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Feasting with St. Stephen

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Some years ago, in 1934, when the young Elizabeth Bishop was setting out to become a poet, she asked a favor of her Vassar colleague, Margaret Miller, on whom she had a crush.[1] As daily encouragement, she invoked Margaret "to paint a beautifully lettered sign for the foot of her bed" with the following lines: "But as for one which hath a long taske, 'tis good, / With the Sunne to beginne his business."[2] Sober advice indeed from Donne's *La Corona* and the sonnet usually titled in modern editions as "The Temple" (lines 11-12, Sonnet 4). The lines are hardly among Donne's more exuberant or memorable. No bracelets of bright hair about these bones. But in their low-keyed prosy way, they get the job done, pointing toward fulfillment in the future, as Bishop hoped would be the case with her. Arising early each morning, perhaps she even subliminally wished to gain someday a laurel crown of her own.

I offer this morsel as yet another sign of Donne's nourishing afterlife, but my essay runs in a more distinctly hagiographical direction: toward excavating the first earthly wearer of a heavenly crown—St. Stephen—especially in one of Donne's late sermons and in the visual culture of his day. After that I will turn modern, assaying Stephen's place in a brief

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[1] This essay was originally given as the Presidential Address at the 34th conference of the John Donne Society in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2019. For encouragement and improvements, I would like to thank Achsah Guibbory, Dayton Haskin, Helen Hecht, Jeffrey Johnson, and the late Chauncey Wood.

[2] Megan Marshall, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), p. 49. For the original context see *One Art: Elizabeth Bishop, Letters*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 26.

Fig. 1: Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian* (1480 C. E.)

sonnet sequence by Anthony Hecht. In retelling this tale, I find encouragement in the possibility that not every Donnean is equally familiar with the subject. Although Donne might have believed, following the Catholic historian, Cardinal Baronius, that "there are (I think) more Martyrs of this name, *Stephen*, then of any other Name,"[3] when I put the question of his name to a colleague who knows much more about this subject than I, she responded quickly, with her no-nonsense, English Tudor-New York accent, "oh, yeah, the guy with all the arrows sticking in him."

No, not the St. Sebastian familiar from Art History 101, such as Mantegna's statuesque Sebastian (Fig. 1), or Perugino's more seduct–ive, less prickly hunk (Fig. 2). But St. Stephen, the favorite saint of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, who was reportedly stoned to death in Acts 7, and thus became the first Christian Martyr, or proto-Martyr, as Donne liked to refer to him. His story, selectively told, occupies Donne for the entirety of his Sermon Preached at Whitehall, February 29, 1628 (new calendar), with its famous peroration on equality in heaven, including the phrase "one equall musick,"[4] remembered by Vikram Seth in his 1999 novel, *An Equal Music*, as well as by many later day composers and musicians. The biblical description of the saint's final descent into silence, "And when he said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7.60), serves as Donne's principal scriptural text for the day. This was not Donne's only foray into St. Stephen, it needs be said, just his most prominent. In *A Sermon Preached upon the Third Person of the Trinity*, probably delivered in 1621 or 1622, Donne had enlisted the example of Stephen as a witness to Christ, in line with the text from Romans 8.16 for that day: "The Spirit it selfe beareth witnesse with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

St. Stephen's appeal to the author of *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610) was not only because he was the first Christian martyr and therefore belonged to the primitive age of martyrology when the bare foundations of Christianity were under constant threat. Stephen was also indisputably

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[3] David Colclough (ed.), *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, *Volume III: Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; online 2014), p. 99 (ll. 353-4). Further References to Sermon 6, the February 29, 1627 Sermon, are to this edition.

[4] Colclough, p. 104 (l. 578).

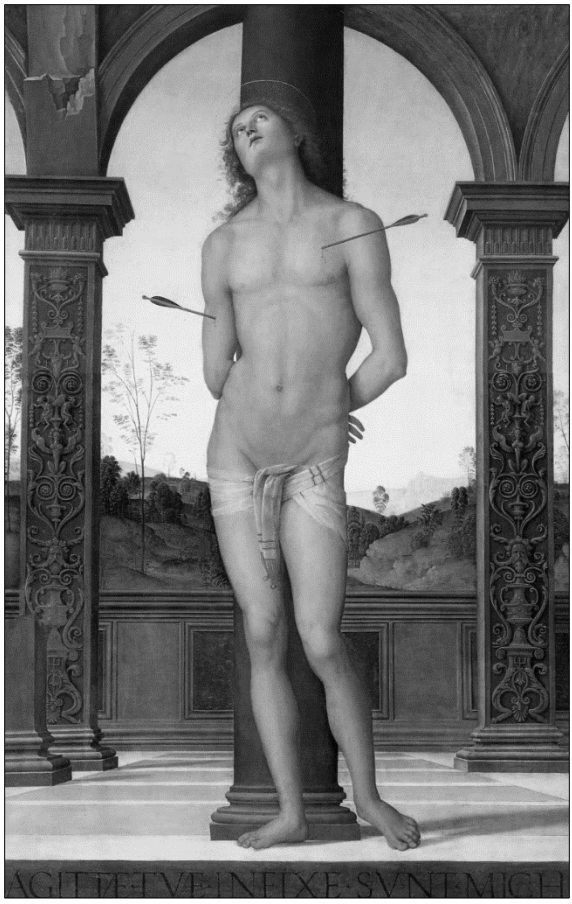

Fig. 2: Pietro Perugino, *St. Sebastian* (1495 C. E.)

a martyr for Christ, or rather *the* undisputable martyr for Christ. In early modern England, rich with controversy and punishment, his credentials remained impeccable. Even if his story appears among the questionable accounts, the fake news of the day for Protestants, provided by the popular *Legenda aurea* (or *Golden Legend*), the saint's authority as a suffering witness to Christ stems directly from Scripture itself. In explicit contrast to any other saints' lives, Stephen's acts are testified to by the word of God—and uniquely so. Abel, the next best biblical candidate is but a type, as Donne observes in *Pseudo-Martyr*.[5]

