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Absence and Presence in "Resurrection, imperfect"

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John Donne's "Resurrection, imperfect" has generally been considered to be an unfinished poem, given its title and the Latin tag "*Desunt cætera*" appended to it in the 1633 *Poems*.[1] In 1958, however, Ruth E. Falk suggested that the additions of "imperfect" and "*Desunt cætera*" were Donne's own, and a commentary on the fact that the work begun by the Resurrection remains "incomplete, unfinished" until the end of the world and the general resurrection.[2] More recently, Kate Gartner Frost has persuasively argued that the poem is complete, and provided a numerological interpretation of it which can only work if "*Desunt cætera*" is counted as a numbered line of the poem as written by Donne.[3] Yet doubt remains surrounding the status of the two disputed phrases, and Lara M. Crowley shows (in this volume) that "*Desunt cætera*" is highly unlikely to be authorial. She also throws doubt on the traditional comma subordinating the adjective to the noun in the title, and therefore on the status and meaning of "imperfect." My purpose here is not to determine whether the poem is unfinished. By comparing Donne's version of the Resurrection to paintings of the same subject, I hope to show that

[1]Quotation of Donne's poetry throughout is from John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967).

[2]Falk, "Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" *Explicator* 17 (1958): item 24.

[3]Frost, "*Magnus Pan Mortuus Est*: A Subtextual and Contextual Reading of Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University o f Central Arkansas Press, 1995), pp. 231–261.

whether the "imperfection" of Donne's Resurrection poem is a deliberate artistic decision or an inability to come to terms with the theme, the poem enacts the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of contemplating the Resurrection of Christ. The successive metaphors of "Resurrection, imperfect" express the impossibility of capturing the moment of the Resurrection, as does the unfinished quality of the whole poem.

This paper is based on the use I made of "Resurrection, imperfect" in a class taught in 2008 at the University of Lausanne. The class was called "Painting the Word" (a shameless plagiarism of John Drury's excellent book of the same name[4]), and I co-taught it with Denis Renevey, a colleague in Medieval English literature. We looked at religious paintings of key liturgical and iconographic moments—Annunciation, Crucifixion, etc.—and then explored different ways in which the same subjects had been interpreted in medieval and early modern poetry. The idea was to identify iconographic elements and spatial patterns in the paintings, especially those not explicit in the corresponding biblical passages, and then to compare the way in which the poetry interpreted the same scene. At the same time as comparing visual and verbal interpretations of the same scene, we discussed ways in which medieval and early modern treatments of the same subject matter differed.

The structure of the class immediately brought certain patterns to light. Focusing on a sequence of specific liturgical moments made it obvious that not all subjects were given equal attention in literature or the visual arts. So while there is no shortage of nativity paintings and poems, and certainly no shortage of crucifixions, it is harder to produce a reasonable corpus of texts for a topic such as the Resurrection. And the Resurrection also highlighted one of the fault-lines between the medieval and early modern periods. While my medieval colleague had little difficulty filling his side of the syllabus, with the Old English poem "The Phoenix," William Dunbar's "Done is a battell on the dragon black," and the Resurrection from the York mystery cycle, it proved far from easy to find "Resurrection poems" written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Resurrection is mentioned in *Paradise Lost* (3.245–249 and 12.431–435) but with no description or detail. Herbert's "Easter Wings" avoids representation or discussion of the actual moment of

[4]Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

Resurrection even more successfully than Donne in "Resurrection, imperfect"; his "Easter," while slightly closer to the biblical scene, still represents it rather obliquely. Crashaw's "Easter Day" calls on Jesus to rise: "Rise, Heire of freshe Eternity, / From thy Virgin Tombe" (1–2), and might be interesting to consider alongside Donne's poem, as it moves into a very different set of mixed metaphors: "This rock buds forth the fountaine of the streams of Day" (9).[5] While there is no shortage of references to Easter, there are not very many evocations of Easter morning itself, and those that exist tend to shift quickly into either metaphor or the signification of Easter for the Christian: the promise of general resurrection or spiritual resurrection as part of the individual's spiritual journey. (Herbert's "Easter Wings" does both.) David Lyle Jeffrey's *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, usually an excellent resource for the construction of such courses, has little extra to propose in the way of "straight" Resurrection poems, and his entry on "Resurrection" perfectly illustrates the apparent literary reluctance to focus on the moment of Christ's Resurrection itself, moving in the first sentence and a half from the Resurrection of Christ to discussion of the general resurrection.[6]

