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THE LYRIC EYE : SELF-REPRESENTATION IN THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH PORTRAIT-POEM

Through a discussion of a number of early modern poems on portraits, this essay addresses questions related to representation on several levels. Many of these poems focus on the question of *likeness*: to what extent a painted portrait may truly represent its object. At the same time, the ekphrastic genre inevitably invites the age-old question regarding to what extent the written word can adequately capture the medium of visual art. The essay will focus particularly on John Donne's love elegy "His Picture" which addresses both these aspects of the question of representation. Donne's problematisation of the possibility of a true painted likeness reflects back on the question of verbal representation and on the difficulty – indeed impossibility – of ever fully pinning down the speaking self of his verse.

"Here take my picture, though I bid farwell", says the speaker of John Donne's love elegy, "His Picture", "T'is like me now, but I dead, t'wilbe more / When we are shadows bothe, then t'was before."¹ At first glance, this poem describes a portrait and, like many poems in this sub-category of ekphrastic poetry in early modern England, it is particularly concerned with the possibility of representation. While James Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of graphic representation"² suggests that this is a concern of all ekphrastic texts, the staging of a painted portrait foregrounds the question of how far such a "likeness" may truly represent its object. In Donne's elegy the speaker is referring to his own portrait, which further complicates the issue, as the exploration of likeness becomes reflexive. In Donne's

1. J. Donne, "His Picture", l. 1 and 3 *sq.*

2. J. Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation", p. 299.

poem, and other poems by his near-contemporaries where the speaker confronts his own “shadow”, the problematization of the possibility of a true visual likeness reflects back on the question of verbal representation and on the difficulty – indeed impossibility – of ever fully pinning down the speaking self of a lyric poem.

Portraiture as a genre emerged in England in the mid-sixteenth century. Although a portrait may represent its sitter on various levels, reflecting their social status or group identification, it is first and foremost an identifiable likeness of its sitter, a record of their physical appearance in a way recognisable to its first audience³. It is this “likeness” that many poems about portraits necessarily pick up on, whether they are praising or disparaging the painter’s skill. Abraham Cowley’s “On the Death of Sir Anthony Vandike, the famous painter” hyperbolically praises the painter’s achievement in mimicking nature:

His pieces so with their live *Objects* strive
That both or *Pictures* seem, or both *Alive*.
Nature herself amaz’d does doubting stand,
Which is *her own*, and which the *Painters* Hand⁴.

Here Cowley makes use of the conceit of the painter’s art rivalling nature to the extent that their creations are indistinguishable. Donne, in typical fashion, succinctly inverts this trope of resemblance in his epigram “Phrine”. In these deceptively simple two lines Donne plays with the ambivalent connotations of the word “painted”:

Thy flattering picture Phrine, is like thee,
Only in this that yow both painted be⁵.

Here Donne problematizes the idea of “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

3. T. Cooper, *Citizen Portrait*, p. 9.

4. A. Cowley, *Poems*, p. 9. Quoted in C. Pace, “‘Delineated lives’”, p. 5.

5. J. Donne, “Phrine”, p. 11.

[and] destroy[ing] divine workmanship”⁶. By insisting that the only likeness between model and artwork lies in their both being painted, Donne 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.

While Donne flatters neither sitter nor artist in his epigram, more conventionally the conceit of the “flattering picture” praised either the painter’s ability, as in Cowley’s poem on van Dyck, or the sitter’s beauty⁷. Alternatively, the comparison of the lady with her painted image may be used as a device to praise the sitter’s natural beauty which no painter is able to capture, as in William Drummond of Hawthornden’s sonnet:

What Pincell paint? what Colour to the Sight
So sweet a Shape can show? [...]
To draw her right then, and make all agree
The heavens the table, Zeuxis Jove must be⁸.