[5] Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London, 1610), pp. 5-6

Stephen's exemplarity thus allows Donne the opportunity for considerable navigational authority and dramatic play in the pulpit. With the martyr in mind, for instance, Donne could explore the cinematic immediacy of suffering, hardly a distant fiction either to the preacher or to his London audience, while also cautioning his auditors—and the orator himself—against the self-justifying pretense of martyrdom as a form of authentic sacrifice. One of the more memorable moments in the 1621-22 sermon, in fact, pivots on this important distinction. Donne goes after the graphic subject of martyrdom with gusto—literally—throwing formal rhyme to the wind, as it were, and courting the greater freedom of prose, its varied rhythms and reverberations being well suited to the pulpit, whether at Lincoln's Inn or St. Paul's. In order for the eye to help guide the ear, I offer a diagramed version of the passage:

> A Martyr is nothing but a Witnesse.
> He that pledges Christ in his own wine, in his own cup, in bloud;
> He that washes away his sins in a second Baptisme, and hath found a lawfull way of Re-baptizing, even in bloud;
> He that waters the Prophets ploughing, and the Apostles sowing with bloud;
> He that can be content to bleed as long as a Tyran can foame, or an Executioner sweat;
> He that is pickled, nay embalmed in bloud, salted with fire, and preserved in his owne ashes;
> He that (to contract all, nay to enlarge beyond all) suffers in the Inquisition,
> when his body is upon the rack,
> when the rags are in his throat,
> when the boots are upon his legs,
> when the splinters are under his nailes,
> if in those agonies he have the vigour to say, I suffer this to shew what my Saviour suffered, must yet make this difference,
> He suffered as a Saviour, I suffer but as a witnesse.[6]

[6] Katrin Ettenhuber (ed.), *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, *Volume. V: Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620-1623* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 111 (ll. 276-87). On Donne's complex response to martyrdom see

Donne begins with measured calm, with a 10-syllable line, in fact. Then as the parallel clauses advance, he ratchets up the imagery of pain. He moves from ordinary Christian assent, to more gruesome modes of identification with Christ, to that great suspended final clause, playing on its own expansion (subordinate clauses within a subordinate clause), inserting an imaginary first-person "I" into the drama, stretching out the syntax as if it were on the rack before contracting the whole into a single, terminal parallelism that differentiates Christ's inimitable suffering from that of a martyr, however tortured, and returns the passage to its original measured subject. To be "nothing but a Witnesse" seems, for all its agony, like a small victory until, that is, Donne offers in the next breath the example of Stephen, the proto-martyr and first witness. "But yet to him that suffers as a Martyr, as a witnesse, a crowne is reserved." To clinch his point about Stephen's exemplarity, Donne, with a small flourish of learning and a long interest in coronals, then expounds on Stephen's name, which in Greek means "crown." For Donne, the name, moreover, makes manifest "a happy and a harmonious meeting," as he says in the sermon, between Stephen's faithful manifestation of his recently acquired Christian identity and the reward of the crown he is to receive in the next life for his martyrdom. It is the first use of "crown" in this sense, a word newly minted for the specific occasion and thus bearing linguistic witness to the act of martyrdom itself. Donne explicitly reminds us in the later sermon that the word appears for the first time in the Bible as a synonym or metaphor for the kingdom of heaven, after which, he tells us, it appears "in the Epistles often and in the Revelation very often."[7]

So who was this proto-martyr with a crown in his name and what other points of interest did his story encompass? The Book of Acts is sketchy with detail and motivation, but the account it gives—and the one Donne took as Gospel authority—identifies a Jewish convert bearing a Greek name, Stephen, who, with the other disciples, murmured against the Hebraic Jews "because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration" (6.1). In what sense the women

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Ross Lerner, *Unknowing Fanaticism: Reformation Literatures of Self-Annihilation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), Chapter 2, "Lyric Fanaticism: Donne's Annihilation"), pp. 59-82.

[7] Colclough, p. 99 (ll. 357-8).

were neglected is not immediately clear. Legend suggests either that the widows were "not allowed to do any service, or that they were given too much work to do in the daily round."[8] In apparent response to these changed circumstances, Scripture attests, the disciples increased their own number, giving themselves "continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (6.4), and they improved their organizational strength with Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the holy ghost" (6.5), as one of the chosen leaders. Stephen then performs, we're told, "great wonders and miracles among the people," but he is accused falsely, by suborned witnesses, of blasphemy against the Law. "For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us."

There then follows a lengthy disquisition by Stephen, more than 50 verses long—now often regarded as a later interpolation by the author of Acts—recounting the Biblical history of Moses and the not-so-chosen people. For reasons not entirely obvious, these lines further infuriate the Hebrew people, some of whom take Stephen outside the gates of Jerusalem and stone him to death. Two of the more curious, dramatic moments bring the Biblical story to a close. In the words of the King James Version, "the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul" (7.58), a puzzling action given various interpretations in *The Golden Legend*, and then Stephen's final words, "And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (7.60)—grateful to be dead.

Biblical scholarship on Stephen is vast. It often focuses on Stephen's administrative role as a deacon of the early pre-Pauline church; his parallel with Christ in forgiving his enemies; his eschatology, specifically, his belief in the Second Coming of Jesus, of which he is the first to give expression—"Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (7. 56); and his complex relationship to Saul, who would become Paul. (8.1). A number of these concerns, amplified by the legendary account, become part of the visual

[8] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols, William Granger Ryan (trans.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 1, p. 45.

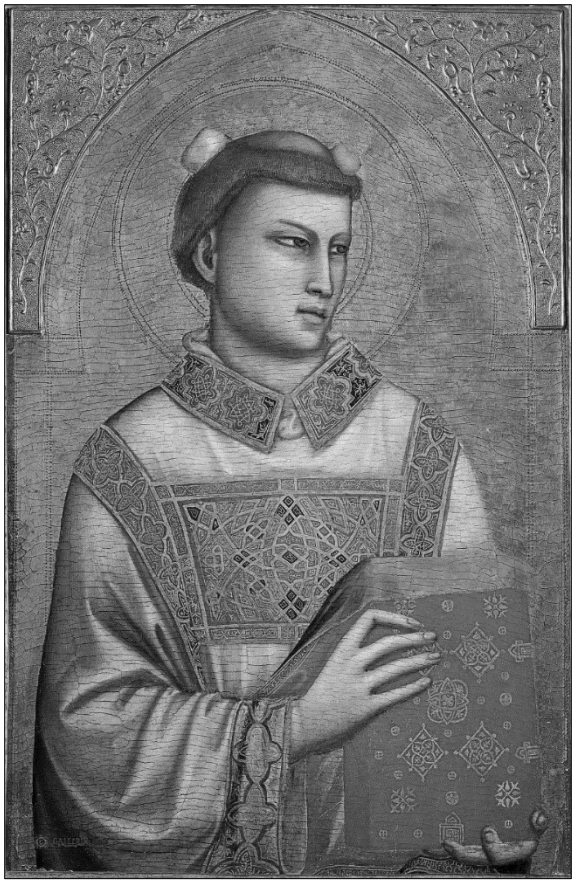

Fig. 3: Giotto, *St. Stephen* (1330 C. E.)

