John Donne Journal
Vol. 15 (1996)

Christ's Image and Likeness in Donne

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While the *Holy Sonnets* have in general come to be regarded as successful and moving poems, the ninth of the 1633 *Divine Meditations* (in Dame Helen Gardner's reordering),[1] has come in for some fairly severe strictures. Sir William Empson, for example, dismissed it as Donne's shuffling up "an old sophistry from Plato," and sharpened the edge of his disapproval in subsequent, revised editions of his *Seven Types* by reminding the reader in a footnote of his continued distaste for the poem.[2] John Carey finds the argument of the sonnet "worthless," and characterizes its manner, in similarly moderate terms, as "gruesome" and "blasphemous."[3] More recently, Richard Strier, in an essay entitled " John Donne Awry and Squint," not only attacks the versification of the sonnet as rivalling *The Court of Virtue* in its alliterative stodginess, but accuses it of displaying "bad faith in both the Sartrian and the Reformation sense."[4] It is not entirely clear whether what has offended them and other critics is the alleged sophistry of Donne's use of the neoplatonic doctrine of the necessary harmony of inner and outer forms, or the perhaps indecorous analogy between Donne's profane mistresses and the crucified Christ, or the perceived speciousness of its logic, or a combination of all these lapses, and more. But since it is not my main purpose to rehabilitate the reputation of the poem whose first line is "What if this present were the world's last night?" I will not attempt to settle that question. I would prefer, in any case, to examine the place of that piece of sophistry (if such it is) in the argument of the sonnet, and its relation to several ideas and themes which recur so often in Donne's lyrics and in his sermons that they might reasonably be thought obsessive.

Almost all of the Holy Sonnets, however editorially categorized and segregated, have to do in some way with the consciousness of sin and thoughts about the consequences of damnation. But *Divine Meditation* 9 (G XIII), like "Oh my blacke Soule," "This is my playes last scene," and "At the round earths imagin'd corners,"[5] is poised more precisely on the penultimate point of life, the moment before death, a moment which absorbed Donne's poetic and theological imagination for many years. His fascination with what was about to happen at that moment is stirred in part by the debate over the fate of the soul as the body dies. To oversimplify the scholastic quarrel, the question it posed was: does the immortal soul go immediately before God for judgment, does it wait in some sort of (Protestant, to be sure) limbo until the general resurrection of the dead, or does it "sleepe . . . a space"[6] until reunited with the body at the call of the archangelical trump?

As Dame Helen observes in an appendix to her edition of the *Divine Poems*, Donne in his *Sermons* seems clearly to hold the view that the soul goes directly after death to face God, while in both sacred and profane poems he writes as if the soul may wait, in a "sleep," to rejoin the body at the general Resurrection.[7] This certainly seems to be the vision of Divine Meditation 4 (G VII), and something like it is suggested in "The Anniversarie" and "The Relique."[8] The second *Anniversary*, "Of the Progress of the Soul," equally clearly supports the position of the *Sermons*: its long exhortation releases its built-up tensions in the soul's enfranchisement, its literal explosion from the "rustie Peece"[9] of the body. What is unusual in Donne's apparent belief in his later years is that it marks a reversion to a Roman Catholic doctrine, which itself had long been a focus for debate among Church Fathers. Most Protestants (Calvin, for one)[10] either held the question one of indifference or felt that the notion of the soul's existence in heaven or hell awaiting the Last Judgment involved relics of the doctrine of Purgatory. Donne for the most part eschewed doctrinal disputes, arguing that they most often engage irresolvable questions and that moral issues and the fundamental tenets of Christianity are

generally perspicuous. His insistence on this point in his *Sermons* is, as Dame Helen says, uncharacteristic.

Donne returned again and again to this moment and the mystery surrounding it, I think, because the puzzles it both posed and would solve in an instant were ones that lay close to the primary sources of Donne's engagement in poetry, religion, and his own inner life. Separation was in itself a motif that imaginatively resolved for him questions not only about the nature of the ties that held spirit to flesh, but about the fit between performance of a role and the underlying personality of the performer, the imponderable bonds of the sexes, the disparate analogies between creature and creator. In the instant of parting Donne found, again and again, the stress, the pain, the terror, that could be chafed into illumination. So, just as the "Valediction" poems rehearsed such feelings for him, so did over a third of the 1633 *Divine Meditations* begin by imagining the thoughts and feelings appropriate to "My spans last inch, my minutes last point."[11]

"What," then, "if this present were the world's last night?" In this case Donne treats the question of where the soul goes after death evasively and proleptically by subsuming it in the meditative confrontation with the image of Christ. This image is stamped in the heart of the devout sinner, a sacred parody of the Petrarchan motif familiar from *Astrophil and Stella*, and *Amoretti*, and the Shakespeare sonnets that appeared in the same year—1609—in which Donne was composing his devotional sonnets, if Gardner's conjecture is right.

