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Ambiguity in John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 13"

Abstract: Taking William Empson's remarks on John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 13" as its starting point, the article explores the superstructure of ambiguity at work in the poem, going beyond Empson's derogatory comments voiced in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in order to pursue a structure of oscillation, which, as the argument shows, underlies the entirety of the sonnet and recurs throughout it in a number of guises. Through an overview of different Catholic and Protestant readings of "What if this present", the article investigates how the interpretation of the text shifts with changes in understanding the sonnet's final line, highlighting its potential for self-referentiality and the latter's interpretive consequences. The close reading offered in the process locates itself half-way between the search for a resolution of opposites characteristic of the New Critical tradition and a deconstructionist reading which denies the existence of a thematic centre in Donne's poem. Reflecting on its own logic and the argument it proffers, the article inquires into the difference between these two kinds of close reading, suggesting that it may be more illusory than it seems.

Keywords: John Donne, William Empson, sonnet, New Criticism, deconstruction, self-referentiality, close reading

In his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson briefly mentions John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 13" ("What if this present") in the context of the fourth type of ambiguity that he distinguishes, namely one where "two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author" (Empson 133). Instead of explaining in detail how this actually relates to the sonnet, he goes on to devote as much as half of the short paragraph in which he addresses Donne's text to an unreserved critique of the poem (Empson 146). Empson expresses his distaste for the logical structure of the analogy between human and divine love by dismissing it as mere "sophistry", which implies his resistance to the idea that beauty and pity should be correlated in the exact same way in two radically dissimilar contexts. But he also questions the idea of referring

to the tortured Christ as beautiful, which is a reservation of a different sort: one that questions not so much the logical arrangement of ideas in the poem as the very employment of such an idea in the first place. In the end, one finds it impossible to decide whether Empson has issues with the poem's structure or meaning—whether in his view the problem lies in the arrangement of logical blocks or within the blocks themselves. This is a curious transposition of the main concern of the sonnet itself onto a body of criticism directed at it, since “Holy Sonnet 13” has universally been read as exploring the nature of the relationship between form and content, a crucial issue for the school of New Criticism, with which Empson and his book on ambiguity have come to be associated.

It would be easy to blame Empson for lack of precision, especially since he obfuscates his position even more when he adds in a footnote that he concludes his discussion of the text with “an expression of distaste for the poem, but it has little to do with the ambiguity in question” (146). Instead, this article locates the source of Empson's wavering in the sonnet itself, exploring the hitherto unrecognized complexity of the logic it employs in order to argue that if Empson is to be blamed for anything, it should rather be his critical blindness to the operations of a poem that exemplifies a range of different levels of ambiguity. The reading of “What if this present” offered here will make much both of the New Critical claim that oppositions and tensions ultimately resolve into a higher unity and of the challenge to this position brought forward by the procedural scions of New Critics—the deconstructionists. The article spotlights the potential of Donne's sonnet to explore and question the distinction between the harmony-seeking close readings of the New Critics and the radically anarchic readings offered by deconstructionists that refuse to acknowledge any form of resolution. In doing so, it re-examines the notions of ambiguity and resolution as such, for inasmuch as ambiguity functions as the negative element within the binary opposition of the two, whether the oscillation that breeds from Donne's text and seeps into criticism is indeed negative—or, in other words, whether it precludes any kind of resolution—is precisely what is at stake in a genuinely close reading of “Holy Sonnet 13”.

If one were to commit the heresy of paraphrase and summarize Donne's sonnet, there would not be much to tell. In fact, the brevity of Empson's remarks springs at least partly from his decision to juxtapose the opening and closing lines in the poem, with the result that there is little to add:

In one's first reading of the first line, the dramatic idea is of Donne pausing in the very act of sin, stricken and swaddled by a black unexpected terror: suppose the end of the world came *now*? The preacher proceeds to comfort us after this shock has secured our attention. But looking back, and taking for granted the end's general impression of security, the first line no longer conflicts with it. ‘Why, this *may* be the last night, but God is loving. What if it were?’ (Empson 145–46)