The mention of Zeuxis, who according to Pliny in his *Natural History* won a painting contest by painting grapes that looked so real that birds tried to eat them, foregrounds the notion of verisimilitude. It also foregrounds the theme of competition, which is never far away in these poems about art. Whether as a contest between painters, or between artist and nature, there is a tendency to describe the attempt to create a likeness in combative terms. Even apparent praise of the painter’s mimetic skill may be a veiled reference to the inability of art to represent life. In his verse accompanying the frontispiece engraving of Shakespeare in the First Folio, Ben Jonson refers to the “strife” with Nature but observes that while the painter may achieve a superficial resemblance, he fails to capture the sitter’s essential qualities:

This Figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;
Wherein the Graver had a strife
with Nature, to out-doo the life:
O, could he but have drawne his wit

6. See F. Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama*, p. 40.

7. C. Pace, “‘Delineated lives’”, p. 5.

8. W. Drummond of Hawthornden, *Poems*, p. 129 (l. 9 sq.; 13 sq.).

As well in brasse, as he hath hit
His face [...] ⁹.

Jonson's verse is one specific subgroup of the genre: a poem that accompanies an actual portrait, and Claire Pace suggests that the tradition of a frontispiece engraving accompanied by a written inscription may have "contributed significantly to the development of the independent 'poem about a portrait' tradition" ¹⁰. Although Jonson here dismisses the physical likeness achieved by the painter, it is nonetheless remarked upon – the engraver has "well... hit / [Shakespeare's] face".

The poets' fascination with likeness is perhaps not surprising since poetry too was recognised, as Philip Sidney puts it in his *Defence of Poesy*, as "an art of imitation" bearing direct comparison with the visual arts:

Poesy therefore, is an art of imitation: for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speak metaphorically. A speaking picture, with this end to teach and delight ¹¹.

Sidney's recourse to the language of *ut pictura poesis* reminds us that the "strife" is not only between nature and art but between visual and verbal art: drawing on the observation attributed to Simonides that "poetry is a speaking picture, while painting is silent poetry" he invites comparison between the arts ¹². The *paragone* between poetry and painting is explicit in Jonson's conclusion that to know Shakespeare the reader should "looke / Not on his Picture, but his Booke" (l. 9-10), but it is arguably implicit in all of these portrait poems. Whether praising or critiquing the painter's art, the poets inevitably reflect back on their own.

Donne's love elegy "His Picture", like his "Phrine", problematizes the notion of "likeness" from its opening lines onwards, with its assertion that the portrait is "like me now" (l. 3). Similarly, another of Cowley's portrait poems, "My Picture", which was clearly influenced by Donne's

9. B. Jonson, "To the Reader", p. 2.

10. C. Pace, "'Delineated lives'", p. 2.

11. Ph. Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy", p. 11.

12. See R. W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, p. 3.

elegy, is explicit in using the term “likeness” to refer to his portrait: “Here, take my *Likeness* with you, whilst’tis so” (l. 1). In both of these poems, it is not only the word “like” that is called into question, but also the pronoun “me” or “my”. Poems about portraits where the portrait is of the speaker himself add an extra layer of complexity to the ekphrasis, since the description becomes in some way a process of self-reflection. Yet even speaking of “the self” in a lyric poem is fraught with pitfalls, and this is somehow thrown into relief when the “I” of the poem starts describing his own portrait. Critics of a more biographical bent often seize on such moments to identify the speaker more definitely with the poet and the portrait with an actual work of art, as if the mirage of a material likeness could fix the poetic speaker in the real world.

This is certainly the case with Donne’s “His Picture”. Most critics concur that the scene set up in the first line of Donne’s elegy evokes the convention of the departing lover presenting his beloved with a portrait miniature¹³. From a fairly early stage in modern Donne scholarship, this has repeatedly been identified with the Marshall engraving of Donne at eighteen with the motto “*Antes muerto que mudado*” that appears as the frontispiece to the 1635 *Poems*. This portrait of a young Donne with his hand on a sword is dated 1591, so shows him at the tender age of eighteen, and his youth and martial stance in the engraving may be what have inspired the parallels with the elegy. This tradition seems to begin with E. K. Chambers’ 1896 edition of Donne’s poems where he observes that “several portraits of Donne are mentioned in Bromley’s *Catalogue of Engraved Portraits*” and claims that “the ‘picture’ of this Elegy may have been the original of one of these”¹⁴. Ann Hollinshead Hurley makes the identification slightly more subtly, commenting that:

the cumulative effect of the portrait is of an untested jauntiness, an appropriate anticipatory, tongue-in-cheek commentary on the young lover of “His Picture” whose inner being is characterized as “faire and delicate”, the “milke” which nourishes love in its “childish state”¹⁵.

