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Chapter 1

SHADOWS

*Others at the Porches and entries of their Buildings sett their Armes, I, my Picture; if any Colours can deliver a Minde soe plaine, and flatt, and through light as mine. (John Donne, Epistle, Metempsychosis)*¹

The opening of Donne's Epistle prefacing his *Metempsychosis*, in the epigraph above, both declares an interest in portraits and expresses some doubts about what they can "deliver". The "picture" he is accustomed to set at the entrance to his "buildings", seems to refer to the convention of the portrait frontispiece of a printed book.² The Epistle was placed first in the 1633 edition of his *Poems*, even though that edition had no frontispiece, and in 1635 it faces the Marshall engraving of the poet – oddly, in this case, separated from the rest of *Metempsychosis* and functioning as a preface to the whole collection. Just as a heraldic coat of arms provides an emblematic key to identity so the function of a frontispiece "picture" is to "deliver a Minde", and Donne may be referring here to Cicero's "*imago animi vultus est*" (the face is the image of the mind).³ But there is some doubt about whether the "Colours" will be able to "deliver" a likeness of their subject's inner self, although Donne inverts expectations by saying that his *mind* is too plain and flat to be captured on the painter's cloth. This doubt about the ability of portraits to deliver a representation is explored in Donne's poems dealing with different kind of portraits, and also forms an intriguing subtext to the actual portraits of Donne that we know of.

There are five known portraits of John Donne at different stages of his life, a surprisingly large number for a non-aristocratic subject, rare for a

¹ Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 3: Satyres*, p. 249.

² On the portrait frontispiece, see Steven Rendall, "The Portrait of the Author", *French Forum* 13.2 (1998): 143–151.

³ Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. and ed. by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948) III, lix, p. 221. Cited in Rendall, p. 144.

poet of his time.⁴ This in itself provides material evidence of Donne's interest in painting. One of the earlier likenesses, the "Lothian portrait" now in the National Portrait Gallery in London (fig. 1), is apparently the earliest existing oil portrait of an Elizabethan poet.⁵ These multiple portraits might suggest an egotistical desire to preserve and record his identity, to imprint an image of the self on the world, but studying them closely reveals something quite different. Despite providing such a rich and complete iconography of their subject, and frequently being invoked to support biographical claims, the pictures provoke questions about how they should be understood. Interpreting Donne's portraits is complicated by the way so many of them are mediated by texts, whether mottos, companion pieces, or intertextual references. While they certainly provide information about him at different periods of his life, we should be cautious about assuming that they "deliver" his mind. They self-consciously stage a fluid and shadowy figure, suggesting, if anything, the unreliability of self-representation.

This concern with the difficulty of pinning down the self and the unreliability of representation is paralleled in his poetry. "Elegy. His Picture" is his only poem to give an extended depiction of a portrait, and, largely because of this, it has often been read as autobiographical. I argue, however, that just as the paintings of Donne resist a fixed meaning, "His Picture" and his other poems referencing paintings themselves call into question the possibility of ever achieving a faithful "likeness". When a portrait is described as "like me" or "like thee" in the poetry, the comparison is never innocent. In poems such as "The Legacie" and "Sappho to Philaenis", he employs established conventions of love poetry such as the lover's gift of a portrait and the image imprinted in the heart, only to take them apart and use them to question the limits of representation. In doing so he calls into question not only the representational function of the artwork but also the possibility of any knowledge of the self. In both the secular poems and the divine poems, his knowledge of the forms and techniques of visual art serves as a source of metaphors for our imperfect knowledge of the human condition.

PORTRAITS OF DONNE

The very fact that such a significant number of images of John Donne exist bears witness to his interest in the process of portraiture. Although in most cases we can only surmise the extent to which he may have contributed to

⁴ A full iconography is provided by Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr John Donne, Dean of St Paul's*. Fourth edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), pp. 372–376.

⁵ Tarnya Cooper, *Citizen Portrait: Portrait Painting and the Urban Elite of Tudor and Jacobean England and Wales* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 177. See also David Piper, *The Image of the Poet: British Poets and their Portraits* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), p. 28.

the process of creating these images, we are given one particularly gripping account of his involvement in his final portrait. In the 1675 edition of his *Life of Donne*, Isaak Walton recounts Donne's design of his own deathbed portrait. Donne, Walton tells us, dressed himself in a winding-sheet tied at the head and feet and stood on a carved urn so that a "choice Painter" could "draw his picture". The picture was eventually turned into the carved effigy by Nicholas Stone that still stands in St Paul's Cathedral, but before that the picture was set by Donne's bedside, where, Walton relates, it "became his hourly object until his death".⁶ Richard Wendorf comments that with this story "Walton shows us a figure who, in the moment of death, has literally turned himself into a work of art, a visual representation of that temporal moment that most interests any biographer: the point at which man and art absolutely merge".⁷ Wendorf's comment not only astutely identifies the method of the biographer and indeed of many biographical critics; it also implies the biographical tendency to seek truth in visual representations, particularly portraits. At the same time, it shows that Donne had already pre-empted his biographer, and not content with having "preach't his own Funeral Sermon",⁸ he had also, if not painted, then actively staged his own deathbed image. Walton's account describes Donne taking on multiple roles with regard to the creation of this image. He directs the process of creation, is the subject of the painting, and finally is the spectator as he meditates on his own image. At the same time Walton's version of both the creation and the reception of the deathbed image demonstrates to what extent this image, like any image, remains open to interpretation.

In the biography Walton goes on to juxtapose the image of Donne in his winding sheet with other pictures he has seen, focusing on one in particular:

I have seen one picture of him, drawn by a curious hand at his age of eighteen; with his sword and what other adornments might then suit with the present fashions of youth, and, the giddy gayeties of that age; and his Motto then was,

*How much shall I be changed,
Before I am chang'd.*

And, if that young, and his now dying Picture, were at this time set together, every beholder might say, *Lord! How much is Dr. Donne already chang'd, before he is chang'd?* And, the view of them, might give

⁶ Izaak Walton, *The Lives of Dr John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr Richard Hooker, Mr George Herbert* (London: Richard Marriot, 1675), pp. 71–72.

⁷ Richard Wendorf, "Visible Rhetorick: Isaak Walton and Iconic Biography", *Modern Philology* 82.3 (1985): 269–291 (p. 283).

⁸ Walton, *Lives*, p. 68.

my Reader occasion, to ask himself with some amazement, *Lord! how much may I also, that am now in health be chang'd, before I am chang'd? before this vile, this changeable body shall put off mortality?* and, therefore to prepare for it.⁹

Walton is referring here to the engraving by William Marshall that is used as a frontispiece to the 1635 *Poems*. This earlier portrait is not reproduced in the *Life*: the frontispiece of the whole volume (which also includes lives of Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker and George Herbert) shows the portrait of Donne painted in 1622 when he was forty-nine and already Dean of St Paul's. The Marshall engraving of the portrait of Donne at the age of eighteen, dated 1591, with motto, sword, "and other adornments" (fig. 2), is accompanied in the 1635 volume by an elegiac poem written by Walton, which again compares the youthful Donne with the sober, older Dean of St Paul's.

This was for youth, Strength, Mirth, and wit that Time
Most count their golden Age; but t'was not thine.
Thine was thy later yeares, so much refine
From youths Drosse, Mirth, & wit; as thy pure mind
Thought (like the Angels) nothing but the Praise
Of thy Creator, in those last, best Dayes.
Witnes this Booke, (thy Embleme) which begins
With Love; but endes, with Sighes, & Tears for Sins.¹⁰

It is assumed that Marshall's engraving is based on a painted portrait that is now lost. As mentioned in the Introduction, twentieth-century speculation – involving very little evidence – that it might have been based on an original by Nicholas Hilliard, tried to establish a definite connection between Donne and the leading miniaturist of his day.¹¹ But even without this somewhat tenuous connection to Hilliard, Donne's relationships with important English painters are certainly documented in later years. The miniature of him by Hilliard's former pupil Isaac Oliver, dated 1616, in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, and of course Nicholas Stone's effigy of Donne in his shroud (1631) – Donne had also commissioned Stone to make a funeral effigy of his wife¹² – show that Donne associated with the best-known English visual artists of his time. The attraction of the Marshall/Hilliard theory is that it also allows us to locate this knowledgeable, culturally aware Donne at the beginning of his career, and as Dennis Flynn argues in the opening pages of *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, if the

⁹ Walton, *Lives*, pp. 73–74.

