed in the relatively sparse scholarly work on “Jesu,” the double meaning that the poem’s speaker finds within Christ’s name only manifests itself when that name is rendered in its Latin vocative case. In other words, only when one calls upon Christ is the inherent redemptive power within His name actualized.

212 Herbert, *English Poems*, 125. All further citations to “Jesu” (“J”) will appear as parenthetical references to line numbers in the main text.

“Heaven” works similarly by finding hidden significances in the sounds of words when they are “viewed” or understood from a different perspective, as instances of speech:

O who will show me those delights on high?

_Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know._

_Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves?
_What leaves are they? impart the matter wholly.
_Are holy leaves the Echo then of blisse?_
_What is that supreme delight?_
_Light to the minde: what shall the will enjoy?_
_But are there cares and businesse with the pleasure?_
_Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persever?_

On one level, the poem represents the questioning and solitary speaker reflecting on his relationship with Christ, yet the sounds that he hears in his own words possess an independent significance, transforming “Heaven” when viewed from this perspective into something like a catechistic exercise, with God Himself as the instructor. What the speaker hears is not the echo of his own voice, but

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214 Herbert, *English Poems*, 191. All further citations to “Heaven” (“H”) will appear as parenthetical references to line numbers in the main text.

the indwelling Christ speaking directly to him. Divine discourse, when viewed from this oblique perspective, is revealed to be so potent that it even reveals itself in the language of human beings, hidden like God Himself but accessible to the listener who attends closely to that still voice. From the standpoint of ludics, it is important to note that the “pleasure”/“Leisure” pairing (“H.” 17–18) emphasizes the central relationship in Herbert’s The Temple between devotion and play; the pleasure that accrues to the devout Christian as his heavenly reward includes a form of recreation or the opportunity to re-create himself—or to have God re-create him.

Understanding George Herbert’s use of anamorphic techniques in his verse prepares us to consider more closely “The Altar,” a shaped poem that itself embodies not one but two images, in the next case study.

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The image of George Herbert’s shaped poem, “The Altar,” appears simple and unitary, like the poem itself, but the shape is actually multistable, betraying upon closer examination not just one but two images within it. This sub-surface complexity will emerge in the following case study as an important component of Herbert’s poetic strategy in “The Altar.”

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1 See also The Temple: A Diplomatic Edition of the Bodleian Manuscript (Tanner 307), ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), 39. All further citations to “The Altar” (“A”) will appear as parenthetical references to line numbers in the main text and footnotes.
IV. A CASE STUDY OF LUDIC POETRY IN THE RENAISSANCE

Recreation and Re-Creation in “The Altar”:
The History of a Form and the Reform of Meaning

Sir, I pray deliver this little Book to my dear brother Ferrer, and tell him, he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it, and then if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul, let it be made publick; if not, let him burn it, for I and it, are less than the least of Gods mercies.  

—George Herbert

According to Jean-Christophe Van Thienen, this passage from Izaack Walton, embodying George Herbert’s apocryphal last words, “reveals Herbert’s will to turn The Temple into ‘a picture,’ i.e. an ‘imago’ of a new sort, the emblem of Anglican salvation, and to replace the Bible of the Illiterate with his own set of mental pictures so as to reconcile man to God.” In thus approaching The Temple as a work of “verbal iconoclasm,” in which Herbert sought to convert and appropriate to the Church of England a long-established set of visual and textual discourses, Van Thienen situates Herbert’s poetic project in The Temple within the array of debates that I explored in the previous case study.

Herbert, for Van Thienen, is an iconoclast, one who shatters the images of previous generations in


4 Ibid.
favor of a new way of seeing, but he is also an image-maker in the Gregorian tradition, creating a didactic picture from which even the unlettered can learn the lessons of salvation. There thus reside in *The Temple*—as described by Walton and as inflected by Van Thienen’s observations—strains both of the iconophobic and of the iconophilic traditions within Western discourse. This much should be unsurprising. Given my argument that iconophobia and iconophilia are thoroughly intertwined during the English Reformation, and given Herbert’s fusion of word and image in pattern poems like “The Altar” and “Easter-Wings,” one would expect to see this type of tension emerge from a close examination of *The Temple*.

What is more unexpected in Van Thienen’s analysis, and what is more pertinent for the purposes of this final case study, is the fact that Herbert is engaged in a re-creative project in *The Temple*. As the inheritor of a tradition of words and images that included Hebraic, pagan, and Roman Catholic influences, Herbert faced the challenge of converting—to use Van Thienen’s term—the pagan and Hebraic elements of that tradition to a Christian use, the Roman Catholic components of that tradition to a Protestant use, and both elements of the tradition to a context specific to the Protestantism of the Church of England. Given the close connections between the concepts of re-creation and recreation in Renaissance England, the re-creative nature of Herbert’s work in *The Temple* becomes associated with a form of recreation that is not what we would anticipate from a figure more commonly associated with sincere gravity than with play.5

Moreover, we see in Walton’s description of Herbert’s final words hints of another important feature of Herbert’s mission in *The Temple*. The picture that, according to Walton, Herbert wished to draw was of a highly abstract and intangible notion: “the many spiritual Conflicts that have past

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5 But see Frank J. Warnke, *Versions of Baroque: European Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 94 (an “extreme element of the play-spirit hovers constantly over the Temple”).
betwixt God and my Soul.” Of course, the problem of how (and, indeed, whether) to depict an immaterial God is part and parcel of the tensions within Western discourses between iconophobia and iconophilia. But how does one figure the immortal soul, much less a spiritual conflict passing between the soul and the God to which it aspires? To materialize, to embody in a fashion that can be rendered in words or images, this notion is to epitomize the poet’s strange and ultimately fanciful undertaking: to “give[ ] to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.”

The following case study explores one site within George Herbert’s *The Temple* at which these strands of thought unite: “The Altar,” an anamorphic poem that re-creatively and recreatively materializes, embodies, and incarnates language—indeed, an entire tradition of word/image discourses—into a concrete image in meditative imitation of the Word that was made Flesh. Within *The Temple*, Herbert plays perhaps most conspicuously in “The Altar,” a poem that incarnates and materializes language by rendering words into the image of an object.

Not coincidentally, it is among Herbert’s best-known pieces, an apparent novelty that can produce a flash of recognition even outside the community of Renaissance scholars. Something about this impression of novelty, however, seems to cheapen the poem, reducing it to a mere gimmick. Indeed, in a recent literary biography of George Herbert, John Drury barely mentions “The Altar” at all—it seems in his eyes to be a trifle, hefty on the page but not entitled to the same serious consideration as Herbert’s other verse. Where Drury chooses to reference it, moreover, he seems

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7 I am not the first to posit a connection between patterned verse and incarnationalism. See, for example, chap. 1, “The Word Made Flesh,” in Willard Bohn, *Reading Visual Poetry* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011). Bohn, however, never develops the idea encapsulated in his chapter title into a fully formed argument, relying instead on the evocative notion to introduce his text, a history of shaped verse in the twentieth century.
to damn it with faint praise, describing it and other instances of patterned verse in *The Temple* as
“heartfelt,” as if Herbert’s notoriously sincere tone were the best index of meaning. Likewise, many
critics of Herbert’s patterned verse tend to dismiss it as a curiosity. Joan Bennett, for example,
attributes Herbert’s interest in the genre to “a child-like quality of mind” (“he liked word games”)
and describes pattern poetry as “a naïve device” but one that suffices for “the simple mood” of “The
Altar.” This assessment is by no means a new phenomenon; although pattern poems attracted some
notable defenders like George Puttenham, the chorus of detractors was both louder and more
eloquent. Ben Jonson, for example, lambasted pattern poems as “A paire of sizers and a Combe
in verse,” and Gabriel Harvey complained that there was “Nothinge so absurde and fruteles, but
beinge once taken upp shall have some imitatoures.” Yet “The Altar” ranks among the richest and
most complex pieces in *The Temple*. Belying its visual unity and simplicity, its almost monolithic

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8 *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 314. Although Drury disagrees with John Dryden’s famous condemnation of shaped verse, arguing that “the insinuation that the writing of figure poems could only be a kind of quaint fiddling about falls and fails with Herbert,” Drury diminishes the tradition’s importance in understanding these poems (and particularly “The Altar”) by claiming that they are “not at all distorted by their appearance or dependent on it (they work aurally as well as visually) for their effect.” Ibid.


10 “[T]hose trifles are come from many former siecles unto our times, vncontrolled or condemned or supprest by any Pope or Patriarch or other seuere censor of the ciuill maners of men, but haue bene in all ages permitted as the conuenient solaces and recreations of mans wit.” *The Arte of English Poesie* (London: Richard Field, 1589), 85.


appearance on the page, this poem embeds within itself an intricate array of structures, allusions, and subtexts. These manifold complexities suggest a concerted strategy to imitate the Creation, the Incarnation, and the re-creative power of Christ’s Sacrifice by means of linguistic play.

In the first section of this chapter, an overture, I shall introduce the raw materials with which Herbert worked in crafting the remarkably complex poem, “The Altar,” by tracing the history of the patterned verse tradition back to its pagan origins so that it will become possible to reveal the ways in which Herbert consecrates that tradition within the text/image matrix of the poem. Section two will offer a close reading of “The Altar” designed to tease out some of this unexpected complexity and to disclose more of the poem’s heretofore hidden ludic dimension. In section three, I shall address the implications of this analysis by discussing what it might mean for Herbert to erect an altar of words at the same time that altars of stone were being re-installed in churches throughout England. Finally, in a coda based upon Herbert’s prose work, *A Priest to the Temple or, The Countrey Parson His Character, and Rule of Holy Life*, I shall attempt to bring my three case studies full circle by reflecting upon the subject of Chapter II—the role of preaching within the Reformed Church of England.

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A. OVERTURE
Herbert’s Consecration of the Shaped-Verse Tradition

As a shaped poem, “The Altar” is implicated in a rich historical context, and an important dimension of Herbert’s re-creative agenda in this piece is his deliberate and studied intervention in the tradition of pattern poetry. Therefore, to consider it “in isolation as [a] fluke[] of some kind,” as Dick Higgins says, is to miss its significance both as a poem and as a “cultural frame of reference.” I suggest that Herbert’s medium becomes part of his message; his remaking of the shaped-verse tradition enables him to physicalize the process of conversion in an imitation of the Divine Word that became Flesh.


Rosemond Tuve, of course, has stressed the importance of understanding the conventions and traditions that George Herbert inherited; she therefore disapproves of the fact that “Partly because of the picture poems, ‘The Altar’ and ‘Easter-wings’, he is often thought of as a writer who liked to perform stunts or toy with oddities.” A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 138. As Summers remarks, “Herbert, of course, no more invented the pattern poem than he invented ‘emblematic poetry’ or the religious lyric: his originality lies in his achievement with traditional materials. ‘The Altar’ and ‘Easter-wings,’ his two most famous pattern poems, are not exotic or frivolous oddities.” George Herbert, 123.
The earliest pattern poems in the Western tradition are the ancient Greek technopaigneia, a term which translates as “games of skill.”17 Six of these poems—most famously the axe, wings, and egg of Simmias of Rhodes but also including two later altar-shaped poems—survived the Middle Ages to be published in the 1555 Greek Anthology, a text with which Herbert was almost certainly familiar.18

Although the tradition of shaped verse displays obvious spiritual components, not to mention bold markers of the ludic, Herbert’s relationship to this tradition is not necessarily uncomplicated. For example, although the Greek Anthology’s two altar poems have religious themes, one by Dosiadas (Figure 26), according to Higgins, describes “a shamanistic sexual transformation of some kind,”19 and Simmias’ wing-shaped poems (see Figure 27) are tributes to the god Eros. Given that Herbert directly imitated these poems in “The Altar” and “Easter-wings,”20 one may justly consider their distinctly pagan origins to be deeply troubling. As C. C. Brown and W. P. Ingoldsby write:

17 “Commentators seem to agree that all six poems were primarily exercises in wit, jeux d’esprit.” Adler, “Technopaigneia,” 109. Adler also notes that the poems tended to “invite a playful, yet also concentrated, manner of reading” in which “reading becomes a game.” Ibid., 110. Westerweel describes the two altar-shaped poems as “puzzle poems” that encode the names, and test the reader’s knowledge, of the gods. Patterns and Patterning, 68. It is therefore not surprising that “The Altar” and “Easter-wings,” as descendants of these poems, have been described in similarly ludic terms. See, for example, Leah S. Marcus, Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and Variations in Seventeenth-Century Literature (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), 110 (“the visual punning of ‘The Altar’ and ‘Easter-wings’ […] display[s] the poet at play, building words into a sacred game for the glory of his heavenly Father”); and Frank J. Warnke, “Sacred Play: Baroque Poetic Style,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 22, no. 4 (Summer 1964): 455–64, 456 (describing the poems as forms of “intellectual play”).


19 Pattern Poetry, 19.

20 For more on the influence of the Greek technopaigneia on Herbert’s patterned verse and on English pattern poems in general, see Johnson, “Recreating the Word,” 57–58. See also Adler, “Technopaigneia,” 118 (“In England, poets generally retained the actual shapes of the technopaigneia”); Higgins, Pattern Poetry, 208 (“almost all the English pattern poetry uses shapes and forms derived from the Hellenistic Greek models”); and Higgins, “Pattern Poetry as Paradigm,” Poetics Today 10, no. 2 (Summer 1989), 401–28, 414 (“The poet [of patterned verse] has not made originality a priority but has worked within the traditions associated with the form he has chosen for a particular piece”).
“[…] Herbert opened for himself the problem of defining an attitude toward the pagan […] sources from which the [poems] drew some of their meaning.”


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21 Brown and Ingoldsby, “George Herbert’s ‘Easter-Wings,’” 131.
Yet this problem is itself an important dimension of the poems’ significance. As Chana Bloch has observed, one of Herbert’s fundamental concerns in *The Temple* is “making the old new.” My central contention, of course, is that “The Altar” is a re-creative text, in multiple overlapping senses; Herbert’s conversion of the pagan *technopaigeia* to Christian purposes both reflects and embodies this important reformative endeavor. He does not disguise the pagan origins of his shaped poems but rather embraces and even flaunts them; for Herbert to position “The Altar”

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22 *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 113. See also Van Thienen, “Anglican Recycling,” 199 (“[. . .] Herbert’s borrowings aimed at recycling—or ‘christianizing’—profane sources to define a new Anglican exempla”).

first among the pieces in “The Church” is for him to summon up associations with a pagan religious structure, in which the altar was the first object one encountered upon entering the edifice.24

“The Altar,” for example, does not possess the form of a Christian altar but rather (as Summers takes pains to point out when contesting the concept of an “extreme Anglo-Catholicism” in Herbert’s work)25 that of a Hebrew or even of a pagan sacrificial site. And the tradition of technopaigneia likely began with the engraving of poems not in the shapes of pagan altars but on the physical objects themselves. However, for Herbert to adapt the pagan tradition of depicting pagan altars in shaped poetry to the contemplation of Christ’s perfect Sacrifice—which obviated the need for other sacrifices and for the pagan and Hebrew altars on which those sacrifices were offered—is itself an extraordinarily powerful device of visual and historical rhetoric. Converting this pagan tradition to Christian purposes is simultaneously a commentary on and a poetic enactment of the process of re-creation that the Crucifixion effected. The Sacrifice of Christ as the incarnated Word was both the embodiment and the fulfillment of Old Testament law; it was the means by which God extended the grace of a new Covenant to His Creation, a new Covenant that thoroughly realigned man’s relationship with the Divine and that re-created the human world. “The Altar” illustrates and imitates this process in poetic form. As Herbert says in prose, the country parson is

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24 Joseph H. Summers, The Heirs of Donne and Jonson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 95. This effect is heightened by Herbert’s inclusion of “The Church-porch,” which Summers describes as in some respects “pre-Christian,” as the first piece in The Temple. Ibid. In that long initiatory poem, heavily predicated upon a Horatian poetics, “Herbert put the traditional, classical […] mixture of pleasure and profit to the uses of Christian didactic verse.” Ibid., 89.

