

Donne's Holy Sonnet I and Alciato's Emblem CXXI¹

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As Louis M. Martz established in his by now classic *The Poetry of Meditation*, the Continental meditation tradition, especially that created by Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercices* (1537), influenced and served as a basis for the inspiration and writing of seventeenth-century religious poetry. Thus, metaphysical poems, among them, those of Donne's, particularly his *Holy Sonnets*, can be analysed as rhetorical pieces which show remarkable resemblances with the use of the three powers of the soul –memory, understanding and will– to create the three basic parts of a meditation exercise: 1) a visually vivid composition of place, or dramatic situation, in which the poet immerses himself as a way of provoking the meditative mood, 2) the analysis of that situation and the feelings it elicits in the speaker's conscience, and 3) the dialogue with God in which the speaker most usually demands pardon for his past sins and seeks assistance to be able to resist future temptations and thus be a perfect Christian deserving salvation.

The poetry of meditation is essentially a product of the imagination and is characterised by its powerful visual nature. It is the most proper occasion for the use of the metaphysical conceit and other powerful images, some of which are akin to emblems. Actually, poems of meditation written in the metaphysical style can be best defined as a sort of triangle or 'trinity' that is the result of the interaction and interdependence of three elements: religious meditation, conceits, and emblems (see Figure 1).

The first angle is formed, as I indicated above, by the articulation of meditation as imagination and the use of poetical images. The second angle is built with the relationship between conceits and emblems. These two elements are so closely related that establishing their kinship can be just as problematic as considering what was first whether the egg or the hen. There are examples of conceits that inspired emblems (such as the fly and flame or moth and flame emblem, derived from Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere* meaning the dangers of love (Sloane 1981: 39, 40), emblems that became conceits or "word-emblems" (Daly 1979: 55), conceits that became emblems which transformed back into conceits (Praz 1975: 13), and conceits and emblems that share a common source: mythological, biblical, scientific, literary, or otherwise. Finally, the triangle is completed by the fact that, in the seventeenth century, the Renaissance emblem tradition, originally the Humanist expression of secular, common-place philosophical or moral ideas, evolved, even in Protestant countries such as England, towards the reflection of religious concepts and dogmas as a means of aiding meditation as a result of

¹ This is an expanded version of my original paper read at *SEDERI 9*.

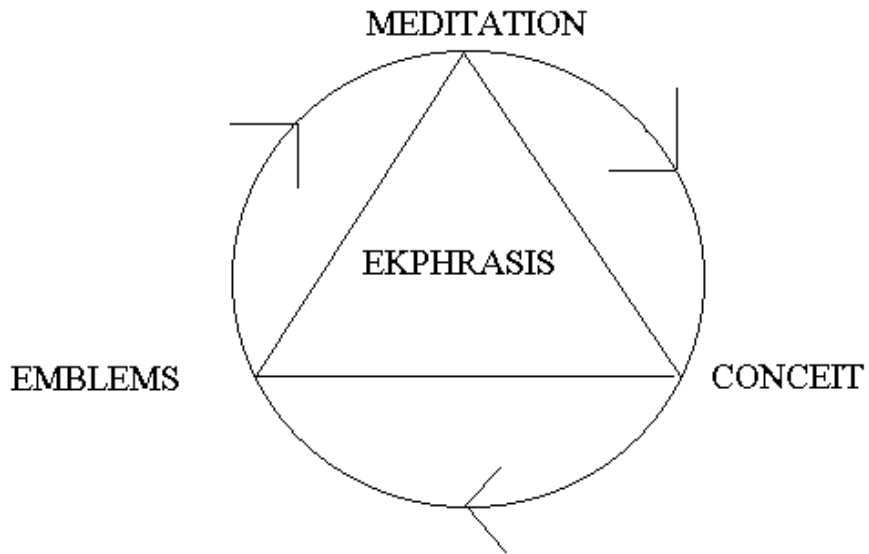


FIGURE 1. Mind map of the connections between meditation, conceit and emblems that characterise Donne's metaphysical ekphrasis.