history of Stephen, as Donne might have known it, and I take Jeffrey Johnson's valuable point that the later sermon shows an unusual interest in depictions of art as partial license to embark on a short Italianate pictorial excursion for the light it sheds on the first martyr.[9]

As with most paintings of saints, Stephen is identified by the means of his martyrdom. Giotto's rendition, now in the Horne Museum in Florence, is one of the most elegant in this regard (Fig. 3). Only two small stones, the viewer will quickly see, are all that the artist uses. Otherwise, the representation of Stephen is one of the comeliest in the

[9] Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 61-4.

Fig. 4: Fra Angelico, *The Stoning of St. Stephen* (circa 1447 C. E.)

tradition. Dressed in "a sumptuously ornate dalmatic," or open-sleeved vestment, to signal his status as a deacon, the almond-eyed Saint holds with both hands a weighty, "richly bound book,"[10] not a Bible, to convey an image of his learning that he used to confront the Sanhedrin. In the manner of a byzantine icon hammered out in gold, the depiction of Stephen here seems worldly, solid, like all Giotto's figure. He is well-groomed and handsome, as if the artist was stirred to represent in paint the moment recorded in Acts when "all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (6.15), and, as legend testifies, were terrified.[11]

Giotto's St. Stephen was probably used as a private altarpiece. For a consideration of the larger narrative of Stephen's actions, we have to look elsewhere (Fig. 4). A luminous instance is Fra Angelico's fresco in the Vatican's Cappella Nicolina. (Incidentally, you can never entirely trust the Web Gallery, which assigns this painting to Giotto.) The artist uses the city wall of Jerusalem to underscore a cinematic sense of the

[10] Luciano Bellosi, *Giotto: Complete Works* (1981; New York: Riverside, 1995), p. 71.

[11] *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 46.

story-line, as if we're witnessing Stephen being pushed out a door, facing us, and then, in the next frame, facing away from his stone-throwing torturers, almost ready to disappear altogether from sight, apparently now without a halo. It is not in Fra Angelico's nature here, any more than elsewhere, to represent acute human suffering: in part because of the harmony of the design itself, in part because of the attention to beautiful colors, but mainly because of the Dominican's disposition that seems already serenely otherworldly. His mob is well-attired, few in number, and not especially unruly, with the passivity of the scene reflected in the stance of the observers.

For darker versions of the narrative, we can turn to two separate Venetian paintings that Donne might have had the opportunity, at least, to view. Vittore Carpaccio produced a cycle of five paintings on "The Life of St. Stephen" for the Scuola di Santo Stefano in 1511-1520. The group has not survived intact. It was dispersed after Napoleon's Venetian invasion, and one painting has been altogether lost, "The Judgement of St. Stephen." In the "Stoning" (Fig. 5), as with Fra Angelico, Stephen is at the picture's edge, in a field, in this case, looking up and beyond the frame. Jerusalem, you will see, is a distant, dark, hostile prospect, on a hill, exuding a stream of people, perhaps coming to watch the spectacle, as directed by the faceless figure at the center, pointing to St. Stephen. Gone is Fra Angelico's elegant coloration and poise. It is replaced by dominant reds to reflect the anger of the moment, and a crowded, hostile scene mixing stone throwers and soldiers, who seem, in their garb, as much Turkish as Jewish. As such, the Turks being Venice's inveterate enemy at this juncture in history, and in light of the recent creation of the ghetto in Venice in 1516, the incipient anti-Semitism in the account comes to the surface. Scholars have viewed this painting as the most anti-Jewish of the cycle. There is also the curious figure in the lower left-hand corner of Saul. We know it is Saul because of the cloaks, but he is painted from an already sympathetic Pauline view. Writes one art historian: "The close similarities in their postures associate the faces of Saul and Stephen in an evocative mystical relationship that provides the greatest emotional intensity of the painting while also marking off the two spatial and

Fig. 5: Vittore Carpaccio, *The Stoning of St. Stephen* (1520 C. E.)

symbolic ends of the space within which the cruel scenes of the martyrdom takes place."[12]

A second Venetian painting, by Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto in 1594, fills out the visual narrative even further (Fig. 6). It gives the story a dramatic, vertical representation in place of the horizontal history recounted in Carpaccio's Scuola, The heightening is made possible, indeed called for, because of the painting's location in the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore. Tintoretto's St. Stephen is fully baroque. His martyrdom is now moved front and center, taking up the bottom third of the painting. Hands in prayer, his body is at a slight diagonal, stretching upward with one leg, the other kneeling on a rock pile. Stephen's pious emotionality is central to the viewing experience even

[12] Vittorio Sgarbi, trans. Jay Hyams, *Carpaccio* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1994), p. 224.

Fig. 6: Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto, *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen* (1594 C. E.)

if the saint-to-be does not engage with the earthly viewer's gaze. All the usual regalia is present amid the many rocks, including his open but

defaced book and a palm frond to indicate his prayer of forgiveness. A quaternion of rock throwers appears at the imaginary four corners around him. With the smaller stones, the golden nimbus around his head seems to work its protective charm, but above there is a giant-like figure raising a large rock that looks ominous, ready to send Stephen into the next life—upward, as the painting insists in the reflective golden light illuminating God's triumphant gesture and linking it with Stephen's nimbus. As our eyes climb steadily to the triumphant scene above, we also encounter the figure of Saul in a different place than in Carpaccio. He is now in a direct line between Stephen and God. Recognizable because of the pile of garments, Saul bends his head downward, looking at Stephen, while Stephen is looking up but not toward Saul, who will become Paul and the interpreter of the Word, but toward Jesus, "the Son of man standing on the right hand of God," as Acts says (7. 56).