13. J. Bryson, “Lost Portrait of Donne”, p. 15; H. Gardner (ed.), *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, p. 143.

14. E. K. Chambers (ed.), *The Poems of John Donne*, p. 237.

15. A. H. Hurley, *John Donne’s Poetry and Early Modern Visual Culture*, p. 52 sq.

Such attempts to link the “picture” to the engraving of the young Donne’s portrait are often accompanied by parallel bids to identify the departure of the speaker with one of Donne’s own sea-voyages, most likely to Cadiz with Essex in 1596¹⁶. This reflects a more general biographical tendency that persists in Donne studies. His poetry seems particularly prone to such biographical interpretation, perhaps because he is one of the earliest poets for whom such a large range of “ego-documents” – letters, legal documents, and of course portraits – are extant. Jonathan Post remarks that, in part thanks to Isaak Walton’s *Life*, Donne’s life is “more vividly imaginable than that of almost any other writer in early modern England”¹⁷. But the pitfalls of biographical criticism work both ways – assuming that internal evidence from a poem can give information about the poet’s life or opinions can be just as limiting as accepting that any object in a poem has one fixed referent in reality.

It was in part to escape from the long shadow of such biographical assumptions that the New Critics put such an emphasis on the separation between the poet and the persona or speaker of the work; to insist, in the words of John Ransom, that “the poet does not speak in his own but in an assumed character, not in the actual but in an assumed situation”¹⁸. The New Critics’ identification of tension and paradox as the driving forces of poetry made Donne very congenial for their brand of interpretation. An extended close-reading of his “Canonization” is a key part of the first chapter of Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well-Wrought Urn*, “The Language of Paradox”, and of course Donne’s poem also provides Brooks with his book’s title¹⁹. Poems such as “The Flea” or “The Sun Rising” lend themselves well to being read as the “fictional representation of a possible real-world speech act”, a

16. This type of approach can be dated back to at least the late 1890s: E. Dowden, “The Poetry of John Donne”, p. 801, cited in G. A. Stringer *et al.* (eds), *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 2, p. 820. The dating of the poem seems to be largely based on that biographical assumption (see *ibid.*, p. 820 *sq.* and p. LXI-LXVII).

17. J. Post, “Donne’s life”, p. 1.

18. J. C. Ransom, *The World’s Body*, p. 254 *sq.*, discussed by J. Culler in his *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 264.

19. C. Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, p. 10-17. See also A. Tate, “Tension in Poetry”.

“dramatic monologue” in the mouth of a “persona”²⁰. Because “His Picture” opens with an identifiable “situation” – a departure and the gift of a portrait – it too is open to the kind of interpretation that reads the speaker as a dramatized and coherent fictional self, even when it escapes from purely biographical criticism. The very presence of the portrait, and the reflection on the possibility of mimetic representation, may contribute to creating this expectation of mimesis at the level of the utterance as well. If there is a portrait, the logic seems to go, there must be a coherent self, real or fictional. It is perhaps not coincidental that the *locus classicus* of the dramatic monologue in English poetry is a poem about a portrait, Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”²¹.

Whatever expectations are set up by the portrait proffered in the first line, however, Donne’s elegy problematizes both the possibility of representation and the very idea of a coherent speaking self. In both Donne’s “His Picture”, and Cowley’s slightly later poem “My Picture”, the convention of the portrait ekphrasis calls into question the integrity of the speaking subject, who in both poems is doubled, fragmented, replaced, silenced and threatened with dissolution.