¹⁰ *Poems, by J.D., with Elegies on the Authors Death* (London: M. Flesher for J. Marriot, 1635).

¹¹ See Introduction, p. 8, n. 32.

¹² Hurley, *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 35.

original of the Marshall engraving was indeed by Hilliard, it would give us important information about Donne's standing at court in his youth.¹³

The absence of a painted original, however, means that our knowledge and understanding of this early portrait is particularly mediated by text. Our appreciation of the monochrome print is enhanced by Walton's textual ekphrasis in his *Life*, and by his elegy accompanying it in the 1635 *Poems*, and of course its use as a frontispiece juxtaposes it directly with Donne's own texts.

Walton's description draws attention to yet another textual feature of the portrait, the motto in Spanish in its top right-hand corner, which reads "Antes muerto que mudado". Both the motto and Walton's reference to it have provoked much discussion. Walton mistranslates it as "How much shall I be changed / Before I am changed", which fits his conversion narrative that casts Donne as "a second St Austin", as well as his moralising appropriation of the image.¹⁴ The correct translation would be something like "Sooner dead than changed". Edward Terrill has identified the source of the phrase, in Jorge de Montemayor's pastoral romance *La Diana* (1559).¹⁵ The Spanish poem was known at the English court, translated into English in 1598 by Bartholomew Yong. It was also translated by Philip Sidney and was evidently an influence on his *Arcadia*.¹⁶ As Catherine Cresswell discusses in detail, once we know the source of Donne's Spanish motto, its irony becomes apparent. In Montemayor's poem, the line is not to be taken literally: it is "a fickle woman's vow of constancy", written on the sand by the faithless Diana, and remembered some time later by her lover Sireno, by then aware of Diana's infidelity.¹⁷

While on the surface this Spanish motto could convey "unwaveringly stoic asseveration", as Flynn puts it,¹⁸ once it is read in tandem with its inter-textual source it appears to comment ironically on constancy and mutability. No longer a comment on the inconstancy of women, the motto seems to ask to what extent the portrait can be a faithful representation. As Cresswell has

¹³ Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 1–5.

¹⁴ Walton, p. 38. On Walton's mistranslation, see Catherine J. Cresswell, "Giving a Face to an Author: Reading Donne's Portraits and the 1635 Edition", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 37:1 (1995): 1–15 (p. 1) and Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, p. 2; p. 196 n. 2.

¹⁵ T. Edward Terrill, "A Note on John Donne's Early Reading", *Modern Language Notes* 43 (1928): 318–319 (p. 318), cited by Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, p. 196 n. 2.

¹⁶ Walter R. Davis and Richard Lanham, *Sidney's Arcadia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press., 1965), p. 46.

¹⁷ Cresswell, "Giving a Face", pp. 7–9.

¹⁸ Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility*, p. 2.

pointed out, the portrait functions as an emblem, but an emblem-portrait in which “Donne’s motto and figure counter one another”. As she goes on to propose, “rather than reveal Donne, the emblem-portrait foregrounds not the portrayed subject but the very procedures of portraiture, its own and its subject’s constructed, fictive nature”.¹⁹ The motto’s ironic comment on inconstancy counters any attempt to “fix” a meaning on the portrait and opens it up to a much more complex interpretation.

This combination of image and contradictory words occurs in other portraits we have of Donne. Most notable is one of the best-known: the “Lothian portrait”, dated c. 1595, described in Donne’s will as “that picture of mine which is taken in Shaddowes”,²⁰ also contains an inscription, in gold lettering at the top of the image, following the curve of the oval that surrounds Donne’s figure (fig. 1). The inscription references the painting’s “shadows” while reinforcing the image of Donne as melancholy lover: “Illumina tenebr[as] nostras Domina” (Lighten our darkness O Lady). Like the motto of the Marshall engraving, it is in a foreign language, like the typical motto of an impresa or emblem, and this too is an altered quotation, altered again in terms that change the gender of the source text. The source has been identified both as an Evensong collect from the Book of Common Prayer: “Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord” and as Psalm 17: 29 in the Vulgate: “Deus meus illumine tenebras meas” (My God illumines my darkness).²¹

The Lothian portrait has been mediated through text in yet another way. Unlike the Marshall engraving of Donne in 1591, it was only known to exist because of fragmentary verbal clues, until it was rediscovered in the collection of the Marquess of Lothian at Newbattle Abbey by John Bryson in 1959.²² Apart from the “picture taken in Shaddowes” reference in Donne’s will, which bequeathed it to Robert Carr, Earl of Ancrum, two other verbal traces of the portrait seemed to corroborate its existence. William Drummond of Hawthornden refers to the bequest: “J. Done gave my L. Ancrum his picture in a melancholie posture with this word about

¹⁹ Cresswell, “Giving a Face”, p. 10; p. 11.

²⁰ Bald, *Donne*, p. 567.

²¹ For an identification of the source as the Book of Common Prayer, originating in the Sarum Breviary, see Louis L. Martz, “English Religious Poetry”, in *From Renaissance to Baroque: Essays on Literature and Art* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 8; The National Portrait Gallery identifies the source as the Vulgate. National Portrait Gallery – Conservation Research – NPG 6790; John Donne <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw111844/John-Donne>

²² John Bryson. “Lost Portrait of Donne”. *The Times*. (London) October 13, 1959: p. 13; p. 15.

it *De Tristitia ista libera me Domina*” (From this sadness deliver me O Lady).²³ Another reference is to be found in R. B. [Richard Baddily]’s *Life of Dr Thomas Morton*:

For my selfe have long since seen his (Donne’s) Picture in a dear friends Chamber of his in *Lincolnes Inne*, all enveloped with a darkish shadow, his face & feature hardly discernable, with this ejaculation and wish written thereon; *Domine* [sic] *illumina tenebras meas*, which long after was really accomplished.²⁴

While both Drummond and R. B. misremember the inscription, it is worth noting that they both emphasise its part in the portrait. Although R. B. failed to notice, or to recall, the playful misattribution of gender (and therefore inscribes the portrait in a narrative of conversion to spirituality that is similar to Walton’s), Drummond, while getting more of the words wrong, does remember the play on gender. Bryson, and most subsequent critics, concur with Drummond’s reading that Donne is assuming the posture of a melancholy lover. The floppy hat and the crossed hands correspond to the description of the “Inamorato” in Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).²⁵ The combination of the consciously assumed posture and the inscription leads Kate Frost to describe this portrait, too, as an “impresa” to be interpreted.²⁶

Tarnya Cooper, formerly curator of the Tudor and Jacobean galleries at the National Portrait Gallery, describes the Lothian portrait as “extraordinary” and “an exception”,²⁷ and the Portrait Gallery’s commentary on the painting notes that:

Given the nature of the pose and format, the portrait must have been carefully orchestrated by Donne; the inscription suggests that it may originally have been painted for a lover or for a friend. It is possible that the painter was a friend or associate – perhaps a painter working on theatrical events at the Inns of Court – who took instruction directly from the young poet about the nature of the composition.²⁸

This involves a lot of speculation, of course, but it corresponds to Walton’s account of Donne’s involvement in the composition of his own deathbed

²³ National Library of Scotland, MS 2060, f.44v, quoted in Bryson.

²⁴ R. B. *The life of Dr. Thomas Morton, late Bishop of Duresme*, 1669, pp. 101–102.

²⁵ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: John Lichfield and James Short, for Henry Cripps, 1621), pp. 250–251. See Kate Gartner Frost, “The Lothian Portrait: A Prologemenon”, *John Donne Journal* 15 (1996): 95–125 (pp. 96–97).

²⁶ Frost, “The Lothian Portrait: A Prologemenon”, pp. 98–99.

²⁷ Cooper, *Citizen Portrait*, p. 175.

²⁸ National Portrait Gallery – Conservation Research – NPG 6790; John Donne.

image, and provides one more suggestion that Donne may have been involved in the production of an actual work of art as more than simply a sitter, inviting us to interpret the composition of the painting – and its intertextual inscription – as resulting from Donne's initiative.