25 George Herbert, 140. Summers argues instead that examining the poem in the context of its tradition reveals it to be “religiously ‘low.’” Ibid., 141.
not ashamed to use any “forme”—“he reformes, and teaches” with it. Such a re-formation (and re-creation) is precisely what Herbert accomplishes by exploiting the pagan origins of shaped verse in “The Altar”: “to Christianize,” in Mary Ellen Rickey’s words, “a patently classical genre.” The entire history of the technopaigneia tradition, including its pagan associations, is embedded within “The Altar,” and those associations are central to Herbert’s re-creative agenda in the pattern poem.

After the Greek technopaigneia the next major development in the tradition of patterned verse comes in the fourth century with the carmina quadrata of Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, better known to history as Porfyrius or Optatian. His innovations defy easy description but readily register on the eyes (Figure 28). Resembling nothing if not a contemporary word-search puzzle, this example of a carminum quadratum illustrates the defining principle of the form: it is composed in the rough shape of a square. Because the poem includes a secondary but complementary text

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26 A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson His Character, and Rule of Holy Life (London: T. Maxey, 1652), 159 (emphasis supplied). See also Stanley Stewart, George Herbert, Twayne’s English Author’s Series (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 56.

27 Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 121. See also ibid., 15 (“The Altar, then, is no mere quaint vagary of a naive sensibility, as for two centuries it was mistakenly thought to be, or even an eccentricity redeemed by its skillful combination of Biblical allusions, but rather its maker’s declaration of God’s ability to turn all of experience, even pagan tradition, to His own”).

28 Dick Higgins observes that the English poets’ imitation of shapes from the ancient Greek technopaigneia “is an instance of evoking these works from the past more or less automatically. [. . .] [A] Greek used the wing form, and so, if an English poet does the same, he evokes the Greek, at least to another Englishman who is familiar with the literature. In this way its meanings and associations are encoded in its shape.” Pattern Poetry, 208. A poet’s incorporation of visual patterns or shapes into his verse was “perhaps comparable to the function of allusion that is so much at the heart of our traditional verse.” Ibid., 6. Bart Westerweel sees Herbert imitating not just the form of these poems but also some of their content; “he manages to preserve some of the idioms of his classical examples, turning them into images with surprisingly fresh meanings.” Patterns and Patterning, 73. According to Charles A. Huttar, “Prominent for the earliest sixteenth-century practitioners of the [emblem] form was a consciousness of their continuity with the ancient world.” “Herbert and the Emblematic Tradition,” in Like Season’d Timber: New Essays on George Herbert, ed. Edmund Miller and Robert DiYanni, Seventeenth-Century Texts and Studies (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 59–100, 61.

cancelled out from the background, an *intextus* that can be read independently of the poem as a whole, the poem also exemplifies a related form, the *carminum cancellatum*.

**Figure 28.** Publilius Optatianus Porfyrius, “Carmen XIX,” c. 325. Zentralbibliothek Zürich (call number Rh 84,2).

The chi-rho monogram in this poem points to one of Optatian’s major contributions to the tradition of patterned verse: he made it, as Jeremy Adler says, “a fit vehicle for Christianity” and “prepared a metaphysical basis for the medium utilized by writers well into the Renaissance and
beyond: the poem’s meaningful shape reflected the significant order of God’s universe. Christ is symbolically implicated in Optatian’s text in much the same way that the Living Word was thought to be immanent in the fabric of reality, rendering both Himself and the Creation legible to a sufficiently sensitive reader.

Optatian’s use of the monogram also illustrates the importance of individual letters to the form, an element of the shaped verse tradition that would significantly influence Renaissance practice in general and Herbert’s entry into the genre in particular. Martin Elsky positions the shaped poems that developed from Optatian’s emphasis on letters within the context of Renaissance linguistic theory, a fusion of Humanism, Neoplatonism, and cabalistic interests in which words were “material things that belong to the same network of resemblances that endows natural objects with allegorical meaning.” Letters received as much attention as words in this theory, so much so that the process of forming words from letters was, according to Higgins, “a very sacred one indeed, part of the divine game of realizing things out of their underlying numbers or letters.” For example, a 1603 treatise by Alexander Top, *The Oliue Leafè: or, Vniuersall Abce*, posited that God called the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet into being at the time of Creation in order to signify each of the things He created. According to Elsky, Top argued that “Hebrew letters are hieroglyphs intrinsically


31 Rosalie Colie notes that, for many early theologians, “it is axiomatic that the experience of the divine can be expressed only by the fundamental word for words that recollects, fits back all subsidiary words into itself, the *logos*.” *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 97.

32 “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 245.

33 *George Herbert’s Pattern Poems*, 8. See also Elsky, “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 246–47.
connected to the things they represent,” so that “the material condition of written language is a shadow of the spiritual meaning of its words.”34

Among the poets who contributed to the tradition of shaped verse during the Middle Ages, Hrabanus Maurus stands out for his introduction of much more elaborate visual images into the carminum cancellatum form. Figure 29, a poem from De laudibus sanctae crucis, features an image of Christ’s crucified body superimposed upon the background poem while the letters within Christ’s form spell out several distinct intexti. Christ’s halo, for example, not only reveals the Latin phrase “King of kings and Lord of lords” hidden within the principal text, but also makes prominent use of the Greek letters alpha, mu, and omega, which represent Christ’s status as the beginning, middle, and end of Creation.

34 Elsky, “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 251.
The fact that crucifixes and images of Christ’s body appear frequently in Hrabanus’ *carmina cancellata* warrants emphasis. His display of Christ’s corporeal form symbolically reenacts the Incarnation in which Word became Flesh; Hrabanus’ text is simultaneously the background from which Christ emerges and the framework that gives shape to His image. The poem is therefore a
superb piece of what James S. Baumlin has called incarnational rhetoric, and it would have been an ideal model for Herbert to follow. Given the fact that Hrabanus was an abbot, the poem must also be understood in a monastic context. During the Middle Ages members of monastic communities relieved the tedium of their solitude and prevented the sin of *acedia* or idleness by means of projects requiring great skill and intellectual effort, projects that they considered to be forms of recreation. Because, according to Kenneth B. Newell, “all *carmina* were composed in the service of God, more painstaking skill and complexity in the lettering and ornamentation were indicative of a stronger piety and were greatly to be desired.” Thus, the obvious intricacy of Hrabanus’ poems enables the composition of those works to be recognized as a mode of playful worship. Finally, the fact that Hrabanus chose to depict the suffering Christ implicates the poem’s reader in a monastic process of meditation.

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36 Hrabanus’ works were widely available in the seventeenth century. Dick Higgins, “Pattern Poetry as Paradigm,” 410.


38 Newell, *Pattern Poetry*, 3, 15. Jeremy Adler is therefore not entirely correct when he asserts that medieval pattern poets replaced the “whimsicality” of earlier *technopaigneia* “with a profound seriousness.” “*Technopaigneia,*” 110. The *carmina cancellata* of Hrabanus and others were a form of *serio ludere*, serious play in which whimsy and gravity happily coexisted.

39 Gustavus Selenus exploited the resemblance between Hrabanus’ creations and play in the *Cryptomenytices et Cryptographiae* (1624), which included poems by both Hrabanus and Optatian along with codes and puzzles. Higgins, “Pattern Poetry as Paradigm,” 409. See also Stanwood and Johnson, “The Structure of Wit,” 24.
Patterned verse in English begins in 1509, when a late-medieval aesthetic still held sway in Britain, with an untitled poem in Stephen Hawes’ *The Conuercyon of Swerers*. As seen in Figure 30, the poem explicitly refers to an accompanying illustration in which the suffering Christ presents his wounded body as an object of meditative contemplation: “Behold thou my syde / Wounded so

\[^{40}\text{See Church, “The First English Pattern Poems,” } 637.\]
ryght wyde / Bledyng sore that tyde / all for thyn owne sake.”

Hawes’ adaptation of the form to English verse therefore incorporates not only Hrabanus’ use of the poem’s text as an object of somber reflection about Christ’s Passion but also his emphasis on Christ’s corporal form. In addition, Hawes continues the tradition in which the composition of poetry is associated with a virtuous, productive, and edifying form of recreation; as he writes earlier in the collection, his objective in composing the poems was to “eschewe ydlenesse” and thereby to avoid the sinful vice of *acedia*.

In Hawes’ work one can witness a fusion of patterned verse with the distinct tradition of the emblem book, which was nascent in Britain but long in vogue on the Continent by the early sixteenth century. The winged shape of Hawes’ untitled poem and the words which form that shape reciprocally reinforce the power of the accompanying image in much the same way that the discrete components of an emblem—*pictura* (the image central to the emblem), *inscriptio* (the heading, title, or motto appearing above the *pictura*), and *subscriptio* (the verse piece accompanying the emblem and printed beneath it)—explicated and commented upon each other. Rosemary Freeman has thoroughly documented the connections between emblematic practice in English literature and

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41 The Gothic lettering, the relatively primitive typography, and the intervention of an image of Christ in Hawes’ poem combine to obscure the precise nature of the visual pattern that Hawes was constructing. Church describes it as “a pair of wings; the initial three lines contain one syllable. The syllables increase until the middle point of the poem is reached and then the length of the lines begins to decrease until the last three lines.” Ibid.

42 Ibid. Puttenham noted that some readers of patterned verse were occupied in a similar endeavor, for such poems were “fittest for the pretie amourets in Court to entertaine their seruants and the time withal, their delicate wits requiring some commendable exercise to keepe them from idlenesse.” *The Arte of English Poesie*, 75.


contemporary theories about the value of play and recreation.\textsuperscript{45} Mildmay Fane’s 1648 emblem book, which Freeman describes as “a collection of poems consciously, and often indeed fantastically, emblematic,” powerfully illustrates this connection.\textsuperscript{46} His work’s Latin title, \textit{Otia Sacra}, means “holy leisure” and thus strongly implies that the intimate relationship that arose during the Middle Ages among play, meditation, and poetry persisted in English devotional poetry well into the Renaissance.

The forms of patterned verse associated with the ancient Greek \textit{technopaigneia} and those derived from Roman and medieval \textit{carmina figurata} ultimately converged, with the intervening mediation of emblematic poetry, in a coalescence that manifested itself in what Adler calls “the flowering of figured poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”\textsuperscript{47} “At every point,” he says, “the form seems embedded in a network of contemporary practices, interests and beliefs.”\textsuperscript{48} Central among these myriad connections was the idea, explored in depth by Michel Foucault,\textsuperscript{49} that the human institution of language was not merely a set of arbitrary signs but rather a phenomenon deeply affiliated with—and even embedded within—nature and the fabric of reality itself.\textsuperscript{50} Poets and

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\textsuperscript{45} Freeman explains that the symbolism of an emblem “was just difficult enough to make the discovery of its meaning an intellectual adventure of a not too strenuous kind.” “George Herbert and the Emblem Books,” 153.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{47} “\textit{Technopaigneia},” 114.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} See \textit{The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences} (1966), trans. Alan Sheridan (1970) (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 35 (“In its raw, historical sixteenth-century being, language is not an arbitrary system; it has been set down in the world and forms a part of it”).

\textsuperscript{50} Adler, “\textit{Technopaigneia},” 128.
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critics also understood patterned verse in the context of their interest in the Cabbala. The practice of reading in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was in some senses akin to decipherment. Even a text’s individual letters were, Anne Ferry says, “an emblem of divine order and a source of power,” and, as a consequence, according to John Reid, “letters received attention as physical objects themselves.” The innovations of Optatian in this regard were especially influential examples for Renaissance practitioners of patterned verse who composed works in which the shapes of letters featured as prominently as the shapes of things.

Charles A. Huttar says that shaped verse “has come to be better appreciated as we have learned more about its venerable pedigree, its standing in the aesthetic thought of the time, and its artistic purposes.” Although true as a general statement, this claim is especially applicable to the patterned verse of George Herbert. Familiarity with the tradition within which Herbert was operating makes it possible to appreciate the ways in which he worked—and played—with that tradition in “The Altar,” and in turn to understand the poem in its full richness and complexity.

Herbert’s re-formation of the pagan elements of the shaped-verse tradition was intimately personal; long before composing the poems of The Temple, Herbert was a well known writer of Latin

51 Ibid., 127. See also Higgins, Pattern Poetry, 175–76 (“pattern poetry reappeared in the renaissance more or less concurrently with the spread of cabbalism”). “Recent research has uncovered the full extent to which a fascination for alphabetical symbolism, an interest in Hebrew as the original language and a science of visible letters were ongoing concerns in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe.” John Reid, “Observing the Law of the Letter: Order in George Herbert’s Hieroglyphs,” Idéologies dans le monde Anglo-Saxon 8 (1995): 148. Interest in the Cabbala during the Renaissance was heavily inflected by Christian doctrine, as in Johannes Reuchlin’s De arte cabbalistica (1517), which one observer describes as an example of Christian Cabbalism. See Ana Hatherly, A Experiência do Prodigio: Bases teóricas e antologia de textos- visuais portugueses dos séculos 17 e 18 (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional / Casa de Moeda, 1983).


54 See Elsky, “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 245.

55 “Herbert and the Emblematic Tradition,” 76.
and Greek verse in the classical style, and much of his poetry was in the tradition of *The Greek Anthology*. These “elaborately ornamental poems,” as Joseph H. Summers calls them, themselves illustrate Herbert’s playful proclivities and Herbert’s interest in a ludic poiesis. For example, in “In metri genus” (“On the Type of Meter”), Herbert writes “tot ludat numeris antiqua poesis,” rendered in translation as “classic poetry frolics / In so many different meters.” The word “ludat,” of course, might more appropriately be translated as “plays” than “frolics.” More conspicuously ludic in form and style is a series of anti-Papist poems playing on various anagrams of the word *Roma*, including *amor* (“love”), *oram* (“frontier”), *ramo* (“branch”), *armo* (“shoulder”), and *mora* (“delay”). Of course, Herbert was already operating within a long tradition in exploiting these commonly recognized anagrams; using them against instead of in praise of Rome, however, was itself a form a way of reworking that tradition. Herbert, in fact, condemned the Puritan polemicist Andrew Melville for composing poems that abandoned tradition: “For only fads are pleasing to the Puritans; / Words and ways of doing things are changed.”

Aspects of “The Altar” can be traced directly to Herbert’s early Latin and Greek poems. In *ΛονίΘυσία* (“Reasonable Sacrifice”), Herbert writes that dead earth at the Creation was an altar

56 George Herbert, *The Latin Poetry of George Herbert: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Mark McCloskey and Paul R. Murphy (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1965), vi. These poems—particularly *Musae Responsoriae ad Andreeae Melvini Scoti Anti-Tami-Cami-Categoriam* (“Poems in Response to the Scotsman Andrew Melville’s Con-Oxford-Cambridge Accusations”)—are more explicitly and strongly anti-Puritan than anything Herbert ever wrote in English. The fact that this poem is in Latin, and therefore not likely to be as widely read as *The Temple*, might help to account for the fact that many critics insist on a radically Protestant view of Herbert. See ibid.

57 *The Heirs of Donne and Jonson*, 87.


59 Ibid., 102–105.


and that earth infused with the Divine breath became man; the two are ultimately united in Christ so that “man becomes / The living altar of God.” The concept that the individual human subject is fused through the efficacy of Christ’s Passion with the sacrificial altars of the Old Covenant is, of course, a central focus of “The Altar,” an emphasis that will be explored more fully in the conclusion of this section. And the syllogistic form of the poem finds its origins in ancient texts describing pagan sacrifices.