There is perhaps no great need to rehearse the literary, philosophical, and even optical traditions that lie behind the trope of the beloved's image graven in the heart of the lover. Dante and Petrarch canonized it, and Ficino's *Symposium* commentary provided the *scholia*. The first sonnet in Sidney's sequence takes its motive from the idea, resolving the contest between imitation and invention by appealing to nature; in this case inspiration is to be found not in the Muse but in the truths of nature, and the truest image of Stella is the reflective heart of Astrophil.

Shakespeare, typically, overgoes the convention, in Sonnet 24, by taking for granted the basic figure and then pressing it further into a conceit in which he is a painter and his body the shop in which he

displays his paintings. Thus,"through the painter must you see his skill / To find where your true image pictured lies, / Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still, / That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes" (5-8).[12] The painter becomes both the manipulator and the medium through which images appear, for "perspective it is best painter's art" (4). Shakespeare forces the terms of optics back to their root meanings—perspective means "see through"—in order to insist that the poet's art of representation is both opaque and transparent. It is through—that is, by virtue of—his skill that one can see the image of beauty; we also look through his conceited body to see the image on his heart; and finally that image, imagined as visual, is created for us by its verbal rendering in the poem we are reading. But Shakespeare is not yet done: "Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done. / Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me / Are windows to my breast, where through the sun / Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee"(9-12). In other words, the poet, having "glazed" his shop windows with the image of the young man's eyes, can now see the image in his heart by looking into those eyes, because they reflect the image of the poet and his engraved heart. The technical term for this sort of thing is catoptrics; the effect is a dizzying, hermetic, infinite redoubling of identical images. And it is on this perception that the sonnet's assertions founder, for the poet must confess in the couplet, "Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art; / They draw but what they see, know not the heart." At the last minute the shutters come down over the windows of the heart, presenting us with the expressionless, or at least unexpressive, face that tells nothing of what goes on within. The erotic metaphysics of the identity of lovers is challenged by the art of physiognomy, the ancient beliefs and techniques that constitute the science of understanding the inside by reading the outside.

That Donne was familiar with both the Petrarchan figure of the graven heart and with neoplatonic doctrines of physiognomy hardly requires demonstration. The *Elegies* play frequently on the ambiguities of images, and the very casualness of the line in the *Elegy* entitled "His Picture"—"Thine, in my heart, where my soule dwels, shall

dwell"[13]—suggests how thoroughly the notion had been absorbed into Donne's poetic of love. Among the *Songs and Sonets* "The Dampe"[14] provides another example of the figure's usefulness for ironic hyperbole, a favored mode. Donne imagines the massacre of his friends when his autopsy reveals his mistress's picture on his anatomized heart.

Although it may be argued that the conceit of the heart's graven image as an emblem of the identity of lovers' souls appears most often in Donne in comic or bitter exhortations to faithfulness, we must also observe that it is rarely found in company with the neoplatonic argument that the face, or outward appearance in general, must correspond to, and thus reveal infallibly, the character within. This, despite the fact that in *Divine Meditation* 9 we are concerned with Donne's assertion that in his "idolatry" he argued that point with "all [his] profane mistresses." As Strier has noticed, a survey of Donne's secular poems does not bear out that claim; unlike Dante, Petrarch, Spenser, and comparably epideictic poets Donne tends not to dwell on the beauty of his beloved and, in the canon as we have it, nowhere presses the moral significance of outward loveliness.

What distinguishes the conceit of the graven heart as it appears in the profane and in the devotional poems is the way it deals with the question of identity and reflection. In the secular poems Donne is recurrently fascinated by the visual image of the mirror-reflection, most notably by the familiar "babies," the images of the lover's face that are seen in the reflecting globes of the beloved's eyes or tears. In "Witchcraft by a Picture" Donne proposes to guard himself against being "drowned" in her tears by drinking them, thus negating her power over his reflected self, and by reabsorbing his substance.[15] In "The Exstasie" the famous double strand of intertwined eyebeams serves as gentle mockery of "all [their] propagation";[16] and "A Valediction : of Weeping"[17] unites the emblematics of tears with Donne's lifelong speculation on the relation of image to value, as in coins and medals.[18] The point, as in the valediction forbidding mourning, is to stem the flow of tears by recalling to mind their infinite value, since they bear the image of the beloved face.