Donne's apparent involvement in the composition of both the Lothian portrait and the Marshall image has obvious parallels with his orchestration of his deathbed image as described by Walton. Indeed, all the different pieces of information we have connecting Donne with visual art place him in multiple positions in relation to the material object. Often, as with the deathbed image, he assumes several positions simultaneously. He is the subject of the painting but also its orchestrator, and its spectator. He is a collector, a connoisseur and, as his will shows, a donator of paintings. Frost has suggested that, taken as a whole, the extant portraits of Donne could be seen as representing "a progress through his life, a kind of self-conscious ages of man scheme."²⁹ Even if this claim cannot be sustained, the similarities between the two earliest portraits of Donne in 1591 and 1595 do suggest, if not a "deliberate program", certainly a continuing concern with issues of self-representation. Despite their differences, these two early portraits resemble each other in what David Piper has described as their "role-playing",³⁰ as well as in their punning intertextual inscriptions, which problematise our understanding of the paintings and remove the possibility of a simple identification of the face in the portrait as a true representation of Donne. Indeed, Cresswell holds that Donne's portraits "resist a coherent reading". She makes the point with reference to the Marshall engraving but goes on to argue that readers of all of Donne's portraits "will not uncover the true Donne... but a rhetorical figure."³¹ Rather like his poems, they both invite and resist interpretation, their layers of meaning adding to the impression of an elaborate artifice, challenging any expectation that a portrait will "deliver" the mind of the sitter.

"HIS PICTURE"

The "picture ... taken in shadows" thus resists easy assumptions about a portrait's representational power. In a poem written around the same time as the Lothian portrait was produced, Donne plays on the polysemy of the word "shadow", and approaches the question of the representation of the self through an imagined work of visual art. "Elegy: His Picture" is the only one

²⁹ Kate Gartner Frost, "The Lothian Portrait: A New Description", *John Donne Journal* 13 (1994): 1–11 (p. 2).

³⁰ Piper, *Image of the Poet*, p. 28.

³¹ Cresswell, "Giving a Face", p. 4; p. 12.

of his poems that stages a painting at any length. As such it can certainly be described as an ekphrasis, a verbal representation of a visual work of art.³² But rather than describing the portrait likeness, as we might expect, the poem goes beyond or beneath the finished surface of the painting to focus instead on the material and painterly process of making a likeness.

“Elegy: His Picture” opens by dramatising the presentation of a portrait gift and its appreciation, and in the first lines a play on the word “shadow” parallels the artwork with the speaker’s death and alerts us to the uncertain status of visual representation:

Here take my picture, though I bid farwell
Thyne in my hart, wher my Soule dwells shall dwell.
T’is like me now, but I dead, t’wilbe more
When we are shadows bothe, then t’was before. (ll. 1-4).³³

The basic pun – that shadow can mean both “portrait” and “ghost” – parallels the picture and the moment of death in a number of ways. Once dead, the speaker of the poem will be more like his portrait than he was alive. “Shadow” implies a comparison on grounds of insubstantiality: both a portrait and a ghost are insubstantial “copies”, counterfeits, of the original man,³⁴ and may also recall the sense of “shadow” as “actor”: “a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage” (*Macbeth* V.5.24–25).

But “shadow” also has the very material denotation of the act of painting: in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries “to shadow” may mean simply to paint or to draw.³⁵ “Shadow” may also carry the more technically precise meaning of an underdrawing, the bottom layer or rough draft of a painting, echoing the Italian *adumbratio*.³⁶ Due to the paucity of artistic vocabulary in English, as Lucy Gent has shown, the word “shadow” has multiple possible meanings when used in the context of visual art. As well as describing these well-established painterly techniques the word is also associated with the very new (in the late sixteenth century) painterly use of shadow, of *chiaroscuro* creating the illusion of depth, which, along with

³² James Heffernan proposes a good working definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of graphic representation” in “Ekphrasis and Representation”, *New Literary History* 22. 2 (1991): 297–316 (p. 299).

³³ Quotations from “His Picture” are from Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 2: Elegies*, p. 264.

³⁴ OED *shadow* n. 6b; see also Claire Pace, “‘Delineated Lives’: themes and variations in seventeenth-century poems about portraits”, *Word and Image* 2.1 (1986): 1–17 (p. 6).

³⁵ See OED *shadow* v. 8. and Lucy Gent, *Picture and Poetry 1560–1620* (Leamington Spa: James Hall, 1981), p. 19.

³⁶ See Gent, *Picture and Poetry*, p. 19.

perspective, was beginning to be recognised as “one of the chief means of achieving a greater illusion of reality”.³⁷ Fifteen ninety-six (the probable date for this poem)³⁸ is quite early for “shadow” to have this sense – but given the existence of the Lothian portrait, dated one year earlier, we know that Donne in this period was aware of painting making use of shadows. The technique itself is considered to be rare for such an early date, when an “unshadowd” style was still more popular.³⁹ Many years later, in a sermon preached at Whitehall in February 1628, Donne once again demonstrates his technical knowledge of artistic technique and the metaphorical potential of the word “shadow” when he compares the “dying man, that dies in Christ” with a picture printed from a copper engraving:

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 the Copper; So this Picture of that dying Man, that dies in Christ ... was graving all his life; All his publique actions were the lights, and all his private the shadowes of this Picture. And when this Picture comes to the Presse, this Man to the streights and agonies of Death, thus he lies, thus he looks, this he is. (8: 190)

Donne's evident technical knowledge of engraving and the production of prints furnishes him with metaphors to describe man's relationship to mortality: the actions of a man's life are compared to the long-drawn-out creative process of engraving the copper, while the actual picture is the final product. At the end of his life a man becomes the print, that static, unchangeable result, in a logic that parallels the “when we are shadows both” metaphor in the Elegy.

Donne's knowledge of painterly technique allows all these secondary meanings of “shadow” to hover in “His Picture”, even if the primary sense can be taken as that of “portrait” or “copy”. But the pun depends on the idea that the copy is simultaneously material and immaterial. The dead man and the picture are not only compared because they will be similarly insubstantial; paradoxically, when they are “shadows bothe” they will be paralleled in substance. The body of the poem's speaker, which has become “foule and course” (l. 12), separated into different layers, parallels the material construction of the picture.

This elegy has attracted a good number of biographical readings, as have many of the other valediction poems. From a fairly early date in modern Donne criticism, the voyage on which the speaker is departing has been linked to one of Donne's own sea-voyages, most likely to Cadiz

³⁷ Pace, “Delineated Lives”, p. 6; cf. Gent, *Picture and Poetry*, p. 26.

³⁸ See Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 2: Elegies*, pp. 820–821.

³⁹ Pace, “Delineated Lives”, p. 6.

with Essex in 1596.⁴⁰ The dating of the poem seems to be largely based on that biographical assumption.⁴¹ And, perhaps inevitably, this biographical reading extends to a desire to link the “picture” to a specific material portrait of Donne himself. Given that the estimated dating of the poem to 1596 coincides so neatly with the 1595 date attributed to the Lothian portrait, it is perhaps surprising that critics have not in general attempted to identify “His Picture” with Donne’s “picture taken in shadows”. This may simply be because, as Helen Gardner says in her edition of the *Elegies*, the Lothian portrait “is hardly the size to hand to a lady”,⁴² but equally, the critical desire to find an actual portrait predates the 1959 rediscovery of the Lothian portrait. In a tradition which apparently begins with E. K. Chambers’ edition *The Poems of John Donne*, the elegy has instead been identified with the Marshall engraving.⁴³ There is no particular reason why the elegy shouldn’t be linked to the Marshall image, but also no particular reason why it should. Most critics concur that the scene set up in the first line of the elegy evokes the convention of the departing lover presenting his beloved with a portrait miniature.⁴⁴ If one were tempted to see this as more than a literary device and to search for a physical portrait, then the martial stance of the young Donne in the Marshall engraving provides, as Ann Hollinshead Hurley puts it, “an appropriate anticipatory, tongue-in-cheek commentary on the young lover of ‘His Picture’ whose inner being is characterized as ‘faire and delicate’”.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the identification of the Marshall engraving with “my picture” in the Elegy under discussion remains problematic, and not only because of the biographical fallacy involved in such an assumption. The very idea that we might find a physical companion image to Donne’s Elegy is highly ironic because what Donne goes on to do in this poem is to problematise representation and strip down the image of the man to its constituent elements.