“His Picture” makes great play with the word “shadow” as a synonym of “portrait”: “T’is like me now, but I dead, t’wilbe more / When we are shadows bothe, then t’was before” (l. 2-4). “Shadow” implies a comparison on grounds of insubstantiality: the basic pun proposes that both a portrait and a ghost are insubstantial “copies”, counterfeits, of the original man²². Once dead, the speaker of the poem will be more like his portrait than he was alive²³. The OED also includes the sense of “shadow” as “an actor or a play in contrast with the reality represented” (as in *Macbeth*’s “a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage [...]” 5.5.23-4), and in the circumstances, especially in the light of the New Critical idea of the first-person lyric as a “dramatic monologue” or “fictional utterance”,

20. J. Culler, *Theory of Lyric*, p. 112, paraphrasing B. Hernnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure*, p. 19.

21. R. Browning, “My Last Duchess”, in *Dramatic Lyrics*.

22. “*shadow*, n. 6b”, OED Online (December 2021), online: <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/177212>>. See also C. Pace “‘Delineated Lives’”, p. 6.

23. Although I largely follow New Critical convention here in using the term “speaker”, it should be evident by now that this does not entail accepting wholesale the idea of a poem as some kind of “dramatic monologue”.

it is intriguing to consider whether the speaking voice of a poem could equally be described as a “shadow”, in contrast to the possible real-world situation represented. Cowley’s “My Picture” also uses the word “shadow” for his portrait, and explicitly plays with the opposition of *shadow* and *substance* in the second stanza:

I really believe, within a while,
 If you upon this *shadow* smile,
 Your *presence* will such vigour give,
 (Your *presence* which makes all things live)
 And *absence* so much alter *Me*,
 This will the *substance*, I the *shadow* be²⁴.

Cowley goes on to develop the conceit of the inversion of shadow and substance: not only do the original man and the shadow portrait apparently change places but the value attributed to substance as opposed to shadow is inverted too. The conceit that the picture is indistinguishable from the reality is taken several steps further: not only is the picture given life but the “Me” is altered. Yet the understanding between Cowley’s speaker and his beloved is such that he knows she will value shadow over substance, and the poem concludes:

But *Thou*, who (if I know thee right)
 I’th *substance* does not much delight,
 Wilt rather send again for *Me*,
 Who then shall but my *Pictures Picture* be²⁵.

Donne’s poem too inverts the conventional opposition of substance and shadow, less explicitly but in more depth. Although we generally understand a shadow to be less real than an original, immaterial, unreal or derivative, the word also has the very material denotation of the act of painting: in the late 16th and early 17th century “to shadow” could mean simply to paint or to draw²⁶. 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

24. A. Cowley, “My Picture”, in *Poems*, l. 7-12.

25. *Ibid.*, l. 21-24.

26. See OED *shadow* v. 8. and L. Gent, *Picture and Poetry 1560-1620*, p. 19.

and course" (l. 12), separated into different layers, parallels the material construction of the picture.

Various critics over the years have suggested that Donne in fact offers us two "pictures" in the *Elegy*. Firstly there is "my picture" offered by the speaker to his lover as he departs for war, and not described to us, beyond perhaps what is implied in the phrase "faire or delicate" (l. 17). Secondly there is "another picture"²⁷, the verbal image we are given in lines 5-10 of the returning soldier, battle-scarred and sun-burned²⁸:

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 [...] ²⁹.

An offshoot argument to this notion of the two pictures is that the image of the "sun-tanned, blue-stained returning warrior" is more "attractive"³⁰, his "bristles, rough hands, and [...] other craggy features" more "appetising to women", as John Carey puts it, than was the original picture³¹. Yet attractive as the notion of this rugged, sun-kissed 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 can be qualified as a verbal portrait to parallel the painted one, 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"³². 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

27. R. Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, p. 54.

28. J. Carey, *John Donne*, p. 51; Th. Docherty, *John Donne, Undone*, p. 128.

29. J. Donne, "His Picture", l. 5-10.

30. A. H. Hurley, *John Donne's Poetry and Early Modern Visual Culture*, p. 59.

31. J. Carey, *John Donne*, p. 52.

32. G. Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, p. 204.

“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)³³.