Tintoretto's "Stoning" is a remarkably full version of the martyrdom story told in Scripture. Adding to the painting's completeness, the six major figures compose a circle, a large coronal in honor of the Saint the work celebrates. The painting also takes us close to the sensibility that animates so much of Donne, in its rich play of shadow and light, dramatic gesturing—everybody is doing something—vivid coloration, and simultaneous embrace of the eternal and the temporal. But for reasons that will become clear later, there are two other works I want to look at before dispensing with these illuminating cultural markers of St. Stephen.

The first is a relatively unknown drawing of "The Stoning" by Michelangelo (Fig. 7), of interest to scholars for many reasons but to us here largely because of its radically different angle on the story. As the art historian Paul Joannides notes, "Michelangelo's treatment is unusual in concentrating upon the isolated saint and his brutal executioners."[13] Observing that St. Stephen's arms reprise those of Adam in his expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the Sistine Chapel, Joannides goes on to note, "it seems clear that in Michelangelo's *Stoning of St. Stephen* no heavenly scene was planned. The composition is both intense and complete. None of the figures looks up, in contrast with

[13] Joannides, "On Michelangelo's 'Stoning of St. Stephen,'" *Master Drawings* 39.1 (Spring, 2001): 1-9 (p. 8).

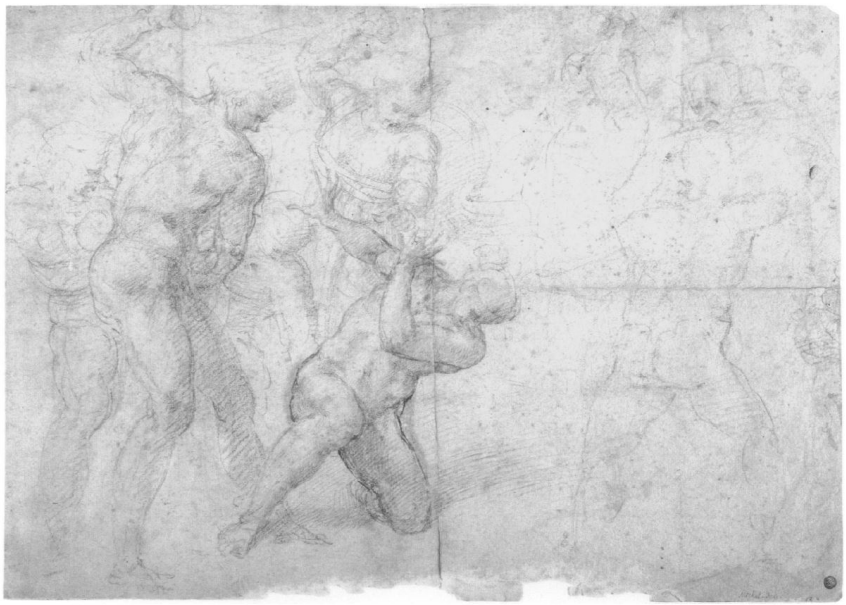

Fig. 7: Michelangelo, *The Stoning of St. Stephen*

every other rendering of the subject, including Raphael's drawing in the Albertina. . .." "In Michelangelo's rendering," Joannides observes, "the saint looks down, turning in revulsion from his murderers rather than up to his Savior. This, revealingly, conveys a mood that anticipates that of the *Last Judgment.*"[14] Revulsion over the bullying, yes, and terror and pathos, we might add, for the victim.

We can further illuminate the sense of unmitigated suffering in Michelangelo by an engraving also dedicated to the executioners and their subject (Fig. 8). I haven't been able to identify the artist. I would guess early seventeenth century, probably Northern Renaissance. The engraving is mainly of interest for the clarity of its design. You can readily see a shameful Paul on the right, with his head in his hand, the piety of Stephen, and, most conspicuous of all, the keen, anatomical attention given to the athletic bodies of the murderers. The scantily clad front two are nearly Olympian in stance and strength. Pectoral muscles, biceps, thighs, calves are all on display. With boulders in hand, they tower above the saint, about to crush him. The one closest to us is

[14] Joannides, p. 9.

Fig. 8.

even placed on a primitive stone pedestal, for our better viewing, while the two behind wait their turn. One cradles the rock like a bowler; the other participates vicariously with raised arm. This is a work all about the outlines, quite literally, rather than about suffering in Michelangelo's sense. On the Internet, the image pops up to commemorate the calendar date associated with Stephen's martyrdom, December 26th. The chosen date, coming right after Christmas, seals the special affinity between the proto-martyr and Jesus.

So how does Donne's St. Stephen fit into this rich history? A partial answer is that he is closer to Giotto's dignified and learned representation of the saint than Michelangelo's beaten victim. (The latter looks forward to Hecht's version of the story.) There is nary a stone thrown in Donne's sermon, nor is there much sense of the larger social setting as there is in the other paintings: no city walls, no representation of the murderers, just references to St. Paul, to the

significance of expounding on Stephen's name again, to the loaded matter of falling asleep with a free spirit. But then again Donne is not painting in words a life of the saint. He is preaching on a text chosen for the day, of which Stephen serves as an exemplar: on the spirit as witness, in the first sermon, and on forgiveness and sleeping in the second. Muscle in Donne is always a matter for the mind, not the body, in this case of coming to understand the complex pattern provided by St. Stephen's nominal identity and meritorious actions.