⁴⁰ Edward Dowden, “The Poetry of John Donne”, *The Fortnightly Review* 47 (1890): 791–808 (p. 801).

⁴¹ Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 2: Elegies*, pp. 820–821 and pp. lxi–lxvii.

⁴² Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne. The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 143.

⁴³ E. K. Chambers, ed., *The Poems of John Donne* (London: Lawrence and Bullen; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1896), I, p. 237; see also Gardner, ed., *Elegies*, p. 143; Hurley, *John Donne’s Poetry*, pp. 52–53.

⁴⁴ Bryson, “Lost Portrait”, p. 15; Gardner, ed., *Elegies*, p. 143.

⁴⁵ Hurley, *John Donne’s Poetry*, p. 53. Hurley combines the traditional juxtaposition of “His Picture” with the Marshall portrait with the hypothesis of the lost Hilliard original in order to parallel “His Picture”, “Hilliard’s portrait of Donne” and Hilliard’s treatise “On the Art of Limning”, reading all three as attempts to problematise the nature of representation (pp. 53–60).

Various critics over the years have suggested that Donne offers us two “pictures” in the Elegy: first “my picture” offered by the speaker to his lover as he departs for war, which is not described to us, beyond perhaps what is implied in the phrase “faire or delicate” (l. 17). Second, there is “another picture”,⁴⁶ the verbal image we are given in lines 5–10 of the returning soldier, battle-scarred and sunburned:⁴⁷

When weatherbeaten I come back; my hand
Perchance with rude Oares torne, or Suns beams tand,
My face and breast of hayre cloth, and my head
With Cares rash sodain horines orespread,
My body a sack of bones, broken within
And powders blew staines scatterd on my skin ... (ll. 5–10)

An offshoot argument to the notion of the two pictures is that the image of the “sun-tanned, blue-stained returning warrior” is more “attractive”, his “bristles, rough hands, and ... other craggy features” more “appetising to women”, as John Carey puts it, than was the original picture.⁴⁸ Yet attractive as the notion of this sunburned soldier may be, the “returning warrior” description, far from giving us an image of a whole man, is fragmented, in more ways than one.

These lines provide us with a blazon of the speaker’s body, and this in itself could be seen as a verbal portrait, since in his *Art of English Poesie*, George Puttenham describes the poetic blazon as the prime example of “*Icon*, or resemblance by imagerie or pourtrait, alluding to the painters terme”.⁴⁹ However while Puttenham specifies that the poet should “resemble every part of [the] body to some naturall thing of excellent perfection in his kind”, in the Elegy the speaker’s body is paralleled with rough materials and images of disintegration. Rather than itemising the body in order to represent the whole, this blazon insists on fragmentation, presenting us with a body “torne” (l. 6), a man reduced to a roughened hand and chest, a hoary head and finally a “sack of bones, broken within” (l. 9).

Donne’s play with tropes of similitude here opens out into a larger commentary on the notion of verisimilitude in general. The poetic

⁴⁶ Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1947), p. 54.

⁴⁷ Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, p. 54; John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 51; Thomas Docherty, *John Donne, Undone* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 128.

⁴⁸ Hurley, *John Donne’s Poetry*, p. 59; Carey, *John Donne*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie: Contrived into three Bookes: The first of Poets and Poesie, the second of Proportion, the third of Ornament* (London: Richard Field, 1589), p. 204.

convention of the immortalising portrait, that “the painted image will survive, while the actual physical appearance of the sitter decays”⁵⁰ can be seen, for example, in Thomas Randolph’s “Upon his picture” (1638), in which the speaker contemplates the portrait of his younger self at the moment when “death displays his coldness in my cheek, / And I myself in my own picture seek, / Not finding what I am, but what I was” (ll. 5–7).⁵¹ Donne pays lip service to this trope with the line “This [the portrait] shall say what I was” (l. 13), but in contrast to Randolph’s more conventional poem, in Donne’s it is precisely in the coldness of death that the speaker will be most “like” the portrait. Donne’s defining “shadow” pun insists on a rethinking of the *likeness* of sitter and portrait: “T’is like me now, but I dead, t’wilbe more / When we are shadows bothe, then t’was before” (ll. 3–4).

Thomas Docherty is the most insistent of the critics who read the “weather-beaten” speaker of lines 5–10 as “another, entirely dissimilar, portrait” in which “Donne” is “*changed*” and the subject of the portrait “becomes, finally, unnameable, unidentifiable”.⁵² While I agree – up to a point – with Docherty, that this poem is in many ways about the impossibility of representation, I disagree with his insistence that there are “(at least) two pictures” and particularly with the idea that “there is no identity between the picture[s]”.⁵³ Rather than offering a “second picture” in these lines, I would argue that Donne goes beyond – or beneath – the surface of one portrait in order to explore the physical processes by which the image, and the man, are constituted. The fragmenting blazon of lines 5 to 10 applies not only to the man but also to the picture: *his picture* too is reduced to the materials required for pictorial representation: the cloth, the white base, the crushed bone and blue powder that make up pigments.

“Powders blew stains scatterd on my skin” in line 10 retains, of course, the sense of gunpowder on the returning sailor,⁵⁴ but in the context of a discussion of a painted portrait, “powders blew staines” also strongly suggests the mixing of paint from powdered lapis lazuli or azurite. Hurley proposes something similar in her analysis of the elegy, suggesting that “the actual craft of making miniatures may well have been in his mind ... when

⁵⁰ Pace, “Delineated Lives”, p. 3.

⁵¹ See Philip McCaffrey, “Painting the Shadow: (Self-)Portraits in Seventeenth Century Poetry”, in *The Eye of the Poet: Studies in the Reciprocity of the Visual and Literary Arts from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed by Amy Golahny. (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 1996), pp. 179–195 (pp. 181–182).

⁵² Docherty, *John Donne, Undone*, p. 126.

⁵³ Docherty, *John Donne, Undone*, p. 128.

⁵⁴ John Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, Doubleday, 1967), p. 64; A. J. Smith, *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 419.

he refers to the 'blew staines' of gunpowder ... prompting his audience to recall the familiar blue background of the idealizing portrait miniature".⁵⁵ Such an interpretation is reinforced by the other physical details enumerated in lines 5–10, all of which are open to a similar double reading. The "hayre clothe" of the soldier's roughened skin has echoes of the painter's cloth – a term commonly used to refer to painters' canvas in the sixteenth century, for example in Richard Haydocke's translation of Lomazzo's *Trattato*.⁵⁶ Although haircloth is not a traditional support for oil painting, it is a stiff woven cloth not unlike canvas. The addition of "hayre" emphasises the roughness of the material and highlights the parallels between body and painting, while simultaneously evoking the hair shirt of the penitent, humbled man.⁵⁷ Moreover, the "horines orespred" could refer not only to a new crop of white hairs on the care-worn head but also to the white layer of binder, chalk and pigment called "gesso" spread over the canvas to prepare it for the application of oil paints. Pursuing this interpretation, "My body a sack of bones, broken within" (l. 9) could refer to the use of crushed bones in making pigment – particularly the black known as "bone black" made from the powder of charred bones burned at a high temperature.⁵⁸ The National Portrait Gallery's recent conservation research into the Lothian portrait reveals that it does contain the pigment bone black, particularly in the sleeve on the right.⁵⁹

The conviction of the National Portrait Gallery curators that Donne must have been actively involved in the "orchestration" of the Lothian portrait suggests that he would have been aware of the details surrounding the material production of an oil painting, including the somewhat gruesome process required to produce a painting's colours. Not only may the "sack of bones" in the Elegy refer – at least in part – to the material production of the painting's "shadows", but other details that have emerged during the restoration of the Lothian portrait may also correspond to the poem.

⁵⁵ Hurley, *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 173.

⁵⁶ Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge Caruinge Buildinge Written first in Italian ... and Englished by R [ichard] H [aydock]* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1598), p. 6; p. 23.

⁵⁷ C. A. Patrides, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: J. M. Dent, 1985), p. 14.

