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"Vile harsh attire": Biblical Typology in John Donne's "Spit in my face yee Jewes"

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A half-century ago, Rosemond Tuve in *A Reading of George Herbert* (1952) explained and exemplified a historical approach to 17th century English religious poetry, stressing particularly the importance of iconography and typology in studying verbal imagery.[1] By choosing representative poems by George Herbert, Tuve intended not to be exhaustive but selective, so that other commentators would be motivated to reexamine religious poetry from the same historical vantage point. To dramatize the effectiveness of her methodology, Tuve singled out William Empson's New Critical approach to Herbert's poetry. That approach, she contended, was remarkably deficient because it dissociated the poetry from the very contexts that make it understandable. One example stands out. Empson argues that Adam must have been taller than Jesus because in Herbert's poem "The Sacrifice" Christ uses a ladder to climb the tree from which Adam, unassisted, plucked the forbidden fruit.

But Tuve cites iconographic and typological contexts to explain that Jesus was the fruit restored, the replacement for the fruit that Adam had taken. Iconography depicts the Savior crucified on the tree of knowledge of good and evil that he had mounted by a

[1] *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1952).

ladder, usually visible as it leans against the trunk. Often likened to a stalk of grapes crushed in the winepress of the cross, Jesus becomes the food and drink of life, a correlation liturgically and sacramentally enacted to dramatize the rehabilitation of fallen humankind. Typologically, liturgically, and sacramentally, the self-sacrifice of Jesus and the Eucharist contrast with Adam's godlike aspiration and the forbidden fruit.

Though not popular nowadays, Tuve's iconographic and typological method continues to be useful. I will use that method in order to explicate four lines of a Holy Sonnet by John Donne, "Spit in my face." Moreover, I will suggest how these lines not only bear on other poems that Donne wrote but also anticipate the very manner by which he prepared himself for death. The four lines end the poem, "Spit in my face":

> And Jacob came cloth'd in vile harsh attire
> But to supplant, and with gainfull intent:
> God cloth'd himselfe in vile mans flesh, that so
> Hee might be weake enough to suffer woe.[2]

In this passage, Donne alludes to Genesis 27. 6-29, which recounts how Isaac, whose eyesight was failing, summoned his elder son, Esau, on whom he intended to bestow the "special blessing," a solemn ritual whereby the father confers the rights of primogeniture especially when his death is imminent. Before he blesses Esau, Isaac enjoins him to hunt, from which he should prepare and serve his father's favorite meal. Rebecca, the mother of Esau, overhears that Isaac will bless him. She instigates a plot involving deception whereby the younger son, Jacob, her favorite, will impersonate Esau. Because Esau is hirsute, Rebecca instructs Jacob to wear the skins of goats. She then prepares Isaac's favorite

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[2]Donne's poetry is quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne,* ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967). Line numbers are cited parenthetically in the body of the essay.

meal, which Jacob offers to his father. Seeking to verify that the son with whom he is speaking is his first-born, Isaac runs his hands across, what he presumes will be, the hirsute neck and hands of Esau. But the skins of goats worn by Jacob trick Isaac into bestowing the blessing on him instead of his elder brother. When Esau becomes aware of the trickery, he vows to slay Jacob, who is urged by his mother to flee to Laban, her brother. Ironically, the name "Jacob" through etymological association means "he who supplants" or "he who deceives," an appellation upheld when the biblical figure tricks his father and thereby victimizes his elder brother.

Among the iconographic and typological renditions of Jacob's trickery is *The Bible of the Poor,* a late 15th century medieval blockbook that Rosemond Tuve cites as a veritable treasure trove of exegesis, a compendium of traditional interpretation derived largely from the commentary of the Church Fathers and from visual images in manuscripts: Bibles, lectionaries, missals, sacramentaries, books of hours, and the like. *The Bible of the Poor*, a forty-leaf blockbook, has a horizontal iconographic arrangement, each leaf with a triptych, in which the central panel is a scene from the New Testament while the flanking panels depict episodes from the Old Testament. Such an arrangement highlights typological interrelationships, both comparisons and contrasts, of the Hebraic and Christian scriptures. In *The Bible of the Poor,* comparisons include resemblances between Moses and Christ, both of them lawgivers and deliverers of their peoples from captivity. Much as Moses presented the Decalogue to the people, so too did Jesus explain and exemplify the New Law to his followers. Moses liberated the Chosen People from enslavement in Egypt, and Jesus freed humankind from the forces of Satan, sin, and death. Among other examples, contrasts occur between Adam and Jesus, because the former is the means of humankind's downfall, whereas the latter becomes the source of regeneration. Presumably compiled as a resource to assist friars in their preaching and religious instruction, *The Bible of the Poor* provides ample evidence of the

