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# A Rhetorical Comparison of Spurgeon, Newman, and MacDonald

Robert Ellison

*Marshall University*, [ellisonr@marshall.edu](mailto:ellisonr@marshall.edu)

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# A Rhetorical Comparison of Spurgeon, Newman, and MacDonald

AT SOME POINT IN THEIR CAREERS, CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON, John Henry Newman, and George MacDonald all published sermons based on John 11: 1–44, the account of the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Spurgeon's "A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!" was preached August 7, 1864, and published in volume 10 of his *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*. Newman's "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus" was "written and preached . . . between the years 1825 and 1843" and published in volume 3 of *Parochial and Plain Sermons*.<sup>1</sup> And the fortieth chapter of MacDonald's 1868 novel *The Seaboard Parish* is a funeral address entitled simply "The Sermon." We find in these sermons three very different methods of interpreting the same passage of scripture and communicating that interpretation to an audience, methods which can in large part be ascribed to the different positions these preachers occupy on the orality-literacy continuum. These sermons, in other words, provide specific illustrations of the categories I created in the previous three chapters: "A Mystery!" demonstrates how Spurgeon's oratory is dominated by the conventions of orality. "Tears of Christ" shows the prevalence of literacy over orality in Newman's homiletics, while "The Sermon" is indicative of the way in which MacDonald moved away from orality and practiced a largely literate approach to the art of preaching.

Although Spurgeon's sermon is grounded in the conventions of orality while Newman's and MacDonald's are informed by the practices of literate expression, all three discourses reflect an important tie to the oral tradition: an emphasis on "practical decision making."<sup>2</sup> The text on which "A Mystery!" is based is John 11: 14–15—"Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless, let us go unto him" ("A Mystery!," 453).<sup>3</sup>

Spurgeon's application is accordingly an appeal for his hearers to profess the belief of which Jesus speaks:

Before God's throne to-day, if thou believest, thou art as clear as the angels in heaven. Thou art a saved soul if thou art resting upon the atonement of Christ, and thou mayst go thy way and sing—

“Now, freed from sin, I walk at large,  
The Saviour's blood's my full discharge;  
At his dear feet my soul I lay,  
A sinner saved, and homage pay.”

If this be the result of your affliction, Christ may well say, “I am glad for your sakes that I was not there to stop the trouble, to the intent that ye may believe.” May God bring you to faith for Jesus' sake. Amen. (464)

Newman finds his preaching text somewhat later in John's gospel, in verses 34–36: “Jesus said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto Him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how He loved him” (“Tears,” 128). In his application, he exhorts his congregants to remember that Jesus has the same love for them that he had for Lazarus:

Let us take to ourselves these comfortable thoughts, both in the contemplation of our own death, or upon the death of our friends. Wherever faith in Christ is, there is Christ Himself. . . . We will not, after our experience of Lazarus's history, doubt an instant that He is thoughtful about us. . . . We all have experience of this in the narrative before us, and henceforth, so be it! will never complain at the course of His providence. Only, we will beg of Him an increase of faith . . . a more confident persuasion that He will never put upon us more than we can bear, never afflict His brethren with any woe except for their own highest benefit. (138)

No preaching text is indicated at the beginning of MacDonald's sermon; Harry Walton, MacDonald's spokesman in the novel, points out that he “gave [his congregation] no text” when he “stood up to preach” (“The Sermon,” 578). Like “A Mystery!” and “Tears of Christ,” however, “The Sermon” ends with a clear application, a call to believe that Christ is able to resurrect all humans just as he raised Lazarus:

What is it to you and me that he raised Lazarus? We are not called upon to believe that he will raise from the tomb that joy of our hearts

which lies buried there beyond our sight. Stop! Are we not? We *are* called upon to believe this. Else the whole story were for us a poor mockery. . . . That he called forth Lazarus showed that he was in his keeping, that he is Lord of the living, and that all live to him—that he has a hold of them, and can draw them forth when he will. If this is not true, then the raising of Lazarus is false—I do not mean merely false in fact, but false in meaning. If we believe in him, then in his name, both for ourselves and for our friends, we must deny death and believe in life. Lord Christ, fill our hearts with thy life! (591)

The use of a closing appeal or exhortation is the only element of oral expression we find in all three sermons. The ways in which Spurgeon, Newman, and MacDonald bring their audiences to these final applications reflect the degrees to which the conventions of orality and the techniques of literacy are present in their sermons.