The security offered by the last line is that a “*beauteous forme assures a piteous minde*”, Christ's beauty being a guarantee of his merciful disposition towards the

speaker, who contemplates the image of the Saviour. If one takes for granted the assurance of the line, there is little else to dwell on, and if the contrast between lines one and fourteen is indeed the ambiguity that Empson cites to illustrate his point (which one could only guess at, since he never makes it clear), then everything seems resolved and the task of the critic is over, the only thing left being to praise the author for writing such a good piece. Antony Bellette takes this position and congratulates Donne on making everything fall into place when he notes that

Donne ends with an affirmation of perfect congruence between Christ's "beauteous forme" and "pitious minde", between the indwelling Grace and its outward manifestation. The sonnet itself, one of the most deeply felt and at the same time one of the most carefully controlled that Donne wrote, demonstrates a like congruence between thought and form. (Bellette 339)

Bellette is in the minority, however, and for most critics, something is amiss, no sense of actual security ever being felt by the speaker or the reader. The fault lies with the argument that supports the logical proposition of the poem's final line, but it is not easy to tell if this is really the essence of Empson's critique, because his discontent appears to be channelled in two different directions:

In the first notion one must collect one's mind to answer the Lord suddenly, and Donne, in fact, shuffles up an old sophistry from Plato, belonging to the lyrical tradition he rather despised, and here even more absurdly flattering to the person addressed and doubtful to its general truth than on the previous occasions he has found it handy. Is a man in the last stages of torture so beautiful, even if blood hides his frowns? (Empson 146)

Ramie Targoff singles out the fact that Empson finds issue here with how the poem refers to the tortured body of Christ as beautiful, seeing this as a symptom of his critical blindness to the visual sensibility of the Baroque era, an all-too-common flaw that Empson is by no means the only commentator to exhibit (Targoff 128). However, the sentence in which Empson asks whether the tortured Christ can really be considered beautiful does not seem to communicate as much resentment towards the poem as the previous one, in which he focuses on the analogy between the beauty of the speaker's mistresses and that of Christ. The speaker's hope for Christ's mercy hinges upon his observation that in matters of earthly love, beauty goes hand-in-hand with pity, and the surprising analogy to divine love is his way of placating his fears concerning the judgment he would have to face if the present moment were indeed to be the last. Empson dismisses the text's logic as mere sophistry, absurdly applied in this particular context and doubtful in its efficaciousness. His last sentence on the sonnet reeks of sarcasm in how it congratulates the speaker: "Never mind about that, he is pleased, we have carried it off all right; the great thing on these occasions is to have a ready tongue" (Empson 146).

Is the problem with the sonnet that the image of Christ is not beautiful or does it consist of the fact that even granted that it is, this alone cannot guarantee anything? It would seem that if the former is the case, the latter question becomes groundless. Yet, dismissing the speaker's attribution of beauty to Christ's tortured face is by no means easy. On the one hand, the description is merely the speaker's

subjective turn of phrase, “a willful decision that the bloody, tearful picture he describes is to be regarded as beautiful” (Targoff 128). On the other hand, the religious sensibility of the era supports the epithet, and Daniel Derrin is right to observe that “[c]ontemporary divines would not have had trouble describing the divine act of love that stood behind the symbol of the cross as, in some way, beautiful, given its meaningful connection to forgiveness and transformation” (Derrin 162). This is not to deny that such a reading is problematic and clashes with the direct impression of “the destroyed Christ in the mental image” as “one of the ugliest things imaginable” (162), because the beauty it acknowledges is not that of the image itself but of the sacrifice that it represents. Depending on whether one’s attention focuses on the image as a pictorial representation or on the idea that it represents, the image alternates between extremes of ugliness and beauty. To settle the matter for good, one would have to know whether it should be taken at face value or read as a sign, and since both readings are possible, there is no way to avoid ambiguity. To complicate matters even more, details of the description push both interpretations into their respective extremes. The fact that blood fills Christ’s frowns makes the image even more gory and terrifying, simultaneously reinforcing its beauty; that is, the poignant symbolism of sacrificial blood that brings redemption to humankind. And to add yet another level of ambiguity, Achsah Guibbory reads the frowns themselves as a sign, asking whether it really is one that reassures the speaker of salvation; could the frowning image of Christ not just as well suggest that the speaker will be condemned to hell (Guibbory 210)? The voices of the critics make a full circle, and the initial problem still stands; there is no way to tell for sure whether the image of Christ is beautiful, and even if it is, this only gives rise to more questions.