the influence of the Counter-Reformation emphasis on the persuasive and illustrative force of the visual arts.²

The meditation-conceit-emblem triangle delimits the 'area' of the visual aspect of seventeenth-century religious poetry, it is the base that supports the notion that the seventeenth-century religious poems, especially those of Donne and Herbert, are a perfect example of *ekphrasis*, or painting with words, and its *energeia* or vividness and the associated psychological effects it produces on the reader. This triangle is the foundations upon which we can build the edifice of the complex relations between this sort of poetry and the visual arts, a structure that we must bear in mind when it comes to studying the individual poems for it will allow us to understand them much better.

Thus, the composition of place of the meditative exercises, present in most of seventeenth-century religious poems as already shown by Louis L. Martz in his monography, is very similar to the composition in a painting. In pictures and paintings, human figures and objects are arranged according to underlying, invisible, sophisticated geometrical patterns that, together with perspective, form a *Gestalt* or highly organised and functional unity that regulates not only the internal dynamics or feigned movements within the painting, but also the way and order in which we look at the image, that is, the aesthetic reception and psychological effect of the work of art. In poems and other texts we can also find such a kind of governing principle although figures, objects, scenes, actions, etc. are depicted with words (*ekphrasis*). We must analyse the images conveyed through words as if they were real, material images and discover the occult geometry that binds their elements. In so doing, not only we will understand and enjoy the poems much more, but we will make a few very interesting discoveries about them. That is precisely part of what I intend to do with Donne's Holy Sonnet I in this my paper.

In Holy Sonnet I, contrary to the usual order of meditation, Donne splits his direct address to God and his subsequent petition for spiritual aid into two parts corresponding to the first two lines and the final couplet of the sonnet. In fact, these two parts work as a frame to the composition of place and its analysis which occupy the main part of the sonnet, that is to say, lines three to twelve. In this structural division, we find the first pictorial analogy in the poem.

The central part of the poem is highly dynamic because of the abundance of verbs expressing movement. Donne uses what we can term 'kinaesthetical' language, following the example of Bradbrook (1965: 110, 148) who points out this characteristic in both Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Chapman's *Hymns in Noctem*. First, Donne expresses the speed with which he is getting closer to dying, how time passes double quick for him as it is both Death and himself who move, shortening the distance and time for their meeting. Here, in order to emphasize his own irresponsible behaviour, Donne departs somewhat from the innumerable "Dance of Death" representations in which figures are caught unawares by the ominously grinning skeleton or frantically try to escape from it. However, after indicating his own participation in this rush, he stops dead, so to speak, for he is the victim of the paralysis produced by the consciousness of his situation. He is so paralysed by terror that he does not even dare move his eyes as he states in line 5. Now, he transfers all the energy and movement to four exterior forces, and he places himself as the immobile, vulnerable centre subject to their operations along two different dynamic vectors: one horizontal, the other vertical (see Figure 2). Despair because of the irredeemable things done in the past (*behind*) and death as what lies ahead (*before*) constitute the two forces that constrain and press Donne's persona centripetally in the horizontal vector, that is, in this world's temporal plane. They are the forces that provoke Donne's physical and spiritual

² The connection between meditation and graphic aids such as emblems is shown by the dislike that St. John of the Cross showed to such a practice, for him, this was not proper meditation and only acceptable in beginners (*Subida al Monte Carmelo*, II, C. 12-17, in *Obras Completas*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos (BAC), (Madrid, 1955) 157-180. Curiously, Maravall (1990: 107), on whom I first relied for this piece of information, gives an incorrect citation: "pp. 383 y ss., 605, etc.".

paralysis, allowing him no other movements than those that the other two forces, God and the Devil, permit or subject him to by pulling away centrifugally from his central position along a vertical vector. This vertical vector corresponds to the metaphysical, eternal plane, and Donne's soul is pulled in the two opposed directions, up and down, which traditionally correspond to ascension and fall, Heaven and Hell, salvation and damnation. Donne can only overcome his total paralysis and move his eyes upward if God grants his permission (line 10), and only in this way can he move up and get closer to eternal bliss. However, his will is so weak and so vulnerable to the Devil's workings that he is not able to keep his ascension because sin keeps dragging him down. He needs a new intervention of God's grace to be able to get rid of his sins, avoid temptation, and finally attain salvation.