Although he took a few notes into the pulpit, Spurgeon composed his discourses as he stood before his audience; virtually every aspect of “A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!” illustrates the extemporaneous, orality-dominant nature of his preaching. The sermon is divided into introduction, exposition, and application, a sequence derived from classical rhetoric’s six-fold paradigm of “introduction, narration, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion.”<sup>4</sup> Each division of the sermon, moreover, contains elements characteristic of oral thought and expression. Spurgeon begins his sermon by telling a story, a practice that is an integral part of the oral tradition:<sup>5</sup>

There lived in the little village of Bethany a very happy family. There was neither father nor mother in it: the household consisted of the unmarried brother Eleazar, or Lazarus, and his sisters, Martha and Mary, who dwelt together in unity so good and pleasant that there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. (“A Mystery!,” 453)

The complete story comprises nearly two pages of Spurgeon’s twelve-page discourse; in it Spurgeon freely embellishes John’s account of the death of Lazarus. For example, John does not describe the type of hospitality Mary and Martha extended to Jesus during his visits to Bethany, but Spurgeon tells us that Jesus had a room of his own in their house, a room furnished with “a table, a bed, and a candlestick” (453). Similarly, John records only that Mary and Martha “sent a message to Jesus” telling him of Lazarus’ illness (11:3), but Spurgeon asserts that they did so “With glow-

ing hopes and moderated anxieties" (453). Finally, Spurgeon embellishes his source by praising Mary's and Martha's devotion to Lazarus. He tells us that Martha "has been sitting up every night watching her poor brother," and he places words in Mary's mouth: "He will come. . . . Brother, he will come and quicken thee, and we shall have many happy hours yet" (454). The result is that by the time he begins his exposition, Spurgeon has constructed an entirely new narrative version of John 11:1–44.

The core of Spurgeon's sermon is a nine-page exposition based on the story he tells in the introduction. Like the introduction, it reflects Spurgeon's extensive ties to the oral tradition. Because oral communication is "essentially evanescent"—there are no permanent records, no way to look things up—the only ideas an oral culture can preserve are those that have been committed to memory in a mnemonic, easy-to-recall way.<sup>6</sup> Since medieval times, one of the mnemonic devices most widely employed in the pulpit was the division of a sermon into "heads," major units of thought that serve as "great assistances to the memory, and recollection of a hearer."<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon divides the exposition in "A Mystery!" into three heads and begins the exposition by announcing what these divisions will be. He first states the central "principle" of his sermon: "that our Lord . . . sets so high a value upon his people's faith, that he will not screen them from those trials by which faith is strengthened" (455). He then outlines the divisions under which he will discuss this principle, the way in which he will "press the wine of consolation from the cluster of the text":

In three cups we will preserve the goodly juice as it flows forth from the winepress of meditation. First of all, brethren, Jesus Christ was glad that the trial had come, *for the strengthening of the faith of the apostles; secondly, for strengthening the faith of the family; and thirdly, for giving faith to others.* (455; Spurgeon's emphasis)

As he moves from one "cup" to another, Spurgeon repeats these key phrases verbatim, enabling his congregants to keep track of the progression of the discourse and helping them to commit his points to memory (455, 460, 462). This repetition, moreover, receives special emphasis in the printed text: when he prepared the transcript of this sermon for publication, Spurgeon cast the three major heads in capital letters and the points and subpoints in italics. The nine pages of Spurgeon's exposition can therefore be distilled into an outline in which the mnemonic characteristics of oral expression are readily apparent:

- I. Jesus Christ designed the death of Lazarus and his after resurrection FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF THE FAITH OF THE APOSTLES.
- A. Let us once observe that *the trial itself would certainly tend to increase the apostles' faith.*
1. *Trial takes away many of the impediments of faith.*
  2. *Nor is affliction of small service to faith, when it exposes the weakness of the creature.*
  3. *Furthermore, trial is of special service to faith when it drives her to her God.*
  4. *And then trial has a hardening effect upon faith.*
- B. But not to tarry here, let us notice that *the deliverance which Christ wrought by the resurrection of Lazarus, was calculated also to strengthen the faith of the apostles.*
1. *Here divine sympathy became most manifest.*
  2. *What an exhibition these disciples had of the divine power as well as the divine sympathy.*
- II. Jesus Christ had an eye also to THE GOOD OF THE FAMILY.
- A. Mary and Martha had faith, but it was not very strong, for they suspected Christ's *love . . .* [and] They certainly *doubted* his power.
- B. They were three *special favourites* upon whom very distinguishing regard was set, and therefore it was that he sent them a *special trial.*
1. *Special trial was attended with a special visit.*
  2. *This special visit was attended with special fellowship.*
  3. *And soon you shall have special deliverance.*
- III. Now I come to the third point. . . . This trouble was permitted for GIVING FAITH TO OTHERS.
- A. Afflictions often lead men to faith in Christ because *they give space for thought.*
- B. Afflictions lead men to faith full often *by preventing sin.*
- C. Troubles, again, often bring men to believe in Jesus because they compel them *to stand face to face with stern realities.*
- D. *Trials tend to make men believe in Christ when they are followed by deliverances.* (455–63; Spurgeon's emphasis)