To explore those questions, it is necessary to analyze the analogy constructed in the sestet. Derrin offers the following summary:

“Beauty” commonly goes with other good attitudes or passions like pity. A good example, says the speaker, searching through his memory fragments, is his “Profane Mistresses” (l. 10). By recognizing their own “beauty” (l. 11) such mistresses are moved to “pity” the speaker-lover and fulfill his desires. Since pity, therefore, is found alongside beauty, the “beauteous forme” of Christ’s torn and bleeding body, just like the beautiful mistress, “assures a piteous minde” (l. 14). (Derrin 161)

There are two flaws in Donne’s speaker’s argument. One is the analogy itself, since the idea that Christ should exhibit the same psychological reaction as a narcissistic girl flattered into pity is unorthodox, to say the least. After all, the recognition Derrin speaks of is effected by the speaker’s direct address to the mistresses, a form of implicit compliment. But the real problem is that there is nothing to build the analogy on, because the Petrarchan tradition in which the speakers practice what indeed often amounts to idol worship of their mistresses is all about the pain of rejection, and “the tortured syntax of lines 11 and 12 betrays the incongruity of this Petrarchan analogy” (Kuchar 559). The image of a ship tossed by rough winds

on a stormy sea, as in sonnet 34 from Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, illustrates the plight of the Petrarchan lover much better than the dubious scenario of a mistress turned to pity by the speaker's successful coaxing. And, as John Stachniewski points out, this kind of flattery, which aims at eliciting a positive response from the object of the speaker's affection, "would occur, almost certainly, on the point of rejection" (Stachniewski 693). It is the same logic of ambiguity at work all over again. A claim is made that the mistress's beauty guarantees her pity, an idea unsubstantiated by the lyrical tradition Donne draws on. Yet, even granted that the woman's beauty should after all translate into her pity for the lover, the question remains as to whether this would work in the same way for the speaker's relationship with Christ. Not only are there problems with the efficacy of the analogy, but it is not even possible to ascertain whether a working model of the beauty-pity connection is proposed in the first place from which one could begin to construct it. There are serious issues both within the logical blocks the speaker employs and with the nature of their arrangement. Ambiguity abounds: the image of Christ may or may not be beautiful, and beauty may or may not move the mistress to pity. For an analogy that builds upon the beauty of Christ and the pity of the mistress, the one offered by Donne's speaker has very little footing and its logic crumbles before the reader's eyes, as neither of its two constituent elements is in any way guaranteed. And even if they were, that may still not be enough. What guarantees for salvation could the speaker then hope for?

This is where the theological context comes into play, for, like many other Holy Sonnets, "What if this present" explores both the Catholic and the Protestant position on the subject it tackles. Gary Kuchar argues that the poem "exposes the tensions between the Ignatian dependence on sense experience and Protestant disavowal of such experience", noting a clash of two epistemologies in the sonnet: those of Aristotle and Augustine (Kuchar 560). Indeed, while the search for continuity between form and essence that defines the tradition of Catholic meditation offers the speaker a degree of hope, Augustine's vision of an immense epistemological gulf between heaven and earth and the consequent disavowal of analogical thinking in Protestantism undercut the certainties he seeks. Kuchar encapsulates the challenge posed to Ignatian logic by the Augustinian tradition when he notes that from the Protestant perspective, "the speaker's meditation was bound to fail from the start not only because its particular analogy is inappropriate but because any analogy between Christ's appearance and his essence is bad Protestant thinking" (Kuchar 560). In other words, the efficacy of the speaker's logic would have been a point of theological contention in the early seventeenth century, quite apart from the particulars of the analogy as employed in the sonnet. Kuchar concludes that "the speaker's efforts at meditation appear ... wishfully persuasive rather than genuinely consolatory" (Kuchar 559), and in this respect, "What if this present" is not much different from another sonnet in Donne's cycle, "Death, be not proud", with the argument of both poems coming across as "so strained that it alerts us to

its opposite, the emotion or mental state in defiance of which the argumentative process was set to work” (Stachniewski 691).