The conspicuous difference between these exercises in convention and the visual conceit at the center of "What if this present" is the fact that the face engraved on the heart of the devout lover is, at least at first glance or superficially, as different as can be imagined from his own. To put it another way: the doctrine that underlies the many Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan instances of the graven-heart trope, derived from Diamanta's speech in the *Symposium* and repeated and varied in Cusa, Ficino, and innumerable others is the necessary identification of lovers with each other. The power of love is such, in this tradition, that those who are drawn to each other by such force exchange souls; thus the image of the one will be found within the heart of the other, and the epistemological dogma that like can be known only by like will supplement and reinforce the hypotheses of neoplatonic metaphysics.

What Donne the sinner finds in the heart of his soul, as he tells us in line three, however, is "The picture of Christ crucified," and the poem's structure of argument is arranged so as to move us from the perception of Christ as fearsome judge to the recognition of Christ as merciful savior. The image is the face of Christ upon the cross; and the mortal problem for the sinner is to learn how to read the physiognomic signs of the face whose image is indwelling in his heart. To interpret the meaning of Christ's image correctly is to know instantly of one's election or reprobation.

Some Donne criticism has concentrated on the impress on his writing of his studies in theology and of the history of his religious affiliations; and like several recent reinterpretations of the devotional literature of the early seventeenth century, it has argued that the mediatorial quality of his Anglicanism has been overemphasized at the expense of the profoundly Calvinistic bent of his religious thinking. By this is meant not simply the fact that the Anglican church of which Donne was so prominent a spokesman was fairly orthodox in its agreement with many of Calvin's views on election and the means of justification, but that Donne's imaginative view of God's role in the work of predestination and judgment was predominantly dark. God as wrathful judge figured more largely in his visions of the moment after his "minute's last point" than did the Son as sacrifice and intercessor.[19]

One can find support for this view in, for example, *Divine Meditation* 3 (G VI), where Donne admits that in contemplating the moment of his death, even though he believes that "My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space," he is tremblingly aware that "my'ever-waking part shall see that face, / Whose feare already shakes my every joynt" (7-8).

In "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward"[20] Donne's sophistic evasions of his consciousness of guilt at, so to speak, "going the wrong way" on the most solemn of Christian holy days are gradually countered by growing acknowledgment of wrongdoing; but the final awareness and illumination are announced by the poet's discovery that what his eye cannot see is "present yet unto [his] memory." As he cannot keep from remembering what Good Friday signifies and the image that carries that signification—the Saviour hanging "upon the tree"—he realizes that the image in his mind's eye is reflected in the eyes of Christ, who is looking at the sinner's retreating back, but seeing not that denial of the face but the distorted or encrusted image of his creator which is embodied in that wrongly-directed body. Nevertheless, Donne's ascription of feeling and motive to the Christ whose image his memory preserves even against his will is "Calvinist" in tone, in the terms I have mentioned: "I turne my back to thee, but to receive / Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave. / O thinke me worth thine anger, punish mee, / Burne off my rusts, and my deformity, / Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace, / That thou may'st know me, and I'll turne my face" (37-42). The conviction of a depth of sin that requires punishment even though the meaning of the crucifixion was the forgiveness of sins is characteristic of the mood of most of the Holy Sonnets, as many readers have observed. Even in "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" God's grace and mercy are conceived as the end or fulfillment of condign punishment, the breaking, blowing, and burning that are essential conditions of the restoration of God's image in the mind and body of man.

In "What if this present" the persistent image of a wrathful God is replaced by—either by superimposition of another image or by an act of interpretation—the face of a savior, a "beauteous form" which is

understood to be the inscribed sign of a spirit of pity, mercy, and forgiveness. The question is how that act of reinterpretation is motivated and performed, how one image is replaced by another, and how that change is registered and made convincing in the passage of the poem. Another way to pursue the same question is to ask what it is that Donne claims to be looking at, what face it is that he describes and sees. The question is not an idle one, as we can infer from Donne's numerous excursuses from the pulpit on the meaning of St. Paul's prophecy in I Corinthians 13.12 that "then" we shall see "face to face." Divine Meditation 9 is poised on the edge of that mysterious moment before the separation of soul from body; and Donne theorizes his apprehension in an extended meditation on the proper interpretation of the expressions and passions inscribed upon the face of Christ crucified.