⁵⁸ The "Suns beams" too fit into this reading, as Italian painters exposed freshly painted oil pictures to the sun after each layer was added, "to remove by evaporation the yellow coat of oil which always rose to the surface, and which if not removed by this process darkened the colours", Mary Merrifield, *Original Treatises on the Arts of Painting* [1849] (New York: Dover, 1967), I, p. cccvii.

⁵⁹ National Portrait Gallery – Conservation Research – NPG 6790; John Donne <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw111844/John-Donne#paintsampling>

The examination of its layers has revealed not only substantial traces of bone black but also the preparation layers of a “thick chalk ground and a relatively substantial priming containing lead white” which may imply that Donne had some knowledge of the priming process and which could be connected to the “horines orespred”.⁶⁰

I am not using the Lothian portrait to make yet another identification of “His Picture” with an actual work of art. The picture in the poem stripped back to its constituent layers is emphatically *not* the Lothian portrait, especially as this is painted on panel rather than cloth.⁶¹ In fact it does not really bear resemblance to any of the extant portraits of Donne – or to any completed artwork. The “shadows both” pun may, in part, parallel the elegy with the metaphor of the dying man as a finished work of art developed in the 1628 sermon: “when this Picture comes to the Presse, this Man to the streights and agonies of Death, thus he lies, thus he looks, this he is” (8: 190). Yet “His Picture” is barely concerned with how the speaker looks, or with the “fair or delicate” finished product (l. 17), but rather with the “foule and course” process (l. 12) required to produce a painting.

Donne’s insistence on the materials that go into the making of the picture demonstrate his interest in process and in the painter’s practice of his craft, and is in keeping with his general attention to making rather than to “made work”. Such a material and painterly ekphrasis of a work of visual art is in keeping with the long tradition of verbal representation of visual representation, whose *locus classicus* is the description of Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad* Book 18, ll. 478–608. As Lessing famously observes in his *Laocoon*, Homer “does not paint the shield as finished and complete, but as a shield that is being made”.⁶² Homer’s ekphrasis of the shield insists on the difference between what is represented and the medium of representation.⁶³ And yet despite all Donne’s evident interest in painterly creation, the effect of “His Picture” is less a mimicking of the creative process than a process of excavation, a peeling back of the layers. The elegy begins by appearing

⁶⁰ National Portrait Gallery – Conservation Research – NPG 6790; John Donne <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw111844/John-Donne#paintsampling>.

⁶¹ Although most surviving English portraits from the sixteenth century are on panel rather than canvas, the earliest portrait on canvas examined in the National Portrait Gallery’s “Making Art in Tudor Britain” project dates from 1546, and many English people in the period owned painted cloths depicting a range of subjects. Charlotte Bolland, Project Curator (Making Art in Tudor Britain), personal communication.

⁶² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1962), p. 95.

⁶³ See Heffernan, “Ekphrasis”, p. 301.

to proffer a “picture” but proceeds to undo the possibility of knowing a person through a portrait – or through their surface appearance – by taking the picture apart and showing the layers that go into its composition. In a sermon preached one Whitsunday at Lincoln’s Inn, Donne compares the practice of the painter and the printer, and describes the painter who “makes an eye, and an eare, and a lip, and passes his pencill an hundred times over every muscle, and every haire, and so in many sittings makes up one man” (5: 38). In “His Picture”, the effect is rather the opposite – one man (who at the beginning of the poem we assume we know, from literary convention or the traditional association with the poet) is unmade.

Donne’s progressive deconstruction of the trope of the portrait gift thus raises questions about the material status of the painting, the nature of representation, and in particular the possibility of representing the self. In the second part of “His Picture”, in parallel with the unmaking of the self I have been describing, the speaker slips out of the picture frame and becomes the connoisseur. Through both the portrait gift and the disintegrating blazon of his body, the poem has constructed the speaker as an object to be gazed at. But in the second half he shifts speaking positions to put words in his mistress’s mouth:

This shall say what I was, and thou shalt say,
Do his hurts reache mee? doth my worth decay?
Or do they reach his judging mind, that he
Should like and love les, what he did love to see? (ll. 13–16)

The conventional notion, that the portrait represents him as he was, is complicated by the way his lover’s words construct him as a viewing, “judging mind”, rather than the object of the painting. Paradoxically, when he is “speaking” in lines 1–13, he is the object of other people’s gaze; when the words are supposedly those of his lover, he becomes a judging subject. The portrait is taken apart and reduced to its constituent layers; and simultaneously, Donne presents us with a sitter who does not remain fixed, as an object to be looked at, but escapes from the picture to become a viewing subject.

THE PICTURE IN THE HEART

At the same time as drawing attention to the painting’s material construction, Donne parallels the portrait gift with another poetic trope: that of the picture in the lover’s heart, in the second line of the elegy: “Here, take my picture”, the speaker urges: “Thyne in my hart, wher my Soule dwells shall dwell” (ll. 1–2). This, perhaps, is a truer “other picture” than that identified by Tuve and Docherty in the later lines describing the weather-beaten,

powder-stained veteran. And while the poem proceeds to peel back the layers of his material portrait, the immaterial picture of her in his heart, once mentioned, is left untouched. I cited “Witchcraft by a picture” in the Introduction as one of the best examples of Donne’s doubling and ambivalent attitude to images. In that poem, the speaker’s reflection in his lover’s eyes conjures up the fear that through “wicked skill” (l. 5), the “pictures made, and marrd” (l. 6) might be used, like an effigy, to hurt or kill the speaker. But the mimetic power of the initial “picture” is called into question. In James Knapp’s words, the representation is “true in that it resembles [the speaker’s] appearance but false in that it fails to capture the truth of his dynamic self”. There is thus a similar undermining of the picture’s “ability to tell the truth” as in “His Picture”.⁶⁴ But the destructive potential of the visual representation is countered by the stability and safety of the poem’s final “Picture”: “One Picture more, yet that will bee, / Beeing in thyne owne hart, from all mallice free” (ll. 12–13).⁶⁵ The idea that the internal image is the truer picture, untarnished by time and not subject to the imperfections and inaccuracies of a painter’s reproduction, already casts some doubt on material paintings’ ability to represent. Yet although the poetic convention is that the image in the heart will last longer than the physical work of art,⁶⁶ when Donne uses it, the internal image often seems to be preserved at the expense of the lover’s physical self.

While the trope of the lover’s heart that may be given as a gift, returned, or broken, is a conventional one, I am interested here in what happens when this is combined with the idea of the immortalising image. The closest verbal parallel to the second line of “His Picture” is to be found in his Holy Sonnet “What if this present were the world’s last night”: “Mark in my hart, Ô Soule where thou dost dwell / The Picture of Christ crucified” (ll. 2–3), which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4, concerning the Crucifixion.⁶⁷ The trope of the image in the heart recurs several times in the *Songs*

⁶⁴ James A. Knapp, “Looking At and Through Pictures in Donne’s Lyrics”, in *The Art of Picturing in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. by Camilla Caporicci and Armelle Sabatier (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 33–49 (p. 41). Knapp reads these two poems, and “The Crosse”, in the light of the legal paradox of *veritas falsa*.

⁶⁵ Quotations from the *Songs and Sonnets*: “Witchcraft by a picture” and “The Dampe” are from Johnson *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 4.3: Songs and Sonnets*, p. 227; p. 194; “Image of her, whom I loue” and “The Elegie” (known as “The Legacie” in some other editions) are taken from Johnson *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 4.2: Songs and Sonnets*, p. 88, p. 156.

⁶⁶ See Pace, “Delineated Lives”, pp. 3–4.

