

Colloquium: “Resurrection. Imperfect.”

Introduction

Judith Scherer Herz

We know the title—“Resurrection. Imperfect.”—but should there be a comma between the two words or a period or no punctuation but instead a largish space? And that tag at the bottom of the poem in all printed editions—“*Desunt cætera.*”—is that Donne’s comment or that of a puzzled scribe? We don’t often read the poem, rarely write about it, and rarely teach it. As a candidate for this colloquium that, from the first panel in 1988 on “The Ecstasy” through 2009’s “Loves Progress,” has regularly emphasized the classroom, how we’ve taught a text, the problems, curiosities, hooks that we can probe and share, it is not an obvious choice. And yet, and yet . . . it intrigues, it catches the attention, this slinky toy on a staircase, in our panelist Raymond-Jean Frontain’s fine image, “that keeps turning over and over on itself in its search for a permanent footing.” It has certainly intrigued Kate Gartner Frost, one of the two people who have written about it since Ruth E. Falk’s 1958 *Explicator* note (another is the same Raymond Frontain), and who has taught it, and who suggested that it be the colloquium poem for her presidential year.¹ Her reading of it in her 1995

¹Frost, “*Magnus Pan Mortuus Est: A Subtextual and Contextual Reading of Donne’s ‘Resurrection, imperfect,’*” in *John Donne’s Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), pp. 231–261;

essay, as it dealt with the mythographic, the alchemical, the cosmological, and the liturgical aspects of the poem, grounded all the presentations at the colloquium. Although she was unable to attend, and since that time we have heard the very sad news of her death, the panelists did her proud. I know she was looking forward to reading this volume of the journal. I do think she's still listening out there. And certainly the discussion that followed the presentations suggests that the poem may well appear on some syllabi in the near future.

Inevitably the questions circled around title and tag. What is imperfect, unfinished: the resurrection (ours, Donne's, one presumes, not Christ's) or the poem? And the tag: is it part of Donne's poem or an artifact of a manuscript? Indeed, it occurs in only one manuscript, and in a nice irony, the manuscript that Lara M. Crowley argues for as the copy-text is indeed the one that contains the phrase, except that she argues that it is the scribe's doing or that of "a lost progenitor," not part of the poem and so in the poem printed here there is no line after the last line. Crowley indeed has taught the poem, but only while preparing her paper, the classroom experience confirming the persistence of the title/tag controversy. Still, the textual evidence hardly solves the problems of meaning nor resolves the question whether the poem is complete or not. Indeed, what the debate highlights and most readers, whether they take the tag to be part of the poem or not, would agree, is that whether the poem is finished or not, thematically it is the resurrection that is incomplete. In Frost's argument it is "a finished poem concerned with unfinished time."² One need not agree with the first part of that statement to assent to the second.

Frontain's reading, like Frost's, makes that phrase part of, or an index of, the poem's meanings, highlighting the "human incompleteness inscribed in the poem." Following three interrelated tropes—"the soul of the whole," the fatigue of the sun, and the hypothetical witness—he offers a reading that places this text in a productive relationship with several other poems such as the "Anniversaries," the "Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day," "The Sunne Rising." In this reading it is a poem about what

Falk, "Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" *Explicator* 17 (1958): item 24; and Frontain, "Donne's Imperfect Resurrection," *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 26 (1990): 539–545.

²Frost, p. 261.

cannot be put into words. He posits that the title is explained by the tag, that it is “typically Donnean to advertise that something is lacking in a poem that purports to celebrate the source of ‘all.’”

Even if “Resurrection. Imperfect.” does not often figure in the classroom, one very interesting example of its being taught was offered by Kirsten Stirling. Having co-taught a course that looked at key iconographic and liturgical moments in religious painting alongside of medieval and early modern literary texts, Stirling addressed with striking images the “something lacking,” that absence at the heart of Donne’s poem. How depict the moment of Christ’s resurrection given the absence of witnesses in the gospel accounts? How visualize the unseeable? Surveying the various painterly solutions, she focuses on Donne’s use of the hypothetical witness in an argument that nicely avoids the textual finished-or-not question as it puts pressure, nonetheless, on the unfinished as an aspect of the poem. Stirling emphasizes the impossibility of capturing that moment in order to test the various metaphors for it, concluding that the text enacts that impossibility as it offers three imperfect images for the body of the resurrected Christ, “turning absence into the sign of a living presence.”

As Frontain points out, the last word of the poem is “whole,” and that may well be the answer, even if the slinky toy at any moment might reverse its direction. The period between the two words of the title in the copy-text keeps the balance perpetual. However, were the tag lacking, as Crowley’s editing of the text proposes, the debate about imperfection might only lightly suggest that the poem is unfinished. Certainly Donne’s only other resurrection poem, the sixth of the *La Corona* sequence, does not even attempt to look on the sight he cannot see but readies his own (as yet imperfect) soul by that event for the moment when waked from sin and death “I againe risen may / Salute the last, and everlasting day.”³

Concordia University, Montreal

³Donne, *La Corona*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967), lines 83-84 (emphasis in original).