Whether or not the argument Donne resorts to in "What if this present" is sophistical, as Empson charges, the fact is that he continued to worry the problem after his ordination and throughout his later life as divine and Dean. His opinions on precise points of theology changed in some measure over those years, but his anxiety about how, and in what form, the sinner would confront his saviour remained constant. During his tenure at Lincoln's Inn he preached on the subject several times, at first adopting from Augustine the notion that God, yielding to the "naturall inclination of man, when he cannot have, or cannot comprehend the originall, and prototype, to satisfie, and refresh himself with a picture, or representation... hath afforded us his Sonne, who is the image of the invisible God."[21] Later Donne was to become more sensitive to the implications of this theory of accommodation, advising King James in a sermon preached at court in 1629 that "God ... was the first, that made Images; and he was the first, that forbad them. He made them for imitation; he forbad them in danger of adoration." (IX, 75) But before then he had recovered from Augustine the central distinction, drawn from Genesis 1.26, between God's image and His likeness, as it appears in the creation of man.

It was a distinction that Calvin, among others, thought to be a matter of indifference;[22] but for Donne, relying on a favorite text from St. Bernard, (*uri potest, non exuri Imago Dei*)[23] the image of God in

man is indestructible, while his likeness consists in man's virtuous habits and behavior, and thus can be smirched and even made unrecognizable by corruption of the will. Although the words "image" and "likeness," and perhaps even some of the concepts that link them, like "impression," "imitation," and "identity," may shift and exchange places in Donne's writings, he maintains a distance between their intrinsic meanings. That distance is best preserved and perhaps best observed in his many discussions of the differences between the ways we will see Christ and God the Father when the darkness of our seeing in the glass "now" has been lifted from the eyes of our understanding.[24]

Early on, in one of the Lincoln's Inn sermons, preached on a text from Job, Donne plays on the ambiguous terminology from Corinthians to explain that "Our flesh, even in the Resurrection, cannot be a spectacle, a perspective glasse to our soul. We shall see the Humanity of Christ with our bodily eyes, then glorifyed; but, that flesh, though glorifyed, cannot make us see God better, nor clearer, then the soul alone hath done, all the time, from our death, to our resurrection." (III, 112) But Donne's thinking, it seems, was gradually and increasingly attracted to the Protestant mode of interpretation, and his views of the change adumbrated in Paul's "now" and "then" moved toward the allegorizing of the "glass" in which we see only dimly. Following theories of accommodation, Donne at different times argues that the specular, reflecting glass is a figure for the book of creatures, for Scripture itself, or even (following Calvin)[25] for the holy ministry and its preaching of the Word. The contrast with the purified state of our vision when accommodation is no longer necessary becomes ever sharper, and it is in that longed-for directness of perception that Donne places new emphasis on the distinction between the face of Christ and the face of God.

He can be seen grappling with his perennial curiosity about what he will be like when he is changed in a Candlemas sermon preached on a text from Matthew in 1626 or 1627; looking again to Augustine, he finds him embroiled in a debate over the assertion that God has a body. Although he allows himself to become entangled in parallel disputes about the metaphysics of angels and other questions of the sort, Donne