Not surprisingly, the Christian components of the shaped-verse tradition are also germane to Herbert’s re-creative purposes in “The Altar.” As were many intellectuals during the Renaissance, Herbert was deeply invested in the trope of world as text. An artistic tradition capable of literalizing that concept as clearly and dramatically as Optatian’s and Hrabanus’ *carmina cancellata* would have had an obvious appeal to Herbert for its myriad expressive possibilities. Pattern poetry, even in its earliest manifestations, Adler says, “came to reflect the nature of the world as divine book.” Both *carmina* are obvious poetic representations and imitations of the fundamental idea of the Incarnation—Word made Flesh. In Optatian’s *carminum* in Figure 28, with its *intextus* in the form of the chi-rho monogram representing the name of Christ, the letters of the Word emerge from a pattern of letters which form words in multiple configurations. In Hrabanus’ poem in Figure 29, the embodied Word in the form of the crucified Christ emerges from the words of the *carminum quadratum* and takes form as a separate *intextus* composed of the separate cancelled

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62 Ibid., 107.


65 “Technopaigneia,” 113.
words and letters. Both examples foreground the concept of Christ’s immanence in the physical world by displaying His symbolic and physical presence as immanent in the poems’ texts.

Herbert exploits this tradition in “The Altar,” a poem which physicalizes the metaphor of Word made Flesh by converting letters and words into the image of the thing that it describes. Herbert contemplates Christ’s perfect Sacrifice in “The Altar” by claiming the redemptive power of the Passion for himself (“O lett thy blessed sacrifice be mine” [“A,” 15]). Optatian’s and Hrabanus’ contributions to the shaped-verse tradition enable Herbert to accomplish this innovation, in which an entire poem, rather than a cancelled image within it, is given over to the idea of the Creation as a legible text with Christ as its language and central message. Herbert, therefore, is not merely re-creating or re-forming an aspect of the tradition in which he is operating; he is also using that tradition to comment on and to imitate the re-creative force of the Passion.

Herbert’s fascination with the idea of the Incarnation, Christ’s embodiment in human form, points to another way in which Herbert reinvents the Christian elements of the patterned-verse tradition in “The Altar.” A poem like “The Bag” vividly, and perhaps even grotesquely, illustrates Herbert’s engagement with the idea of Christ’s physicality. Herbert describes the Word’s descent into human form as a kind of “undressing” and His assumption of a physical body as an investiture in “new clothes.” The bag of the poem’s title ultimately proves to be the wound in Christ’s side, which Herbert’s Christ offers as a depository for “any thing to send or write / [. . .] / Unto my fathers hands and sight.” Hrabanus and Hawes feature the suffering, pierced, and broken body of Christ prominently in their works in Figures 29 and 30. Although “The Altar” does not figure Christ’s

body, it contemplates the physicality of Christ by reference to the Incarnation and Passion as efficacious sacrifices. More significant, however, is the fact that the poem is an *embodiment* of a physical object. Henry Vaughan, that notorious imitator of Herbert, referred to shaped poems as “Bodyed Idea’s.”67 “The Altar” introduces the first series of poems in “The Church,” a section of *The Temple* named after the institution which is considered to be, as George Ryley stressed in his 1715 commentary on *The Temple*, the body of Christ.68 Embodiment and physicalization, important dimensions of the patterned-verse tradition, are therefore present in modified or re-created forms in “The Altar.”

These two ideas, the popular Renaissance trope of world as text and the centrality of embodiment to the Christian tradition of shaped verse, fuse and lead into a third facet of that tradition which Herbert exploits and reforms: Optatian’s use of letters as shapes in his *carmina cancellata*. As Elsky argues, the theory of the material basis of language was an important dimension of the patterned-verse tradition, and the hieroglyphic significance of letters was in turn a significant element of this theory.69 It is by now uncontroversial that “The Altar” anamorphically resembles the capital letter I as well as an altar.70 As a result, Elsky’s argument features a prominent lacuna. Although Elsky describes “The Altar” by observing that “instead of letters being imprinted

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69 “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 246–47.

70 See, for example, Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica*, 141; Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, 105; and Summers, *George Herbert*, 145.
on a thing [. . .] a thing is imprinted in an arrangement of letters,” he never discusses the significance of the fact that the poem is shaped like a letter as well as an object; he says that “Herbert’s pattern poems spell God’s Word by building up letters into pictures” (258), but he never notes that, in “The Altar,” that picture is itself a letter.

The fact that the thing that Herbert is imprinting in an arrangement of letters is another letter is a profoundly reflexive and suggestive artistic choice because, in ways that even Elsky does not acknowledge, “The Altar” illustrate[s] the way Herbert sees meaning as divinely ordained in the sensible elements of language” (252). Among many circles during the Renaissance, letters were understood to possess hieroglyphic qualities; they possessed a symbolic significance connecting them to physical things (248). In a commentary on Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas’ influential 1578 thesis Deuine Weekes and Workes, Simon Goulart stressed the continuities between the original language of God, Hebrew, and its contemporary descendants, including English. In particular, Goulart argued that “the God-given capacity of language to signify persists through time,” and that letters continue to possess nearly magical semantic significance (251).

71 “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 255. Subsequent citations in this discussion appear as parenthetical references in the main text.

72 In his 1568 work De recta et emendata linguæ Anglicaæ scriptione, dialogus, Thomas Smith described the process of forming words from letters as an exaedificare, a building. Ibid., 248. This idea creates a close connection between my argument about “The Altar” and Stanley Fish’s claim about The Temple as a whole: “My thesis can be stated simply: the temple of Herbert’s title is the ‘spirituall Temple’ that is built up by catechisms to be the dwelling place of God.” The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 54.
And the fact that the letter formed by the shape of the altar in Herbert’s poem is an I is highly salient to his re-creative work in the piece: the shape of “The Altar” alters itself, depending on one’s perspective, so that it represents not only the site of a sacrifice but also the individual human subject. It is, of course, that subject who is central to the theology of Reformed Christianity, because it is the individual person upon whom Christ’s perfect Sacrifice was bestowed (an inversion of the pagan and Hebraic idea that man offers sacrifices to God) and with whom God forges a personal relationship through the mediation of Christ (an inversion of Roman Catholicism’s emphasis on the Church as mediator of that relationship). For a poet who saw profound significance in the ability of English poets to pun on the words son and sun, the fact that a pagan or Hebrew altar could be altered into the shape of an I would have been extraordinarily important, an imitation of how meaning is divinely ordained in the sensible elements of language. For Herbert, this coincidence, as it might seem to us, would have embedded within it a mystical testimony to the truth of the

73 As Fish notes, “the pun is not beyond Herbert.” Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature, Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994), 212. See also Mark Taylor, The Soul in Paraphrase: George Herbert’s Poetics, De proprietatis litterarum: Series practica (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 51 (“[. . .] Herbert often shows a playful interest in the homographic, homophonic, or quasi-homophonic resemblances of words”).

74 Colie has noted the anamorphic nature of the image generated by the poem. Paradoxa Epidemica, 307. Adler writes of its “visual ambiguity, where a second image emerges from the first like the product of a vision.” Technopaigneia,” 133. This notion, which brings to mind the kind of optical illusion that has often been exploited in parlor games, returns us to the realm of the ludic, for the word “illusion” is derived from the Latin ludere, meaning “to play.”

75 I am indebted to Albert C. Labriola for this observation, which he develops more fully in “The Rock and the Hard Place: Biblical Typology and Herbert’s ‘The Altar,’” George Herbert Journal 10, no. 1–2 (Fall 1986): 61–69.

76 Herbert, “The Sonne,” in English Poems, 173–74 (“Let forrain nations of their language boast, / [. . .] / I like our language, as our men and coast: / [. . .] / How neatly doe we give one onely name / To parents issue and the sunnes bright starre!”).

77 See Reid, “Observing the Law,” 157 (“Herbert in effect harnesses the Adamic power of the letter so as to give it a specifically Christian function and signification”).
conversion wrought by the New Covenant (and by the Reformation): a conversion, re-formation, and alteration that is played out and played upon in the textual and visual fabric of the poem itself.78

B. A CLOSE READING
“Nothinge so absurde”: Herbert at Play in “The Altar”

It is a critical commonplace that Herbert is squaring form with content in “The Altar,” but that is, according to Rosalie Colie, only “the crudest sense” in which we can understand the poem.79 Up to this point, I have been considering the poem not as a textual artifact but rather as an intervention in a larger tradition of patterned verse. However, turning to its textual contexts within the array of poems in The Temple as well as to the language of the piece itself reveals a finer granularity of detail that supports my conclusion in the previous section: Herbert is engaged in a playful mode of poiesis in “The Altar,” one that imitates the incarnational qualities of Divine language by converting Word into Flesh. This section begins with a treatment of “The Altar” in its larger context, specifically investigating its apparently incongruous position within The Temple and “The Church”; we shall revisit in this connection the poem’s 1 shape, which not only resolves that seeming incongruity but also becomes significant to the poem’s meaning in terms of its status as an emblem and its operation as a figure for Herbert’s self. Moving then toward an investigation of the language of “The Altar,” the second segment of this section argues that recreation (or re-creation) and incarnationalism become most evident in the text of the poem when it is understood as a structure designed to guide a transformative reading, a gradual process of confusion and revelation that ends with an altered or

78 Austin Warren, Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 31 (“Occasionally Herbert seeks to incarnate the theme of a poem in its very shape”).

79 Paradoxia Epidemica, 195. Colie also warns us that, not just with “The Altar” but with the poems of The Temple more broadly, “The more one tries to say something intelligent […] the more gibberish one tends to talk.” Ibid., 190.
re-created conception of the piece’s subject matter and of the reader’s relationship to God. A brief conclusion ends this section, which is followed by a discussion of the implications of the readings that now follow.

1. “The Altar” in the Context of *The Temple*

Presumably referring to the fact that one of the shapes generated by “The Altar” is that of a pagan or Hebraic sacrificial site, an altar that would have been positioned at the entrance to a larger edifice, Stanley Fish cites the cardinal position of “The Altar” within “The Church” as a key problem in need of a solution. Why, in other words, is a non-Christian altar positioned at the beginning of a patently Christian work, particularly in light of the fact that this positioning seems to connote a pagan or Hebraic temple rather than a Christian one? Although I have already offered one solution to that potential problem in the previous section—the idea that Herbert is foregrounding the non-Christian origins of the shaped verse tradition in order better and more dramatically to display a consecration and re-creation of that tradition with his entry into the genre—the question is also addressed by the fact that the poem is shaped like the letter I, which is not only the English personal pronoun denoting the self but also the Roman numeral one.

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80 *Living Temple*, 140. John Hollander offers some tentative solutions to this ostensible problem—that the shape is the ruin of a classical altar or that it is “broken” (“A,” 1) “because it violates some of the traditional shaping of the familiar *technopaignia*”—but his claims are insufficiently developed to be satisfactory. *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 263. For a more creditable set of possible explanations, see Elsky, “George Herbert’s Pattern Poems,” 256–57.

81 As far as I have been able to ascertain, I am the first scholar of the poem to have noticed this dimension of its shape. Others—like Labriola, “The Rock and the Hard Place,” 61, and Julia Carolyn Guernsey, *The Pulse of Praise: Form as a Second Self in the Poetry of George Herbert* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 39, for instance—have noticed the capital I shape and have exploited it in their readings, but no one has pointed out that the letter I is itself multivalent.
Taking this sense of the poem’s shape, it is possible to approach the poem as if it were a dedicatory verse for the entire volume, or at least for its largest segment, “The Church.”82 As Arnold Stein says, “[. . .] ‘The Altar’ introduces more than one hundred and fifty poems in which the poet does not hold his peace.”83 Or, as Summers declares, “In an important sense this, the first poem within ‘The Church’ . . . is the altar upon which the following poems (Herbert’s ‘sacrifice of praise’) are offered, and it is an explanation of the reason for their composition.”84 To read and understand the poem in this fashion is to give new meaning and significance to the phrase, “These stones to praise thee may not cease” (“A,” 14); the “stones” in this case become connate not only with the parts of the speaker’s “hard heart” (“A,” 10) but also with the poems that follow, each poem serving as a stone used to construct The Temple.85

What should also be evident by this point is the profound complexity and multivalence of this simple-seeming poem,86 its tendency to signify excessively and therefore playfully. Moreover, we should see a gesture in the direction of the incarnational: Herbert is collapsing his entire volume


84 George Herbert, 142.

85 John Hollander opines that one of Simmias’ egg-shaped poems is “about poetry, about creation and tradition, [. . .] and about its own shape.” Vision and Resonance, 256. To consecrate a pagan poetic form to Christian purposes, and to place a notable example of that conversion first among a collection of verse, is in a sense to consecrate poetry itself.

into a single poem, metonymically rendering a temple as an altar, just as he fuses the speaker’s heart and self into the poem.\(^8^7\) And, if one can be said to be the opposite of zero, we can see in Herbert’s use of the Roman numeral one as a shape for his poem another gesture, that of decipherment or decipherment, which is relevant to “The Altar” in at least two senses. First, pointing back to the cabalistic elements of the shaped-verse tradition, an act akin to decipherment is required in order to read and understand the work fully. Second, to decipher or “de-cipher” is to “un-zero,” to create \textit{ex nihilo} in a way that imitates the Creation by means of the Word.\(^8^8\)

If, indeed, “The Altar” is what Summers calls “an emblem of the entire volume,”\(^8^9\) then we can also connect its multiple shapes to the tradition of emblematic verse, a tradition with which we may fairly assume Herbert was intimately familiar,\(^9^0\) in a way that further reveals an incarnational dimension to the poem. An emblem ordinarily contains three elements, \textit{pictura}, \textit{inscriptio}, and \textit{subscriptio}, which interact with and comment upon each other in order to produce a dense set of meanings. “The Altar” can be considered a kind of “telescoped emblem” in which all three of these


\(^8^8\) “The voice of God in the void, bringing order out of chaos, is one analogue of the Incarnation.” Richard E. Hughes, “George Herbert and the Incarnation,” \textit{Cithara} 4 (1964): 22–32, 24. See also Summers, \textit{George Herbert}, 145 (“to Herbert the hieroglyph did not exist as a total mystery or as isolated beauty, but as a beauty and mystery which were decipherable and related to all creation”). But see James Boyd White, “This Book of Starres”: \textit{Learning to Read George Herbert} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 81 (“the speaker [. . .] presents himself not as a unit or integer, but as divided at least into two”).

\(^8^9\) \textit{Heirs of Donne and Jonson}, 96.

\(^9^0\) Huttar, “Herbert and the Emblematic Tradition,” 64. Rosemary Freeman situates George Herbert’s patterned verse, along with other poems in which he is particularly sensitive to imagery, within the emblem book tradition. “George Herbert and the Emblem Books,” 157. George Puttenham perceives a connection as well. \textit{Arte of English Poesie}, 84–85.
elements are fused into one in an imitation of the single yet triune Christian God. The poem is not only the text of the emblem, the subscriptio, but its altar shape serves as the image or pictura and its I shape as an inscriptio or motto that emphasizes the connection between the altar and the individual believer: “O lett thy blessed sacrifice be mine” (“A,” 15)—the speaker addresses Christ directly, without mediation, and personally claims the benefit of His Sacrifice. To have word and image, word and thing, joined in this manner is yet another way in which Herbert intervenes in the tradition in order to imitate the process of Incarnation in which Word becomes Flesh.

Herbert also makes a gesture in the opposite direction, converting Flesh into Word by implicating himself within the poem’s text: “God’s creative problem,” Colie argues, “was to make flesh of the Word; the poet’s to make word and words of the mortal flesh—in other words, God’s incarnation must be reworked, worked the other way, so that the transient experiences of the mutable body may lay some claim to immortality.” Of course, the poem’s I shape hints broadly at this gesture by establishing an equation between the altar as a place of sacrifice and the individual believer, namely the author or the speaker. But what might be lost without this insight is the significance of the final line: “And sanctify this Altar to be thine” (“A,” 16). Unless we understand that the altar of the poem is the speaker’s self and that the speaker is asking for grace to be bestowed

91 The term belongs to Jeremy Adler: “the figured poem conflates pictura and subscriptio into a single word-image, thereby to become a kind of telescoped emblem.” “Technopaigneia,” 129. However, Adler and the other critics whom I have encountered do not extend their analyses to the point of seeing all three emblem elements present within “The Altar.”