On one level this is in keeping with the poetic convention that the portrait ekphrasis comments on the passage of time while also immortalising its subject. The idea that “the painted image will survive, while the actual physical appearance of the sitter decays”³⁴ 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” (l. 5-7)³⁵. 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 the speaker will be most “like” the portrait in the coldness of death – or just before death, when he returns from war, a shadow, one might say, of his former self³⁶.

Thomas Docherty is the most insistent of the critics who read the description of the returning warrior as “another, entirely dissimilar, portrait”; “Donne” is “*changed*” and the represented individual “becomes, finally, unnameable, unidentifiable”³⁷. 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]”³⁸. As already discussed, Donne’s conceit in this poem is built on identity, on *likeness*: “T’is *like* me now, but I dead, t’wilbe more / When we are shadows bothe, then t’was before” (l. 3-4, my emphasis). It is in, or near, death that the speaker will be most “like” the portrait. On one level, the dying man

33. Nancy Vickers has influentially argued that the idea of disintegration as central to the functioning of the Renaissance blazon. See e.g. N. J. Vickers, “‘The Blazon of Sweet Beauty’s Best’”, p. 95.

34. C. Pace, “‘Delineated lives’”, p. 3.

35. In H. Maclean (ed.), *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets*, p. 212. See Ph. McCaffrey, “Painting the Shadow”, p. 181 *sq.*

36. Cf. OED *shadow* n. 6f.

37. Th. Docherty, *John Donne, Undone*, p. 126.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

will resemble the work of art because both are finished products³⁹. But in this elegy Donne goes beyond – or beneath – the finished product in order to explore the physical processes by which the image, and the man, are constituted. The fragmenting blazon of lines 6 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 the sense of gunpowder on the returning warrior, but in the context of a painted portrait, “powders blew staines” also strongly suggests the mixing of paint from powdered lapis lazuli or azurite. Ann 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 he refers to the “blew staines” of gunpowder [...] prompting his audience to recall the familiar blue background of the idealizing portrait miniature⁴⁰.

Such an interpretation is reinforced by the other physical details laid out 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 dell’arte della pittura*⁴¹. 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

39. Donne makes the comparison between a dying man and an artwork explicit in a sermon preached at Whitehall in February 1628, when he compares the “dying man, that dies in Christ” with a picture that is 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, thus he is.” J. Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 8, p. 190.

40. A. H. Hurley, *John Donne’s Poetry and Early Modern Visual Culture*, p. 173.

41. G. P. Lomazzo, *A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge Caruinge Buildinge Written first in Italian... and Englished by R[ichard] H[aydocke]*, p. 6 and 23.

simultaneously evoking the penitent, humbled man⁴². 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 “bone black” made from the powder of charred bones burned at a high temperature.

Far from providing a link to an actual portrait of Donne, “His Picture” undoes 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. The opposition between “fair or delicate” (l. 17) and “foule and course” (l. 12) is therefore not only between the delicate man represented in the portrait and the roughed-up, toughened man who returns from war, but also between the surface appearance of the finished portrait and the rough materials that are combined to create it. This is reinforced by the insistence on texture in the opposition between “course” and “delicate” that comes back in the word “tough”, which ends the poem. The very physical, *coarse* (l. 12) procedures that go into the production of paintings are paralleled with the disintegrated human body described in lines 5-10. Not only is the speaker’s body reduced to its constituent parts but his picture is also reduced to its layers of canvas, gesso and paint, *undone* (to pick up on Thomas Docherty’s use of the word). In a much-quoted metaphor from 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”⁴³. In “His Picture”, the effect is rather the opposite – one man (who at the beginning of the poem we assume we know, from the traditional association with the poet or the critical convention of the persona) is unmade.