The reader’s perception of the speaker’s argument depends not just on the acknowledgment or dismissal of his verbal skills—the readiness of his tongue, as Empson put it—but on the theological perspective adopted. Whether one’s philosophical champion is Aristotle or Augustine determines the outcome of the reading process. What is worth noting is that the text of the poem can easily support both Catholic and Protestant interpretations, with an interesting ambiguity in the meaning of idolatry coming into play as one switches between one and the other. From the Catholic perspective, the beautiful image of Christ does indeed assure the speaker of the Saviour’s mercy. The argument that the female paragons of beauty of the Petrarchan tradition rarely show pity to the lover is not enough to challenge this certainty and paradoxically only serves to augment it, because the context for the speaker’s discussion of his “profane mistresses” is one of idolatry. Any rejection that the speaker experienced at the hands of his lovers can therefore be dismissed as inconsequential and ultimately supports the idea that looking for continuity between form and essence is right, only that this has to be done in the proper context—that of the sacred, rather than the profane. Even if the analogy between earthly and divine love fails—and how could it not fail if the speaker’s love for his mistresses was idolatrous—analogical thinking still holds within the sphere of divine love. In the Catholic reading, idolatry would thus denote a misapplication in the profane context of a set of valid principles of logic underpinning the revelation of God’s nature to humankind: the transparency of the relationship between form and essence is evident in the sacred sphere but fails to apply to the speaker’s idolatrous devotion to women. In this way, the failure to observe continuity in the profane context, amply witnessed in the tradition of Petrarchan lyrics, only serves to reinforce the validity of analogical thinking as such.

All it takes to shatter the certainty is to switch to a Protestant point of view. There can be no successful probing of God’s nature with reason and its tool—logic—because as Martin Luther famously said, reason is the Devil’s whore: while it may point to the existence of the Creator, it is unable to specify God’s nature or provide guidance in the quest for salvation (Janz 49). Donne himself mentions in “Holy Sonnet 14” that reason “proves . . . untrue”, and with Augustine providing much philosophical framework for both Luther and Calvin, the only way for the gulf between man and God to be bridged in Reformation theology is for God to take action himself, giving humankind the gift of Revelation, outside of which no real knowledge of his nature can be possible. There can be no guarantee of continuity between outward form and inner essence in Protestant thought, and the idolatry of the speaker’s relationship with his mistresses lies precisely in the attempt to identify one. The same mistake is made in his attempt to determine God’s disposition—an equally idolatrous act of elevating reason, one founded on the same mistaken assumption of continuity. That both uses of logic are in fact instances

of idolatry is the only analogy that holds between them, and it is, significantly, an analogy of the speaker's own doing, a product of his despair and wishful thinking rather than a valid observation of how things are. From this perspective, the cruelty of the mistresses in the Petrarchan tradition testifies to nothing but a flaw in the speaker's logic, whose application to God will similarly yield no fruit: no guarantee of salvation is to be had.

Trying to understand whether the speaker can truly hope for the certainty that he verbalizes in the sonnet's final line, the readers shift between two different meanings of idolatry and two philosophical and theological frameworks, oscillating between certainty and despair. But this is just one level of ambiguity, and as should be clear by now, the ambiguity in "Holy Sonnet 13" has a two-tiered nature. Its structure is that of an oscillation between two kinds of oscillation, as in the case of the link between Christ's beauty and the profane mistresses' pity; the validity of the analogy is an issue quite distinct from the perhaps even more troubling ambiguities inherent in postulating this beauty or pity in the first place. This structure is founded on the binary opposition of form and essence, complicating their relationship by simultaneously querying their distinctness and questioning what it is that becomes subject to juxtaposition to begin with. So to say that the ambiguity in Donne's sonnet may be reduced to a simple conflict between Catholic and Protestant modes of thought or to an opposition between a false analogy and a veritable one is to miss a whole level of oscillation. It would seem that the Catholic framework leads to certainty, while the Protestant one can only produce despair, and that a conscious choice of either Aquinas or Augustine will inevitably produce effects that one may predict, and thus control, in advance. However, such a formulation of the problem fails to acknowledge the uncertainty that concerns the most fundamental of all the blocks that give rise to this logical superstructure—the referent of "this beauteous forme" in the poem's last line. Whether this refers to the form, or image of Christ as contemplated by the speaker, or to the beautiful form of the sonnet itself, makes a difference and upsets the illusion of control over the poem's meaning.