⁶⁷ Quoted from Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 7.1: Holy Sonnets*, p. 25. (Revised Sequence).

and *Sonnets* and it is notable that each time the image is paralleled by a damaged or physically disintegrating body. In "Image of her, whom I loue"; the lover's "fayre Impression, in my faythfull heart / Makes me her Medall" (2–3). Once the image is imprinted, though, stamped and coined (another material image to which Donne returns more than once), the speaker is not convinced that he can physically continue to bear it. It becomes "ominously powerful",⁶⁸ "growne too Greate, and good for mee" (6), and he wonders if it might be easier to live without his heart and its burden: "take my hart from hence" (5). The contemplated removal of the heart in "Image of her" seems relatively painless and rhetorical, but in other poems the idea of the extraction of the image from the heart is expanded to a much more visceral opening up of the body. In "His Picture", as we have seen, the "shadow" was associated with the disintegrating body of the speaker. In "The Dampe" the speaker is already dead, and the "Picture" proven to be the cause. Whereas in the elegy, the body is "torne" and reduced to "a sack of bones", in "The Dampe" it is cut open with the precision of a post-mortem:

When I am Dead, and Doctors knowe not why,
And my friends curiositie
Will have mee cutt vp, to survey each part,
When they shall finde your Picture in my heart ... (ll. 1–4)

In both of these cases, as in "His Picture", the image in the heart seems to be in conflict with the physical integrity of the speaker, as if they cannot co-exist in the same space. David Anderson, in an article on Donne's "internal images" in the light of the iconoclastic controversy, argues that his use of the trope in his secular poetry "parallels [his] argument about holy images, stressing the benefits and dangers of a picture's transcendent power".⁶⁹

The most extreme example of this kind of opening up of the body to reveal an image is the poem "Elegie" (known as "The Legacie" in most modern editions), a poem whose staging of a shifting, unrepresentable self recalls the shifting subject positions of "His Picture" as well as the anatomical excavation of "The Dampe". Like the love elegy, "Elegie" is a valediction poem of sorts, involving a gift or bequest, a poem in which death and the self are both treated highly ambiguously and become fluid concepts. As in

⁶⁸ David K. Anderson, "Internal Images: John Donne and the English Iconoclast Controversy", *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 26.2 (2002): 23–42 (p. 36).

⁶⁹ Anderson, p. 36. More tenuously, perhaps, Philip Ayres has suggested that the "Picture in my heart" of "The Dampe" resembles the Passion scene reportedly inscribed physically in the heart of St Clare of Montefalco. "Donne's 'The Dampe', Engraved Hearts, and the 'Passion of St. Clare of Montefalco'", *English Language Notes* 13 (1976): pp. 171–173.

“The Dampe”, Donne’s speaker in “Elegie” is already dead for love, and as in “Image of Her”, he plays with the convention of the lover who sends his heart. But in this poem the speaker has difficulty locating his heart. After he has “search’d where hearts should lye” (14), all he can find is:

... something like a hart,
But collours it, and Corners had;
It was not good, it was not bad,
It was intire to none, and fewe had part,
As good, as could bee made by Arte
It seem’d ... (17–22)

With the notable exception of Ilona Bell, critics of “Elegie” have tended to read “corners” as implying that the object is not perfect, not true, because not a perfect circle, while “collours” is often read as suggesting something artificial, cosmetic and therefore negatively connoted: “a painted [heart], not a ‘true plain’ one”; “a painted heart, i.e. a hypocritical one”.⁷⁰ Although it has been read as an “ingeniously simulated” heart,⁷¹ the focus on form and colour does not seem to have been extended to the idea that the coloured, painted object is indeed a painting, or at least the idea of a painting, occupying the same space in the heart as the picture in “The Dampe”.⁷²

In the last line of “Elegie”, the object like a heart proves to belong not to the speaker but to his lover: “no man could hold it, for ’twas thine” (24). The shifting ownership of the heart is part of the exchange-of-hearts trope, but here there seems to be an insistence on the interpretation of this represented heart. No one can fully grasp it; only very few people can begin to understand the multiple, shifting, fluid self through this representation of it. What is notable here, and comparable to “His Picture” and “The Dampe”, is the violence done to the body of the speaker in the search for the representational object. The body of the lover is “ripped” and “killed ... again” (15) in the attempt to access its “true” heart, but all that is to be found is the picture, the counterfeit, which can only ever be an imperfect copy of

⁷⁰ Theodore Redpath, ed., *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, second edition (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983), p. 116; Arthur L. Clements, *John Donne’s Poetry* (New York and London: Norton, 1966), p. 10. Ilona Bell identifies “colours” and “corners” in the poem as legal terminology: “Women in the Lyric Dialogue of Courtship: Whitney’s Admonition to al yong Gentilwomen and Donne’s “The Legacie”, in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, ed. by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 76–92.

⁷¹ Smith, ed., *Complete English Poems*, p. 382n.

⁷² I am grateful to Kader Hegedüs for first suggesting this interpretation to me. Hegedüs. “Maps, Spheres and Places in Donnean Love. Donne’s spatial representations in the ‘Songs and Sonnets.’” MA (University of Lausanne), 2012, p. 17.

the self it represents: "it was not good, it was not bad ... As good, as could bee made by Arte / It seem'd" (19; 21–22).

In parallel with this, the poem stages a self that is grammatically fractured, in a bewildering confusion of pronouns that begins in the opening stanza and becomes even more pronounced in the second: "I heard mee say, tell her anone, / That my selfe (that's you not I) / Did kill mee..." (ll. 9–11). The speaker (if it's possible to use the term in this poem) is simultaneously "mine owne executor, and Legacie" (l. 8). Carey describes this as "an exasperating poem, of course", a key example of Donne's interest in what he calls the "fluidity of the self".⁷³ The confusion of subject and object here echoes that in "His Picture", where, similarly, the self slips between multiple possible roles. Once more a painting – this time an internal image – is paralleled with an unreadable and ungraspable self. The colours and corners of paintings seem to generate reflection on the impossibility of pinning down the self and the unreliability of representation. Donne's doubt in the epistle to Metempsychosis as to whether "any colours can deliver a minde ..." seems to be at work again here. Something *like* a heart will not give access to the speaker's inner self.

LIKENESS

Among the genres of Renaissance art, the portrait is perhaps particular in that its painter was praised for achieving a perfect likeness, even while appreciation of art in general may have been moving towards an understanding of art as more than simply literal representation.⁷⁴ "His Picture" and "Elegie" demonstrate Donne's interest in the idea of "likeness": the shadow which will be more "like" the sitter when he is dead; the poetic trope that proves to be only "something like a heart". As the reading of "Elegie" begins to suggest, poems like these test the limits of both pictorial and verbal representation. The idea of "likeness" is also a literary trope, and as we have seen, Puttenham uses portrait painting to contextualise his discussion of similes: "*Icon*, or resemblance by imagerie or pourtrait, alluding to the painters terme".⁷⁵

The poem that plays most with the idea of *likeness*, while not staging a portrait as such, is Donne's elegy "The Comparison", often considered one of his more misogynistic poems. It alternates many flattering and extremely unflattering similes to describe a female figure, although its conclusion, that "She, and comparisons are odious", suggests that the misogyny has been at

⁷³ Carey, *John Donne*, p. 175.

⁷⁴ Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Puttenham, *Art of Poesie*, p. 204.

least partly directed towards an examination of the trope of the simile.⁷⁶ A comparable whiff of misogyny surrounds his exploration of likeness in two further poems, the epigram “Phrine” and the longer heroic epistle “Sappho to Philaenis”. Both develop the investigation of the limits of representation that we have seen in “His Picture” and the actual portraits of Donne, but through the depiction of the female body. The poetic convention of blazoning and praising the female form makes it ripe for parody as well as for exploring the limits of “likeness”. There is nonetheless something slightly uncomfortable about the way these two poems pursue this through mocking or belittling constructions of female figures, with “Phrine” mobilising the negative connotations of the “painted” woman, and “Sappho to Philaenis” evoking the banality of lesbian desire.

