4 Going to Extremes

4.1 The extremes of love and hate

In this shorter chapter I want to indicate the range of pathos to be found in early modern writing. Focusing, initially, on extreme expressions of emotion, and specifically on the crucial opposition of love and hate, should provide co-ordinates for the investigation of intermediate degrees. As a further system of reference, and an additional pointer to the possible combinations of feeling (for example, of personal and political emotion), I have chosen to look at expressions of love or hate on four different ‘levels’ – religion, politics, family, sexuality – within contexts which are either literary in their use of pathos, or addressed functionally to specific topics, audiences and occasions. A further purpose is to foster precision in the reading of such texts, without the additional complication of reference to the critical texts studied in the last chapter, or to the texts to which they refer, which we will look at in the next chapter. It will also be helpful, in a second section, to represent the widely different purposes and occasions to which emotive persuasion was applied, in this case instancing the relationship of preacher and congregation, subject and prince, feminine and masculine. Here extremes of feeling may be combined in a single text to serve its manifest persuasive design.

‘The extremes of love and hate’ are of course relative. Extreme malice, for example, might in the judgement of some readers be something the mind can intuit but never realise (see the article by Downes cited on p. 8, above), and in any case any such realisation might be deeply harrowing to read! Let’s say that I want to look at the visible ends of the range. But even within those undefined limits, we may find a fairly clear structural opposition in every enactment of love and hate from
the religious to the erotic. Taking our cue from Aristotle’s perception of
the desire at the heart of hatred, that its object ‘should perish’ (Rhetoric,
II.iv.32), we should find at one extreme the negation of another’s
being (either the life, or the identity of that being), and at the other
extreme, affirmation of it.

Any attempt to communicate such feelings depends on the capacity
and susceptibility of those who are being invited to share them, or to
empathise with them. Those who go the whole way will quite probably
sense their difference from those who do not. Whenever teaching and
moving are to be integrated, any writer representing the extreme
emotions of a character, or any speaker trying to stir them in a
companion or in an audience, will predict and seek to exploit this
range of response, which I have termed the RPER. We have already
seen how it may be deliberately stimulated through the use of
Inclusion and Exclusion models (see pp. 20–5, above). Here we will
consider several examples from outside the central group of authors
figured in the two main chapters (besides some passages in their work,
not referred to elsewhere). I will use varying degrees of direct quotation
and analysis to suggest how the intensity of feeling expressed in each
passage might reflect a sense of the original audience, whether reading
or listening. Most of the passages will be briefly characterised, while
two (the speech of Bunyan’s Mr. Stand-fast at his crossing of the
Jordan, and Donne’s ‘Apparition’) will be examined in detail with
some use of linguistic analysis.

4.1.1 Bunyan: the glowing coal

As I have just indicated, the first kind of emotion to be considered has
God as its object, which in the context of sixteenth and seventeenth
century England must mean the God of Christianity. But the humanity
of the feeling expressed in the following passage will I hope render it
accessible and acceptable to secular readers and to those of other faiths.
Today the passage will elicit a range of reaction far outside anything
predictable by Bunyan, all the more so as a consequence both of its
subject, and the complex layering and interconnection of its emotive
imagery. Towards the conclusion of the Second Part of his The Pilgrim’s
Progress (1684), Bunyan’s Mr. Stand-fast, like several of his compan-
ions, is summoned to cross the River; in other words he becomes aware
that he is about to die. This whole extended passage of allegory –
triumphantly completing Bunyan’s account of a Christian
community’s journey towards Heaven, and analogous to the emotive
conclusion of a speech or sermon – worked so memorably, for so long,