92 Paradoxia Epidemica, 141.

93 “[T]he crucial premise of the poem is the absolute equation that has been effected between the speaker’s body and his verse (the stones of the altar are the pieces of his heart), crucial because it represents the complete collapse of the distinction between narrator and narrative work.” Barbara Leah Harman, Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert’s Poetry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 188.

94 Lewalski considers this to be “The governing trope” within “The Church.” Protestant Poetics, 105.
upon him in the form of a sanctification in which God and Christ take possession of him and his soul, it would be easy to see the line as anomalous: an altar is not ordinarily a thing that is sanctified; it is rather the place at which sacrifices are offered. But Christ’s Sacrifice was offered on and to each believer, completing the New Covenant’s inversion of pagan and Hebraic practice—man offered sacrifices to God rather than God sacrificing Himself for man—which the poem’s conversion of the shaped-verse tradition emphasizes. This reading also explains at least part of the common undergraduate question about “The Altar”: Why are certain words, including “heart” in line 5, often rendered in large and small capitals in some published versions of the poem?95 If we imagine the poem as the rough image of a person viewed from behind, the word “heart” appears in exactly the position on the “body” where his physical heart would be: offset to the right slightly below the top of the torso.96

Robert B. Shaw, contesting Stanley Fish’s reading of the poem as a “self-consuming artifact,” imagines that the weaving of the self into the sense97 of “The Altar” should rather provide “a sense of the divine plenitude” than “an annihilation [. . .] of the self”: “The grace of the Incarnation is such that we may share in God’s omnipresence without exchanging our identities, as Fish would have it. God may do the tuning, but it is still from human instruments that notes of praise ascend. In Herbert’s poems, as in sacramental worship, the sacrifice accomplishes not an annihilation but a

95 See, for example, Herbert, English Poems, 47.


97 I allude, of course, to “Jordan (II).” Herbert, English Poems, 116–17.
transfiguration of the self.” I contend that it is ultimately the plenitude of Divine grace that Herbert is imitating in “The Altar.” Through play, conceived as an excess or superfluity of expression and signification as well as through the idea of re-creation, Herbert honors and worships his God.

2. The Language of “The Altar”

At the finest level of detail that we can examine, the text of the poem itself, we can also see quite clearly traces of the ludic and of incarnationalism when we understand the poem as a structure of language that fosters and engenders a particular type of reader response, one in which the reader is at first perplexed but then is gradually yet surely guided through the poem’s many ambiguities.

A broken Altar, Lord, thy servant reares
Made of á heart, & cimented with teares.
    Whose parts are, as thy hand did frame;
    No workemans toole hath touch’d y^e same.

5    A heart alone
    Is such á stone,
    As nothing, but
    Thy power doth cut.
    Wherefor each part

10    Of my hard heart
    Meets in this frame,
    To praise thy Name.
    That, if I chance to hold my peace,
    These stones to praise thee may not cease.

15    O lett thy blessed sacrifice be mine,
    And sanctify this Altar to be thine.

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98 Call of God, 104. See also Johnson, “Recreating the Word,” 55 (“The typology within ‘The Altar’ embodies a spiritual conversion, a recreating of the Word within the human heart”).

99 To the extent that it relies upon reader response theory, my reading in this segment of this case study is indebted to Stanley Fish’s masterful approach to “The Altar” in Self-Consuming Artifacts, 207–15. However, whereas Fish understands the poem to be superseding itself as it develops from line to line, my own view is substantially different.

100 Vendler, Poetry of George Herbert, 61 (“The ‘allegory’ seems too simple at first glance [. . .]. But as soon as we begin to examine the terms in their interrelations, mysteries arise”).
An encounter with the poem’s first line immediately introduces a degree of confusion in the reader’s mind: the speaker claims to be erecting a “broken” Altar (“A,” 1), but in no sense does the structure on the page appear to be imperfect. To the contrary, its appearance is almost monolithic, and particularly in manuscript form, one is immediately impressed by the great care that the writer has taken to ensure that his lines of verse meet neatly “in this frame” (“A,” 11) (see Figure 25). Although we may be accustomed, even at this early point in “The Altar” and in “The Church,” to Herbert’s penchant for self-deprecation, the process of simultaneous perplexity and revelation continues in the very next line, in which we learn that the altar of the poem is “Made of á heart, & cimented with teares” (“A,” 2). On one level, this is a move in the direction of clarification, for we learn that there are really two altars in play in the poem: the altar on the page and the figurative altar of the speaker’s broken heart. Yet in the next line, we lose the clarity that we have just achieved when we learn that the parts of the figurative altar and of the speaker’s heart “are, as thy hand did frame; / No workemans toole hath touch’d y same” (“A,” 3–4). First and foremost, we must wonder why a loving God would break the speaker’s heart, but also we must confront the speaker’s unusual disclaimer of craftsmanship for his poem: “The ‘shape’ poem is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of workmanship in poetry.” Understanding the speaker’s allusion to Old Testament Scripture—“And if thou wilt make mee an Altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewen

101 Along the way, if we are especially attentive to Herbert’s love of pun and quibble, we shall notice that the speaker “reares” his altar (“A,” 1), building it upside-down on the page from top to bottom. Fish has recognized this pun (Self-Consuming Artifacts, 215), but commentary on “The Altar” has yet to recognize that the quibble has an incarnational dimension: the poem is doing or enacting what it says in a way that meshes word and deed, Word and Flesh, together perfectly. It also draws attention, if we attend to it carefully, to our act of reading, making us very self-conscious about our encounter with the poem in a way that accentuates its re-educative or re-creative effect.


103 Clarke, Theory and Theology, 205. See also Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, 207 (“the first thing the poem does [. . .] is call attention to itself as something quite carefully made”).
stone: for if thou lift vp thy toole vpon it, thou hast polluted it”¹⁰⁴—points us in the direction of conceiving the unhewn stones as part of the figurative altar rather than the printed one, but that same understanding might also confuse a sensitive reader, for that would mean that throughout the first four lines of “The Altar” the speaker has never referred to the shape on the page, a conclusion that would seem to diminish the significance of that shape.

Greater clarity comes in the next portion of the poem, in what Ronald W. Cooley calls “the central pedestal,” which pertains to “the life of the heart” as opposed to “the realm of external action.”¹⁰⁵ The speaker, explaining that “A heart alone / Is such a stone, / As nothing, but / Thy power doth cut” (“A,” 5–8), answers one of the reader’s questions by revealing that his heart was made of stone and therefore had to be cut, or “broken” (“A,” 1), by the action of Divine grace in order to permit him to praise his Lord.¹⁰⁶ This answer is confirmed in the next lines—“Wherefor each part / Of my hard heart / Meets in this frame, / To praise thy Name” (“A,” 9–12)—which allude

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¹⁰⁴ Ex 20:25 (AV 1611). This allusion also serves as an important reminder about the role of labor in much Christian theology. Although Christianity privileges callings and vocations, or labor dedicated to the worship of God, labor is principally viewed as a consequence of the Fall and of man’s first sin: “In the sweate of thy face shalt thou eate bread, till thou returne vnto the ground: for out of it wast thou taken, for dust thou art, and vnto dust shalt thou returne.” Gn 3:19 (AV 1611).

¹⁰⁵ “Full of All Knowledge”: George Herbert’s Country Parson and Early Modern Social Discourse, The Mental and Cultural World of Tudor and Stuart England (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 21. Cooley’s description of the poem in this regard emphasizes another way in which “The Altar” is incarnational in design: Just as “Easter-Wings” is driven by variations of line lengths that parallel the actions described in those lines, “The Altar” opens and widens its lines when referring to the world of externals, narrowing and closing them when referring to the internal operation of the speaker’s self.

¹⁰⁶ This passage also alludes to Joshua 8:31, which repeated Moses’ command that the Israelites raise “an Altar of whole stones, ouer which no man hath lift vp any yron” (AV 1611), and exhibits Herbert’s tendency throughout The Temple to deny his own artistry in crafting his poems.
to the common biblical trope of the heart hardened by the taint of sin, and which explicitly offer
the praise that God's grace has made possible. Moreover, the words “this frame” (“A,” 11) seem
finally to give the reader an unambiguous reference to the altar on the page, the means by which the
speaker offers his praise. Yet questions remain. Given the extraordinary self-consciousness required
for the speaker to deliver his praise in the shape of an altar, the explicit reference of “The Altar” to
its own shape appears for the first time terribly late in the poem. And the praise that the speaker
offers to his God seems at this juncture to be conversely premature: he still, after all, possesses a
“hard heart” (“A,” 10).

In the final four lines, the poem begins to open up again on a literal level, gradually widening,
and also in the sense that it provides the reader with solutions to these problems, solutions that
convert the reading experience and that re-create the poem in the mind of the reader. We learn next
that the purpose of this altar of praise is to speak for its craftsman—“These stones to praise thee may
not cease” (“A,” 14)—if he should “chance to hold [his] peace” (“A,” 13). The words “These
stones,” however, create a final block for the reader. Previously the speaker has told us that his heart
is “à stone” (“A,” 6 [emphasis supplied]), so that we shift here from the singular to the plural. To
be sure, the fact that the speaker’s heart has been fractured, presumably into multiple stones, might

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107 “And I wil giue them one heart, and I wil put a new spirit within you: and I will take the stonie heart out
of their flesh, and will giue them an heart of flesh.” Ez 11:19 (AV 1611). Another allusion suggests itself in the
truncation of the central lines: “[. . .] Circumcision is, that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter, whose praise
is not of men, but of God.” Rom 2:29 (AV 1611). Jeffrey S. Johnson argues that the narrowed lines literalize the
figurative act of circumcision (“Recreating the Word,” 58), which further supports the view that the poem is
incarnational.

108 See Marion White Singleton, God’s Courtier: Configuring a Different Grace in Herbert’s Temple
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 84 (“[. . .] ‘The Altar’ is primarily concerned to point out the
mysterious ways of God which empower even the stony heart of man to praise his Maker”).

109 See Vendler, Poetry of George Herbert, 62 (“is it truly possible to have one’s heart converted into an altar
by God and still remain hostile to him?”).
justify the shift, but that maneuver seems clumsy and unsatisfying. Instead, it exploits our consciousness that we are reading not just an individual poem but the first entry in a collection, “The Church,” so that the plural “stones” may be understood as a reference to the following poems and so that we are forced to revise our conception of the stone that was the speaker’s heart: it is also the altar on the page. While the figure before us had seemed to be suspended from reference in the poem for too long, “The Altar” finally reveals that it had been its own subject matter all along, and in the process it becomes a singular, unitary, and therefore unhewn stone, precisely as the speaker had promised several lines earlier. Heart and verse, figurative and literal, fuse and coalesce in this penultimate gesture of transfiguration. It is followed by the final couplet—“O lett thy blessed sacrifice be mine, / And sanctify this Altar to be thine” (“A,” 15–16)—in which Christ’s Sacrifice is invoked explicitly for the first time, the Sacrifice that makes possible the transfiguration that we have just witnessed and in which Herbert has forced us to participate. And, in a final incarnational move that can be seen in most typeset versions of the poem, Christ’s “SACRIFICE” fits perfectly atop Herbert’s “ALTAR” in the poem’s final two lines. This set of conversions and re-creations effects the kind of transfiguration that occurs in the Eucharist, not conceived as in the Roman Catholic

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110 This “unification of the previously ‘split’ personality into the harmonious image of the priest at the altar provides appropriate closure for the poem.” Ibid. “By the end of ‘The Altar’, indeed, the altar is no longer imagined as the place where man sacrifices to God but as the place of Christ’s sacrifice for man.” White, “This Book of Starres,” 80. “It is the fusion of these two conditions—the outer condition of acting and the inner condition of being acted upon—that constitutes regeneracy.” Cooley, “Full of All Knowledge,” 22. “[T]he reader is forced [. . .] to expand the frames of reference within which his understanding is moving.” Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, 209.

111 Herbert, English Poems, 47.
doctrine of transubstantiation but rather as a lively sacrifice of the heart—to which the poem’s altar is equated—in the sacramental moment.112

3. Words Accomplished in the Truth

[T]he words which were do continue; the only difference is, that whereas before they had a literal use, they now have a metaphorical use, and are as so many notes of remembrance unto us, that what they did signify in the letter is accomplished in the truth.113

—Richard Hooker

What Hooker describes is like what Herbert is doing in “The Altar.” The letter (of the law) has been fulfilled and accomplished (embodied) in the poem. The letter has been realized (real-ized) with a concreteness standing as testimony to the fact that Herbert sees the process he is modeling as non-metaphorical, one having the highest degree of reality imaginable. It is an expression of enormous faith and commitment. More than that, it is an imitation of the incarnational event itself that acts in concert and cooperation with that event, that merges with the original and takes power from it, and that lends itself to the operation of the Word becoming Flesh.114

Making the power of this work all the more stunning is the fact that it was likely written without immediate plans for publication, perhaps to be read only among a small coterie of Herbert’s

112 R. V. Young goes further, asserting that this transfiguration “occurs pre-eminently in the sacrament of the Eucharist, most uncompromisingly when explained as transubstantiation, in which the words of the consecration enact the transformation of the elements of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ and thus present what they represent.” Doctrine and Devotion in 17th-Century Poetry, Studies in Renaissance Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 106. Of course, Protestants in the Church of England were united in rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation, understanding the Eucharist rather as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.


114 “[. . .] Herbert did not merely write about the Incarnation: he saw poetry itself as a miniature version of the Incarnation, and each divine poem as a microcosm of the Incarnation. The doctrine provided Herbert, not only with subject, but with form, technique and meaning.” Hughes, “George Herbert and the Incarnation,” 24.
colleagues or even simply for his own pleasure and edification. If this is the case, then we might understand “The Altar” in Huttar’s terms “primarily as a compositio for meditation, a mandala,” or a device for private devotional practice. As M. M. Mahood writes, “the reader has the sensation that he is listening to the poet at meditation or at prayer, eavesdropping on the ‘many spiritual Conflicts’ of Herbert’s inner life in his last years at Bemerton.” “The Altar” is, in other words, a kind of TOY, and the task of the next section is to examine the consequences of this form of play on our understanding of English Reformation discourse, given the fact that Herbert is creating an altar out of words at a time when the status of altars in the English Reformed Church is in a dramatic state of flux.

115 “Herbert and the Emblematic Tradition, 77.


118 Placing “The Altar” in my matrix of discursive play types is a delicate task. In light of the poem’s status as a “private ejaculation,” its ranking on the methexis axis must be rather low, but the poem is decidedly not a TRICK. Although more telic than a pure TOY, because of the very clear direction in which the poem develops, “The Altar” might be best understood as occupying the TOY-TRICK quadrant of the matrix.
C. IMPLICATIONS
Herbert and the Altars of the English Reformed Church

“The Altar,” along with the other poems of The Temple, has long appealed to audiences of a wide range of confessional orientations, with the partial consequence that the poem seems to generate endless critical controversy as scholars attempt to claim it for different points on the continuum of English Reformed belief and praxis. Lewalski sees Herbert’s use of biblical typology in the poem as “characteristically Protestant”; Richard Strier resolutely claims that “The best critics of ‘The Altar’ have recognized that it does not in any way refer to the Eucharist.” On the other hand, Malcolmson finds evidence that Herbert is “forging an image that can illuminate what is true in the approach of” both Puritans and high-Church figures; Kathleen Lynch also interprets “The Altar” as evidence of “Herbert’s characteristically conciliatory stance,” a doctrinal posture that is distinctly of the English via media. Many other critics, of course, see the poem as Eucharistic in completely

119 Herbert “has been, and continues to be, the exemplar for the English parson. Whether the individual minister is High Church, Low Church, Evangelical, Charismatic, whatever, Herbert is portrayed as the prototype of the parson, poet, teacher, and preacher. He is the saint of Bemerton, the Ur-Vicar, the Echt-Rector.” Justin Lewis-Anthony, “If You Meet George Herbert on the Road . . . Kill Him! Herbertism and Contemporary Parish Ministry,” George Herbert Journal 32, no. 1–2 (Fall 2008–Spring 2009): 31–42, 32. See also Ilona Bell, “‘Setting Foot into Divinity’: George Herbert and the English Reformation,” Modern Language Quarterly 38, no. 3 (September 1977): 219–41, 220 (“Everyone seems to love Herbert’s poetry, and many have claimed him as a posthumous ally”); Daniel W. Doerksen, “‘Generous Ambiguity’ Revisited: A Herbert for All Seasons,” George Herbert Journal 30, no. 1–2 (Fall 2006–Spring 2007): 19–41, 19; Guibbory, Ceremony and Community, 44; and Graham Parry, The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation: Glory, Laud and Honour (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press 2006), 135. Doerksen suggests that this phenomenon might be the product of Herbert’s deliberate intent, as “the mature Herbert was not a partisan but a moderate.” Picturing Religious Experience: George Herbert, Calvin, and the Scriptures (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 1. Joseph L. Womack’s Working It Out: Growing Spiritually with the Poetry of George Herbert (Richmond, VA: R. K. W. Publications, 2009), is evidence of Herbert’s continuing influence in Christian circles, even beyond the pulpits and pews of the Anglican communion; it is essentially an ecumenical self-help book “directed to those who are seeking spiritual guidance and are open to the possibility of finding that guidance in poetry.” Ibid., 3.


different senses. R. V. Young, from the title of “The Altar” alone, sees evidence of “the medieval Catholic roots of Herbert’s piety.” Thomas B. Stroup vigorously resists the claim of Joseph Summers that the poem is “religiously ‘low.’”