The outline is not the only place we find mnemonic repetition in Spurgeon's preaching; throughout the exposition, Spurgeon employs the rhetorical device of *copia*, the "repetition of the just-said," to keep "both speaker and hearer surely on the track."<sup>8</sup> Several times, for example, Spurgeon asks the same question or makes the same assertion in a number of different ways. The best illustration of the copious use of questions appears in the third point of the third head of the exposition. Spurgeon asserts that trials bring people "*to stand face to face with stern realities*," and the first half of the paragraph devoted to this point consists of five related questions:

Did you ever lie upon the edge of death for a week? Did you ever lie with your body racked with pains, listening for the physician's whispers, and knowing that they amounted to this, that there were ninety-nine chances to one that you could not possibly recover? Did you ever feel that death was near? Did you ever peer into eternity with anxious eyes? Did you ever picture hell and think yourself there? Did you ever lie awake, and think of heaven and yourself shut out of it? Ah! it is in such times as these that God's Holy Spirit works great things for the sons of men. (463)

A page later, in the final paragraph of the discourse, Spurgeon exhorts his hearers to "Remember that the one thing needful for eternal life is trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ," and he emphasizes the certainty of this salvation with a string of five virtually identical statements:

if Christ suffered for you, you cannot suffer. If God punished Christ he will never punish you. If Jesus Christ paid your debts, you are free. Before God's throne to-day, if thou believest, thou art as clear as the angels in heaven. Thou art a saved soul if thou art resting upon the atonement of Christ, and thou mayst go thy way and sing. (464)

The most significant repetitions in "A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!" are Spurgeon's frequent restatements of his preaching text and the application, or central "principle" (455), he derives from that text. Spurgeon first mentions his text near the end of the storylike introduction to his sermon. After remarking on the strangeness of Jesus' claim that he was glad he was not in Bethany when Lazarus became ill and died, Spurgeon says, "we may rest assured that Jesus knoweth better than we do, and our faith may therefore sit still and try to spell out his meaning, where our reason cannot find it at the first glance. 'I am glad,'

saith he, ‘for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe’” (455; Spurgeon’s emphasis). The application follows a few sentences later: Spurgeon declares, “We have thus plainly before us the principle, that our Lord in his infinite wisdom and superabundant love, sets so high a value upon his people’s faith, that he will not screen them from those trials by which faith is strengthened” (455).

Spurgeon returns to these ideas throughout the explication and conclusion. The application itself is repeated only once: just before he introduces the second major point of the sermon, Spurgeon admonishes his audience not to “forget the principle we are trying to bring out, that in the case of the apostles, Christ considered that for them to have strong faith was worth any cost” (460). The preaching text, however, appears a total of eight times; the most innovative repetition occurs when Spurgeon attempts to place Jesus’ words within the mouths of his congregants:

I beseech you, rather take my text, and read it the other way say—God help thee to say it—“I am glad that my God did not deliver me, because the trial has strengthened my faith. I thank his name that he has done me the great favour to permit me to carry the heavy end of his cross. I thank my Father that he hath not left me unchastised, for ‘Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.’ ‘It is good for me that I have been afflicted.’” (462)

The dominance of orality in “A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!” is evident not only in Spurgeon’s recurring use of *copia*, but also in his emphasis on keeping the sermon “close to the human lifeworld.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout the discourse Spurgeon illustrates and supports his assertions by suggesting analogies between his text and his congregation’s experiences. To help his hearers understand that God often sends adversity as a sign of his favor rather than his wrath, Spurgeon likens the actions of God to the work of jewellers and gardeners, occupations with which his congregation would surely be familiar:

The lapidary, if he takes up a stone and finds that it is not very precious, will not spend much care in cutting it; but when he gets a rare diamond of the first water, then he will be sure to cut, and cut, and cut again. When the Lord finds a saint whom he loves—loves much—he may spare other men trials and troubles, but he certainly will not this well-beloved one. The more beloved you are the more of the rod you shall have. . . . The gardener gets a tree, and if it is but of a poor sort he will let it grow as it wills, and take what fruit comes from it



naturally; but if it be of a very rare sort, he likes to have every bough in its proper place, so that it may bear well; and he often takes out his knife and cuts here and cuts there. . . . You who are God's favourites must not marvel at trials, but rather keep your door wide open for them. (460, 61)

A few paragraphs later, Spurgeon moves his comparisons from the workplace to the home, comparing the compassion of Christ to the tenderness a mother shows her children:

You know when a mother is most kind to her child, she lets it run about, and scarcely notices it when it is well; but when it cries, "My head, my head!" and when they take it to the mother and tell her it is ill, how tender she is over it! How all the blandishments of love and the caresses of affection are lavished upon the little sick one! It shall be so with you, and in receiving these special visits, you shall know yourself to be highly favoured above the rest. (461)

Finally, Spurgeon assimilates the "alien, objective world" of John's gospel to the "more immediate, familiar interaction" of his congregants' own lives by directly addressing his hearers throughout his sermon.<sup>10</sup> Spurgeon occasionally addresses his audience through first-person plural constructions—"Thus afflictions fetch us to our God," "we may rest assured that Jesus knoweth better than we do" (455, 58)—but he employs the second person much more often. The words *you*, *your*, *thee*, and *thou* appear more than 100 times in the sermon, often in the form of questions or commands such as "If [God] spared your life, why will he not spare your soul?" and "You who are God's favourites must not marvel at trials, but rather keep your door wide open for them" (461, 64). In short, from the macroscopic level—the outline of the sermon—to the microscopic—the choice of pronouns—"A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!" illustrates the many ways in which Spurgeon's pulpit oratory is informed by the conventions of the oral tradition.

In terms of orality-literacy studies, John Henry Newman's "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus" bears little resemblance to Spurgeon's "A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!" The differences between the two sermons are, I propose, largely a function of the circumstances under which they were composed. While Spurgeon preached extemporaneously, preparing "the sermon so far as thoughts go, and leaving the words to be found during delivery,"<sup>11</sup> Newman wrote complete manuscripts of his discourses, preparing in advance both his thoughts and the words

in which they were to be expressed. Techniques such as the tripartite structure of introduction, exposition, and conclusion and the division of the exposition into four numbered parts are present in Newman's discourse, but they are simply "oral residue," vestiges of "preliterate" practices that, unlike Spurgeon's oral rhetoric, are "not especially contrived and seldom conscious at all."<sup>12</sup> From the opening sentence on, it is evident that the rhetorical paradigms of "Tears of Christ" are derived from literate rather than oral expression.

Walter Ong has suggested that "writing restructures consciousness" in part by enabling humans to think with a degree of "analytic precision" unknown in an oral culture.<sup>13</sup> A concern for such precision is evident throughout Newman's sermon. He begins not by telling a story, but by posing a question—"why did our Lord weep at the grave of Lazarus?" ("Tears of Christ," 128; Newman's emphasis). The introduction is an examination of the difficulties that he confronts in attempting to answer it.

The first difficulty, in Newman's view, lies in the nature of the text. The "very surface" of John's gospel contains "seeming inconsistencies"—why, for instance, would Christ, who "knew He had the power to raise" Lazarus, still "act the part of those who sorrow for the dead?" (128, 129). The second difficulty lies in the nature of the reader; because humans are finite and the trinity is infinite, "the thoughts of our Saviour's mind are far beyond our comprehension" (128). These difficulties are not insurmountable, but solutions will come only after prolonged study. As Newman notes, in order to "put one's-self, even in part, into the position of [Christ's] mind, and to state under what feelings and motives He said this or that," it is necessary to "feed upon [his words], and live in them, as if by little and little growing into their meaning" (130). Feeding upon Christ's words, moreover, does not consist of dealing in "vague statements about His love, His willingness to receive the sinner, His imparting repentance and spiritual aid, and the like" (131). Instead, it requires "contemplat[ing] Christ as manifested in the gospels," viewing "Him in His particular and actual works, set before us in Scripture" (131). The question Newman poses can, in short, be answered only by recourse to the technologies of literacy, for the study of Christ's "particular and actual works" is possible only because those works have been preserved in print.