The double meaning of "forme" is made much of by Stanley Fish and Ramie Targoff, who both see it as pertinent to understanding the text but disagree on what to make of it. Fish, who is explicit that "'This beauteous forme' refers not only to the form Donne has assigned to Christ's picture, but to the form of the poem itself", emphasizes the strain of the speaker's verbal maneuvering, noting how his "effort of self-persuasion . . . fails in exactly the measure that his rhetorical effort succeeds" (Fish 247). In his view, "it is the poem's verbal felicity and nothing else that is doing . . . the assuring" (Fish 247), and the more convinced the speaker seems to be, the weaker is the groundedness of the assurance he speaks of in reality. Targoff finds in Fish a "profound distrust of Donne's intentions", pointing out that

his claim for the "insubstantiality" of the rhetorical "triumph" overlooks the significance of what stands plainly before us: a beautifully executed poem. The perfect shape Donne's thoughts have taken on what may turn out to be the world's last night is perhaps the strongest

evidence he can imagine of his status among God's elect—as if to be able to create a sonnet under the pressure of contemplating final judgment reflects a sign of grace. (Targoff 128–29)

Targoff's comment identifies the potential for a Protestant reading of this new, alternative meaning of "forme". This distinctly Calvinist mode of reading the world by contemplating signs that might indicate whether one belongs to the elect or the reprobate does not approach the signs in question in terms of their resemblance to the original thing that they signify. Instead, it considers them as tied to the plight of person that perceives them, suggesting that they operate as subtle communications from which one may glean whether one counts among the happy lot chosen by God. There can be no talk of direct continuity between representation and the thing represented here, since what the signs refer to lies in the future, or in the atemporality of God's ineffable choice, and not in human experience. Such signs should not be viewed as copies, or mimetic representations, because instead of pointing backward towards a purported origin that has become subject to representation, they direct the readers' attention forward, to the eternal bliss that, as the signs were believed to imply, awaits them in the afterlife. Popularized by Max Weber, who suggested that professional success in one's calling was considered such a sign (Weber 65–69), the idea that this approach ought to be associated with Calvinism has often since been challenged, because Calvin himself never taught that one's soteriological status could be extrapolated from the circumstances of one's life (Schervish and Whitaker 137), a fact that Weber himself is willing to admit (Weber 65). Even if Calvin himself never suggested anything to this end, however, one may ponder the mental strain of resigning oneself to ignorance on the matter and assume, as Terry Lovell postulates Weber did, a psychological defence mechanism interposing between theological beliefs and actual conduct:

the believer who took this complex of beliefs literally would find himself in a psychologically intolerable position, and ... as a matter of fact, rather than of logic or of faith, these beliefs led men to seek worldly success in a calling as a sign that they were among the elect. (Lovell 170)

Thus, even if Calvin believed no true knowledge of God's decision could ever be attained, "this attitude was impossible for his followers", for whom "the *certitudo salutis* in the sense of the recognizability of the state of grace necessarily became of absolutely dominant importance" (Weber 66).

Critics often identify the voice of the speaker in the sonnet with that of its author and see the poem as fraught with "Donne's fear, evident throughout this disturbing sonnet, that he can indeed be damned" (Guibbory 44). Even without adopting this approach wholesale, one may view the speaker in the text as in the very least modelled on Donne, and this makes it possible to think of him as a poet-figure. Thus, the success of his poetic efforts becomes a sign of grace, and it is much easier to grant the poem its beauty—even if there are dissenters, such as Empson—than to concede as much with regard to Christ's image. In this way, the alternative reading of "forme" can indeed give the speaker the assurance he