The “I” of Donne’s poem proves to be something more complicated than either an unmediated version of the poet himself or a New Critical persona. Both fragmented and fluid, the speaking voice – like the portrait – resists any simple representation. The portrait is taken apart and

42. See C. A. Patrides (ed.), *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, p. 145.

43. J. Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 5, p. 38.

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 different kind of subject, a viewing subject. Through both the portrait gift and the disintegrating blazon of his body, the poem has foregrounded the speaker as an object to be gazed at, but in the last third of the poem, he disappears from sight. The first-person pronouns that are so prominent in the rest of the poem vanish in the last seven lines, and they vanish because the speaker himself (in a sense) vanishes. He shifts speaking positions to put words into his mistress's mouth, as the words "thou shalt say" (l. 13) introduce her imagined response to the "rivall fooles", his competitors for her attention:

If rivall fooles taxe thee to'have lov'd a man
 So foule and course, as Oh I may seeme than
 This shall say what I was; and thou shalt say,
 Do his hurts reache mee? Doth my worthe decay?
 Or do they reach his judging mind, that he
 Should like and love less, what he did love to see?
 That which in him was fayre or delicate
 Was but the Milke which in Loves childish State
 Did nurse it: Who now is growne strong inough
 To feed on that which to disusd tasts seems tough⁴⁴.

There is an abrupt shift here from the painstaking scrutiny that has been paid to his body up until now, to the reflection on whether he, as an observer, might "like and love less, what he did love to see" in her. Paradoxically, when he is the "speaking" subject in the first half of the poem, he is also the object of other people's gaze; but in these final lines, where he reports (or rather imagines) his lover's words, he moves out of the limelight and metamorphoses into someone who appraises what he sees, the viewing, "judging mind" who judges her "worth" (l. 14).

The appearance of these "rivall fooles", who implicitly criticise both the speaker's appearance and his lover's taste, introduces a new sense of conflict. The strife between life and art evoked in its opening lines gives way to a competition in love. The rival in love is in a sense another shadow – a mirror image, a potential equal of the speaker. This is made explicit in Cowley's poem where the role of projected competitor in love

44. J. Donne, "His Picture", l. 11-20.

is taken on by the “picture” itself, which becomes a “Rival-image”. Cowley manages the reversal of who looks at whom through the conceit that the lady’s gaze gives life to the shadow-portrait and thus the portrait is imagined gazing back at her :

Ah be not frightened, if you see,
The *new-soul’d Picture* gaze on Thee,
And hear it breath a sigh or two [...] *My Rival-Image* will be then thought blest,
And laugh at me as dispossesst⁴⁵

Cowley imagines the “shadow” taking its mimetic role to extremes, in acquiring a soul, and the ability to breathe, and to see, and to laugh like a cartoon villain. In this imagined confrontation between shadow and speaker, the picture once again threatens to undo the self, to dispossess him not only of his lover but of his place and his identity. Colin Burrow suggests that this anxiety works on several levels in Cowley’s poem, that “the lover in Cowley’s ‘My Picture’ does not just express anxiety in case his picture will become a rival for his mistress’s affection ; he also worries that his poetic identity will be taken over by Donne’s ‘Elegy: His Picture’ ”⁴⁶.

In Donne’s poem and in Cowley’s, and in all these poems about portraits, rivalries abound. There is the rivalry between the speaker and the shadow, the “strife” between nature and art, as well as the *paragone* between word and image. All of these call into question the coherence of the speaking voice of the poem, and perhaps of all poems. The idea that the elegy might show Donne handing his lover an identifiable portrait and departing on an identifiable trip slips further and further from our grasp, to be replaced by the shadow of a Donne fascinated by the process of visual and verbal representation, in the material, physical processes required to produce a “likeness”. Donne, like Cowley, uses the playful self-representation of the portrait conceit to question the very possibility of representation, so that any conjectured poetic speaker is banished to the shadows.

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45. A. Cowley, “His Picture”, in *Poems*, p. 50, l. 15-17 and 19 *sq.*

46. C. Burrow, *Metaphysical Poetry*, p. xxix.

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