The dominance of literacy over orality continues into the expository portion of Newman's sermon. Unlike Spurgeon, Newman does not emphasize the structure of his exposition. Instead of

announcing the “heads” in advance, he simply says, “I will say a few words . . . by way of comment on our Saviour’s weeping at Lazarus’ grave; or rather, I will suggest what each of you may, please God, improve for himself” (131). Nor does he call special attention to these divisions as he moves through the exposition. Although he does provide some cues—the sections are numbered in the printed text, and he uses such standard transitional language as “First of all” and “But next” (132, 33)—he does not use repetition or special typefaces to emphasize his points as Spurgeon does. Finally, the form of the exposition itself is residually rather than explicitly oral. While Spurgeon’s exposition, in accordance with established orally based practices, is divided into numerous heads, subpoints and sub-subpoints, Newman’s consists only of four major divisions:

1. First of all, as the context informs us, He wept from very sympathy with the grief of others.
2. But next, we may suppose . . . that His pity, thus spontaneously excited, was led forward to dwell on the various circumstances in man’s condition which excite pity.
3. Here I have suggested another thought which admits of being dwelt upon. Christ was come to do a deed of mercy, and it was a secret in His own breast.
4. Alas! there were other thoughts still to call forth His tears. This marvellous benefit to the forlorn sisters, how was it to be attained? at His own cost. . . . Christ was bringing life to the dead by His own death. (132–36)

The way in which this exposition progresses is especially significant. Spurgeon’s exposition, like other forms of oral expression, is built on a succession of “thematic recurrences.”<sup>14</sup> His principal assertion is that faith is strengthened by adversity, a theme he restates in each of the three main heads of his exposition. “Jesus Christ was glad that the trial had come,” Spurgeon says, “*for the strengthening of the faith of the apostles; secondly, for strengthening the faith of the family; and thirdly, for giving faith to others*” (“A Mystery!,” 455; Spurgeon’s emphasis). Newman’s exposition, in contrast, does not develop the same basic idea in three thematically related ways. Instead, he suggests four different answers to the question of why Jesus wept at Lazarus’ grave, and each answer builds on what has come before. Christ wept, Newman says, first out of “sympathy with the grief of others” (132). Christ’s pity was

then "led forward to dwell on the various circumstances in man's condition which excite pity," circumstances such as "a mourning multitude" assembled before "a scene of death" (133, 134). Newman's meditations upon this "*victory of death*" (133) lead him to a third thought: Jesus wept not only because he felt pity, but also because he knew he had the power to remove that which had caused his pity; he "had a spell which could overcome death, and He was about to use it" (136). This idea, in turn, brings Newman to his final head, the observation that Jesus wept because he knew that the use of his "spell" carried a price, that he was "bringing life to the dead by His own death" (136).

At two places in the exposition, we find "oral residue" in Newman's "repetition of the just-said."<sup>15</sup> He begins by taking a full page to develop his claim that Jesus "wept from very sympathy with the grief of others," and before moving on to his second point, he restates his main ideas in a single paragraph:

Jesus wept, therefore, not merely from the deep thoughts of His understanding, but from spontaneous tenderness; from the gentleness and mercy, the encompassing loving-kindness and exuberant fostering of affection of the Son of God for His own work, the race of man. Their tears touched Him at once, as their miseries had brought Him down from heaven. His ear was open to them, and the sound of weeping went at once to His heart. (132, 133)

Newman presents a similar synopsis at the end of his second point. His discussion of Christ's meditations "on the various circumstances in man's condition which excite pity" is also rather detailed, taking nearly two pages to develop, and he again helps his congregants to follow his analysis by providing a brief digest at the end: "Here, then, I say, were abundant sources for His grief . . . in the contrast between Adam . . . innocent and immortal . . . and man as the devil had made him, full of the poison of sin and the breath of the grave; and again, in the timid complaint of His sorrowing friends that that change had been permitted" (134-35).