seeks provided one accepts the premises of Calvinism and the psychological logic posited by Weber. Approaching the poem from a Protestant perspective is therefore a way to attain this assurance—and, significantly, to do so without the intermediary role of the profane mistresses and whatever they may bring into the picture—even as the very same theological orientation leads to the opposite result if “forme” is taken to mean the image of Christ. The two-tiered ambiguity that pervades the text is evident here: one faces two interlocked levels of oscillation and settling for a change of direction on one alters the conditions of choice on the other. This leads to another question: does a Catholic reading of “forme” as referring to the sonnet similarly produce a reversal, leading to lack of assurance? The answer is both yes and no, and it once again takes the form of an oscillation between two kinds of oscillation. This is because one may take the “forme” to denote the sonnet as opposed to the image of Christ, but it is also possible to read it as both the sonnet and the image if one draws on the Catholic meditative tradition and accepts the principle of continuity in representation: after all, a large section of the sonnet is a visualization of Christ. The choice is therefore between seeing “forme” either as following the logic of *either... or...* or that of *both... and...*, and the oscillation between the two once again changes the conditions of the interpretive game the text invites the reader to play. If the sonnet is taken to be identical with the image, if it is a faithful verbal representation of the image—that is, if they are one, and that is after all what the principle of continuity suggests—then the Catholic reading still leads to assurance; unless, of course, one sees the identification of the poem with Christ via the intermediary level of the latter’s image as idolatrous. If they are not one, then it is not possible to approach the problem in this way in the first place, and the question is automatically dismissed. But are they one or are they not? The rules of the game have been turned upside down: no longer does the continuity between sign and referent derive from the theological perspective adopted, but it actually conditions the choice of the latter, leading to a vicious circle of logic and precluding any hope for assurance. It is a solipsistic circle of Donne’s own doing, and Stanley Fish is right to point out that

the meditation is curious ...: Donne does not direct it at his beloved, whether secular or spiritual, but to another part of himself. Although Christ’s picture is foregrounded, ... the picture—not to mention the person it portrays—is off to the side as everything transpires between the speaker and his soul. The gesture ... recharacterizes the Last Judgment as a moment staged and performed entirely by himself: produced by Donne, interior design by Donne, case pled by Donne, decision rendered by Donne. (Fish 246)

Fish adds that the dynamics of the scene and the logic that it utilizes are “insulated from any correcting reference” (Fish 246), and this may explain why it is impossible to ascertain anything. There being no objective grounds, no external vantage point to gauge the situation from, the reader is left with no choice but to struggle against the mounting ambiguities that—as in any self-referential system—ultimately lead to paradoxes. The poem is Donne talking to Donne about Donne, and this

makes it difficult to distinguish between the represented and representation even as the distinction itself becomes not just a fundamental building block of the poem but also its main theme and subject matter. Is the sonnet beautiful in itself, or is it only beautiful because the picture of Christ it holds is beautiful? This is a choice between essence and form, and while it is not impossible to think of these separately, “Holy Sonnet 13” makes this extremely difficult. The choice is both real and illusory, and the end result is that the text only amplifies theological uncertainty and kindles a passion of despair beneath the veneer of the speaker’s calm logic.

The recurring structure of a two-tiered oscillation provides fertile ground for even more theological ambiguity. In lines seven and eight, the sonnet addresses the difficulty of comprehending how the God of justice and the God of mercy should be one and the same. The end of time associated with the Last Judgment, which the speaker contemplates, is the moment that “will somehow unite the two covenants of wrath and grace” (Martin 197), but on the night before the reckoning, this is still difficult to imagine. That is why the fear and hope of the moment take on the appearance of a double-image, “represented by the two faces of Christ: Christ as Judge, who damns, and Christ as Saviour, who forgives” (Stirling 249). The speaker ponders this in a conversation with his own soul, the latter becoming thus something of “a two-sided scroll or palimpsest reflecting the two opposite images of God: on the one side beauty and pity, on the other duplicity and wrath” (Martin 209). The question is not only which of the two it is going to be for this particular individual. More importantly, what makes the matter so difficult to grasp is how the two are related. The speaker cannot help but see them as interlocked in a logical structure of *either... or...*, and although he attempts to accept the superior logic of *both... and...*, the octave ends on a heart-felt and genuine question asking how Christ could both forgive his enemies and condemn sinners to hell—for despite the assurance that the speaker conjures up specifically for himself, he does acknowledge Christ to be capable of both. It would appear that amongst the irreducible ambiguities that underlie the speaker’s predicament, the tension between the structure of mutual exclusion and that of double participation, emerges as the only elementary nonvariable of “Holy Sonnet 13”.