presses on the point that if God has a body we must be able to see Him with corporeal eyes. But Donne can accept neither proposition, and he notes that Augustine, in opposing such views because they "derogate so much from God," (VII, 342) drew support from Ambrose, Jerome, Athanasius, and Nazianzen. He quotes with much enthusiasm, and seemingly with some relief, Augustine's counter-argument to the contention that if angels see the face of God, and if the elect are to be angels that they will also see the face of God; and Donne says of the image Augustine is discussing, "That is the face of God to us all, by which God is known and manifested to us; in which sense, Reason is the face of God to the naturall man, the Law to the Jew, and the Gospell to us; and such a sight of God, doth no more put such a power of seeing in our bodily eyes, then it puts a face upon God: We shall see God face to face, and yet God shall have no face to be seen, nor we bodily eyes to see him by" (VII, 344). Donne is thus forced in upon a truer definition of the power of sight by which human beings can perceive their creator: "Only God can see the heart of man, and only the heart of man can see God: For in this world, our bodily eyes do not see bodies, they see but colours and dimensions, they see not bodies; much lesse shall our eyes, though spirituall, see spirits in heaven; least of all, that Spirit, in comparison of whom, Angels, and our spirits are but grosse bodies" (VII, 344). The explanation of those spiritual eyes he finds in a phrase in Ephesians, where Paul congratulates the believers to whom he is writing from prison on the enlightenment of the "eyes of [their] understanding." In a sermon at court in 1629, preaching on the first chapter of Genesis, he said quite simply, "God hath no body...and therefore this Image of God is not in the body of man, that way" (IX, 78). Rather, he goes on, "The Sphear then of this intelligence, the Gallery for this Picture, the Arch for this Statue, the Table, and frame and shrine for this Image of God, is inwardly and immediately the soule of man" (IX, 79). Going beyond that unembellished assertion, Donne reverses the traditional hypotheses governing the correspondences between image and original, die and impression, coin and monarch, creature and creator, by defining a new function for man as a result of this inward and intrinsic imaging native to his soul: "man

hath *filiationem Imaginis*, an expression of his Image; and does this office of an Image or Picture, to bring him, whom it represents, the more lively to our memory. God's abridgement of the whole world was man. Reabridge man into his least volume, *in pura naturalis*, as he is but meer man, and he so hath the image of God in his soul" (IX, 83). Beneath this multi-faceted metaphor is Bernard's dictum: "The image of God burns in us in hell, but it can never be burnt out of us"[26] (I, 160); but to Donne's passionate reception of assurance that God's image in man is indestructible no matter the degradation it is subjected to there is added a dawning sense of the purpose of that stability, the inevitable symbolic function of an image, a value that is imparted to it even by the impress that seals its subordinate status.

That is to say, even while Donne argues that the perdurable image of God is the mark of the soul's dependence upon its creator, he is aware of the significance of the fact that the created image is the best available evidence, here and now, of the power of creation and of the covenants that govern God's creatures until the end of time. That is why the period Donne calls his "idolatry," together with its actual or imagined unions and its rhetorical strategies, can be shown to have had formative effects upon his devotional works, and particularly upon the Holy Sonnets and some of the later sermons. For the neoplatonic doctrines of like understanding like, and of knowledge being a form of love, are remembered and recalled to service when Donne chooses to contemplate man's face-to-face encounter with the image of God in which God has chosen to make Himself accessible to man—Christ, the Son of God and man, incarnated in a body which man can see and understand precisely because it mirrors his own. It follows from both Ficino and Augustine, in this case, that man is able to understand God through the glass of Christ because he so resembles the face and body he looks upon. As Donne said in the Earl of Exeter's chapel in June, 1624, "two seales then hath God set upon us all, his *Image* in our soules, at our *making*, his *Image*, that is his *Sonne*, upon our bodies and soules, in his *incarnation*" (VI, 160).

Notice that the incarnation set God's seal upon both body and soul, and so our bond to Christ's humanity is not expressed only in physical

resemblance but also, and most crucially, in the inward likeness that is the theological analogue of the graven image of the beloved on the heart of the lover. Profaneness, so to speak, is defined in all times and places by its reliance on visual simulacra; the face that Donne seeks in the divine poems and the sermons is an image that will show him the shape of his own nature. The task he confronts in the poems is not only to discover his own image in the face of Christ crucified but to enable that discovery by looking into himself to "see" the soul's image through rectified knowledge. In "Good Friday, 1613" he prays to Christ to restore that image through the burnishing force of "correction," But "What if this present" is a compressed exercise in purifying, correcting, rectifying one's own vision by learning to see the true image under the apparent face.

In comparison, imagining what it will be like to see God fully after death is relatively unproblematic, because it can be defined and understood largely by negatives; Donne often gives himself with fervor to this exercise. As he says in a sermon delivered at Paul's Cross in November of 1629, just a few months before his death,