Such repetition is not, however, a prominent rhetorical feature in "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus." He employs it at the end of only two of his four divisions; while he does point out that he is restating observations he has made before, he does not provide the copious reinforcements of his assertions that we find in Spurgeon's sermon. In short, Newman's exposition is based not on "thematic recurrences," but on progressive linear analysis, a mode of thought and expression which did not become possible until the development of writing and of print.<sup>16</sup>

The literate nature of Newman's exposition is also evident in the distance it maintains between the preacher and his congregation. Newman begins his exposition much as Spurgeon did, with a brief reference to his text followed by a more extended reference to his audience. He suggests that Jesus "wept from very sympathy with the grief of others" and supports his claim by quoting John 11:33: "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" ("Tears," 132). A few sentences later, it becomes evident that Newman is defining "others" not only as the characters mentioned in John's gospel, but as everyone who hears him preach:

when He took flesh and appeared on earth, he showed us the Godhead in a new manifestation. He invested Himself with a new set of attributes, those of our flesh, taking into Him a human soul and body, in order that thoughts, feelings, affections might be His, which could respond to ours and certify to us His tender mercy. When, then, our Saviour weeps from sympathy at Mary's tears, let us not say it is the love of a man overcome by natural feeling. It is the love of God, the bowels of compassion of the Almighty and Eternal, condescending to show it as we are capable of receiving it, in the form of human nature. (132, 133)

This approach, however, is not the norm. In the rest of the exposition, Newman draws explanations for Jesus' tears exclusively from the text. It is only in his closing application that he examines the ways in which the story of Lazarus' death and resurrection is significant to the spiritual condition of his hearers. The governing rhetorical strategy in Newman's exposition is, therefore, precisely the opposite of Spurgeon's: while Spurgeon merely touches on the events in John's narrative and makes his congregation the subject of his sermon, Newman makes only a few references to his audience and uses the text itself as the focal point of his discourse.

Finally, Newman's choice of pronouns is significantly different from Spurgeon's. While "A Mystery!" is replete with second-person forms of address, the word "you" appears only three times in "Tears of Christ": once in a question Newman poses to the congregation, and twice in reference to the applications he proposes in the discourse. For Newman, the pronoun of choice is the first-person plural, which appears fifty-five times in the eleven pages of his sermon. Rather than giving direct instructions, as Spurgeon does when he says, "if you cannot yet claim the result of long experience, thank God for what grace you have" ("A Mys-

tery!," 457), Newman issues indirect, less personal exhortations, such as his admonition that "till we learn to . . . view [Christ] in His particular and actual works, set before us in Scripture, surely we have not derived from the Gospels that very benefit which they are intended to convey" (131). This use of the first person indicates that Newman is aware that he is addressing an audience, but it is not as explicit an acknowledgment of its presence as Spurgeon's second-person address. His choice of pronouns is, therefore, yet another instance of "oral residue"; while echoes of the oral tradition are present, they are overshadowed by the practices of literate expression. As a written discourse delivered orally before a congregation, "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus" illustrates Newman's status as a practitioner of "secondary orality," a phrase which Walter Ong has used to describe an oral performance grounded in "the use of writing and print."<sup>17</sup>

The shift from orality to literacy we see in Newman's sermon is even more pronounced in MacDonald's sermon in *The Seaboard Parish*. Spurgeon and Newman, as we have seen, took different approaches to the preparation of their sermons, but they both delivered their sermons in front of a congregation before preserving them in print. MacDonald, in contrast, bypassed the oral component of preaching altogether, writing and publishing sermons that were never spoken aloud in a church. Once again, the circumstances of composition are reflected in the structure and content of the sermon. Just as Spurgeon's narrative introduction is the earliest indication of oral dominance in "A Mystery!" and Newman's analytical opening sets a largely literate tone for "Tears of Christ," evidence of "primary literacy," the phrase I have proposed to describe MacDonald's preaching, first appears in the one-paragraph introduction to the sermon:

When Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and therefore our elder brother, was going about on the earth . . . there was one family he loved especially—a family of two sisters and a brother; for, although he loves everybody as much as they can be loved, there are some who can be loved more than others. Only God is always trying to make us such that we can be loved more and more. There are several stories . . . about that family and Jesus. And we have to do with one of them now. (578)

This introduction is significantly shorter than both Spurgeon's (nearly three pages long) and Newman's (which occupies nearly four pages of his twelve-page discourse). More important, it does not fulfill the criteria traditionally assigned to the exordium of an

extemporaneous sermon: that it be specifically related to the subject of the discourse, and that it “prepare [the audience’s] minds for the following explication of the text from its context.”<sup>18</sup> Both of these elements are present in Spurgeon’s and Newman’s introductions. Spurgeon ends his exordium with comments upon Jesus’ words in John 11:15—“I am glad for your sakes that I was not there”—and he ends this part of the sermon by outlining the heads under which his exposition will be organized. Newman’s introduction is similarly specific, focusing on John’s observation that “Jesus wept” at Lazarus’ tomb; he informs his audience that his exposition will consist of “a few words” on the significance of Christ’s tears (131). MacDonald’s introduction, in contrast, does not specifically address the passage in John 11 that will be the subject of his sermon. In fact, he does not make it clear that the death and resurrection of Lazarus is his subject at all. He simply notes that “There are several stories” in the New Testament about Jesus’ relationship with Lazarus and his family, and his foreshadowing of the exposition consists only of the rather vague declaration that “we have to do with one of them now” (578). In short, the introduction to MacDonald’s sermon does not carry the rhetorical significance ascribed to either the introductions to “A Mystery!” and “Tears of Christ” or to the exordium of the traditional six-part classical oration.