In the deceptively simple epigram, “Phrine”, Donne plays with the ambivalent connotations of the word “painted”:

Thy flattering picture Phrine, is like thee,
Only in this that yow both painted be.⁷⁷

This is another example of a staging of a material portrait, this time condensed into two lines. Here, as in “His Picture”, Donne shows himself to be fascinated by idea of producing a “likeness”, and the compressed space of the epigram brings the words “picture”, “like”, and “painted” together in an economical interrogation of the possibility of mimetic representation. The basic pun on “painted” here compares the portrait to the painted face of the prostitute, and invokes the general suspicion of face-painting and cosmetics used to “alter or enhance the external body [and] destroy[ing] divine workmanship”.⁷⁸ The epigram is, however, as Norman Farmer observes, “much more than just a cut at prostitutes”.⁷⁹

The poetic convention of the “flattering picture” is generally used either to flatter the sitter – as Claire Pace puts it, “no painted image can approach the perfection of the living model”⁸⁰ – or to praise the painter for the hyper-realism of his imitation of nature, as in Cowley’s “On the Death of Sir

⁷⁶ “Elegy 2. The Comparison”, Stringer *et al.*, eds. *Variorum 2: Elegies*, p. 53. On the misogyny of “The Comparison”, see Achsah Guibbory, “‘Oh, Let Mee Not Serve So’: The Politics of Love in Donne’s Elegies” *ELH* 57.4 (1990): 811–833 (pp. 816–818); Elizabeth Bobo, “‘Chaf’d Muscatts Pores’: The Not-So-Good Mistress in Donne’s ‘The Comparison’”, *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 25:3 (2012): 168–174.

⁷⁷ The text of “Phrine” is taken from Gary A. Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 8: Epigrams*, p. 11.

⁷⁸ See Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 40.

⁷⁹ Farmer, *Poets and the Visual Arts*, p. 24.

⁸⁰ Pace, “Delineated Lives”, p. 5.

Anthony Vandike": "His pieces so with their live *Objects* strive / That both or *Pictures* seem, or both *Alive*".⁸¹ Donne's "flattering picture" flatters neither sitter nor artist. By insisting that the only likeness between model and artwork lies in their both being painted, he insists on the artificiality of the picture rather than the realism for which portraits were so often praised. In "Phrine", verisimilitude turns out to be not only illusionary but impossible.

There is another level, however, to Donne's concise investigation of verisimilitude in this epigram. Phrine is not a random name given to a prostitute but was the name of the Athenian courtesan (*hetaira*) used by Apelles in the fourth century BCE as the model for his painting of Aphrodite rising from the waves, and was also the model for Praxiteles' statues of Aphrodite at Delphi (made of gold) and at Cnidos.⁸² Phrine is thus known, in the early modern as in the classical period, for being painted in both senses of the word, but not only that – she is famous for providing a model for a representation of Aphrodite. Classical tradition held that Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite at Cnidos, in particular, was so "lifelike" that the goddess herself was convinced that Praxiteles must have seen her naked. A tradition of hyperbolic ekphrastic epigrams giving voice to the goddess herself developed this idea.⁸³

While Donne's epigram as a whole establishes likeness between painting and model based on their similarly painted and deceptive surfaces, the opening of the second line which claims that this is the "onely" likeness between them calls into question the whole issue of verisimilitude and the relationship of art to nature, much debated in the Renaissance as in the classical period. As Rensselaer Lee discusses, two different beliefs concerning the relationship of art to nature co-existed in the sixteenth century: the older notion that art should be "an exact imitation of nature," and the more Aristotelian concept that art should represent an ideal nature that improves on actual nature.⁸⁴ Lee points out that these two incompatible concepts are both represented in Lodovico Dolce's dialogue *Aretino* (1557). Moreover, as an example of how the artist may first imitate, and then improve on nature, Dolce specifically takes the example of Apelles' use of Phryne as a model for his painting of Aphrodite, recommending that the artist "choose the

⁸¹ Abraham Cowley, "On the Death of Sir Anthony Vandike, the Famous Painter", *Poems* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1656), p. 9. quoted in Pace, p. 5.

⁸² See Helen Morales, "Fantasising Phryne: The Psychology and Ethics of Ekphrasis", *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 57 (2011): 71–104.

⁸³ See Morales, "Fantasising Phrine", pp. 81–85; e.g. "Paphian Cytherea came through the waves to Cnidus, wishing to see her own image, and having viewed it from all sides in its open shrine, she cried, 'Where did Praxiteles see me naked?' (Plato, *Planudean Anthology*, p. 160, quoted in Morales 2011, p. 81).

⁸⁴ Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, p. 9.

most perfect form he can, and partly imitate nature”⁸⁵ There is no evidence that Donne would have had access to Dolce’s treatise, though Liam Semler identifies several of his statements on the visual arts that have parallels in Dolce’s *Aretino* or *Dialogue on Painting*.⁸⁶ Yet it is striking that Dolce tells the Phryne story precisely in the context of the debate on imitating or surpassing nature, which is what Donne manages to condense in his epigram. This complicates his mocking critique of the trope of verisimilitude. The work of art for which Phryne modelled was praised to the skies for its verisimilitude – but a resemblance to its subject Aphrodite rather than to its model. It is a “flattering picture” in that it surpasses the near perfection of the model, Phryne, to represent the perfect beauty of the subject, Aphrodite. To what extent, then, can the picture be said to be “like” Phryne?

Philip McCaffrey, describing the epigram as “a typical Donnean inversion”, holds that “the [painted] medium is found adequate only in its ability to portray (reflect) artifice”. He continues, “By implicit contrast, the medium of poetry claims the authenticity necessary to satirise the artifice of both portrait and subject”.⁸⁷ This implicit comparison between picture and poetry underlies all of the poems considered so far in this chapter, but it is far from clear that Donne grants poetry any greater claim to authenticity than he does visual art. Indeed, as Donne repeatedly chips away at the layers of the paintings he stages, revealing the mechanisms and devices whereby the surface illusion is created, it seems increasingly clear that this expresses an anxiety about artifice not only in visual art but in all artistic representation.

This is best illustrated in his “Sappho to Philaenis”, which also makes use of the trope of the image in the heart. Donne’s version of Sappho’s address to her lover Philaenis is modelled on Ovid’s *Heroides*. While Ovid’s letter in Sappho’s voice is addressed to a male lover, Donne’s Sappho addresses a woman, making it a rare early modern example of a lesbian relationship in poetry, albeit written by a heterosexual man.⁸⁸ It is not exactly a celebration of lesbian love, however, as the same-sex address in the poem seems to be primarily to be a device with which to explore the limits of *likeness*.

Compared to the picture in the heart in “Witchcraft by a Picture”, which is “from all mallice free”, or the one in “His Picture” which “dwells” with his soul, the picture in “Sappho to Philaenis” is far less securely fixed, far less certain of immortality:

⁸⁵ Ludovico Dolce, *Aretin: A Dialogue on Painting. From the Italian of Ludovico Dolce* (London: P. Elmsley, 1770), pp. 127–130.

⁸⁶ Semler, *English Mannerist Poets*, p. 59; p. 73.

⁸⁷ McCaffrey, “Painting the Shadow”, p. 188.

⁸⁸ See James Holstun, “‘Will you Rent our Ancient Love Asunder?’: Lesbian Elegy in Donne, Marvell, and Milton”, *ELH* 54:4 (1987): 835–867.

Only thine image, in my heart, doth sit,
But that is waxe, and fires environ it.
My fires have driven, thine have drawne it hence;
And I am robbed of *Picture, Heart, and Sense*. (ll. 9–12)⁸⁹

Made of wax, and encroached upon by the fires of passion, this is another “picture made and marred”, simultaneously created in the heart and threatened with destruction. The pun on the word “drawne” in line 11 suggests the designing of the image, the magnetic force of physical attraction and the fanning of the destructive flames, all at the same time. It is clear from the opening lines of the poem, however, that the tension between creation and destruction is being evoked primarily in the context of poetry: it is Sappho’s “poetique fire” (5) that is under threat:

Where is that holy fire which verse is said
To haue, is that enchaninge forces decayd?
Verse, that drawes Natures woorkes from natures law
Thee her best work, to her work cannot draw. (ll. 1–4)

This association of fire and creation opens the poem, and it is clear that the question of artistic creation and imitation of nature is being addressed specifically in the context of verbal art. The pun on “draws” is already in place here, setting up once more the question of whether art can ever imitate nature and also perhaps implying a comparison between verbal and visual art, as *verse* is said to *draw*. These very words, though, are employed to illustrate the “decay” of Sappho’s “holy fire”. They are part of a pattern of plodding repetition that emphasises the failure of her verse. While Gardner argues that the “repetitive” and “monotonous” quality of the poem, and its “metrical dullness . . . matched by the poverty of its vocabulary” suggest that the poem was unlikely to have been written by Donne,⁹⁰ more recent critics have read this flatness of style as deliberate, a dramatised poetic failure. As James Holstun puts it, the “poem’s lyric shortcomings are its dramatic successes”. For Holstun, in these opening lines, “Sappho’s reiterated words are so close in meaning to their originals that they fall flat.”⁹¹ The words that are repeated in these lines, “verse”, “nature”, “work” and “draw”, concentrate our attention on the failure of art to imitate nature.