As Donne readers have come to underscore, his sermons are shaped by, in David Colclough's words, "careful attention. . . to the rhetorical category of decorum."[15] The occasion of their delivery, not just the text chosen for that day, but the circumstances surrounding and influencing the delivery, includes both a reckoning of the place—the building and the audience—and the immediate political context. Since the 1628 Sermon, preached at court, might have been recycled from St. Paul's church, place is perhaps less important here than the February date, in which the sermon initiates the Lenten cycle and thereby underscores the role of personal preparation, of which Stephen's calling is offered as an important model. In this regard, the pages John Carey omits from the sermon in his World's Classic edition of Donne's *Major Works* are rather different from what we might expect given the cynical rubric he supplies in brackets: "Get a Job."[16] Donne's larger point is not that man must work merely to offset the punishment of the Fall but that he should do so, like Stephen, in a manner in which he "professes" to be something in his proper "sphere" and, as a corollary, promises to carry out the duties of that calling sincerely. Donne says: "He that stands in a place and does not the duty of that place, is but a statue in that place; and but a statue without an inscription; Posterity shall not know him nor read who he was."[17] A humanist's thread winds its way through the sermon (and, of course, will later materialize in the statue of Donne, the preacher, in St. Paul). What is striking about this part of the sermon is that no one, neither judges nor princes, holders of earthly crowns, in fact, is exempt from this charge if they wish to sleep Stephen's sleep,

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[15] Colclough, Introduction to *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 3, p. xvi.
[16] Carey, *John Donne: The Major Works* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1990), p. 385.
[17] Colclough, p. 94 (ll. 127-30).

die in peace, and receive a heavenly crown. The distinction between the two realms, earthly and heavenly, is essential and unmistakable, as is the thread connecting them.

As for the political occasion, Colclough notes the military preparations being taken for war in early 1628 against France and the Huguenot cause in La Rochelle, and the more local, and to Donne, worrisome, complicated ecclesiastical politics involving Laud's investigation into preachers, including Donne, in potential violation of the king's and Laud's *Directions*. Donne had come under suspicion for his sermon delivered the previous year, on 1 April 1627. Among a number of possible reasons given, "it has been plausibly suggested by Peter McCullough, that it was precisely D[onne]'s outspoken celebration of preaching and hearing that led to this sermon being investigated by the king and Laud."[18] The sermon on St. Stephen was very probably the next Donne preached at court. Colclough views Donne, wary about his position at court and under Laud, eschewing any mention of either controversy in his sermon and turning his attention, rather, to the subject of fasting and the soul's preparation for Easter. Few readers of the sermon will forget the great opening about tolling bells and, as I mentioned earlier, the equally moving return to "one equall musick" at the close, but I am not quite sure Colclough's is an accurate description of the sermon in light of Donne's admonitions about responding sincerely to the duties of one's calling. This is always a large topic in Donne. Donne is clearly enacting, or performing, his own version of St. Stephen's irenic diligence in calling others to uphold theirs at this moment; and though he veers away from the more flammable issue of preaching, he keeps his hand firmly on the dial about the significance of speaking. In fact, without deriving, as Legend does, Stephen's name from the bogus Latin, *strenue fans*, meaning to speak "strenuously or with zeal,"[19] Donne nonetheless repeatedly underscores the significance of speaking, right down to St. Stephen's final utterance when "he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this

[18] Colclough, "Sermon 5, Preached to the King, at White-hall, First of April, 1627," in *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, *Volume III: Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I*, p. 23 (Notes).
[19] *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, vol. 1, p. 45.

sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." This is not a sermonizer who is going to go quietly.

In Stephen's posture of kneeling and yet speaking, Donne threads the needle between formal prayer and personal utterance. In this regard, Stephen, for Donne, is like and unlike Saul, his "kinsman in the flesh." Both Stephen and Saul are fellow pupils under their celebrated teacher Gamaliel, equals in the foundations of learning and the forms of knowledge, but Stephen has this great advantage, according to Donne: "that he applied himselfe as a Disciple of Christ before Saint *Paul* did; and in that profession became so eminent (for all the Sects, the Libertines themselves taking the liberty to dispute against him, they were not able to resist the wisdome and the Spirit by which hee spake) as that his cosin *Paul*, then but *Saul*, envied him most, and promov'd and assisted at his execution."[20] In viewing Saul / Paul as complicit in the murder, Donne is following Augustine and the trail of the tainted garments as suggested, in his view, by two verses in Scripture "before our Text": "That *they that stoned* Stephen *laid down their clothes at* Saul's *feet*."[21] No equivocation here, as there is in the legend, about the significance of the garments. Donne then uses this distinction between Stephen and Saul to draw the obvious yet still prickly conclusion for his court audience: that "how learned so ever thou art, thou art yet to learn thou first letters, if thou know not that Christ Jesus is Alpha and Omega, he in whom thou must begin and determine every purpose."[22]

As for the office of deacon that Stephen held, Donne accepts the importance of the office, but not (contra Rome's wiggling on this issue) as a matter of Holy Orders. Donne's Stephen is not to start supplying the Sacraments. Rather, Stephen occupies the lowest rung in the church hierarchy—a long way, therefore, from Laud, with Donne somewhere in between. In this capacity, Stephen is like Jesus. He calls people to worship; he ministers to people's souls, as Donne says, "especially upon our selves: for as every man is a world in himself, so every man is a Church in himself."[23] One feels the ecclesiastical fabric stretching a bit dangerously here. Donne, tacking back quickly, reminds

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[20] Colclough, p. 97 (ll. 248-54)
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., ll. 281-3.
[23] Ibid., p. 98 (ll. 327-8)

us that Stephen's exemplariness "is not so much in his active as in his passive part; not so much in that he did, as in that he suffered."[24] Donne thus makes a timely shift to the subject of Stephen's martyrdom.

But how should he represent this scene? Even here anomalies abound. It's not simply that there is no stone-throwing or stone-throwers in the sermon. We might expect quiet on this front in a court sermon. But the discourse of martyrdom itself undergoes an extreme vocational swerve, especially if we remember the visceral depictions of suffering in his earlier sermon associated with Stephen. Stephen, in 1628, is not just proto-martyr, but uber-martyr, an example for all to follow. "In every Calling, in every Profession, a man may finde some exemplar, some leading men to follow. The King hath a *Josias*, and the beggar hath a *Job*, and every man hath some: but here wee must not pursue particulars but propose to all, him whom our Text proposes, Saint *Stephen.*"[25] And not only is Stephen a model in his diaconate calling, in which the Dean of St. Paul's has a vested interest, but in the applicability of his martyrdom to daily living:

> All Martyrdome is not a *Smithfeild* Martyrdome, to burn for religion. To suffer injuries and upon advantages offerd, not to revenge those injuries is a Court Martyrdome. To resist outward tentations from power, and inward tentations from affections, in matter of judicature, between party and party, is a *Westminster* Martyrdome. To seem no richer than they are, not to make their states better, when they make their private bargains with one another, and to seem so rich, as they are, and not to make their states worse, when they are call'd upon to contribute publick services, this is an Exchange-Martyrdome. And there is a Chamber-Martyrdome, a Bosome-Martyrdome, too; *Habet pudicitia servata Martyrium suum*, Chastity is a dayly Martyrdome.[26]