My agenda within the following pages, however, is not to identify or locate George Herbert’s absolute theological position based upon the lines of “The Altar.” Instead, I am interested in examining a curious juxtaposition of historical events. Amy M. Charles’ standard biography of Herbert presents evidence and analysis that can suggest 1617 as an approximate composition date for the lyrics of The Temple, and a number of historians of the English Reformed Church have identified that same year as a significant marker in the development and evolution of a sustained controversy over church fabric, specifically the installation and use of altars in churches. Herbert, in short, was making a remarkably provocative and rhetorically significant move by erecting an altar out of words at roughly the same time that—contrary to the trend of many preceding decades of Church history—altars were beginning to reappear in English churches. “The Altar” is therefore more than a verbal artifact or an intervention into the tradition of shaped verse; it is a commentary

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123 Doctrine and Devotion, 107.


on a dispute that was very much alive at the time during which the poem was composed, and it is an important contribution to the discourse of the period.\textsuperscript{127}

In order to understand “The Altar” in this historical context, let us begin by surveying the events that surrounded the marquee year of 1617.\textsuperscript{128} As Eamon Duffy has stated, “ultimately the Reformation came to be, quite literally, part of the furniture.”\textsuperscript{129} In a frenzy of iconoclasm, altars were being pulled down throughout England by 1550 when Bishop Nicolas Ridley ordered their abolition in the London diocese in May,\textsuperscript{130} a move extended kingdom-wide by Edward VI’s Privy Council in November of that year; Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s 1552 Book of Common Prayer institutionalized the policy of altar-stripping even further by replacing earlier references to “altars”...
with “tables.” For Protestant reformers, the stone altars that had been common in English churches until that time were physical instantiations of the kinds of non-scriptural and human-instituted ceremony that they wished to purge from English worship. Perceiving the installations as remnants of a Roman hegemony over the English Church, the reformers were quite right to imagine stone altars as icons of Catholicism; they were, indeed, the inheritance of a rich medieval Church fabric that pre-dated the Reformation. Despite vigorous efforts, however, the stripping of the altars during Edward’s short reign was left incomplete, for records indicate that during the Marian resurgence of Roman Catholicism that followed, when altars were reinstalled in English churches, only thirteen parishes were without stone high altars and every parish seems to have had at least a wooden altar on which Mass could be said. Early in her reign, Elizabeth I issued injunctions calling for order in the removal of those altars, which reformers began again to pull down, but she ultimately declared that the difference between altars and communion tables was a matter of indifference or adiaphora, a signature move for the monarch who instituted the English via media through the so-called Elizabethan Settlement. Yet Elizabeth’s private chapel favored imagery and ceremony in the high-Church style, evidence of what Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke call a “conservative outlook” that gave encouragement to the nascent Avant-Garde Conformists, who were in a position by the end of Elizabeth’s era to publicly air their dissident views.

The gradual ascendancy of the Avant-Garde Conformist party throughout the course of James I’s reign transformed influence into power with the accession of Charles I to the throne, leading

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131 According to Lee Palmer Wandel, this move and others like it throughout Europe rejected “the temporal complexity of the altar, its linking of the Incarnation, death, and sacrifice to an eternal present through that altar’s very materiality, its abiding presence within the space of each church.” The Reformation: Towards a New History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 214.

132 Fincham and Tyacke, Altars Restored, 3.
toward a Laudian church policy between 1625 and 1640. With respect to the revitalization of the
tradition of stone altars in English churches, this period has typically been the focus of historians
given the significance of pamphlet wars on the subject during the late 1630s, well after George
Herbert’s death.\footnote{As early as 1625, however, pamphleteers began to speak out on the issue. Richard Mountagu, for instance, acting under the protection of James I, published \textit{Appello Caesarem} early that year. Among the arguments that Mountagu marshaled in support of the reinsti-tution of stone altars, tradition was a focal point: “of stone they were, it is certaine, [. . .] before that \textit{Popery} was heard of in the world, or in the Church of Rome it selfe.” \textit{Appello Caesarem} (London: Matthew Lownes, 1625), 286. Sacramental theology was also an important point of doctrine for Mountagu: “Now though you may stumble and breake your shinns at the \textit{Altar}; yet I hope you will not overthrow the \textit{Sacrifice}.” Ibid., 287.} The controversy had its roots in the Grantham case from 1627, in which Bishop
John Williams—an influential figure in Herbert’s life and the man who had helped to bring about
Herbert’s ordination—ruled against a proposal to position the church’s communion table in an altar-
wise fashion.\footnote{See, for example, John Spurr, \textit{The Post-Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 1603–1714}, Religion, Politics, and Society in Britain Series (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2006), 79.} In response, the priest Peter Heylyn published \textit{A Coale from the Altar} in 1636; it
was a vigorous attack on this decision and one that branded Williams as no better than a radical
Puritan: “[. . .] I should rather thinke, that it was writ by Mr. \textit{Cotton of Boston} [. . .] or by some other
neighboring \textit{Zelote}.’’\footnote{Peter Heylyn, \textit{A Coale from the Altar} (London: Robert Milbovrne, 1636), 3.} Williams’ 1637 reply, \textit{The Holy Table, Name and Thing}, pointed out the
sacramental and Roman Catholic associations carried by altars as opposed to Reformed communion
tables: “the \textit{Sacrifice of the Masse} abolished (ffor which \textit{Sacrifice} onely \textit{Altars} were erected) these
(call them what you please) are no more \textit{Altars}, but \textit{Tables of Stone} or \textit{Timber}. [. . .] The proper
use of an *Altar* is to *Sacrifice* upon, the proper use of a *Table is to eat* upon.”¹³⁶ Heylyn issued a rejoinder within only a matter of a few months, “to crush a spreading evil even in the beginning”;¹³⁷ entitled *Antidotum Lincolniense*, the pamphlet accused Williams’ reply of supplying “every where a Pillow for a *Puritans* Elbow,” and collated a number of passages from the reply to stand, column against column, aside similarly themed excerpts from tracts by such Puritans as John Bastwick and William Prynne. Williams, found guilty in Star Chamber of suborning witnesses in the case, likely after Laud had incensed Charles against him, was imprisoned in the Tower of London and left unable to respond further.

Although this exchange is important to consider, above and beyond the fact that it generated such light and heat, it was not the earliest significant example of Laudianism or incipient Laudianism on the subject of altar installations in English Reformed Churches.¹³⁸ To the contrary, 1617 saw what Graham Parry calls “The first visible signs of the new concept of worship in the Church of England,”¹³⁹ as Richard Neile in Durham repositioned the communion table from the middle of the choir to the site of the former high altar and as William Laud in Gloucester moved the communion

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¹³⁶ John Williams, *The Holy Table, Name and Thing* (London: Diocese of Lincoln, 1637), 16–17. Kathleen Lynch argues that Williams’ title, distinguishing between the referent of the term and that term itself, bears a similarity with the fact that in Herbert’s “The Altar” we see two altars, one on the page and one figurative in the speaker’s heart: “‘The Altar’ marks the great metaphoric gaps which inescapably divide a word from referents as various as a generic tradition, the object of representation, and the matter of sacramental presence.” “George Herbert’s Holy ’Altar,’” 42. Given the importance of Williams as an influential figure in Herbert’s life, as well as these affinities, one must take quite seriously Lynch’s claim that, despite Herbert’s use of altar imagery in the poem, he remained squarely within an English *via media* consensus.

¹³⁷ Peter Heylyn, *Antidotum Lincolniense*, Preface, unpaginated. Because the preface is unpaginated, further citations, which would be of limited utility to the reader, will be omitted.


¹³⁹ *Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation*, 12.
table to an identical position in his church. In the case of Laud at Gloucester, at least, surviving records permit us some insight into the rationale that supported what had to have been perceived as a controversial shift: Laud invoked not merely the practice of James’ royal chapel, which featured a communion table positioned altar-wise, but also the Elizabethan injunctions themselves. He further directed prebendaries to bow toward the table during services, secured an order for repairing the altar at Gloucester’s cathedral, and began fund-raising efforts for the installation of a new organ.140 Fincham and Tyacke have judged these developments at Durham and Gloucester to have been the product of “a concerted plan of action [. . .] rather than simply the workings of blind chance,”141 part of “a move [. . .] to convert communion tables into altars.”142 Indeed, during the same year, James visited Scotland for the avowed purpose of bringing the Church in Scotland more closely into alignment with English Church orthopraxis, and particularly to introduce the practice of kneeling at communion; kneeling implies an inclosing rail, which in turn implies an altar rather than a table.143

140 An important note at this juncture is to observe that some of this building and improvement program was likely animated by forces not unique to avant-garde conformity, forces that extended even to Puritan factions with the English Church. During the Jacobean period, at least 63 London parish churches “were either rebuilt or significantly repaired and beautified.” Merritt, “Phenomenon of Church-Building,” 940. These efforts were not led solely by avant-garde clergymen; “Rather, it was the more evangelical, Calvinist members of the ecclesiastical establishment [. . .] who played the more prominent role.” Ibid., 950. Even Puritan parishes “undoubtedly supported a healthy investment in church building and repair.” Ibid., 953. Although Merritt acknowledges a Laudian building program distinct from these more broad-based efforts at improving church fabric, and although altar installations and the repositioning of communion tables certainly fell within the ambit of the former category, churches had suffered from an extended period of neglect and, in many cases of medieval church buildings, were simply unsuited to the needs of Protestant worship. Ultimately, however, altars were items of church fabric “that for all but the most ceremonial of reformers signified Roman Catholicism.” Dyck, “Altar, Heart, Title-Page,” 574.

141 Fincham and Tyacke, Altars Restored, 115.

142 Ibid., 74.

143 See ibid., 114.
In the years that followed, Herbert was himself a builder of churches, not only reconstructing the church at Leighton-Bromswold (so neglected that its roof had collapsed, rendering it unsuitable for use for services) and that at Little Gidding (used for a time to store hay and pigs) but also revitalizing and remodeling his own parish church at Bemerton. Terry G. Sherwood reminds us that “Herbert’s commitment to the physical church and its furnishings is striking.” Herbert, according to Paul Dyck, was “deeply involved in shaping and maintaining the materiality of the church.” We see this commitment at work, of course, in the titles of many poems from The Temple: “The Altar,” “Sepulchre,” “Church-Monuments,” “Church-Lock and Key,” “The Church-Floore,” “The Windows,” and “The Crosse” all testify to Herbert’s interest in church fabric. As one might expect on this basis, Herbert’s building projects have been described in terms that would suggest a proto-Laudian bias: Izaack Walton says that the church at Leighton-Bromswold, for instance, was “for the workmanship, a costly Mosaick; for the form, an exact Cross; and for the decency and beauty, [. . .] the most remarkable parish church that this nation affords.” Yet

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144 See Charles, Life of George Herbert, 121–31; and Paul Dyck, “Locating the Word: The Textual Church in George Herbert’s Temple,” in Doerksen and Hodgkins, Centered on the Word, 224–44.

145 Herbert’s Prayerful Art (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 95. Indeed, Graham Parry goes so far as to call “Herbert’s attention to the architecture and fittings of the church [. . .] unprecedented in English poetry.” Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation, 134.

146 “Locating the Word,” 241.

147 See Davidson, “Architecture of Anglican Worship,” 853 (“he is never far from the physical church building”).

148 Life of Mr. George Herbert, 33. See also Dyck, “Locating the Word,” 225 (Herbert at Leighton-Bromswold constructed “a consciously shaped sacred space” of “expensive workmanship”); Guibbory, Ceremony and Community, 46 (Herbert’s “special attention to the east end” resonates with a defense of “ceremony and ritual within the church”); and Raguin, “You Are What You Wear,” 80 (seeing Herbert as reflecting “a brief revival, leading up to the so-called Laudian reform”). But see Parry, Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation, 132, 134 (although one might be inclined “to hear Herbert’s as an authentic voice of the Laudian church,” his actual construction practice was much more restrained and sober, focused on an Andrewesian decency of appearance rather than on sumptuousness and extravagance).
evidence of a lower-church or Calvinist orientation is also visible: the walls were painted with verses from Scripture in a way that echoes the Word-centered worship of the Calvinists, and the reading pew was positioned at the same level as the pulpit, with both facing the congregation, reflecting an emphasis on both prayer and preaching as efficacious means of salvation. With respect to the communion table—for assuredly tables rather than altars were installed under Herbert’s watch—it was neither railed off nor turned altar-wise, but nave and chancel were separated from each other by a low screen, suggesting something of a high-Church emphasis on the Eucharist as a distinctive site of ceremony. Indeed, against a reading of Herbert’s poetic references to church fittings as purely metaphorical, it is worth stressing that Herbert’s reconstruction work “participated in an activity frowned upon by radicals,” in Dyck’s words; “Rather than seeing the medieval church building as inherently idolatrous, Herbert followed the view widely held in the English church that such a building could spell out the interiorization reformed theology required.” In short, Dyck continues,

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149 Dyck, “Locating the Word,” 224, 225–27. See also Merritt, “Phenomenon of Church-Building,” 956 (“The Laudians were after a different kind of beautification and seemliness”).

150 See Dyck, “Locating the Word,” 227. See also Lynch, “George Herbert’s Holy ‘Altar,’” 55 (observing that the movement of an altar from “behind a screen” was a characteristic feature of Reformed practice). But see Charles, Life of George Herbert, 232 (“even in his Cambridge days and in the midst of rather strong Puritan influences, he considered the Communion table to be an altar and therefore to be placed against the east wall”). However, “A powerful presumption of high Anglicanism governs” Charles’ biography of Herbert. Ilona Bell, “In the Shadow of the Temple,” in Miller and DiYanni, Like Season’d Timber, 255–79, 259.

151 See generally Strier, Love Known.

152 “Locating the Word,” 237–38. See also Davidson, “Architecture of Anglican Worship,” 857 (“If [Herbert] is concerned with inwardness, it is an inwardness that does not stand very well without the external framework that is the physical church”); and Greg Miller, George Herbert’s “Holy Patterns”: Reforming Individuals in Community (New York: Continuum Press, 2007), ix (“unlike many of his Anglican contemporaries, Herbert imagined a significant continuity with the pre-Reformation past”).
“Herbert’s church, like his poetry, is eclectic, retaining elements of tradition and incorporating elements of reform in an innovative blend, producing a space in which people can encounter God.”