Our practice in this particular class was to begin by looking at a few examples of paintings dealing with the subject under discussion, in order to identify different themes, patterns, or representational problems. The earliest images of the Resurrection highlight the problem that the gospel descriptions describe an absence: the discovery of the empty tomb. The simplest visual representation of Christ's Resurrection is the symbolic Resurrection—the empty cross (crux nuda), and early Resurrection paintings, like medieval mystery plays, stay close to the Gospels by showing the moment of the holy women's discovery of the tomb. The depiction of the Resurrection becomes more interesting—but more problematic—when painters begin to represent the actual moment of

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[5]Crashaw, "Easter Day" from *Steps to the Temple* (1646), in *And the Third Day: A Record of Hope and Fulfillment*, ed. Herbert Grierson (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1948), p. 202. Many thanks to Bob Reeder for suggesting that I add Herbert's "Easter" and Crashaw's "Easter Day" to my corpus. I would be grateful if anyone has more suggestions.

[6]Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 662–665.

Christ's Resurrection which is not—cannot be—narrated in the Gospels: all that can be narrated is the discovery of the empty tomb, which is an absence.

There are different iconographic traditions regarding the representation of the moment of Christ's Resurrection, and these provide a range of painterly solutions to Christological problems. How will the painter represent Christ leaving the tomb? In his *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Louis Réau lists five classic variants: Christ in the tomb ("Christus in sepulcrum"); Christ with one foot on the edge of the tomb; Christ in the act of stepping out, with one foot in and one out of the tomb ("Christus uno pede extra sepulcrum"); Christ standing in front of the tomb ("Christus extra sepulcrum"); and, finally, Christ standing on the flat stone lid of the tomb ("Christus supra sepulcrum").[7] In all of these the representation of Christ is natural and human, rather than supernatural—Christ literally has his feet touching the ground (or at most, the top of the tomb). In the central panel of Hans Memling's Resurrection triptych in the Louvre (1490), Christ, dressed in a red robe, steps out of the sepulchre, illustrating Réau's third type. In a slightly earlier painting from Meister Francke's Thomas Altar (1424–1436) now in Hamburg, the representation of Christ is very physical indeed, as he has one hand on the edge of the tomb and is heaving himself out, making his posture very ungainly.

Réau's types can be read as an upward progression, from Christ within the tomb to Christ on top of the tomb, and in a sense this last type of the physical Resurrection can be seen, Réau suggests, as a kind of launching pad for a further version of the resurrected Christ: a transfigured Christ, floating above the tomb, as can be seen for example in Giovanni Bellini's "Resurrection" (1475–1479), now in Berlin. This tradition originated in Italian art in the fourteenth century and was popularized by painters such as Fra Angelico and Tintoretto; it cannot be found in the northern schools until the beginning of the sixteenth century. This tradition may result from a confusion with the Ascension, where Christ is also shown floating in mid-air,[8] and in some of the

[7]Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien vol. II: Iconographie de la bible II: Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), p. 545.

[8]Réau, p. 586.

Apocryphal Gospels too the Resurrection is confused with the Ascension.[9]

The theological/Christological issues behind the representation of Christ's posture are magnified in the question of *how* Christ's body is to be represented. Christ is still wholly man and wholly God, but at the moment of Resurrection is his divinity still hidden? In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel questioned whether it was possible to represent Christ pictorially at the moments when his divine aspects are revealed:

> In particular, the Resurrection, Transfiguration, and Ascension, and in general all the scenes in the life of Christ when, after the Crucifixion and his death, he has withdrawn from immediate existence as simply this individual man and is on the way to return to his father, demand in Christ himself a higher expression of Divinity than painting is completely able to give to him; for its proper means for portraying him, namely human individuality and its external form, it should expunge here and glorify him in a purer light.[10]

Many painters, such as Fra Angelico, represent the "purer light" of Christ's divinity by the almond-shaped mandorla, which is also to be seen in many representations of the Ascension and the Transfiguration. The mandorla and the sun-like glow which Matthias Grunewald opts for in his 1515 Isenheim altarpiece (Colmar) indicate some difference in Christ's body before and after his death.

Donne himself discusses the problem of seeing Christ's glorified body in a sermon given at Lincolns Inn in 1620 where he evokes the Transfiguration as a type of the Resurrection (both Christ's Resurrection and the General resurrection). He refers to St. Jerome in order to describe the way in which the vision of the transfigured Christ affected the sight of the apostles:

> Christ had still the same true, and reall body, and he had the same forme, and proportion, and lineaments, and dimensions

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[9]Réau, p. 539.