range of biblical citation and commentary imparted to the poor people as theological commonplaces. If such a primary source indicates what common folk were taught, then we can safely conjecture that the nobility knew even more. Thus, the immediate audience for Donne's Holy Sonnets, whether common folk or nobility, would have recognized and realized the significance of the allusion to Jacob in "Spit in my face."

In *The Bible of the Poor,* Jacob appears in five triptychs, which provide coverage equal to, or more than, that received by several of the renowned prophets, patriarchs, judges, and kings of the Old Dispensation. Of the five triptychs, the one most pertinent to Donne's allusion likens the escape of Jacob to the Christ child's flight into Egypt, the image from the New Testament that occupies the central panel. Much as Jacob evades the wrath of Esau, so too Jesus flees the anger of Herod, who ordered the massacre of the male infants.[3] In the panel at the viewer's left, Jacob stands in the background with his mother, Rebecca, who bids him farewell. A staff across his shoulder bears the skins that he wore to trick his father, who appears in the foreground with Esau. Esau, having returned from hunting and, then, having prepared his father's favorite meal, learns of his younger brother's deception. In "Spit in my face," Donne's allusion to these episodes emphasizes that Jacob's aim was self-aggrandizement or, to quote the poem, "gainfull intent." To develop a typological contrast with the self-serving Jacob, Donne stresses that the Redeemer "cloth'd himself in vile mans flesh" in order that "[he]might be weake

[3]See *The Bible of the Poor [Biblia Pauperum]: A Facsimile and Edition of the British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2*, ed. and trans. by Albert C. Labriola and John W. Smeltz (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1990). The particular triptych that juxtaposes the escape of Jacob and the flight into Egypt is on page 19. Donne highlights this very same typological resemblance in a sermon that he preached on April 12, 1618. See *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University California Press, 1953), I, 268-284.

enough to suffer woe." Striving to prosper through fraudulent means, Jacob, wearing the skins of goats, degrades himself from the level of humankind to that of the animals. Similarly, the Son, who will voluntarily undergo the punishment meted out to humankind, dons "vile harsh attire," degrading himself from the level of divinity to that of humanity. Unlike the self-serving Jacob, who usurps his brother's birthright, the Son is self-sacrificing on behalf of fallen humankind. In "Spit in my face," Donne applies the word "vile," whose synonyms are "base," "lowly," and "mean," to Jacob and Jesus because both figures degrade themselves in the ways that I have indicated.

As a corollary of this typological analysis, Rebecca foreshadows the role of the Virgin Mary, who invests the Son with his human nature. Furthermore, Isaac's blindness may be compared to God the Father's seeming lack of sight. By punishing Jesus, the innocent victim, in place of the miscreant, Adam, God the Father appears to have judged blindly. Ironically, Jesus, in adopting the form and nature of humankind, may be construed as having deceived and tricked the Father, who, like Isaac, mismatches the legacy with the heir. The Father bestows a legacy of bitterness, justly belonging to Adam and his progeny, on Jesus; and humankind receives, in turn, the merciful bequest of redemption.

From the typology already presented, a reader of Donne's "Spit in my face" will understand more fully the paradox of the deific Son who "might be weake enough to suffer woe." The almighty godhead becoming weak, or the omnipotent deity suffering, strikes the reader as a profound paradox, which is, in effect, the literary expression of a theological mystery. By referring to other Holy Sonnets—for example, "Oh my blacke Soule!"—a reader will detect the rich significance at the heart of the paradox, which centers upon the word "might." In this poem, the speaker urges the reader: to "wash . . . in Christs blood, which hath this might / That being red, it dyes red soules to white." Here the word "might" simultaneously alludes to the omnipotence and the woefulness of the godhead. Paradoxically, the almighty deity by his omnipotence

created humankind, and by his almighty blood the suffering deity offers to redeem fallen humankind. In effect, the Father and the Son are almighty in opposite but complementary ways—the one in creating, the other in re-creating, humankind.