In examining the provocatively shaped and titled poem “The Altar” in this context, it is nevertheless important to bear in mind that “It, simply put, remains an altar in a church, the ‘Altar’ in ‘The Church.’” As both an altar and an image of an altar, the poem cannot be read as simply a declaration that Herbert is a Protestant, a proposition which strikes me as unquestionably true and not in need of further elaboration, and certainly not as a simple disclaimer of human artifice. Rather, the poem exists in a state of extreme tension. As Kathleen Lynch has observed, “The Church” begins with “The Altar” and ends with “Love (III),” in which the idea of a table where the speaker does “sit and eat” is suggested, therefore effecting an even broader, Temple-wide

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153 “Locating the Word,” 227. “While Herbert expressed fairly specific views on worship style, he did so within the inclusive spirit of the Jacobean via media.” Ibid., 226.

154 Ibid., 237.

155 See Guibbory, Ceremony and Community, 16–19.

156 Guibbory contests a number of readings that he perceives as arguing for Herbert’s “affinities with puritan spirituality.” Ibid., 44. See also ibid., 240n3.

157 See Strier, Love Known, 195 (“The final line puts human art in its place by decisively turning away from it just as it attains its perfection”). Strier insists that “this Altar refers to the heart rather than to the poem” (ibid.), minimizing the valuable insight that “The Altar” refers both to its own shape and to the speaker’s interior spiritual condition. Although Strier states that “Seeing where the poem refers to itself and where it does not” is critical to a reading of “The Altar” (ibid., 191), his error is precisely in not recognizing that the poem does, at important junctures, refer to itself. As Guibbory puts it, “Though the Puritan distrust of invention in worship affects Herbert’s devotional poetry, his attitude is more complex than those who see only his ‘radical devaluations of poetry’ admit.” Ceremony and Community, 65. See also Margaret J. Oakes, “To be thy praise, / And be my salvation”: The Double Function of Praise in The Temple, Texas Studies in Literature and Language 47, no. 2 (June 2005): 120–38, 134 (“It is a mistake to label Herbert as ‘Calvinist’ when he chastises himself”); and Taylor, Soul in Paraphrase, 18 (one reason why Herbert’s verse has been misread in this fashion is “The traditional if often unconscious view of Herbert [as] an essentially simple, comparatively child-like, and unlettered [. . .] mind, a man good, devout, and totally without sophistication”).

158 See Oakes, “To be thy praise,” 125 (“[. . .] Herbert glorifies his God within a field of tension”).

159 Herbert, English Poems, 192.
movement toward conversion or “transformation” than that which I have already posited. I suggest that this tension also inheres also in the poem’s relationship to its historical context, and that it is a “generative” tension, in Dyck’s words, one that enables Herbert to forge a deeply personal path through the conflicted doctrine and practice of his era.

“The sacramental habit of mind,” according to Huttar, was pervasive in the Middle Ages, but during the Renaissance it fell “under the shadow of a rationalism which eventually, in the Enlightenment of the century’s close, would nearly eclipse it.” During this period, therefore, “the consciousness of divine presence required more and more effort to maintain.” Herbert’s provocative entry into period discourses with “The Altar,” I suggest, can be understood as part of that Herculean effort. The skill and thought required to compose the poem are daunting. The skill and thought required to appreciate it fully are equally intense. In the wake of the Reformation, with

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160 “George Herbert’s Holy ‘Altar,’” 45. Guibbory sees “The Church” as a work that moves from “The Altar” and “The Sacrifice” to “a series of Eucharistic poems,” and she understands “This focus on the altar rather than the pulpit, the Sacrament rather than the sermon,” as a feature of The Temple which “aligns Herbert with defenders of ceremony and ritual within the church. [. . .] Yet a persistent ‘puritan’ distrust of invention and formalism complicates the volume.” Ceremony and Community, 46.

161 See “Altar, Heart, Title-Page,” 548 (“That there are tensions [in ‘The Altar’] is not in doubt, but for Herbert they are emblematic tensions not violently iconoclastic ones, which is to say, the tensions are generative, allowing the opening of a site of active and searching devotion rather than a devotional act of exclusion: the obliteration of image by word”); and Lynch, “George Herbert’s Holy ‘Altar,’” 56 (Herbert’s positioning of “The Altar” at the beginning of “The Church” “is certainly a generative provocation, one that initiates a line of investigation rather than one that defends an absolute position”).

162 “Herbert and the Emblematic Tradition,” 63.

163 Ibid. Although this secularization model of the Reformation has been questioned by more recent scholarship, I find it to be a useful way of approaching Herbert’s work in “The Altar.” Because the Reformation was far from monolithic, we would be mistaken to reduce it entirely to a movement in the direction of the secular. By the same token, however, we would be mistaken either to assume that contemporary scholarship has explained the Reformation fully or to conclude that it did not embrace some strains of thought captured, albeit imperfectly, by earlier critics.
its insistence on denying the “real presence” of the Eucharist. ¹⁶⁴ perhaps this was the kind of effort necessary for Herbert to himself invoke the presence of God. ¹⁶⁵

First, “The Altar” invokes and engages with a wide range of religious traditions at a very deep and fundamental level. By playing with the tradition and history of patterned verse, Herbert obliquely incorporates into his poem the religious belief systems of pagans, Jews, and Roman Catholics. Although, as I have argued, he converts, reforms, and re-forms those traditions in a manner characteristic of English conformity, Herbert has taken great pains to ensure that nothing is superannuated or left behind. The move is eclectic and even ecumenical, one that perceives the English Reformed Church as a continuation of, rather than as a complete break with, the material traditions and practices that came before it. It is a gesture that seeks and finds communion in at least two senses: the Eucharistic sense of communion, to be sure, but also a communion with a different and closely related unit of Christendom—the Roman Catholic Church. ¹⁶⁶ “The Altar” is a piece of

¹⁶⁴ “[T]he reformers by and large were as concerned as their Roman Catholic enemies to maintain a doctrine of ‘real presence’ even while jettisoning the traditional scholastic logic that had supported it. Misunderstanding of this crucial issue [. . .] has contributed to a confessionally based rift in Donne and Herbert studies between, on the one hand, Anglo-Catholic Martzians and, on the other, those whose via media readings veer in the direction of a ‘Protestant poetics.’” Robert Whalen, The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), xiii–xiv. See also Higgins, Pattern Poetry, 12 (“The Jesuit order had a long-standing tradition of supporting pattern poems”).

¹⁶⁵ For a sustained treatment of how, given the mandates of the English Reformation, “the spiritual cravings for communion with divinity addressed so fully by the Eucharist could also be addressed in poetry,” see Regina Mara Schwartz, Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁶⁶ Achsah Guibbory would see in Herbert’s emphasis on and valuing of tradition a Laudian or “ceremonialist” approach to history, one that “argued for the antiquity of ceremonies, believing that tradition and precedent legitimized them.” Ceremony and Community, 28.
living memory that strives to find in the past something of the immediacy of other traditions’ experiences of the Divine.167

Moreover, as Jonathan Sheehan says, if “Protestants were [. . .] left with a space between the physical fact of Christ’s sacrifice and the satisfaction that it performed,”168 then that gap for Herbert needed to be filled, and to be filled with something tangible, for as Clifford Davidson writes, “How else, it would appear, can the real become known but through the physical [. . .]?”169 As I have suggested, “The Altar” is monolithic in its appearance on the page; it is almost relentlessly material and physical, and the themes of materiality and physicalization resound clearly in my readings of the poem that have emphasized how Herbert operates at play within its lines. The poem’s bulk visually echoes the physical heft of the stone altars that were being placed again in English churches at around the time of its composition, and there is no trace within “The Altar” of the relative spindliness possessed by a communion table. It is almost as if, for Herbert, nothing less substantial than an altar can serve effectively as the point of intersection at which man meets God, the point of intersection that gestures back toward the Incarnation in which God met man.

Finally, the poem attempts a conciliatory mediation between the competing factions in the period’s altar controversy. The bivalent shape of “The Altar” in particular has the power to capture

167 To be sure, the Protestant tradition offered the believer a different type of immediacy: the experience of being converted into a lively sacrifice during the occasion of worship. And, indeed, Herbert’s poem embraces that kind of experience, with its conversion of an altar to the individual believer’s self or I, and vice versa. However, I am not content to rest with this reading of the poem, in which Herbert seems to be struggling so fiercely with a multitude of traditions. I would suggest that something far more complex and rich is occurring within the lines of “The Altar.”

168 “The Altars of the Idols: Religion, Sacrifice, and the Early Modern Polity,” Journal of the History of Ideas 67, no. 4 (October 2006): 649–73, 653. See also ibid., 654 (“This separation of the Passion’s performance and its function was, on a theoretical level, created by the difficulties of translating flesh into the word”).

the two primary perspectives in the debate, what Guibbory calls “Puritan” and “ceremonialist.”

On the Puritan side, the poem’s I shape stresses the Reformation’s concern with interiority and with the individual communicant’s direct relationship with God, unmediated by Church or sacrament. With respect to the ceremonialists, “The Altar” obviously appeals to a high-Church or avant-garde orientation that would stress the centrality of the sacraments to salvation and to the Church’s proper mission. By fusing the two shapes into one, Parry says, “ceremonial worship comes together with Calvinistic belief in a meeting of attitudes that were usually opposed.”

In the last analysis, “The Altar” reveals “how finely graduated were the different kinds of formal worship in the 1620s—“Until Laud and, later, the Civil War forced Englishmen to take sides,” Ilona Bell writes, “partisan lines were rarely rigid and sometimes far from clear.” The poem is perhaps so widely popular precisely because it, according to Achsah Guibbory, “so fully inscribes the ideological dissonances of the early seventeenth-century Church of England.”

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170 Ceremony and Community, 5–7.

171 Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation, 135. Guibbory argues that “The Altar,” as a shaped poem, resembles “the ‘set forms’ of worship that puritans disliked.” Ceremony and Community, 66. I remain unconvinced and, in any event, prefer her argument that “[. . .] Herbert made poetry out of religious conflict, even as those conflicts made poetry itself suspect, aware of its own threatened irrelevance.” Ibid., 69.

172 Parry, Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation, 139.

173 “In the Shadow of the Temple,” 261.

174 Ceremony and Community, 78.
Upon a first glance at *A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson His Character, and Rule of Holy Life*—George Herbert’s posthumously published prose guide for rural pastors in the Church of England—it seems that there would be little to connect Herbert’s sermon practice to the floridly playful pulpit of John Donne. Although we are handicapped in the case of Herbert by the fact that none of his sermons survives in print, as opposed to the ten volumes of Donne sermons that have been preserved and handed down to us, Herbert’s preference for the plain style is apparently clear in his command that a country parson “is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy.” In fact, a number of critics have read *The Countrey Parson* as a work expounding upon the Puritan ideal of plain preaching or prophecying. To characterize Herbert’s homiletics by reference to this isolated passage alone, however, is to miss some of the subtlety that Herbert brings to the subject of preaching, both in *The Countrey Parson* and in his poem, “The Windows.” Despite first

175 Publisher Barnabas Oley added the high-sounding “A Priest to the Temple” to Herbert’s own more humble title “The Countrey Parson,” likely to capitalize on the success of *The Temple*, which had been published earlier to great acclaim, seemingly by all factions in the English Reformed Church. Kristine A. Wolberg, “All Possible Art”: *George Herbert’s The Country Parson* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 39 (“From the moment of publication, *The Temple* and *The Country Parson* were admired by Puritan and Anglo-Catholic alike”). I shall henceforth refer to the text by using Herbert’s original title.

176 *The Countrey Parson* (London: T. Maxey, 1652), 23. All further citations to *The Countrey Parson* (CP) will appear as parenthetical references in the main text and footnotes.

177 See, for example, Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert’s Poetry: “Divinitie, and Poesie, Met.”* Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 55 (seeing connections between Herbert’s recommended practice and the work of Calvinist preacher and rhetorician Bartholomew Keckermann); O. C. Edwards, Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 414 (“While George Herbert is classified as one of the metaphysical poets, his homiletical taste was much simpler than that of the preachers who share that adjective”); Hodgkins, *Authority, Church, and Society*, 90 (“all that Herbert has to say about ‘showing holy’ identifies him with a preaching tradition—exemplified by William Perkins’s *Arte of Prophecying*—that sought the clearest and simplest signs for communicating the preacher’s inner life to his hearers”); and Wolberg, “All Possible Art,” 43 (“In his day Herbert’s approbation of ‘plain’ sermonizing would have been immediately recognized as a Puritan value”).
appearances, the sermonology that Herbert recommends possesses both ludic and incarnational dimensions.

Indeed, “appearances” are deeply relevant to the structure of The County Parson in general and to that of chapter seven, “The Parson Preaching,” in particular. Herbert, for example, notes that to invoke the presence of God in a sermon is an especially effective preaching technique, which he demonstrates with the following sample of language: “Oh let us all take heed what we do, God sees us, he sees whether I speak as I ought, or you hear as you ought, he sees hearts, as we see faces: he is among us; for if we be here, hee must be here, since we are here by him, and without him could not be here” (CP, 26). Herbert advocates the use of this rhetorical device in a sermon (for a rhetorical device it is) because “Such discourses shew very Holy” (CP, 27 [emphasis supplied]).

Herbert also recommends that the country parson capture his auditory’s attention “by turning often, and making many Apostrophes to God, as, Oh Lord blesse my people, and teach them this point; or, Oh my Master, on whose errand I come, let me hold my peace, and doe thou speak thy selfe” (CP, 24). Again, this recommendation, and others that Herbert delivers in the same passage, is based on the fact that such techniques “appear exceeding reverend, and holy” (CP, 26 [emphasis supplied]).

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178 Not only does Herbert recommend invoking the presence of God, a well established rhetorical practice in homiletics, but he also deploys a number of other rhetorical techniques: asterismos, by prefacing his sentence with the exclamatory word “Oh” in order to emphasize what follows (Arthur Quinn, Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase [Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1993], 63); antithesis, by paralleling the structures of the two consecutive phrases, “whether I speak as I ought, or you hear as you ought, he sees hearts, as we see faces” (HoRT, 16–17); and anadiplosis in the repeated but repositioned word “here” in multiple consecutive phrases (HoRT, 10; GoE, 46). Although my objective in this coda is not an exhaustive classification of the tropes that Herbert uses in The County Parson, this brief catalog should, at a minimum, cast doubt on Clarke’s assertion that his recommendations to pastors do “not appear to involve much technical rhetoric.” Theory and Theology, 55.

179 A rhetorical technique that goes unnamed in this passage is aposiopesis, which Herbert demonstrates by breaking off his discourse, deferring further speech of his own, and asking God to continue for him. HoRT, 20; GoE 118.
I do not, of course, highlight these terms of seeming and appearing in order to suggest that Herbert is advocating a form of homiletical hypocrisy, concerning himself only with audience impressions over the sincerity of revealed truth. Rather, I am emphasizing the fact that Herbert as a preacher is distinctly conscious of matters of performance in the pulpit, for acting is a form of playing. Kristine A. Wolberg writes that Herbert’s “interest is in the performance of prayer, not its content, not the pastor’s own heartfelt devotion.” Stated otherwise, “Unlike nearly all Protestants on the topic of preaching, Herbert chooses to emphasize delivery and not exegesis, the parson’s presence, not his text.” Even when Herbert turns to the subject of textual exegesis—expressing a distaste for the practice of Donne and Lancelot Andrewes “of crumbling a text into small parts”—he favors “a plain and evident declaration of the meaning of the text” primarily for rhetorical reasons: Andrewesian crumbling “hath neither in it sweetnesse, nor gravity, nor variety” (CP, 27). And we must not neglect one of Herbert’s most noted directives to country pastors, his “first dictum” on preaching: that they use “all possible art” to capture the souls of their

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180 See HL, 144 (“Drama is called ‘play’ and the performance of it ‘playing’”); and MPaG, 21 (“it is clear that theatrical presentations and dramatic interpretations rightly belong” in the category of play). As Wolberg notes, “There is something of the actor’s language” in the passages that I have been quoting. “All Possible Art,” 27.

181 “All Possible Art,” 26.