[24] Ibid., p. 99 (ll. 338-9)
[25] Ibid., pp. 95-6 (ll. 203-7)
[26] Ibid., p. 100 (ll. 400-9)

The parallel phrases build, efficiently, dramatically, each longer than the other, and Donne continues with further examples of possible modelling as "a true copy of our pattern Stephen, so it be inanimated with that which was even the life and soul and price of all Stephens actions and passions, that is, fervent charity."[27]

Doesn't one wish pulpit oratory always sounded this way, so emphatic in its rhythms, so immediate and absolute in its presentation? The emphasis on "fervent charity"—nearly, or is it?—an oxymoron. Donne is on edge here, pressing forward, anticipating the sermon's final movement. The verb "inanimated" used here is also pure Donne. "Interinanimation" is what souls do to each other in "The Ecstasy." Here, Stephen takes the place of the amorous other, as Donne, the preacher, reanimates the underlying conceit of being stoned to death by giving martyrdom local habitation. The Wall Street swindler in the third pew might wince at the former satirist's piercing touch, as might lawyers and politicians in Westminster then and today, if they only listened. I am reminded of Mary Blackstone and Jeannie Shami's description of Donne's habitual practice of "targeted nearness" in the sermons, as "a sniper's assault on the particular sin of a particular sinner."[28] Donne's Latin phrasing (from Jerome) is also elegantly placed, separating—or forming a bridge between?—what goes on in the chamber and what goes on possibly in a Lady's chamber, holding at a sober distance what the younger Donne could or would not. The preacher has been, presumably, celibate for a decade, but each day represents a new test. Stephen is there to remind him as much, just as he is present in Donne's calling, reminding others in the congregation of his ancient origins as a preacher of the word and of the dignity of that important office.

Not that Donne in his defense of Stephen has become an identifiable target in this scenario, even if he was under investigation for offending the king. Nor is the educated Laud a stone thrower or a de facto Saul, even if Laud stood to benefit by the expulsion of clergy,

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[27] Ibid., pp. 100-101 (ll. 412-15)

[28] Blackstone and Shami, "Donne, Shakespeare, and the Interrogative Con–science," in *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*, ed. Judith H. Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 91.

such as that of George Abbot. But Donne's emphasis on "fervent charity" produces one of the most tightly wrought and potentially outward-looking moments in the sermon. Quotes Donne, interpolating 1 Cor 13.3: "Though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing saies the Apostle" Paul; and then continues: "but if I have not charity I shall not be admitted to that Sacrifice, to give my body to be burnt. St. *Augustine* seems to have delighted himself with that saying (for he saies it more then once) *Si Stephanus non orasset*, if *St. Stephen* had not praied for *Saul*, the Church had no *Paul*; and may we not justly add to that, if *Stephen* had not praid for *Saul*, Heaven had had no *Stephen*, or *Stephen* had had no Heaven: suffering it self is but a stubbornness, and a rigid and stupid standing under affliction; it is not a humiliation, a bending under Gods hand, if it be not done in charity."[29] Done in charity, indeed: in deed, Donne, the preacher, now speaking from the pulpit about charity. The parallelisms are tight, as they so often are in Donne. His judicious addition to Augustine's saying justly reflects back onto the preaching moment. It turns a delightful jingle in Latin into a stern warning in English, redirects a fixed moment in church history into the conditional present of the individual conscience. It is a warning without boundaries.

The finale of Donne's sermon, when he turns to Stephen falling asleep, is nothing if not riveting, thick with particulars, rhythmically rich and varied, filled with gravitas, but schematically simple: "Here I shall only present to you two Pictures, two pictures in little: two pictures of dying men, and every man is like one of these, and may know himself by it."[30] You can feel Donne burrowing into his subject, like an engraver with his burrin, a simile that, in fact, will come to life when he describes the immediate need to prepare for death: "Bee pleased to remember that those Pictures which are deliver'd in a minute, from a print upon a paper, had many dayes, weeks, Moneths time for the graving of those Pictures in Copper; So this Picture of that dying Man, that dies in Christ, that dies the death of the Righteous, that embraces Death as a Sleepe, was graving all his life."[31] The inescapable pun on "graving"—a coinage in fact—tells us that Donne is in his wheelhouse

[29] Colclough, p. 101 (ll. 431-40)
[30] Ibid., p. 102 (ll. 463-5)
[31] Ibid., p. 103 (ll. 524-8)

here. He concentrates on the dramatic extremities of the bad and the good death, calls on all the familiar tropes in his toolbox, gives immediacy to the moment, even pointing to the proverbial hourglass with regard to the diminishing sands of time. Explicit references to Stephen all but disappear in this section—unless, as Colclough speculates, Donne's audience would have had in mind those lines from Acts never actually mentioned by Donne but that played, for instance, a significant part in Tintoretto's Martyrdom: the moment when the heavens opened up and Stephen proclaims seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God.[32]

What is the larger takeaway of Donne's investment in Stephen in 1628? I think the simple answer is that the figure of Stephen allows Donne an opportunity to re-affirm his preaching credentials when they were potentially under attack by the reigning authorities. The preacher doesn't speak grandly here about the pulpit as an "inthronization," as he does elsewhere,[33] but more modestly of Stephen's dedication to his calling. And Stephen's concluding speech act, modelled on Jesus's prayer for forgiveness, reminds us, fundamentally, of the preacher's office, now occupied by the person delivering this intelligently compassionate sermon, bearing witness to Stephen, who is bearing witness to Jesus. It is a tight, if not quite ecclesiastically independent, line of authority; a mirror reflection that is almost a perfect circle. From here, we might go a bit further with Donne's Stephen. In as much as the sermon endorses the need for preparation in the figure of Stephen, it also places an Arminian emphasis on the role of the individual will in the matter of salvation that indicates Donne's anti-Calvinist sympathies that he shares with Laud and others. At the same time, the sermon's concluding emphasis on forgiveness suggests skepticism with regard to institutionally-generated absolutes about truth that scholars like Achsah Guibbory have seen as a hallmark of later Donne, one forming a surprising symmetry with the younger Donne's libertinism.[34] Solitary Stephen, so often on the edge of a painting, is his own person; rather he

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[32] Ibid., p. 21.