The two very abstract and metaphysical concepts of sin and grace are depicted as two rather substantial, solid, concrete, objects that also form part of the antithetical dynamics along the vertical vector in the poem's 'pictorial' composition. We have reached the stage in the poem where the meditation image becomes a conceit. We have actually reached the first angle in the triangle I proposed. Now, the question is whether we can actually go for the second one and relate this conceit to an emblem or any other type of illustration or pictorial representation.

First of all, I must point out that Donne's poem seems to hark back not to any graphic element in particular, but to Psalm 55. There we can find that the Psalmist's supplication for deliverance from his hypocrite enemies, and his terror of death is also expressed with kinaesthetic language and images that establish a vertical vector. At the opposite ends of this vector we also find "wings" that stand for deliverance, and terror and trembling that are identified as a "burden" that God will lift or take care of in order to "sustain" him who asks for help:

4. My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.
 5. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me.
 6. And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! *for then* I would fly away, and be at rest.

22. Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved. (*King James Version*, 1611)

Donne may have read or used any of the English Bibles of his time as their renderings of Psalm 55, or even the *Vulgate* Latin text of Psalm 54, which he knew in the edition with a commentary by Nicholas de Lyra, published in Douai in 1617 (Keynes 1974: 279).³ Nonetheless, if we pay attention to the actual wording of some of these texts: the *Vulgate*, the *Bishops' Bible*, the *Geneva Bible*, and compare them with the *King James Version* key passages quoted above, we find that Donne's Holy Sonnet seems to echo *King James Version*, as he uses the word "sustain" too (line 12), the ambiguous *King James Version* rendering of the *Vulgate*'s much simpler "enutriet", translated as "nourish" in the *Geneva Bible*, and "vpholde" in the *Bishops' Bible*:

8. COR MEUM DOLUIT IN VITALIBUS MEIS ET TERRORES MORTIS
 CECIDERUNT SUPER ME.
 6. TIMOR ET TREMOR VENIT SUPER ME ET OPERUIT ME CALIGO.
 7. ET DIXI QUIS DABIT MIHI PINNAS COLUMBAE UT VOLEM ET
 REQUIESCAM
 8. UT PROCUL HABEAM ET COMMORER IN DESERTO SEMPER.

³ The discrepancy as to numbers between the *Vulgate* and the English Bibles is due to the *Vulgate* joining the Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 as Psalm 9. I am very much grateful to Alan Cottrell from Cotty College, Nevada, Wisconsin, who put up with my ignorance and told me about this via the Ficino Discussion List: Renaissance and Reformation Studies.