182 Ibid., 27.


184 Clarke, Theory and Theology, 55.
flocks (CP, 22). All of these considerations lead Wolberg to conclude that The Countrey Parson has long been mischaracterized as a straight pastoral manual when it might be better considered as a work in the tradition of the Renaissance courtesy book, of which the extraordinarily ludic The Book of the Courtier by Count Baldesar Castiglione (1528) stands as the primary exemplar.

Herbert’s rhetorical practice in the pulpit was also, based on the evidence we can glean from The Countrey Parson, fundamentally embodied and profoundly physicalized. Not limiting his...

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185 The phrase itself is similar to one found in The Temple, in the poem “Praise (II)”: “Wherefore with my utmost art / I will sing thee.” Herbert, English Poems, 155 (emphasis supplied). As we have seen with respect to “The Altar” and in the poems considered in the coda to the previous case study, the art—or artistry or artifice—that Herbert can bring to bear in praise of God is considerable. It is also worth noting that this phrase supplies the title for Rickey’s superb study, an attempt to enrich our understanding of Herbert’s ornate poetic techniques in light of the fact that “the smoothness of his verse and the peculiar simplicity that it seems at first to emanate veil its genuine complexity.” Utmost Art, xiii.

186 See “All Possible Art,” 62. See also Cristina Malcolmson, “George Herbert’s Country Parson and the Character of Social Identity,” Studies in Philology 85, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 245–66 (considering the volume to be an entry in the character genre). To the extent that Wolberg is correct in arguing that The Countrey Parson is not a typical “theological manual” (“All Possible Art,” 19), many other assessments of Herbert’s prose work that describe its author as being more radically Protestant will have to be re-evaluated. See, for example: Clarke, Theory and Theology, 55 (linking Herbert’s preaching to that of Bartholomew Keckermann); Cooley, “Full of All Knowledge,” 6 (declaring that disputes in Herbert criticism about the poet’s theological position “are more or less over” and declaring victory for Lewalski’s Protestant Poetics model); Michael Schoenfeldt, Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 55 (acknowledging that, although “It is impossible to guess” how Herbert might have aligned himself in the Civil Wars that followed his death, “By deliberately situating himself in the country [he] implicitly aligned himself with a region whose longstanding cultural antipathies to the court have been viewed as a contributing factor to the Civil War”); and Ceri Sullivan, The Rhetoric of Conscience in Donne, Herbert and Vaughan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3 (“Lewalski’s conclusion […] has been difficult to challenge”). In the minority, but perhaps closer to the truth, is Gene Edward Veith, “‘Brittle Crazy Glass’: George Herbert, Vocation, and the Theology of Presence,” in Hodgkins, George Herbert’s Pastoral, 52–71. Veith characterizes Herbert’s “middle way,” which “was attacked from all sides” during the seventeenth century (ibid., 53), as an instance of the “conservative Reformation”: “the Reformation understanding of grace, faith, and the Bible expressed in terms of the historical liturgy and a high view of the sacraments” (ibid., 52). See also Douglas Swartz, “Discourse and Direction: A Priest to the Temple, or, the Country Parson and the Elaboration of Sovereign Rule,” Criticism 36, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 189–212, 194 (arguing that The Countrey Parson “is very much in keeping with the centralizing conformity that characterized Arminianism’s governmental program”). But see John M. Adrian, “George Herbert, Parish ‘Dexterity’, and the Local Modification of Laudianism,” Seventeenth Century 24, no. 1 (April 2009): 26–51, 38 (“Whereas Laud compels the parish to conform to national standards, Herbert has his parson adapt to his parish”).

187 Baldesar Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier (1528), trans. Charles S. Singleton (1959), ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: Norton, 2002). For instance, the dialogue is structured around a metagame in which the characters compete to determine which game they will later play—the amusement of “forming in words a perfect Courtier” prevails (ibid., 19); one of the participants in the dialogue defines man as “a risible animal […] which by nature is attracted to pleasure, and desires rest and recreation” (ibid., 105); and the ultimate aim of the perfect courtier is declared to be the task of leading the prince to virtue (ibid., 210) through “the veil of pleasure” (ibid., 213).
advice to the words of a sermon or the manner of textual exegesis, he directs the country parson in how to present his body, urging him in public prayer to “composeth himself to all possible reverence; lifting up his heart and hands, and eyes, and using all other gestures which may expresse a hearty, and unfeyned devotion” (CP, 17). The parson’s vocalizations also warrant Herbert’s attention, as he suggests that the ideal parson’s “voyce is humble, his words treatable, and slow; yet not so slow neither, as to let the fervency of the supplicant hang and dy between speaking, but with a grave livelinesse, between fear and zeal, pausing yet pressing, he performes his duty” (CP, 18).

Embodiment is central to Herbert’s sermon practice precisely because it is the task of the preacher in some fashion to incarnate Christ and the Word through his physical presence in the church and in the community. As Gene Edward Veith says, “God’s Word manifests itself through the preacher’s sermon just as a story from the life of Christ manifests itself in a stained-glass window.”

And Herbert’s poem, “The Windows,” provides further insight into this incarnational ideal:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?
   He is a brittle crazie glass:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
   This glorious and transcendent place,
   To be a window, through thy grace.

But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,
   Making thy life to shine within
The holy Preacher’s; then the light and glorie
   More rev’rend grows, & more doth win:
   Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin.

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188 “‘Brittle Crazy Glass,’” 65. See also Eugene R. Cunnar, “Ut Pictura Poesis: An Opening in ‘The Windows,’” in Miller and DiYanni, Like Season’d Timber, 101–38, 133 (“For Herbert, the preached Word is not mere Scripture; it is Christ, the Word Incarnate, mediated through the Holy Spirit and the grace bestowed upon and internalized within the preacher, who, in turn, confronts the congregation not with mere words nor eloquent words, but with Christ’s presence”).
Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and awe: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the ear, not conscience ring.\(^{189}\)

The poem, in Wolberg’s words, must strike a Herbert scholar as “surprising” both because of its “decided lack of confidence in language” and because of the ending that Helen Vendler describes as “unhappy” in the sense that “it contends that, without an appropriate way of life to support them, words are impotent.”\(^{190}\) Yet the salience of the poem lies in the very fact that its distrust of language mirrors the great role that the pastor’s body plays in *The Countrey Parson*.\(^{191}\)

“The Windows” begins with the question—perhaps the central question in Reformed Church theology\(^{192}\)—of how it is possible for fallen man, as flawed and as distorted as “a brittle crazie glass” (\(\text{“W,” 2}\)), to preach the “eternall word” (\(\text{“W,” 1}\)) of God, both the perfect word of the Scriptures and the good news of the incarnate Word that is Jesus Christ. Almost immediately comes Herbert’s answer: it is only through the power of Divine “grace” (\(\text{“W,” 5}\)) that God renders the mortal vessel of the word and Word transparent so that the light of Christ can shine through him, like a window (\(\text{“W,” 5}\)). Herbert continues and elaborates on the metaphor by extending it to stained-glass

\(^{189}\) Herbert, *English Poems*, 84–85. All further citations to “The Windows” (“W”) will appear as parenthetical references to line numbers in the main text.

\(^{190}\) “*All Possible Art*,” 17 (quoting Vendler, *Poetry of George Herbert*, 79).

\(^{191}\) As Kenneth Graham puts it, “The Windows” is about matching word and deed: “instead of telling stories about others,” the ideal country pastor “illustrates the best of those stories with his own life.” “Herbert’s Holy Practice,” 75–76. To read “The Windows” properly in pari materia with *The Countrey Parson* therefore resolves the tension that exists in the latter between being and seeming. See also Malcolmson, “George Herbert’s *Country Parson*,” 251–52 (“Herbert is both coolly aware of the need to perform and insistent on countering the potential for hypocrisy and the fragility of appearance by an internal holiness adamantly sincere and genuine”).

windows in the poem’s second stanza. In the same way that the stories of Christ’s ministry on Earth are “anneal[ed] in glasse” (“W,” 6) in the artistry of stained-glass windows, Christ can make his “life to shine within / The holy Preacher’s” (“W,” 7–8). In a pun on “rev’rend” (“W,” 9), Herbert suggests that this grace alone makes the pastor worthy of the title that also describes the reverence to which the Christian is called to show the Word. The pastor, therefore, takes on more than mere transparency—which would render the light behind “watrish, bleak, & thin” (“W,” 10)—but rather the full panoply of color and beauty that represent Christ’s holiness and glory.

Further explication of the poem requires that we return to The Countrey Parson and its author’s desire to invoke the presence of God in his sermons (CP, 26). Throughout that text, Herbert insists that the role of the country parson is to become a model of Christ. For example, the chapter entitled “The Parson’s Library” begins rather unexpectedly with a claim that is not about books or texts: “The Countrey Parson’s Library is a holy Life: for besides the blessing that that brings upon it, there being a promise, that if the Kingdome of God be first sought, all other things shall be added, even it selfe is a sermon” (CP, 142). What we see, in other words, both in “The Windows” and in The Countrey Parson, is a form of imitatio Christi. Although “the poem emphasizes God’s...
agency in this successful imitation,” Kenneth Graham says, “it is still the actions of the preacher’s personal history that make credible the doctrinal story he tells.”

By successfully imitating the virtues of Christ in his public and private lives, the country pastor through the grace of God becomes, as Judy Z. Kronenfeld describes it, “a link between the mortal and the eternal, that man may see through the minister into the more than mortal.”

Despite these commonalities, it is beyond doubt that Donne and Herbert had quite different preaching styles: Herbert’s art—in verse, prose, and pulpit—is one that conceals art; Donne, on the other hand, flaunts his artistry and artifice, making them visible in a virtuoso display of difficultà. Yet the concealment of art does not mean that artifice is absent. To the contrary, Herbert’s style of simplicitas, one that yields an appearance of effortlessness but that contains hidden within it a rich complexity, is much closer to the Renaissance ideal of grace in art (and in spiritual matters) than Donne’s. It appears plain only when we fail to examine it closely.

In the next chapter, my conclusion, I shall develop the concept that spiritual grace is a kind of Divine play as part of an effort to answer the question that I deferred from Chapter I: why might

196 “Herbert’s Holy Practice,” 76. But see Veith, “‘Brittle Crazy Glass,’” 65 (“The preacher should accord himself with Christ who is in him, but this is not a moralistic attempt to imitate the virtues of Jesus. Rather, it is a matter of Christ’s work—the poem has Christ doing the annealing, Christ making his life to shine within the preacher—so that the theology of presence intersects with justification by faith”).

197 “Probing the Relation between Poetry and Ideology: Herbert’s ‘The Windows,’” John Donne Journal 2, no. 1 (1983): 55–80, 70. See also Swartz, “Discourse and Direction,” 205 (“God sees and speaks directly through the parson”). Swartz goes so far as to argue that “While Herbert recently has come to be associated with an essential protestantism, he […] proposes [in “The Parson Preaching”] not the absence but the concealing of the institutional mediation between God and the ‘people.’” Ibid., 206.

198 As W. Fraser Mitchell would have it, Herbert was an outspoken critic of Donne’s “metaphysical” style. English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of Its Literary Aspects (1932) (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 364.

the discourse practitioners whom I have been considering have chosen *play* as a means of imitating the incarnational capacity of Divine language?
As this early precursor of contemporary comic strips suggests, Puritans were often objects of derision and mockery during the seventeenth century because, quite simply put, they weren’t much fun. The Puritan pictured here on the left, for example, protests the “good cheere” that Father Christmas brings. This final chapter, in addition to exploring some of the implications of the foregoing analysis, offers some personal reflections on why the Puritans were wrong—and about why discourse practitioners during the Renaissance would use play as an imitative means of worshiping the Divine.
V. CONCLUSION

End Game

[How would they dare so ouer curiously, and carefully to maintaine and keepe them, at the leastwise to wincke at them (as they almost euery where doe) in that vaine & ungodly practise of daunsing [...] which the very Pagans at all times and in all ages abhorred, especially being once growne into an occupation and trade as a practise most pernicious, wherein the sences are altogether captiuated and made subject to unlawful fantasies, to unreasonable thoughts, and wicked deuises.]

—Edward Hake

David’s dance has come to a close (at least as far as the pages of this dissertation are concerned) and now the dour Michal, like a Puritan, is prepared to sneer at his folly. Alessandro Arcangeli has declared that “the Puritan revolution was bent on eliminating, together with traditional holiday

1 Edward Hake, A Touchestone for This Time Present (London: Thomas Hacket, 1574), 27.

2 Although Edward Hake’s views on dancing were more extreme than those expressed by some other Puritans, his opinion is not a frank anomaly. Stephan Gosson condemned dancing in very broad terms by complaining of “the exercise that is nowe amonge us”: “banqueting, playing, pipying, and dauncing, and all such delightes as may win vs to pleasure, or rocke vs to sleepe.” The Schoole of Abuse (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1587), 31. Christopher Shutte’s catechism for families represented Sabbath celebrations, including “the folowing of pastymes, gamyng, daunsing, banquetting, and other outward pleasures,” as violations of God’s fourth commandment. The Testimonie of a True Fayth (London: Thomas Dawson and Tomas Gardyner, 1577), 10. For a concise summary of other views on dancing during the period, see Richard L. Greaves, Society and Religion in Elizabethan England (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 454–57.

Even the precedent of David’s dance did not convince the Puritans that the practice was licit as a mode of worship: “Dauid daunced in deede, but is his dauncing and ours anie thing like? [...] Neuer compare Dauid his dauncing with ours, for there is no more likelihood betweene them, then is betweene heauen and hell.” Samuel Byrd, A Friendlie Communication or Dialogue between Paule and Demas (London: Iohn Harison, 1580), 37.
pastimes, any occasion for fun [. . .].” Although this statement might well be interpreted as a dangerously over-broad generalization, it contains more than a mere kernel of truth: Puritans were not favorably disposed toward the ludic spirit of the Renaissance. For the Puritan mind, according to Ritchie D. Kendall, play was associated with Romish tendencies: “the Catholic regressively sought shelter in a world of ceremonial play, ignoring the more laborious worship God now demanded.”

While the humanists of the Renaissance “professed the dignity of recreation,” Marcia Vale says, “Moralists and Puritans inveighed against the effeminate, foreign and new-fangled nature of contemporary pastimes, and even at the height of the Elizabethan period they lamented the supposed

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4 For a contrary and arguably more nuanced view, see Bruce C. Daniels, Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996). Given the fact that this source’s emphasis is on Puritans in America from 1620 to as late as 1790, I have elected not to rely upon it here. Moreover, there is an argument that at least some of the subtlety that Daniels perceives is based on a misreading of period texts; Gregory M. Colón Semenza has persuasively suggested that limited endorsements of lawful recreations by Puritan thinkers were really “a sham.” Sport, Politics, and Literature in the English Renaissance (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 55. For example, consider John Northbrooke’s Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Enterludes, with OtherIdle Pastimes (London: Thomas Dawson, 1579). Northbrooke states that “playes which are for the exercise eyther of the powers of mynde or bodie art not utterly forbidden.” Ibid., 106. Yet, as Semenza demonstrates, by this point in the treatise any exception to the rule against traditional pastimes has been quashed by a more insistently anti-ludic rhetoric. Sport, 53–55. “[. . .] Northbrooke is an extraordinarily subtle and crafty writer,” Semenza explains, and his brief concession to play is likely “merely Northbrooke’s attempt to avoid seeming as precise as he actually is.” Ibid., 54–55. Likewise, the common Puritan view that moderate recreation could serve the function of edification—a view that we encountered earlier in the thinking of Samuel Byrd—renders play a mere instrumentality to another goal and, therefore, not really play at all. See HL, 13; and MPaG, 10.

5 See, for example, Ronald Hutton, The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 143 (the biblical precision of the Puritans “provides an ample enough understanding of why hostility to seasonal customs should have abounded among those most conscious of Scripture and most determined to remould the world according to its decrees”); and Robert W. Malcolmson, Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 6 (“The Protestant Reformation, in rejecting so many of the habits and assumptions of the past, stimulated the growth of an outlook which was [. . .] intensely suspicious of many established traditions”).

decline in society when compared with an earlier age.” Protestant Sabbatarians believed, as Arcangeli explains, that “if rest and recreation belong in the work cycle [. . .] space for them needs to be found within the working week: the Lord’s day is set out for a completely different purpose.”