[10]Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; rprt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 822

> of his body, in it selfe. . . . It gave him not another face, but it super-immitted such a light, such an illustration upon him, as, by that irradiation, that coruscation, the beames of their eys were scatterd, and disgregated, dissipated so, as that they could not collect them, as at other times, nor constantly, and confidently discerne him.[11]

Donne, like Hegel, conceives of the difference in Christ's transfigured body in terms of light. His image of the "scattered" eye-beams of the apostles is like a reversal of the lovers' eye-beams "twisted and thread[ed] upon one double string" in "The Ecstasy." The visual and human connection between the lovers is not possible between the apostles and Christ when they witness Him transfigured. Donne makes a characteristic move from the impossibility of seeing the transfigured Christ to the impossibility of communicating the nature of the transfigured Christ—or any resurrected body—in words:

> In this type of the Resurrection, the transfiguration of Christ, it is said that *even Peter himself wist not what to say* [Mark 9:6] . . . and . . . Christ himself forbad them to say anything at all of it, till his Resurrection. Till our Resurrection, we cannot know clearly, we should not speak *boldly*, of the glory of the Saints of God, nor of our blessed endowments in that state.
>
> (3:122; Donne's emphasis)

If Peter and the other apostles were not physically capable of witnessing Christ transfigured, another crucial problem for the representation of the Resurrected Christ is that there were, according to the Gospel accounts, no human witnesses. The sleeping guards in the gospels and the paintings emphasize this, being present but asleep. The painters who imagine the moment of Resurrection posit themselves and the viewers of the painting as imagined witnesses of the scene.

Donne's poem does not narrate the moment of Resurrection, nor the apparition of the resurrected Christ, but the moment of discovery that begins the story in all four gospels, and which was illustrated in early

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[11]Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 4:118. All quotations from Donne's *Sermons* are from this edition.

Resurrection images: the discovery of absence, of the empty tomb. While the sun to which "Resurrection, imperfect" is addressed has a clear metaphorical significance that recalls the sun/son pun in "Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward," it is also a literal presence in most of the gospel versions: the holy women enter the sepulchre at "the rising of the sun" (Mark 16:2); "as it began to dawn" (Matthew 28:1); "very early in the morning" (Luke 24:1); cf. "when it was yet dark" (John 20:1). So Donne's speaker may identify himself with the holy women as they discover the empty tomb, or may even pre-empt them, since his "old Sun" (1) is still sleeping. Yet unlike the holy women he approaches the tomb with some knowledge: he *knows* that "a better Sun" (4) has risen, whereas in the gospel accounts the absence is not immediately translated into a sign of a presence. Donne, however, goes on to imagine what the moment of Resurrection *might* have been like, but with a distance from the event that is quite different from the painters who represent the scene as a physical reality.

A visual parallel for the absence translated into presence of Donne's poem can be found in Fra Angelico's "Resurrection" in the Convento di San Marco in Florence (1440–1441). This fresco illustrates the gospel moment of the holy women finding the empty tomb, yet shows Christ floating above their heads (unseen by them) on another plane of existence, surrounded by a mandorla, showing by his invisible presence what the absence of the empty tomb signifies (see fig. 1). In a similar way, Donne's speaker approaches the empty tomb, and then attempts to illustrate (in words) what the absence means. In order to do that he works through three figures: the opening invocation of the sun, with its inherent associations with the son of God ("a better Sun rose before thee to day," 4); the alchemical metaphor; and the metaphor of the soul parting from the body. I will approach these three metaphors in reverse order.

In order to compare the body of the resurrected Christ to the soul leaving the dying body, Donne's speaker posits a hypothetical witness to the Resurrection, which reminds us of the absence of witnesses in the gospel accounts and raises the question of the potential visualizing of the Resurrection. "*Had* one of those . . . / . . . / . . . at this sepulchre been," the speaker speculates, "He *would have* justly thought this body'a soule" (17, 19, 21; my emphasis). This hypothetical witness and his belief are

Fig. 1. Fra Angelico, *Resurrection of Christ and Women at the Tomb* (1440–1441), Convento di San Marco, Florence.

distanced from us by being described as "one of those," and also by the use of the conditional. On one level this hypothetical witness must be wrong. If he interprets the sight of Christ's resurrected body as a soul, he misses the point of the bodily Resurrection of Christ, who remained wholly man. On some level though, the poem suggests, Christ's body can be "*justly* thought . . . a soul" (my emphasis), because it is the only way to

express the difference of Christ's glorified body from the whole body of mankind. The figure functions rather similarly to the mandorla in paintings of the Resurrection and the Transfiguration, to signify difference. It is the attempt to articulate that difference, to contemplate, to conceive of Christ's resurrected body, which governs the three metaphors of "Resurrection, imperfect," and which ultimately ends in the failure (rhetorical or otherwise) of the poem.