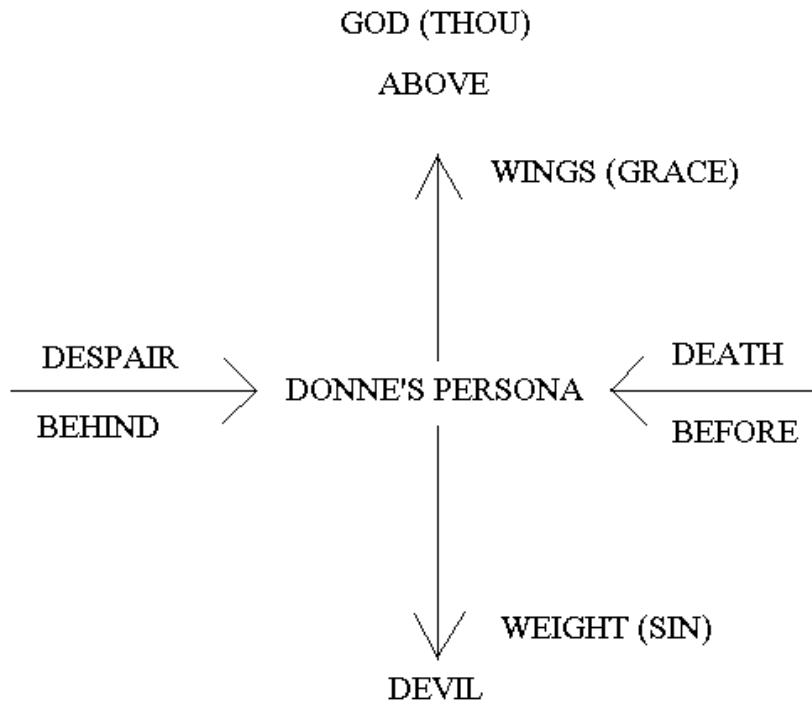


FIGURE 2. Vectors in John Donne's Holy Sonnet I.

23. PROICE SUPER DOMINUM CARITATEM TUAM ET IPSE ENUTRIET TE
NON DABIT IN AETERNUM FLUCTUATIONEM IUSTO. (*Vulgate*)

4. Mine heart trembleth within me, and the terrors of death are fallen vpon me.
5. Feare and trembling are come vpon me, & an horrible feare hath couered me.
6. and I said, oh that I had wings like a dooue: then wold I flie away and rest.
7. Beholde, I wolde take my flight farre of, & lodge in the wilderness. Sélah.

22. Cast thy burden vpon the Lord, and he shal nourish thee: he wil not suffer the
righteous to fall for euer. (*Geneva Bible*, 1560)

4. My heart trembleth within me: and the feare of death is fallen vpon me.
5. Fearefulnes and trembling are come vpon me: and an horrible dread hath
overwhelmed me.
6. And I sayde, O that I had wynges like a doue: for then woulde I flee away, and be
at rest.
7. Lo, then woulde I fleeing get away farre of: and remayne in the wyldernesse. Selah.

22. O cast thy burthen vpon God, and he wyll vpholde thee: he wyll not suffer at any
time the righteous to moue. (*Bishops' Bible*, 1568)⁴

Thus, it is perfectly reasonable to gather that Donne found inspiration in Psalm 55 to express in Holy Sonnet I what *seems* to be a very similar spiritual distress. Furthermore, the parallelism with the *King James Version* could be considered as quite substantial evidence for the difficult tasks of establishing the particular text he used and the dating the poem. If it were the only source on which Donne may have relied, the *terminus a quo* for the composition of the poem could be fixed as 1611, a quite reasonable date, given the circumstances in Donne's biography which I will have the occasion to discuss later on. However, what follows will cancel such a possibility.

But let's go back to my present issue after this little digression. The possible influence of Psalm 55 on Donne's poem might seem to pose a problem to the question of the relationship between Donne's poem and graphic material, that is, whether there is a picture in which we can find any of the metaphorical elements present in the vertical axis in Donne's sonnet. However, this objection is only apparent and can be easily dismissed. Actually, the link between Psalm 55 and Holy Sonnet I is nothing but grist to my mill, even more so if we bear in mind that the Bible together with *The Greek Anthology* are two of the main sources for the Renaissance books of emblems, *impresa*, devices, and other philosophical and moral graphic material. Thus, the existence of any illustration depicting a human figure torn along a vertical line by the opposed elements of wings and some kind of weight can also be accounted for as showing the influence of Psalm 55. The possibilities as to the sources of Donne's Holy Sonnet I are, therefore, three: 1) Psalm 55 was Donne's direct, primary, and only source; 2) Psalm 55 is only an indirect and secondary source, the primary source being a pictorial representation as the one described upon which the connection with Psalm 55 depends; and 3) the most likely option, Donne was conscious of such a link and benefitted from the associations between the two sources.

⁴ I must extend my acknowledgements to the following members of the on-line Ficino Discussion List maintained by the University of Toronto: Professor William Barker, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, for his sending me a facsimile of Psalm 55 in the *Geneva Bible*, Professor Hannibal Hamlin, Yale University, for sending me an electronic transcription of Psalm 55 in both the *Geneva Bible* and the *Bishops' Bible* (Wright 1969: 126-131), and Professor Ellen Moody, George Mason University, Vancouver, Canada, for her electronic transcription of Psalm 55 from the facsimile edition of the *Geneva Bible* (1969: 246-247).