[33] Peter E. McCullough, "Donne as Preacher at Court: Precarious 'Inthron–ization'," in David Colclough (ed.), *John Donne's Professional Lives* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 179-204.

[34] Guibbory, "Reconsidering Donne: From Libertine Poetry to Arminian Ser–mons,"*Studies in Philology* 114.3 (Summer, 2017): 561-90.

is Christ's own person, as Tintoretto makes clear. Such singularity with another is nothing if not quintessentially Donnean, as Guibbory's essay helps us to understand.

The sermon holds other interests for us as well. Donne's fascination with Stephen's name reminds us of the significant role his own name plays in "A Hymn to God, the Father." "Our Names are Debts," Donne writes, "every man owes the world the signification of his name, and of all his names; every addition of honour, or of office, layes a new Debt, a new Obligation on him."[35] And so we have that hymn, written shortly after Donne's elevation to the Deanery. Rather than an expression of assurance from God in being saved from sickness, as Walton suggests, or simply another instance of Donne's egotism at work, we see him performing a dutiful, self-examination of the complex significance of his name—in public if we accept Walton's account that it was "often sung to the organ by the Choristers of St. Paul's Church."[36] The fact that Stephen's name is associated with crowns or wreathes also points directly to "La Corona" and the importance of its author finishing that sequence, with all its twists and turns, on the right note, in the proper *frame* of mind, if only to set out again. There is too the further matter of Stephen as a proto-martyr, or witness, and how the concept of being a witness, indeed a joyful witness, underlies Donne's other two great hymns and distinguishes them completely from the more troubled Holy Sonnets. "A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany," and "A Hymn to God, My God, in my Sickness" are, like the sermon on St. Stephen, poems about vocation and preparation, testimonials to faith, and among Donne's most profoundly moving poems in taking us, as does Stephen, to that point of mysterious reckoning when speech is edged with silence.

Rather than pursue these links further, though, I want to conclude this essay by taking a salmon-leap forward in time. In a rare modern venture into the saint's life in verse, Anthony Hecht dedicated a brief, compact four-sonnet sequence to the stoning of St. Stephen in his 1977 volume of poems bearing the Shakespearean title, *Millions of Strange Shadows*. He called the poem, simply, "The Feast of Stephen," re-directing, with the darkest of turns, as you will see, that hearty warhorse

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[35] Colclough, p. 96 (ll. 221-3).

[36] *Walton's Lives*, ed. A. H. Bullen (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), p. 55.

of a Christmas song: "Good King Wenceslaus came down, on the Feast of Stephen." Donne was an important early influence on Hecht, but I cannot claim that Hecht knew, or was influenced by, Donne's sermon on St. Stephen, although Hecht was certainly familiar with Elizabethan martyrology as "'More Light! More Light,'" his frequently anthologized poem on Buchenwald, reminds us. Donne's sermon might best serve, instead, as a distant backdrop for Hecht's poem, which in its curious angle on events reminds us of Michelangelo's powerful vision of bleak, un-redemptive suffering and, in its particulars, of the mannered, bodily attention paid to the torturers in the engraving we examined.

In Hecht's post-World-War Two scenario, Stephen is not a proto- or an uber-martyr, an exemplary model, that is. The representation of his final prayer at the end of the poem as "unintelligible" renders that possibility moot. Rather, the person who turns out to be Stephen is a kind of everyman in this allegory of brutality, and it is the group formation of masculine brutality that is Hecht's primary focus. Only when we arrive at the last of the four sonnets do we fully understand the circumstance shadowed forth by the title—why Stephen? why Feast?

As the sequence is brief, let me quote the sonnets in the order they were always printed in his books, 1 and 2 on the left page, 3 and 4 on the right:

> I
> The coltish horseplay of the locker room,
> Moist with the steam of the tiled shower stalls,
> With shameless blends of civet, musk and sweat,
> Loud with the cap-gun snapping of wet towels
> Under the steel-ribbed cages of bare bulbs,
> In some such setting of thick basement pipes
> And janitorial realities
> Boys for the first time frankly eye each other,
> Inspect each others' bodies at close range,
> And what they see is not so much another
> As a strange, possible version of themselves,
> And all the sparring dance, adrenal life,
> Tense, jubilant nimbleness, is but a vague,
> Busy, unfocused ballet of self-love.

II
If the heart has its reasons, perhaps the body
Has its own lumbering sort of carnal spirit,
Felt in the tingling bruises of collision,
And known to captains *as esprit de corps*.
What is this brisk fraternity of timing,
Pivot and lobbing arc, or indirection,
Mens sana in men's sauna, in the flush
Of health and toilets, private and corporal glee,
These fleet caroms, *pliés* and genuflections
Before the salmon-leap, the leaping fountain
All sheathed in glistening light, flexed and alert?
From the vast echo-chamber of the gym,
Among the scumbled shouts and shrill of whistles,
The bounced basketball sound of a leather whip.

III
Think of those barren places where men gather
To act in the terrible name of rectitude,
Of acned shame, punk's pride, muscle or turf,
The bully's thin superiority.
Think of the *Sturm-Abteilungs Kommandant*
Who loves Beethoven and collects Degas,
Or the blond boys in jeans whose narrowed eyes
Are focused by some hard and smothered lust,
Who lounge in a studied mimicry of ease,
Flick their live butts into the standing weeds,
And comb their hair in the mirror of cracked windows
Of an abandoned warehouse where they keep
In darkened readiness for their occasion
The rope, the chains, handcuffs and gasoline.

IV
Out in the rippled heat of a neighbor's field,
In the kilowatts of noon, they've got one cornered.
The bugs are jumping, and the burly youths
Strip to the waist for the hot work ahead.