The meaning of the sonnet is thus organized at its very core not so much around the thematic or theological concerns that it expresses as around a recurring structure of double inclusion ceaselessly oscillating towards mutual exclusion, and *vice versa*. No apparent resolution can be offered to this superstructure of ambiguities governing the unveiling of the text. As such, the reading offered here seems to distance itself from the New Critical attitude, which “presuppose[d] the presence of a determinate meaning, of an epistemologically stable construct behind or outside the text” (Barzilai and Bloomfield 157). After all, how can an oscillation count as an epistemologically stable construct? One may be tempted to qualify this reading as deconstructive, but it is just as possible to say that it is a little bit of both and thus to preserve the structure of oscillation in question on the metalevel of critical

discourse. At this point, it would be instructive to compare the New Critical and deconstructive modes of reading to see whether or not reclaiming "Holy Sonnet 13" for the showpiece of ambiguity that it is *contra* Empson satisfies the New Critics' need for resolution.

Rajnath succinctly encapsulates the essence of New Critical readings when he observes that "[u]sing the Hegelian terms one can say that in the New Criticism thesis and antithesis result in a synthesis, whereas deconstruction rules out the possibility of a synthesis" (87). Consequently, one finds in New Criticism a constant desire to identify "a positive unity" (Brooks 179):

An important difference between the New Critics and the deconstructionists is that the former believe the text has a core, a centre which resolves antinomies, while the latter believe in free-play, the decentering of the text. To the New Critics, opposites that are simultaneously present in the text do not cancel each other out but resolve into a higher unity. (Rajnath 85–86)

In other words, the New Critic "uses close analysis to try and arrive at definitive thematic statements which are presumably present within the formal structures of the poem itself" (154). By contrast, "the deconstructor resorts to close analysis to subvert the self-authenticating status of texts and to disclose the deconstructive situation, the enigmas and undecidables that destabilize meaning" (154). The core assumptions of the two groups seem opposed to each other, but their methods of close reading are surprisingly similar, so much so that it is often claimed that "deconstruction is a continuation and imitative form of the New Criticism or Anglo-American formalism" (151). In terms of critical praxis, then, "the formal analyses and close reading procedures of the deconstructionists resemble the methods finally honed by their New Critical predecessors" (153), and both approaches are known for their vigilant attention to the structure of poetic texts. Given the continuity of method, Paul de Man observes that one critical attitude gradually evolves into the other, since

[a]s it refines its interpretations more and more, American criticism does not discover a single meaning, but a plurality of significations that can be radically opposed to each other. Instead of revealing a continuity affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, it takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity. (de Man, *Blindness and Insight* 28)

Whereas the search for ambiguity was originally, for the New Critics, a prelude to identifying a higher unity in the text, deconstructionists are content with locating structures of indeterminacy that do not allow for any resolution or synthesis. This is a major difference, but practically speaking, the deconstructive critic still

discovers that the text is full of complexities and ambiguities. What else is new? Some critics would say that only the names have been changed and that the deconstructors, determined to disguise their old-newness, have substituted terms such as "indeterminacy" or "undecidability" for the New Critical "ambiguity". (Barzilai and Bloomfield 154)

The way to differentiate a New Critical close reading from a deconstructive one is therefore to consider its ultimate end: whether it leads to "an achieved harmony"

(Brooks 179) or a nihilistic cancelling out of opposites. The question that needs an answer is which of the two categories the oscillations of “Holy Sonnet 13” fall into.