Needless to say, I reject possibility number one and accept the other two which are not only non-mutually-exclusive, but complementary, as number two can be subsumed in number three.

But the question is still the following: does any such a pictorial representation as the one described above exist? Actually, as Praz points out (1975: 35-38), ever since the publication of Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili* in 1499, there was a long line of emblems and illustrations in which a human figure has a pair of wings sticking out of one hand or arm while his or her other hand is holding any other object or chained to a stone or some kind of heavy weight. There are examples with various secular meanings in Anton Francesco Doni's *La Zucca* (1552), Jean Sambucus's *Emblemata* (1564), and Hadrianus Junius's *Emblemata* (1565) (see Appendix I, Figures 1 to 4). But it is Emblem CXXI in Andrea Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* that is specially suggestive in connection with Donne's poem; so much, that I think it was Donne's source for the conceit in lines 6-13, in conjunction with Psalm 55, in his 'divine meditation' (quotation marks are totally intentional, to discover why, see below).

Alciato's collection of emblems was published for the first time in Latin, with 104 illustrations in 1531. The collection was expanded and more illustrations were added in subsequent editions in both Latin and various European vernacular languages, but it is the woodcut for the 1540s Lyons editions that is particularly relevant for my discussion.

In the *pictura* or illustration of Emblem CXXI (see Appendix I, Figures 5 to 7 and 10 to 12),⁵ we can precisely see three of the four elements in the vertical axis in Donne's Holy Sonnet I. Above, there is a human figure of unknown gender, presumably an allegory of Fame for the theme of the emblem is that poverty as a hindrance to the achievement of fame, and below, a man with the pair of wings that lifts him and the stone or weight that prevents him from flying away. In the Alciato website maintained by the Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada), the Latin motto that identifies the theme of the emblem is translated as: "Poverty hinders the greatest talents from advancing", and the epigram that offers a commentary on the picture reads:

My right hand holds a stone, my other hands bears wings.
As the feathers lift me, so the heavy weight drags me down.
With my intellect I could be soaring among the highest peaks
If envious poverty did not pull me down.

Quite clearly, we can see that the *pictura* and the epigram show a very similar image to that of Psalm 55 and the conceit created by Donne in his Holy Sonnet I. The only difference is that Alciato materialises the metaphor and employs it for the expression of a mundane feeling in a secular adaptation or parody.

Now then, it is possible that Donne found his inspiration in any of the multiple editions of Alciato's emblems that included this woodcut and circulated throughout Europe at the time of his writing his sonnet, but it is also quite likely that he knew Geoffrey Whitney's version of Alciato's emblem.⁶ Whitney included this in page 152 of his anthology of emblems gathered from different sources entitled *A Choice of Emblems*, published in 1586. Whitney either uses the same woodcut as that of the Lyons editions of Alciato's emblems (see Appendix I, Figure 13), or employs a close copy – a common practice among European emblematisers, who 'borrowed' motifs and illustrations from one

⁵ In some editions, this emblem bears number CXX, for example the one I have used, the modern Spanish edition. This alteration is due to the censoring of emblem LXXX, *Adversus naturam peccantes*, in the editions previous to 1621 because it showed a figure emptying his/her bowels on a *choenix*, or grain measure, the emblem meaning transgression of the law with special overtones of incest.

⁶ Keynes does not record Alciato's or Whitney's books of emblems among those in Donne's library.

another–, reproduces the same motto, supplements quotations from the classics, and substitutes a more elaborate English epigram for the original Latin one:

One hand with winges, woulde flie vnto the starres,
 And raise mee up to winne immortall fame;
 But my desire, necessitie still barres,
 And in the duste doth burie up my name;
 That hande woulde flie, th'other still is bounde, 5
 With heaueie stone, which houldes it to the ground.
 My wishe, and will, are still to mounte alofte.
 My wante, and woe, denie me my desire:
 I shewe theire state, whose witte, and learninge, ofte
 Excell, and woulde to highe estate aspire: 10
 But pouvertie, with heaueie clogge of care,
 Still pulles them downe, when they ascending are.