The body-soul metaphor is somehow both adequate and inadequate, right and wrong. A similar doubleness, it seems to me, applies to the tincture metaphor, in which Christ becomes the Philosopher's stone, the tincture which can transmute other metals to gold.[12] The comparison between the alchemical process and redemption through Christ is not Donne's conceit; many writers on alchemy made the comparison themselves. In Donne's poem we are told that Christ "for these three daies became a minerall" (12). The first definition of "mineral" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "*Alchemy*. According to certain writers: that variety of the philosophers' stone which was responsible for the purification of metals." The lines about gold and tincture seem to gloss the word "mineral": "Hee was all gold when he lay downe, but rose / All tincture" (13–14). These lines can be read, as Frost has read them, as a clear reference to the different stages of the alchemical process:

> In the threefold transmutative process the base matter was gradually albified by heating, dissolution, and coction. From the fire emerged the tincture, a white powder, often called the Philosopher's Gold, which imparts its whiteness to everything it is mixed with, purifying and transmuting. In spiritual alchemy, the stage of spiritual gold was achieved by union with Christ, the white tincture.[13]

Yet to rise "*all* tincture" raises a similar problem, it seems to me, as falsely identifying the body as a soul. The metaphor again marks the difference between Christ's resurrected body and all other bodies. But through this figure the body becomes almost *not* a body. To be all tincture, or to be (like) a soul, is a move towards the spiritual, ethereal,

[12]The alchemical context has been explained in great detail by Frost, pp. 239–242.

[13]Frost, p. 242.

away from the physical. Such metaphors resemble the choice made by painters of the Resurrection to show Christ ethereally floating in the air, rather than solidly feet on the ground.

Metaphor is essential, because it seems we can only see or imagine Christ's body if we describe it as something else. And yet metaphor is always inadequate, because like the "eye-beames" of the apostles at the Transfiguration in Donne's sermon, the full picture is "scatterd . . . dissipated," always at one remove from what we want to see. In the same sermon Donne points out that in Matthew's gospel, at the moment of Transfiguration, Christ's face is described as shining like the sun (Matthew 17:2), and he connects this with the General resurrection, as Matthew's gospel also says "then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father" (Matthew 13:43).[14] The sun figure, which opens Donne's Resurrection poem, is thus connected to the irradiating, coruscating light signifying the impossibility of seeing the glorified Christ. The sun-son pun recalls that of "Goodfriday 1613," where the speaker "should see a Sunne, by rising set, / And by that setting endlesse day beget" (11–12). Yet the eye-beams in "Resurrection, imperfect" are going in very different directions from Donne's crucifixion poem. In that poem the speaker knows where he *should* be looking, but is unable to look. In the Resurrection poem, he looks in the right direction, but cannot see. In "Goodfriday 1613," the eye of his imagination recreates the image he should be looking at; in the Resurrection poem his imagination creates three imperfect images of the sight he is missing.

Using paintings to help read poetry can be fraught with problems, and I do not mean to suggest that Donne's "Resurrection, imperfect" is to be read as an ekphrasis of the tradition of painted Resurrections, or even that he was necessarily aware of these traditions when he wrote it. Studying the visual tradition, however, can draw attention to key themes and problems in a particular iconographic subject, and comparison of how visual and verbal artists overcome or foreground those problems can be illuminating. Pursuing the ways in which painters of the Resurrection such as Memling and Fra Angelico sought to visualize the unseeable reminds us how concerned Donne is with sight, particularly (though not exclusively) in the religious context. And comparison with painting can provide a slightly different angle of access to the poem, particularly in the

[14]See Donne, *Sermons*, 2:120.

classroom, reminding students that texts can be read spatially too. Donne's poetry is very concerned with space, and "Resurrection, imperfect" is no exception. With the holy women, or before them, Donne's speaker approaches the empty sepulchre, and attempts to fill it with words turning absence into the sign of a living presence. At the centre of the poem, as Frost points out, are the words "fill all" (11).[15] Donne does not try to fill in the empty space with a picture of the resurrected Christ; rather, he acknowledges that it is a space, which can only be filled with ways of imagining the resurrected Christ. But how to imagine, how to put words to, that glorified body? The space, of the sepulchre and of the poem, is filled with three imperfect images for the body of the resurrected Christ.

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[15]Frost, p. 244.