A useful comparative case study is Cleanth Brooks’ reading of another poem by Donne, “The Canonization”, in *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Here, the resolution offered by close reading has two dimensions, one thematic and the other structural. On the thematic level, the paradox lies in the fact that Donne attempts to parody sainthood in his vision of the two lovers yet treats both their love and the religious context of sainthood seriously (Brooks 10–11). The lovers are isolated from the rest of the world like holy men and women, but their withdrawal from the common affairs only serves the purpose of making their love more intense: “in becoming hermits, [they] find that they have not lost the world, but have gained the world in each other, now a more intense, more meaningful world” (14). As such, they become hermits of another kind, substituting a passion for the divine with passion for each other, but still living a life of passion nonetheless. Brooks also makes much of the double meaning of the word “die”, which was sometimes used in the period to communicate a sense of sexual satisfaction (14–15). Through their death, the lovers attain a higher form of life, and, although Brooks never mentions this directly, their “death” may actually lead to the formation of new life. The key idea is that absolute sainthood may be achieved by absolute profanity and that death may amount to life. Such a “reconciliation of opposites as a constituent of Donne’s poetry” is precisely what “made him a particularly appropriate poet for the explication and elaboration of American New Criticism” (Docherty 12). What connects the two ideas is the structure of paradox: whatever is posited as the starting point becomes itself to the fullest precisely at the point when it becomes its very opposite. But this means that the resolution, or reconciliation, offered by Brooks is not merely of a thematic nature and that it operates on the level of a recurring structure. Brooks himself acknowledges this, explaining towards the end of his book that his choice of poems was conditioned by the presence in them of particular structures: “the common goodness which the poems share will have to be stated, not in terms of ‘content’ or ‘subject matter’ in the usual sense in which we use these terms, but rather in terms of structure” (Brooks 177). He further explains what he means by structure:

One means by it something far more integral than the metrical pattern, say, or than the sequence of images. The structure is certainly not “form” in the conventional sense in which we think of form as a kind of envelope which “contains” the “content”. The structure obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material. (178)

Sainthood as profanity and death as life belong to two different thematic spheres, but what unites them is the structure of the kind of juxtaposition that the poem makes. Similarly, in “Holy Sonnet 13”, the ambiguity of the representation as opposed to the represented, or in a broader sense the ambiguity of the sign and the thing signified, manifests itself in questions as diverse as the issue of the beauty of Christ’s image, the conflicting religious readings and the referent of “this beauteous

forme". It is a structural principle that unites them all, offering a kind of a resolution and acting as the superstructure on which the entirety of the poem is founded.

There is, moreover, another kind of resolution to be found both in Brooks' reading of "The Canonization" and in the reading of "Holy Sonnet 13" offered here, one built upon self-referentiality. Brooks call it another "factor in developing and sustaining the final effect" (16) and thus constitutive of the final resolution. The speaker in "The Canonization" claims that the two lovers need no tomb or hearse following their "death" and that their life in death will be satisfied by the pretty rooms of the sonnet form rather than the grandeur of chronicles, since a well-wrought urn is for them just as good as a half-acre tomb. Brooks comments that

[t]he poem is an instance of the doctrine which asserts: it is both the assertion and the realization of the assertion. The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the "pretty room" with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which can hold the lovers' ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with the prince's "half-acre tomb". (Brooks 16)

The poem speaks of a well-wrought urn and becomes one. Such is also the case with "Holy Sonnet 13", which speaks of a tentative assurance and provides this assurance in none other than a tentative way. On the surface level, it would certainly be more of a resolution if the poem could go either way and either definitively grant the speaker the assurance of salvation or plainly refuse to do so. However, one needs to bear in mind that the sonnet is about ambiguity more than anything else; it is therefore fitting that in the ultimate pronouncement of its final line, it should emerge as ambiguous. Nothing is being reconciled here, but the text offers a resolution that brings together various trains of thought under the single rubric of ambiguity.

The grammar of the final line of "What if this present" is unequivocal. It plainly asserts that the beautiful form—whether of the image of Christ or the sonnet itself—grants the speaker assurance, but, to use Paul de Man's observation from his discussion of another poem, while the grammatical structure "is devoid of ambiguity, [its] rhetorical mode turns the mood as well as the mode of the entire poem upside down" (de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric" 30). The final line and the train of thought that it concludes may be the speaker's desperate attempt to convince himself that assurance is within his grasp, but it may just as well constitute a half-baked understanding of the actual state of affairs, or amount to nothing more than a wish. The incompatibility of rhetorical and grammatical structures leaves it open to the reader whether or not to take the grammatical meaning of the poem's final line at face value. The hesitation of the reader, predicated upon the rhetorical oscillations within the text, is the fundamental aesthetic experience that the structure of the poem engenders. Leading to the same prevailing sense of ambiguity via diverse routes—numerous rhetorical paths arranged not linearly but in parallel to one another—"Holy Sonnet 13" gives its readers a unified experience of undecidability and, worthy of a place on literary ambiguity's hall of fame, it deserves more than the kind of cursory mention given it by William Empson.

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