In line with the dual reference to red(ness), the typological implication of the verse—that Christ's blood "dyes red soules to white"--is that the Father created the first man from adamah, the Hebrew word for red earth, and named his creature Adam; and the Son, as John Donne writes in "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," redeemed humankind when he did "[m]ake dirt of dust" (l. 27). That is to say, when his blood flows onto the dust at the foot of the cross, Jesus produces the reddened earth or malleable dirt from which fallen humankind is redeemed. If creation happens when God breathes into red earth, then re-creation occurs as the almighty blood of the suffering godhead moistens the dust of fallen humankind, an act of re-creation also from red earth. Furthermore, by imparting his blood, Jesus brings about a transformation: fallen humankind is restored to a state of primal purity or pristine innocence, signified by whiteness. Jesus, who "dyes red soules to white," is akin to a fuller or dyer, whose cleansing agent is his own blood. From another but related perspective, the imagery of red(ness) operates so that the shameful blush of sinfulness, which characterizes the penitential soul, elicits the flow of Christ's life-saving blood, a virtual homeopathic antidote that promotes a cleansing or purgation. More aptly described, this process of restoration is regeneration, by which is meant re-creation or re-genesis.

In light of what I have recounted thus far, the typological parallel of Jacob and Jesus also points to the sacrifice of young goats or kids, traditionally offered as immolations or holocausts in the Old Dispensation. The goats whose hides Jacob wore were sacrified presumably, and the bloodied flesh in which the Son was invested indicates his sacrifice at the hands of tormentors. Accordingly, the typological correlation of Jacob and Jesus in "Spit in my face" acquires its greatest significance by reference, first, to

John's Gospel and, then, to Paul's letter to the Philippians. The first recounts how the Son, a Divine Person, "became flesh and made his dwelling among us," and the second glosses that assertion by elaborating on (what it calls) the "attitude" of Jesus at the time of his voluntary humiliation, which Paul enjoins all Christians to imitate: "Do nothing out of selfishness . . . ; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but everyone for those of others." Paul's foregoing commentary accentuates the selflessness of Jesus, against which the selfishness of Jacob may be typologically contrasted. Paul explains that Jesus

> ...though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something
> to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in
> human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming
> obedient to death, even death on a cross.[4]

Called kenosis or the kenotic Christology, this humiliation of Jesus is traditionally described by two sets of visual images.[5] First, Jesus emptied himself of some of his divinity and into that partial void accepted the nature of humanity. Second, Jesus divested himself of the garb of divinity and attired himself in the vestment of humanity. The latter visual image particularly encourages

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[4]See John 1. 14 and Philippians 2. 1-11, quoted from *The New American Bible* (Mission Hills, CA: Benziger Publishing Co., 1986). I have opted to cite this edition of Scripture because it highlights more effectively even than the King James Version the imagery associated with the humility of Jesus and his kenotic transformation.

[5]For a study of kenosis and its interpretive application to literature of the 17th century, see Michael Lieb, *The Sinews of Ulysses: Form and Convention in Milton's Works* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1989), chapter four ("The Kenotic Christology"), pp. 38-52.

typological correlation with Jacob, who by vesting himself with the skins of lesser creatures anticipates a similar degradation by Jesus.

The nexus of biblical typology that I have recounted leads one to comprehend the futility of the speaker of "Spit in my face," who, while wishing to bear the punishment that he justly deserves, strives to substitute his own sinful self for his innocent intercessor, Jesus, on the cross. But he acknowledges that if this wish were granted, his "sinnes" yet "can not be satisfied" even by his "death." Much as the speaker's sinfulness continues daily, so too does the crucifixion of Jesus, which redeems or re-creates all humankind: past, present, and future. More heinous than Jews are the unchristian Christians, like the speaker, who test the "strange love" of Jesus, which contrasts with the self-interest of Jacob. Strangely, Jesus loves his tormentors, and his love increases in direct proportion to the pain inflicted on him. To highlight the heinousness and number of his own "sinnes," the speaker acknowledges that they "[sur]passe the Jewes impiety." The Jews "kill'd once an inglorious man," whereas he, the speaker, does "[c]rucifie him daily, being now glorified." In short, the Jews crucified Jesus before he was glorified at his Resurrection, but the speaker by renewing and repeating his claim on the redemptive act continues, in effect, to crucify Jesus. And he does so after Jesus was glorified at the Resurrection, exalted at the Ascension, and returned heavenward to be enthroned with the godhead. Consistent with his kenotic descent when he became incarnate, Jesus, after his sojourn on earth and his glorification and exaltation, does "not regard equality with God something to be grasped"; for even then he willingly relinquishes enthronement in heaven to be a sufferer on behalf of fallen humankind. Because the efficacy of unremitting self-sacrifice continues through the panorama of time, Jesus veritably sheds his blood daily, thereby providing the merits imputed to humankind to attain to salvation.