> They go to arm themselves at the dry-stone wall,
> Having flung down their wet and salty garments
> At the feet of a young man whose name is Saul.
> He watches sharply these superbly tanned
> Figures with a swimmers' chest and shoulders,
> A miler's thighs, with their self-conscious grace,
> Brilliantly oiled and burnished by the sun,
> He catches a brief glimpse of bloodied hair
> And hears an unintelligible prayer.[37]

The sonnets appear as four panels on a wall—to be witnessed, in the process of being read from top to bottom, left side, then right; verso and recto. Each stanza is its own room, metaphorically and structurally, an idea explicitly raised on the left side, before we move outside on the right. In spite of their individualized focus, they deliver a strong narrative line. To rearrange their order would be to destroy their story. If Hecht was interested in the pictorial shape of the form, as I think he was, he clearly decided on the sonnet because of its subject matter: its long-standing association with the many varieties of love. In this case, the narrative infuses narcissism with male desire and friendship, with the homoerotic tensions spilling over into the sadistic act of stoning the never explicitly named Stephen and pointing to the eroticized nature of Saul's strange, voyeuristic participation. This group of sonnets concentrates on the male body only, as James Franco's ten-minute video version of the poem illustrates to a fault. The militarism underlying the familiar phrase, "*Esprit de corps,*" in the second sonnet, along with being very fine in its wordplay, is one of many ways Hecht underscores how the carnal drive completely displaces the dialectic between body and soul that is so often a feature of the sonnet tradition, as he understood it.[38] Each frame documents, with ever-increasing violence, the social rituals *instrumental* in the formation of masculinity, from the "coltish

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[37] Quoted from *Anthony Hecht: Collected Earlier Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

[38] Hecht, "The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History" in *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 62-3

horseplay of the locker room" to the final apocalypse of high-noon murder in "a neighbor's field."

In the sequence, Hecht explores the dark space thrown into bold relief when a highly refined sensibility examines barbaric human behavior.[39] This is a poet who knows his way around the locker-room as well as the gym; the commandant's office as well as the field of battle; incorporating the images and idiom of ballet, basketball, and Beethoven. When needed, he can do so with a light touch, as in the case of the second sonnet, in preparation for the volta beginning with the third sonnet. There is sophistication, too, born out in the use of the sonnet itself: the preference for slant rhymes throughout, the avoidance of those obvious sonnet markers: quatrains, octaves, sestets, and couplets, while vestiges of the form remain. The first sonnet, one long sentence, pauses at some of these usual junctures, but now as a feature of the poem's grammar and syntax; figures of thought unfold responsive to the imagined setting, not as rigid structures inherited from the past. In this regard, we might view the close of the second sonnet as a play on the meaning of like sounds, almost in the manner of a couplet: "whistles" vs. "whip." There is a further dark sleight of hand, too. The smack of a basketball seems likened at first to the sound of a whip, as might be the case if we were in a normal gym. But look again. Hecht has reversed vehicle and tenor. Beneath the "scumbled shouts"—scumble, an art term here, for soften and cover up—lies a whip. The last word in this sonnet, now replaces the rather innocently "unfocussed ballet of self-love" of the previous sonnet. Things are heating up.

Hecht's poem is driven quietly forward by a narrative that returns us to the proto-martyr as an ur-instance of bullying that, in turn, invites us to look beyond the Bible and religious truths for other explanations. I don't think Hecht is discrediting the story of Stephen's martyrdom so much as he is using the story to develop another kind of narrative to account for human behavior besides a sacred explanation. To that end, the poem takes up the matter of witnessing central to the biblical account, but Hecht twists it, making the murderers the objects of gaze, indeed of Saul's lusting gaze and the unholy motives it implies, not of

[39] I have addressed this aspect of Hecht's art in "Anthony Hecht: Worth the Weight" in *Evaluations of US Poetry Since 1950.* 2 vols. ed. Robert von Hallberg and Robert Faggen (University of New Mexico Press, 2021), II: 147-69.

Stephen bearing witness to Jesus in his martyrdom. But Saul is not quite alone here, since the highly pictorial nature of these sonnets has also implicated the viewing reader in something like a guilty hall-of-mirrors. And nowhere more so than when we watch Saul watching sharply the "superbly tanned / Figures . . . Brilliantly oiled and burnished by the sun." Olympian in stature as seen by Saul—note the poet's sudden shift to an erotically charged discourse—but awful in execution, the men strip down for their task, tossing Saul their clothing, and thereby bringing him into the narrative. The boy-men, who had been watching each other admiringly, now close in for the kill. To say that we become queasy here begs the obvious. The poem acts as witness to a new form of brutality that seems always to have been with us, at least since the first martyrdom. Stephen's murder isn't part of some distant, fantastical past. We see it all the time. Rightly or not, my students almost always think of Matthew Shephard.

"Bearing witness," a charged, flammable term in Donne's day, has become, if anything, a baggy term in current poetry circles. "All poems bear witness," writes poet-critic Cathy Park Hong, "even if it's to the dailiness of one's life—like going to the movies or stealing plums from the icebox—but a poem valorized as such is a poem that is testimony to an exceptionally dark period, embalming a moment where there has been a visible, collective trauma."[40] Her testimonial point is a necessary one. Donne knew so, but "embalming" is perhaps the wrong word for what Hecht is doing here. Rather, he seems intent on opening up the story of a legendary witness, or martyr—"scumble" also means to scrape out—for a new era of understanding in something of an Audenesque manner. Suffering, death itself, occurs off-center, at the right-hand bottom of the page (like Icarus in "Musée des Beaux Arts") as Saul looks calmly on, unable to make sense of Stephen's prayer. Coming later in time, we have a different view; indeed perhaps we even recall the meaning of Stephen's prayer, and think, too, of the unintended consequences of having an angelic face. In this, Hecht's post-biblical Stephen is as much for our time as the biblical Stephen was for Donne's. And without a name, he is, necessarily, without a crown, as Hecht's severely linear narrative underscores. The moment of epiphany, our moment of epiphany regarding the unnamed subject, is the moment of

[40] "Against Witness," *Poetry* 206.2 (May, 2015): 157.

the poem's dead-end when we suddenly, learnedly, glimpse the identity of the unnamed subject and the biblical occasion. There is no consoling link back to the beginning, no ritual rebirth, nothing comparable to the closing, circular upswing of Donne's "Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise." The sonnet simply concludes with a reference to an "unintelligible prayer." No Paul-to-be, in other words, just plain Saul, and a poet who shares with Donne and St. Stephen the seriousness of his calling before going to sleep.

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