Donne is once again exploring the issue of representation and the very possibility of creating a “likeness”. Appropriating the voice of Sappho, he takes apart one of her most famous similes, the opening of fragment 31 that

⁸⁹ Quotations from “Sappho to Philaenis” are from Stringer *et al.*, eds., *Variorum 8: Elegies*, pp. 409–410.

⁹⁰ Gardner, ed., *Elegies*, p. xlvi.

⁹¹ Holstun, “Lesbian Elegy”, p. 837; p. 838.

was later adapted by Catullus: “he seems to me to be equal to the gods”.⁹² In the hands of Donne’s Sappho this comparison is drawn out to the point of redundancy and ridicule:

Thou art soe faire
As Gods, when gods to thee I doe compare,
Are grast thereby; and to make blynde men see
What thinges Gods are, I say they are like to thee... (ll. 15–18)

Not only does the heavy-handed repetition again emphasise poetic failure, but the simile itself fails in its self-reflexivity: Philaenis may be compared to gods because gods can be compared to Philaenis. A similar tautology governs Donne’s Sappho’s next attempt to represent her lover, which is through a poetic blazon. Sappho might almost have Puttenham’s *Art of Poesie* open at the page dealing with “Icon”, as these two attempts at comparison in the poem cover the two kinds of “Icon, ... or resemblance by imagerie or portrait” that Puttenham outlines. If the comparison to the gods corresponds to the instruction to “liken a humane person to another in countenance ... or other qualitie”, Donne’s Sappho then proceeds “to resemble every part of her body to some naturall thing of excellent perfection in his kind, as of her forehead, browes, and haire”.⁹³ But this attempt too produces only tautology. In a swift rejection of the Petrarchan blazon, the natural comparison fails, as Philaenis can only be compared to herself:

Thou art not softe, and cleere, and strait, and faire
As Downe as Starrs Cedars and lillies are
But thy right hand, and cheeke, and eye onlye
Are like thy other hand, and cheeke and Eie. (ll. 21–24).

Everything else in nature is inadequate to represent by comparison nature’s own “best work”. Sappho’s poetic invention is unable to *draw* on nature in order to generate the required comparisons.

This has been described as a “crisis of signification ... a regression to self-referential collapse and signifying failure”.⁹⁴ It is certainly a breakdown of poetry, and more specifically, it is a breakdown of Icon. The verbal portrait cannot be “drawn” because nature and/or poetic inspiration is inadequate, so it ends up being nothing but a self-perpetuating reflection, perfectly symmetrical but poetically empty. Twenty lines later, the self-referential

⁹² On Donne’s knowledge of and reference to Sappho see Don Cameron Allen, “Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,’” *English Language Notes* 1 (1964): 188–191.

⁹³ Puttenham, *Art of Poesie*, p. 204.

⁹⁴ Barbara Correll, “Symbolic Economies and Zero-Sum Erotics: Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,’” *ELH* 62.3 (1995): 487–507 (p. 495; p. 499).

blazon is re-doubled, as Sappho compares her own features to those of her lover Philaenis, concluding:

My two lips, Eyes, thighes differ from thy two
But soe as thine from one another doe
And oh noe more; The likenes being such
Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
Hand to strange hand, lip, to lip none dennies
Why should they brest to brest or thighes to things?
Likeness begets such strange selfe flatterie,
That touching my selfe all seems done to thee. (ll. 44–52)

Here the tautological blazon of lines 21–24 is transferred onto the spectacle of Sappho's body mirrored in the body of Philaenis, their physical "likenes" represented verbally in the doubled blazon of body parts: "hand to strange hand, lip to lip ... brest to brest ... thighes to thighes". Almost immediately, though this doubling turns out to be an actual mirror: "myne owne hands I kiss ... Mee in my glasse I call thee" (53–55). This slippage from lesbian love to "masturbatory consolation", as Barbara Correll puts it, does seem dismissive of same-sex love, as "lesbian erotics are represented as simple self-pleasuring, not as a union of two distinct lovers".⁹⁵ More than this, however, the "likeness" of this imagined lesbian encounter meditates on the impossibility of artistic imitation. Sappho's self-love seems almost to be generated by the failure of the simile, the icon, the verbal portrait.

"Sappho and Philaenis" is a poem about what would happen if the iconic system broke down. If a portrait (or a poem) could represent nature exactly, this is what it would be like: repetitive, doubling, banal, "narcissistically sterile".⁹⁶ In the real Sappho fragment 31 the speaker is also made speechless by the presence of the beloved, but this is a temporary speechlessness due to the fires of passion. Ovid, and following him, Donne, develops this into a trope of poetic failure. The threatened wax image in the heart, however, seems to be Donne's own, an almost incidental reference to visual art in this illustration of failed verbal representation. But that picture in the heart makes this elegy part of the network of poems discussed above, with which it shares an undermining of Petrarchan conventions and a questioning of the relationship of art to nature. The fragile waxen image in the heart is the illustration of the failed verbal portrait, encapsulating both the hope of capturing the lover's "likeness" and its impossibility.

⁹⁵ Correll, "Symbolic Economies", p. 499.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth D. Harvey, "Ventriloquizing Sappho: Ovid, Donne, and the Erotics of the Feminine Voice", *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 31:2 (1989): 115–38 (p. 131).

In his *Life*, Walton quotes Henry Wotton's comment on Donne's funeral effigy: "it seems to breathe faintly, and posterity shall look upon it as a kind of artificial miracle".⁹⁷ It seems an appropriately ambiguous counterpart to this final likeness of John Donne, highlighting both the artifice and the impossible aspiration of the image. It is a strange paradox that the portraits are so often considered to deliver some kind of biographical truth about Donne, and that "His Picture" is repeatedly claimed to be one of the most autobiographical of his poems. In fact, we see quite the contrary. All of the portraits and poems considered in this chapter demonstrate Donne's fascination, throughout his life, with the processes of visual and verbal representation, and the artifice involved in producing a true likeness. The Donne of the 1590s, who staged himself visually in the Marshall engraving with its curious motto, shows himself to be deeply interested in conventions of self-representation in both painting and poetry. But beyond this it is hard to draw on the engraving for very much information about Donne himself, as it plays with the very idea of faithful representation. The portraits present us with an artificial self, and thwart any attempt to read beyond their staged surfaces. The elegy's verbal representation of a visual representation proves doubly unreliable. In "His Picture", in "Phrine", in "Sappho to Philaenis", the word "like" sparks a profound questioning of what artistic reproduction implies, not only in the abstract terms of Classical or Renaissance discussions of mimesis, but also through a reflection on the technical processes that lie behind a "likeness", whether these involve canvas, primer and pigments or paper, words and tropes.

The chapters that follow consider what happens when Donne pursues these considerations in the context of religious art. The fundamental issues at stake remain the same, and his fascination with the painter's craft and the limits of representation are just as evident in his sermons and divine poems. When Donne calls mimetic representation into question in his love poems and undoes the possibility of knowing the subject through the picture, he is tapping into the essential paradox of the Christian image highlighted by Joseph Koerner. As Koerner puts it, every Christian image can be seen as essentially iconoclastic, "meant to train our eyes to see beyond the image, to cross it out without having to ... actually [destroy] it".⁹⁸ Margaret Aston comments, "On this view, all art inherently clashes with reality; a portrait as much as an icon is to be 'crossed out' of the viewer's receiving mind because (like any crucifix) it seemingly makes present a person we cannot see, an

⁹⁷ Walton, *Lives*, p. 77.

⁹⁸ Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, p. 12.

unseen presence.”⁹⁹ Donne’s playful and paradoxical treatment of likeness and representation in his secular poetry engages with this inherent tension in the image and sets the scene for his exploration of the representation of the divine and the “picture” as a vehicle for understanding the incomprehensible relationship between the individual and God.

⁹⁹ Aston, *Broken Idols*, p. 3.