> "that day...shall show me to my selfe; here I never saw my selfe, but in disguises: There, Then, I shall see my selfe, and see God too. *Totam lucem, & Totus lux aspiciam*; I shall see the whole light; Here I see some parts of the ayre enlightned by the Sunne, but I do not see the whole light of the Sunne; There I shal see God intirely, all God, *totam lucem*, and *totus lux*, I my self shal be al light to see that light by. Here, I have one faculty enlightned, and another left in darknesse: mine *understanding* sometimes cleared, my *will*, at the same time perverted. There, I shall be all light, no shadow upon me; my soule invested in the *light of joy*, and my body in the *light of glory*. How glorious is God, as he looks down upon us, through the Sunne? How glorious in that glasse of his? How glorious is God, as he looks out amongst us through *the King*? How glorious in that Image of his? How glorious is God, as he calls up our eyes to him, in the beauty, and splendor, and service of the Church? How glorious is that spouse of his? But how glorious shall I conceive this light to be, *cum suo loco viderim*, when I shall see it, in his owne place. In that Spheare, which

> though a Spheare, is a Center too; In that place, which, though a place, is all, and every where. I shall see it, in the face of that God, who is all face, all manifestation, all Innotescence to me, (for, *facies Dei est, qua Deus nobis innotescit*, that's God's face to us, by which God manifests himselfe to us) I shall see this light in his face, who is all face, and yet all hand, all application, and communication, and delivery of himselfe to all his Saints." (IX, 129)

But before that transcendent illuminated vision and self-knowledge can be achieved, God presents His face to us here, by accommodation, in many guises and through many veils. The only saving one is the one that most resembles us, His incarnation as the Christ. And we can follow Donne, in the sermons as in the divine poems, as he tries to find the lineaments of resemblance between himself and the iconic face which spans the poles of his identity, being more like him than any other creature and at the same time unimaginably distant and unlike. The process of search and discovery involves discerning the signs of Christ's mediating role in the images of his Passion, and restoring the Christlike virtues in the poet's inherent likeness to his maker. Both aspects of the work find some energy in the neoplatonic doctrines of the love poems, or at least those which align themselves with Petrarchan motifs of lovers' identity and the concinnity of outer and inner, body and spirit, metal and stamp.

The process requires both preparation and training; and we can find both in the divine poems and in the sermons any number of exhortations: to remember, to see, to recognize, to acknowledge the significations of image and likeness. Barbara Lewalski has revised Louis Martz's influential analysis of the shaping role of Salesian and Loyolan meditative techniques in much devotional poetry of Donne's period, and certainly in Donne's; she has advanced the recognition of a more nearly orthodox Protestant meditative tradition, which focuses more sharply on the central role in the religious life of the *imitatio Christi*, the moral imperative upon the individual to take Christ's life as an exemplum and to try to conform his own life to that model.[27]

Donne's way of treating the questions surrounding the image of

God in man shares some of the characteristics of both meditative schools; for although the *Divine Meditations* are based often on the imaginative recreation of an episode in Christ's history, the hortatory point of the poem is equally often a challenge or contest offered by the fearful sinner to the sacrificial figure who has borne those sins and yet is destined to judge him for them. Donne's response, characteristic in its attempt to allay anxieties aroused by the thought of that ultimate judgment, is to encourage himself (or his auditory in St. Paul's) to think of and thus to "see" the fierce outlines of the God of Judgment melting into the compassionate visage of the suffering Christ. In a Lenten address given at Whitehall in 1622/23 Donne, preaching on the text from John, "Jesus wept," refers to the verse from Lamentations, "*Behold and see if ever there were any sorrow, any teares like mine*: Not like his in value, but in the roote as they proceeded from natural affection, they were teares of imitation, and we may, we must weepe teares like his teares. They scourged him, they crowned him, they nailed him, they pierced him, and then blood came; but he shed teares voluntarily and without violence: The blood came from their ill, but the teares from his own good nature: The blood was drawn, the teares were given" (IV, 331).

Preaching to the inmates of a hospital on Easter Monday of the same year, Donne concentrated appropriately on Christ's power to transform all natures and events: "We shall see him in a transfiguration, all clouds of sadness remov'd; and a transubstantiation, all his tears changed to Pearls, all his Blood-drops into Rubies." "Be therefore," he warns his hearers, "no strangers to his face: see him here, that you may know him, and he you, there... look him in the face in all these respects, of Humiliation, and of Exaltation too; and then, as a Picture looks upon him, that looks upon it, God upon who thou keepest thine Eye will keep his Eye upon thee . . . and as in thy Vocation, when *he shin'd in thy heart*, he gave thee an inchoation of this light, so in associating thee to himself at the last day, he will perfect, consummate, accomplish all, and give thee *the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus*, there" (IV, 129-130).