“The Laudian party,” on the other hand, according to Leah S. Marcus, disseminated an image of the Anglican priest as a wellspring of jouissance—a village master of ceremonies [. . .] who keeps up old parish customs and spreads good fellowship, renewing the ties between the official hierarchy and alienated elements of the local community through his irresistible merriment, his own comportment disarming any suspicion that the ‘liberty’ of old pastimes was incompatible with innocence.

Indeed, as Laud’s power and influence dwindled in the years approaching 1640, she continues, traditional games came to be “justified not on grounds of social utility, but as vehicles of divine grace.”

It is against this background that the central tasks of this final chapter can be situated. In the following pages, I shall first present the implications of the thesis that I have advanced in this dissertation—that practitioners of discourse during the English Reformation were engaged in playful acts that sought to imitate the Divine by creating texts in which Word could be incarnated as


8 Recreation in the Renaissance, 83. This was an ironic disposition given biblical support for the notion that the Sabbath was associated with God’s own time of rest: “And on the seventh day God ended his work, which he had made: And he rested on the seventh day from all his works, which he had made.” Gn 2:2 (AV 1611).


10 Ibid., 17.
Flesh—by recapitulating briefly where we have been and what we have learned from the foregoing case studies. That work being completed, the second section, a short final coda, will offer some personal reflections and meditations on my thesis that might suggest to the reader why practitioners of discourse during the Renaissance found in play such an amenable avenue for their approach to worshiping the Divine.

A. IMPLICATIONS
   The State of the Game Revisited

This dissertation began with a review of the state of our knowledge with respect to the three components of the argument that I have been developing in these pages: play, incarnationalism, and imitation. It is only fitting, therefore, to return to this theme by considering what contributions to our understanding of Renaissance and Reformation discourses my study might have yielded. I would like to propose that three key insights have emerged from my examination of Renaissance discourse practitioners in the context of the ludic: (1) we can now understand the works that those figures produced more fully and appreciate their artistry more deeply by virtue of seeing them as part of a broader pattern of worshipful imitation; (2) the definition and typology that I have developed for describing and categorizing different kinds of ludic discourse are provisionally useful, although the latter might ultimately be of greater utility in a study specifically oriented toward the tasks of classification and comparison; and (3) the phenomenon of English Reformation discourse might ultimately be so multifaceted that any schema straightforward enough to be heuristically useful—even the highly nuanced model that I have been using in this dissertation—might lead scholars toward oversimplification and distortion unless it were used with utmost caution.
In keeping with my interest in formalism and my conviction that the study of aesthetics remains an important critical enterprise, I suggest first that my investigation has been intrinsically valuable to the extent that it has disclosed new meanings in the works under review and to the extent that it has facilitated a greater awareness of the structural beauty of those works.

Considering the sermonology of John Donne within the framework of ludic excess has revealed that Donne’s pulpit speech crackles with a rich array of tropes, masterfully deployed to yield the greatest and most intense possible response from his auditory. To the same extent as his famed verse, Donne’s sermons are complex structures of wit from the broadest conceptual levels to the finest layers of detail that we have examined. These works now disclose to us a fuller understanding of Donne’s skill as an artisan of his language, and we are now able to recognize their true poignancy as we witness Donne striving toward maximum expressivity, not simply as a poet but as a Christian aiming for the redemption of discourse itself.

The visual works of Hans Holbein, William Scrots, and other artists of the Renaissance may likewise now be viewed not as mere optical illusions, mindless fancies aping a popular if grotesque trend toward perspectival distortion, but as attempts to redeem the fallen and therefore idolatrous image. Like the modernist pieces of Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp that ached to depict not only three dimensions but four upon two-dimensional surfaces, Holbein’s and Scrots’ works are strange to us precisely because they seek more than mimetic representation; their goal is a God’s-eye view of their subjects that simultaneously can evoke the presence of the Divine.

George Herbert’s “The Altar” has emerged from this dissertation not as a simple (or simplistic) meditation upon faith accomplished through a quaint device but rather as a remarkably complex visual and textual artifact that embeds within just sixteen short lines the entire genealogy of discourses upon which it draws for its complex work. If verse is the art of conceptual
compression—the art of distilling the rambling content of prose into a more dense and potent form—then Herbert reveals himself in the foregoing pages to be a true master of verse artistry, a poet capable of making the complex seem pure and simple through a delicate and even tender concealing of his art.

I also suggest that my definition and typology of discursive play afford critics a measurably improved vocabulary for describing ludic discourse and its different possible forms. To put it simply, before this dissertation, and despite the recognition from many quarters that “loose talk” about games dominated the field, critics spoke of playful discourses without ever defining what might make a discourse ludic in the first instance, without ever applying the abundance of available views of play to the particular context of discursive acts and practices. The definition that I have supplied, while offered tentatively and provisionally, is therefore a distinct step toward more meaningful scholarship.

Likewise, the typology that I have offered provides an intelligible basis for distinguishing different kinds of playful discourse from one another. While it should be obvious that Donne in his sermons and Herbert in “The Altar” are not playing in quite the same way, my typology allows us to describe the differences with greater precision than was previously possible. Donne is engaged in a GAME with his auditory because he speaks with the expectation of an active response (positioning his discourse high on the methexis axis) and because the discourse has a distinct telos: salvation. Herbert, on the other hand, is engaged in more solitary play, with his poem “The Altar” emerging as a TOY-TRICK hybrid marked by minimal audience response and, given the multiple aims of his discourse, a similarly low position on the telos axis.

The reader will note, however, that I have done little comparative work in the preceding case studies. In other words, while I have used my typology to categorize the discursive play of both Herbert and Donne, I have not drawn any conclusions directly from my finding that the two discourse practitioners play differently with language. Although conclusions of that nature were not strictly necessary to my thesis, my endeavor in this dissertation not being principally oriented toward a comparative study, they would have certainly provided a more rigorous test of the possible effectiveness of my typology than I have supplied here. I therefore offer that typology as a device of only provisional utility; a comparative study might disclose more fully whether and to what extent it can be useful for other scholars of ludics.

Finally, I suggest that my study has revealed new complexities in the spectrum of English Reformation confessional positions, complexities that even the powerful schema that I have been using in this dissertation does not fully capture; one might therefore conclude that heuristic models of the English Reformation might ultimately be unable to account fully for the discourses of the period unless they themselves became so complex as to be unwieldy. For example, Daniel W. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkins place both Donne and Herbert within the category of Calvinist Conformists, but those discourse practitioners and others that I have considered do not quite fit into any single category in their schema.

Donne, with his evident passion for preaching, cannot be classified without complication or reservation as a high-Church figure; the intensity of his commitment to a Word-centered liturgy with a central role for the sermon does not permit anything so unambiguous, and in fact suggests a very nearly Puritan orientation for him. Yet his homiletical style is quintessentially of an Avant-Garde

Conformist variety in its similarity, in some respects, to the pulpit oratory of Lancelot Andrewes. Indeed, I would contend that Donne goes far beyond Andrewes in terms of his reliance on the full panoply of rhetorical and conceptual tools available to the period preacher. Donne’s ludic sermons are assuredly not of the plain style that would have marked a homily from a Puritan pulpit, but a figure like Laud would not have approved of the enthusiasm with which they were delivered.

Greater complications arise when considering Holbein, Scrots, and the anonymous artist responsible for the corrugated anamorphosis that we considered in Chapter III, at least in part because the schema that Doerksen and Hodgkins developed was designed principally for characterizing the Jacobean rather than the Edwardian Church. It is possible, however, to make some general observations. First, we cannot without being guilty of anachronism categorize those artists as Avant-Garde Conformists, much less as Laudians; those varieties of belief would have to await the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods. Yet by the same token it is not possible to classify these figures unreservedly as Puritans either—although they took great pains in their works to avoid the taint of idolatry by crafting images that possessed a lively presence, their willingness to innovate so boldly in a ludic fashion marks them off from those who feared the power that images possess in the first instance.

Herbert’s “The Altar” also challenges the explanatory and descriptive power of the schema upon which I have relied. Its altar shape cannot possibly be ignored given the events that surrounded its composition, and that shape could suggest a high-Church orientation for Herbert. But its anamorphic I shape, suggestive of a Calvinist orientation, militates strongly against that classification. Likewise, Herbert’s advice to country parsons with regard to preaching is remarkably

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13 Ibid.
ambiguous. In some senses, Herbert seems to favor a Puritan plain style, while in others—and particularly in the extravagantly ludic nature of the works that we considered—he resembles an Avant-Garde Conformist. In no sense is his positioning as a Calvinist Conformist within Doerksen and Hodgkins’ schema stable or unproblematic.

Yet a schema is ultimately just that: a heuristic that provides a practical means for investigating a complex subject rather than a point-by-point mapping of that subject onto a perfectly accurate model. I say this in order to stress that I am not taking Doerksen and Hodgkins to task for failing to provide a more nuanced schema; rather, my point is simply that schemata themselves might be unable to capture the richly complex world of the English Reformation. Recall for a moment that Antonio Foscarini observed twelve separate religious parties in England, and then consider how unwieldy such a model might become if we were to develop one of such complexity. I suggest only that we use judiciously the tools that we possess instead of allowing ourselves to confuse those tools with the more multifaceted reality that they heuristically represent.

One thing, however, should be certain based on my analysis and the schema upon which I have relied—none of the discourse practitioners whose works I have analyzed can be said to fall within the category of Non-Conforming Puritans. We are not, in other words, dealing in this dissertation with radical Reformers, whom I have already suggested cannot readily be classified as players. The phenomenon that I have been describing and illustrating in this dissertation, rather, seems to be confined to higher-Church figures. The next section, a final coda, explains why their understanding of worship was such a fertile ground for the playful impulse.

B. A FINAL CODA

Deus Ludens

My central argument in this dissertation has been that practitioners of discourse during the English Renaissance engaged in an imitative worship of the Incarnated Word through play. As I have been characterizing this argument, it is composed of three strands: play, incarnationalism, and imitation. I wish to close by more tightly braiding those threads together and by answering a question that I deferred from Chapter I:

Why would discourse practitioners choose play as a way to imitate and worship the Divine?

The answer to that question is contained in the subtitle of this final coda: Deus ludens. God the player. God plays, too.

According to Michael Edwards, there are three levels of biblical revelation: “creation, fall and re-creation.” I contend that, at each of these three levels, we and the discourse practitioners whom I have been considering could understand the persons of the triune Christian God of the Renaissance as pursuing a play impulse.

When hee prepared the heauens, I was there: when he set a compasse vpon the face of the depth. / When he established the cloudes aboue: when he strengthned the fountaines of the deepe. / When he gaue to the sea his decree, that the waters should not passe his commandement: when he appointed the foundations of the earth / Then I was by him, as one brought vp with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoycing alwayes before him.

Prv 8:27–30 (AV 1611)

The voice of Wisdom in Proverbs adopts a ludic tone as she describes with great joy and intimacy the process of Creation that is recounted from a much different perspective in Genesis. She

rejoices in God’s crafting of the world, and she brings delight also to Him as His abundant goodness overspills the heavens in order to create an ordered universe from nothing at all.

“[W]e cannot truly grasp the secret of Homo ludens,” Hugo Rahner says, “unless we first, in all reverence, consider the matter of Deus ludens, God the Creator who, one might say, as part of a gigantic game called the world of atoms and spirits into being.” 16 The Creation is a ludic act precisely because, in Jürgen Moltmann’s words, “God is free.” 17 And as we have seen, this freedom—the freedom to act or not to act, the freedom to give or to withhold, the freedom to create or to reside in a void—is a hallmark of play. Moltmann continues to say of God that “When he creates something that is not god but also not nothing, then this must have its ground not in itself but in God’s good will or pleasure. Hence the creation is God’s play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom. It is the realm in which God displays his glory.” 18 This is entirely consistent with the Renaissance view of God as one who, as Judith Dundas puts it, “perpetually plays the game of wit, by writing metaphor into the universe, establishing the system of correspondences, and, in general, astonishing man with relationships that only supreme ingenuity could devise. According to this school of thought, the poet’s wit is the means whereby he both imitates and expresses the divine plan.” 19 This imitative act pursues the Incarnation because of Christ’s central role as the spoken Word through which the Creation was effected in the act of which all other versions of play partake; as Rahner says, “not even the most inspired gesture of man at play can be other than a

18 Ibid.
clumsy, childish imitation of the Logos, who, since the beginning of time, has made play before the face of the Father.”

In the sweate of thy face shalt thou eate bread, till thou returne vnto the ground: for out of it wast thou taken, for dust thou art, and vnto dust shalt thou returne.

Gn 3:19 (AV 1611)

With the Fall comes death—and work. “To the authors of the Bible,” Sebastian de Grazia says, “work is necessary because of a divine curse. Through Adam’s fall the world was become a workhouse. Paradise was where there was no toil.” Discourse, too, becomes fallen as part of this curse: in Eden, “words and world,” Edwards asserts, “would presumably interpenetrate with ease. At the naming, therefore, the world, which was derived from God’s language and was god’s (spoken) text, now became Adam’s text also.” And with the Fall comes Babel, a biblical metaphor for what happens to discourse when God withdraws his favor from this world. A world without the favor of God is no longer a world of play, no longer a world of sense.

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20 Man at Play, 9. According to David L. Miller, “both Eastern and Western religious thought contain creation stories which rely on the word ‘play’ as a basic metaphor for understanding our world.” Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play (New York: World Publishing, 1969), 99. Moreover, the earliest theologians of Christianity were capable of seeing Christ as a figure at play. Gregory Nazianzus, for example, writes:

For the Logos on high plays
stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills,
into shapes of every kind.

Quoted in ibid., 109. And for Maximus the Confessor, “truly we deserve to be looked upon as a children’s game played by God.” Quoted in ibid., 109–10.


22 Towards a Christian Poetics, 9.
For by grace are ye saued, through faith, and that not of your selues; it is the gift of God.

—Eph 2:8 (AV 1611)

For all haue sinned, and come short of the glory of God, / Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Iesus Christ.

—Rom 3:23–24 (AV 1611)

And if by grace, then is it no more of workes: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of workes, then is it no more grace, otherwise worke is no more worke.

—Rom 11:6 (AV 1611)

In these excerpts from Pauline epistles, we see that Divine grace, like play, is superabundant. It is gratuitous, like play, even in the etymological sense: free, spontaneous, voluntary—a gift, freely bestowed without any pretense of desert. And it is pointedly distinct from the notion of work or works; it is wholly unearned—unlike death, which is “the wages of sinne”—and wholly unmerited. Christ’s coming in human form re-creates the world and man’s relationship with the Divine. The Renaissance mind, with its close links between recreation and re-creation, could easily have perceived in the overflowing grace of Christ’s coming a form of abundance that I have coded as play.

“Play,” Robert E. Neale tells us, “is as illusive [sic] as the wind and can no more be caught by theory than the wind can be trapped in a paper bag.” This is a comforting notion for an


25 Rom 6:23 (AV 1611).

26 Quoted in Miller, Gods and Games, 4–5.
emerging scholar in the field of ludics, for it permits him on occasion to miss the mark while venturing for a kind of truth. In that spirit, I offer a final hypothesis and a final question.

The Puritans won. Despite the Restoration in 1660, it was the Puritan mode of discourse, plain and direct, that the Royal Society adopted in its “attack on eloquence”\(^\text{27}\) that same year and that governed the Enlightenment’s passion for reason at the dawn of an era that saw a growing secularism accrete in a trend that continues to the present day. What is different today, however, is the returning dominance of a spirit of play in postmodern thought. How much more fertile could that spirit be, what kinds of creative wonders could it yield, if it were married—as it was in the Renaissance—to a keen awareness of the presence of God?

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