The primary literacy of “The Sermon” is even more evident in the exposition than in the introduction. As we have seen, one of the fundamental differences between oral and written expression lies in the frequency with which mnemonic devices are employed. This rhetorical strategy is evident throughout Spurgeon’s heavily oral exposition; the use of *copia*, multiple heads, and other mnemonic techniques appear in virtually every paragraph. Some repetition is present in Newman’s residually oral exposition, but it is confined to summary paragraphs at the end of only two of the four major divisions of his discourse.

MacDonald’s exposition, in contrast, lacks even the “residue” of orality. Unlike Spurgeon and Newman, who focus on only a few verses of John 11, MacDonald takes the entire narrative as his subject. He begins with verse 3, in which Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus informing him of Lazarus’ illness, and ends with verse 43, in which Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the grave. MacDonald provides continuous commentary as he moves through these forty verses, discoursing on such varied subjects as the ways in which the “old painters and poets represented Faith” in their works; the notion that the metaphorical equation of death

with sleep may have been “altogether a new and Christian idea”; and the speculation that “it might be interesting . . . to compare” Mary and Martha’s actions in this chapter with their conduct in Luke 10, the account of another visit Jesus paid to Lazarus’ household (581, 584, 585). MacDonald, moreover, never dwells on a single idea as Spurgeon does, nor does he pause to reflect upon and summarize where he has been as Newman does. Instead, he moves quickly from one observation to the next, and his exposition is not so much a sermon, an orally based discourse focused on a single main idea,<sup>19</sup> as it is an explication or a commentary, modes of analysis that are primarily linear, and therefore literate, in nature.

Finally, primary literacy in MacDonald’s discourse is evident even in the pronouns that MacDonald employs throughout the sermon. Like Newman, MacDonald takes John’s gospel, not his own audience, as his subject; when he addresses his audience, he does so in the first-person plural. At the beginning of the discourse, for example, MacDonald discusses the message that Mary and Martha sent to Jesus—“Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”—and he writes,

You know when any one is ill we always want the person whom he loves most to come to him. . . . And we may not in the least suppose the person we want knows any secret that can cure his pain; yet love is the first thing we think of. And here we are more right than we know; for, at the long last, love will cure everything; which truth, indeed, this story will set forth to us. (579)

MacDonald, however, addresses his audience much less often than either Spurgeon or Newman; this passage and the final application are virtually the only places in which this language appears.<sup>20</sup> In the nine pages between these two paragraphs, the pronoun that appears most frequently is the first-person singular. The first extended use of “I” appears in MacDonald’s analysis of Jesus’ decision to go to Bethany. The disciples protest, fearing that Jesus will be stoned if he returns to Lazarus’ hometown, and Jesus replies, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of the world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him” (John 11:9, 10 KJV). In response to Jesus’ statement, MacDonald writes,

The answer which [Jesus] gave them I am not sure whether I can thoroughly understand, but I think, in fact, I know it must bear on



the same region of life—the will of God. I think what he means by walking in the day, is simply doing the will of God. . . . I think he means that now he saw plainly what the Father wanted him to do. . . . Something not inharmonious with this, I think, he must have intended; but I do not see the whole thought clearly enough to be sure that I am right. (582–83)

MacDonald uses “I” a total of twenty times; this preference speaks directly to the question of his awareness of and interaction with his audience. We see in this sermon little of Newman’s indirect references to his audience and none of Spurgeon’s direct second-person addresses. Instead, the use of “I” to the exclusion of other rhetorical approaches suggests that MacDonald is preaching with little awareness of or consideration for his audience; it suggests that he sees himself as addressing no one but himself in the sermon.