Other poems by Donne develop a similar viewpoint on the kenotic Christology, with explicit reference to attire and with implicit allusion to the story of Jacob. In "Goodfriday, 1613.

Riding Westward," Donne cites the "flesh which was worne / By God, for his apparel, rag'd, and torne" (ll. 27-28). The ambiguity of "rag'd" suggests, on the one hand, ragged or tattered flesh and, on the other, the rage of tormentors who, like ferocious beasts, inflict wounds on Jesus. Like "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," "Spit in my face" features a speaker who acknowledges the unique role of Jesus as the only sufferer who can redeem and re-create fallen humankind. But unlike his counterpart in the other poem, the speaker in "Spit in my face" advocates an empathic role for himself as a fellow-sufferer with Jesus. Apparently he seeks to undergo the torment of Jesus in order to assume punishment for his own sinfulness, to accept the legacy that was unjustly bestowed on the Son, to give evidence of his contrition for causing the anguish of Jesus, and to express his earnest wish to be redeemed and re-created by the blood of the Savior. To achieve empathy with Christ, the speaker in "Spit in my face" would divest Jesus of the apparel of humanity and thereafter invest himself with it. That is, he seeks to assume the human nature worn by the suffering Jesus, and in doing so the speaker would accept his just legacy of bitterness. One of the most graphic examples of humankind's transfiguration into the suffering Jesus occurs in Donne's "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," in which the speaker petitions: "in his purple wrapp'd receive me Lord" (l. 26). Here, the speaker contemplates his funeral shroud, akin to the garment in which Jesus was invested when he was mocked and buffeted, suggestive, as well, of the bloodied flesh of the Savior.

From a related perspective, a funeral shroud, likewise signifying both the garment of Jesus at the Passion and his bloodied humanity, enters Donne's own life, particularly as the author prepared to die. As he neared death, Donne removed his clothes, wrapped himself in a winding-sheet, stood upright, and posed for a painter. This painted image of Donne in his winding-sheet was the model for the engraving on the frontispiece of *Death's Duel*, the sermon that Donne composed and preached shortly before his death on March 31, 1631. Below the visual image on the

frontispiece is the epigraph: "Corporis haec Animae sit Syndon, Syndon Jesu." Translated literally, the epigraph reads: "May this shroud of the body be like the shroud of the soul, the shroud of Jesus." Helen Gardner provides a paraphrase of the epigraph: "As the body is shrouded in white linen, may the soul be shrouded in a white garment also, which is not its own but the white garment of Jesus." The whiteness that Gardner stresses nicely accords with the author's burial site, marked by a white marble statue of Donne upright but wrapped in his funeral shroud.[6]

The winding-sheets to which I have referred in the poetry and in the life of Donne are variously described as purple or white to signify the suffering humanity of Jesus and its effect in purifying humankind's fallen nature. In line with this view, the speaker in the poetry and Donne himself trick God the Father by assuming the external guise of another. Unlike Jacob, however, they are willing to accept a just but bitter legacy. And by posing as Jesus, the speaker and Donne hope that after having worn the bloodied garment of Jesus, they will receive the white one. If that was the hope fostered by Donne in life, the statue at his tomb projects the same attitude in death—that he may be raised, vested in white, and thus regenerated or re-created. Though the legacy that Donne claims is that of suffering, the patrimony that he hopes to acquire is one of regeneration. He wears the red garment of Jesus to receive, in turn, the white one. In both of these instances, each motivated by self-aggrandizement, Donne, like Jacob, impersonates another. If, finally, the name Jacob means "he who

[6]For the epigraph in *Death's Duel* and Gardner's translation of it, see *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 8, ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) pp. 446-447. For a picture of Donne wrapped in his shroud, see page lxiii (overleaf).

supplants" or "deceives," Donne by impersonation supplants the Son and deceives the Father, victimizing the former and tricking the latter.

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