Dominating this passage is the double sense of expectations

overturned and prophecies fulfilled, while the figural theme is the persistence of truth beneath apparent metamorphoses. God's power is interpreted as Christ's ability to convert the meanings of conventional signs to their opposites—blood to rubies, for example. The ubiquity of God's eye upon the sinner is compared to the familiar optical illusion of the portrait whose eyes seem to follow its beholder's; and Donne makes of this an exhortation to focus one's thoughts—one's inward eye—upon the image of God as seen in the face of Christ. Finally, the promise implicit in God's gift of faith, the imputation necessary to election, is said to be fulfilled "at the last day" in the revelation of divine glory "*in the face of Christ Jesus*, there," thus at the same time alerting his audience that the image they seek will appear in the guise of another, and reassuring them that the unexpectedness of the guise is the guarantee of its authenticity.[28]

We should remember that Donne's thinking here is still poised on the edge of the moment of realization, the verge of judgment, when he will know in what face or image God will appear to him. "At the last day" he speaks of God's glory being illuminated in the familiar face of Jesus; elsewhere, as in another Easter sermon, preached at St. Paul's in 1628, he distinguishes this moment from another: "In earth God assumed some materiall things to appeare in, and is said *to have been seene face to face*, when he was seen in those assumed formes. But in heaven there is no materiall thing to be assumed, and if God be seen face to face there, he is seen in his Essence. S.*Augustine* summes it up fully, upon those words, *In lumine tuo, In thy light we shall see light, Te scilicet in te*, we shall see thee in thee; that is, sayes he, *face to face*" (VIII, 234-35). Thus late in his sustained meditation on this ultimate confrontation and access of knowledge, he fuses the concept of God's essence, unknowable until the last day, and ultimately unknowable in full even then, with a face seen suddenly, once and for all, in its complete and recognizable impression.

The theology of the sermons tells us that that face is Christ's; and the poems of the earlier period, both sacred and profane, suggest that the face of the beloved—be it an unnamed woman or Christ—can be

recognized, even looked at squarely, only insofar as the looker—the seeker, the lover—is able to find his own resemblance, the lineaments of his own inner spiritual truth, in those ever-watchful features. The crucial difference betweeen these versions of self-knowledge, the difference that marks the change, or development, over the years between Donne's ordination and the delivery of his last sermon, is that between the love-poems in which Donne is fixed on the face of his own reflected image in eyes or tears, and the poems in which he learns to see the image beneath the likeness, the essential identity beneath the differing faces. The difference can perhaps be observed in noting the language of the closing words of the sermon Donne preached in Lent of 1630, his last appearance in the pulpit of St. Paul's, the discourse known as "Death's Duell," and the *Divine Meditation* with which we began, "What if this present were the world's last night?" Pressing his audience to a greater, a more genuine, a more appropriate response to the crucifixion of Christ than fasting or what he calls "*disciplines* and *mortifications*," Donne reminds them that "there now hangs that *sacred Body* upon the *Crosse*, *rebaptized* in his owne *teares* and *sweat*, and *embalmed* in his *owne blood alive*. There are those *bowells of compassion*, which are so conspicuous, so manifested, as that you may *see them through his wounds*. There those *glorious eyes* grew faint in their light: so as the *Sun ashamed* to survive them, *departed with his light too*" (X, 247-48).

In the "picture of Christ crucified" summoned up in Divine Meditation 9, Christ's judicial posture is melted and dissolved in the flow of his compassion. The "light" of God's glory is quenched by tears, the stern lines of condemnation are overflowed by the blood of sacrifice. It is as if the expression of Christ's countenance is caught in the kind of conflict Donne epitomizes in the opening lines of *Satire III*: "Kinde pitty chokes my spleene; brave scorn forbids / Those teares to issue which swell my eye-lids."[29] But Christ's face is not fixed in stasis by contradictory emotions: rather, it yields the signs of one role to those of another, revealing God's essence as mercy rather than strict justice.