MacDonald’s elimination of the hearer from the preaching process exemplifies the shift from orality to literacy identified at the beginning of this chapter. Spurgeon’s preaching adheres most closely to the practices of the oral tradition—he spoke extemporaneously, composing his sermon while in the presence of his congregation—and his choice of the second-person pronoun reflects the classical orator’s direct involvement with his audience. Although he composed his discourses in isolation, Newman believed that an awareness of one’s audience must be “included in the very idea of preaching,”<sup>21</sup> and his frequent use of “we” indicates a residual awareness of his audience consistent with the residual orality we find throughout his preaching. By using “I” instead of “we” or “you,” MacDonald indicates that his preaching is a literacy-based, “solipsistic operation” rather than an orally-based communal enterprise.<sup>22</sup> He encapsulates, in other words, the distance that inevitably separates a writer from his readers. By so doing, he illustrates one of the fundamental distinctions between oral and written communication: while an orator addresses a specific audience at a specific time, “the writer’s audience is always a fiction.”<sup>23</sup>

58. Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 16, quoted in MacDonald, *An Expression of Character*, 220n.
59. "Great Scottish Teacher," 383.
60. "Mr. George MacDonald's New Sermons," 852.
61. *Ibid.*, 852, 853.
62. John Ruskin to George MacDonald, 18 December 1868, quoted in Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 337.
63. "Mr. George MacDonald's New Sermons," 852.
64. "George MacDonald as a Teacher of Religion," *London Quarterly Review* 31 (1869): 423.
65. *Ibid.*, 418.
66. Review of *Robert Falconer*, by George MacDonald, *Fortnightly Review* 4 (1868): 115–16, quoted in Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Myth-maker* (Nashville, Tenn.: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 184.
67. Review of *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, by George MacDonald, *Athenaeum* 21 December 1878; 801, quoted in Hein, *George MacDonald*, 310.
68. Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 14, 17.
69. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 195; Reis, *George MacDonald*, 74, 106.
70. Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 153.
71. Flynn and Edwards, preface to *George MacDonald in the Pulpit*.
72. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 6.

## CHAPTER 7. A RHETORICAL COMPARISON OF SPURGEON, NEWMAN, AND MACDONALD

1. W. J. Copeland, preface to *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, by John Henry Newman, vol. 1 (London: Rivington, 1868).
2. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, 278.
3. The sermons discussed in this chapter will be cited in the text according to the following key:

"A Mystery!": Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "A Mystery! Saints Sorrowing and Jesus Glad!" in *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1951).

"Tears": John Henry Newman, "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 3 (London: Rivington, 1868).

"The Sermon": George MacDonald, "The Sermon," chap. 8 in *The Seaboard Parish* (London: George Routledge and Sons, n.d.).

4. Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England*, 72.
5. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, 244.
6. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31–36.
7. Blair, "Lectures on Rhetoric," 113.
8. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40, 41.
9. *Ibid.*, 42.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, 153.
12. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, 25, 26.
13. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 78, 104.

14. *Ibid.*, 144.
15. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*, 25; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.
16. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 141–151.
17. *Ibid.*, 136.
18. Lessenich, *Elements of Pulpit Oratory*, 51.
19. The insistence on unity of thought in pulpit oratory appears throughout homiletic articles published in Victorian periodicals. A representative statement is H. Rogers' assertion that a good sermon is one in which the preacher "never wanders from the subject, that each remark tells upon the matter in hand, that all his illustrations are brought to bear upon the point, and that he is never found making any step in any direction which does not advance his main object, and lead towards the conclusion to which he is striving to bring his hearers" ("The British Pulpit," 75, 76).
20. Other uses, such as "But let us read the verses" and "Here we have a glimpse of the faith of Thomas the doubter" (582, 584) appear fewer than half-a-dozen times and are largely incidental to the question of audience awareness in MacDonald's sermon.
21. Newman, *Idea of a University*, 336.
22. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 101.
23. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, 74.

## CONCLUSION

1. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), v.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Greenblatt and Gunn, introduction to *Redrawing the Boundaries* (New York: MLA, 1992).
4. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 156.
5. Walter J. Ong, letter to the author, 7 February 1994.
6. Wenham, "Sermons and Preachers," 2; Altick, *English Common Reader*, 7.
7. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word*, 82.
8. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 119.
9. Altick, *English Common Reader*, 2, 249–50, 324.
10. *Ibid.*, 204, 330.
11. Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 22.
12. Levine, "Victorian Studies," in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992), 144.
13. Arnstein et al., "Recent Studies," 149.

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6. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 31–36.

7. Blair, "Lectures on Rhetoric," 113.

8. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40, 41.

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13. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 78, 104.

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