Nor is this simply a reflection of the wishful thinking, the magical

exhortation, or the sheer sophistry that the poem's critics have found it to be; for one thing, in the *Holy Sonnets* in general Donne is much more likely to chastise himself, to find himself irredeemably lost in sin, beyond even Christ's forgiving embrace. His characteristic mood is defiance, or defiant fear, his mode the challenge or the dare. But in "What if this present" the increasingly clear perception of the real meaning of Christ's face begins in the instruction to "Mark" the image of that face, which lies engraved in the heart, where the soul dwells. If then, the eye, the heart, and the soul are tied together by bonds of identity and understanding, as they are in the profane poems Donne here refers to, the image of Christ is carried in and on the soul of man, defining his true and fundamental resemblance to God, as differentiated from his mere likeness, that "image" he has so besmirched and encrusted, as he reminds us in "Good Friday, 1613." If he were to look into his soul, then, he would see the image of his own heart; and that would be, as Sidney and Shakespeare said of themselves, the image of the beloved with whom they have exchanged identities. Here and now Donne finds, instead, the "picture of Christ crucified"; like the eyes that are fixed upon him as he rides westward, or those that follow him like the gaze of a painted face, this face is inescapable, and it shows him the true image of the Son of God and the Son of Man. It also tells him that his own consciousness of sin, the acknowledgment of his own responsibility for the blood that fills Christ's frowns, his own "piteous mind," in short, is the evidence of God's innate mercy. He was right all the time, it seems, in trying to persuade all his "profane mistresses" that the beauty he attributed to them was an indelible sign, as the platonists had it, of a virtuous soul. What has changed is the definition of "beauty." The soul of compassion creates its own "beauteous form," one which to the eye of the flesh may seem merely a "horrid shape," marked, as in Christ's case, by the scars of pain and the stern, uncompromising, regard of the law. In Divine Meditation 9 the implicit discovery of his compassion for "Christ crucified" is revealed in his seeing through the mask of the God of judgment to the face of the merciful savior. In this Donne proceeds as God does with the world, presenting his truth in an embodiment equal or accommodated to the understanding of his

audience, but leading to clearer and deeper understanding, which will in turn lead to a burning away, a purifying, an ultimate revelation of the one image underlying all the many likenesses, the form under all the shapes, the face that is both our own and the other's, the face that St. Paul promises we will see "then."

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Notes

[1] The thirteenth in Grierson's numbering of the sonnets. Quotations in the text will follow Gardner's numbering, but will give Grierson's parenthically as "G."

[2] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (third edition) (Connecticut: New Directions Books, 1953) p. 146.

[3] John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 47.

[4] Richard Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608-1610." *Modern Philology* 86.4 (1989): 357-84. See also his remarks in *Resistant Structures: particularity, radicalism, and Renaissance texts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

[5] *John Donne. The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 10. All citations to Donne's devotional poems are to this edition.

[6] Gardner, *Divine Poems*, p. 8; Divine Meditation 4 (G VII).

[7] Gardner, *Divine Poems*, pp. 114-17.

[8] *John Donne. The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 71-2, 89-90.

[9] *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1912) 2 vols., vol. I, p. 256.

[10] See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.) 2 vols., Book III, Chapter XXV (Vol. 2, p. 208).

[11] Gardner, *Divine Poems*, 7: Divine Meditation 3, l.2 (G VI).

[12] William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complant*, ed. John Kerrigan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 88. In *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), Joel Fineman considers this poem from a number of viewpoints; but see especially pp. 135-39.

[13] Gardner, *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, p. 25.

[14] Gardner, *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, p. 49.

[15] Gardner, *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, p. 37.

[16] Gardner, *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, pp. 59-61.

[17] Gardner, *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, pp. 69-70.

[18] See John Carey, "Donne and Coins," in *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in Honour of Her Seventieth Birthday* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 151-63.

[19] John Carey attributes most of Donne's anxieties about these matters to his guilt or continued uneasiness over having abandoned the Catholic traditions of his mother's family and of his own boyhood.

[20] Gardner, *Divine Poems*, pp. 30-31.

[21] John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson

(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962) 10 vols., vol. II, p. 320. This is from a sermon preached on January 30, 1619/20. Citations of the *Sermons* are to this edition, and hereinafter will be identified in the text by volume and page numbers.

[22] Calvin, *Institutes*, Book I, Chapter XV.

[23] Donne quotes this text from Bernard frequently in the *Sermons*, often with slight variations of the Latin words and of his own translation of them; cf. VI, p. 159; II, p. 247; IX, p. 81; X, p. 46.

[24] There are many examples, but see particularly I, 189; II, 266; and Sermon Number 9 in Volume VIII, pp. 219-36.

[25] Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter 3.

[26] See above, p. 83, n. 23.

[27] Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 253-82.

[28] This sermon follows the rituals of the holy days in which Jesus has enacted the most radical transformations of spirit and flesh to which the human imagination has reached.

[29] *John Donne. The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 10.