In Whitney's epigram, the nature of the figure situated above in the clouds is clearer for it is identified as "immortall fame" in line 2, and there is a better correspondence and complementation between the motto, the *pictura*, and the epigram to express the frustration of both ambition and intellectual possibilities because of poverty. However, in Alciato's Latin epigram we find the word "sustinet", which offers a further parallelism with Psalm 55:22 in the Authorised Version, a coincidence that Donne not only would not have missed if he had written his poem at some stage after 1611, but also –and of course this is speculation– he would have quite consciously benefitted from when he wrote line 12: "That not one houre my selfe I can sustaine".

The conclusion that can be drawn from the obvious parallelisms –as to image and text– between Donne's image and this emblem, whether Alciato's or Whitney's, or even the combination of both, is that Donne identifies with the figure in the emblem picture and appropriates it to create his *persona* in the central part of Holy Sonnet I. In other words, we find that, Donne actually builds a self-dramatisation based on this emblem in an exercise in sacred parody or *contrafactum* of the emblem,⁷ an adaptation of the emblem for the purposes of meditation exercise.⁸ Curiously enough, if Alciato's emblem is a reworking of Psalm 55, Donne's poem is a "double parody": a religious parody of a secular parody of a Biblical text, thus coming full circle back to the original spirit of Psalm 55.

Or is it? Is Donne's sonnet really a religious poem only? Must these connections with Psalm 55 and Alciato's and Whitney's emblems alter our consideration of Donne's meditative poem? Does the sonnet actually offer other levels of meaning that are heavily dependent on these associations?

To answer these questions, we must go back to the scheme or mind map I proposed at the beginning of my exposition to establish the relationship between meditation, conceit and emblem. It is evident that, so far, I have followed the direction meditation-conceit-emblem to explore the relationship between these elements, but in fact, the process of composition certainly was the other way around: emblem-conceit-meditation as Donne must have had the emblem either physically before him on his desk, or virtually, in his mind's eye when he composed the poem. The emblem surely was the source

⁷ Martz (1962: 186) uses the term "sacred parody" to refer to secular poems adapted to express religious contents, but Wardropper (1958: 5, 6) prefers the term *contrafactum/a* as it is international and easily understood by scholars. Wardropper's book is a good, basic introduction to the history of sacred parodies or *contrafacta* in Western European literature.

⁸ The theatricality of this procedure is practically identical to that of the portraits of noble and high-class Spanish ladies who were depicted by Zurbarán and others with the attributes of Saints, or those of French ladies in allegorical or mythological garb. This kind of portraits has been studied by Orozco (1969: 105-107; 1988: 189-211).

for his conceit, he pressed it in the service of the rhetoric of the sonnet, therefore constituting an appropriation of the emblem image to build this self-dramatisation in which he expresses his 'religious' despair in order to achieve the help of 'God'. In fact, this practice is what, according to Sloane, characterised the poetry of the early metaphysical poets, Donne and Herbert. For Sloane, the difference between Donne and Herbert on the one hand and Crashaw, Vaughan and Traherne on the other is that they represent different stages in the evolution of the use of visual material in poetry. All of them are influenced by the epistemological crisis of the end of the 16th century and move away from the traditional medieval system of correspondences. The metaphors and conceits used by Donne and Herbert must not be understood as signifying universals, but must be interpreted as introducing a personal meaning, appertaining to the biography and personality of the authors. For Sloane, Donne and Herbert and other early metaphysical poets adapted emblems as part of the meditation exercises characterized by: 1) the visualization of the soul as participating in religious drama, 2) the interiorization of the meditative image, and 3) the equation of the *persona* of the poem with the object of meditation (1981: 50). However, the poems of the later, Baroque, metaphysical poets do not participate of these features for they totally abandon the analogies and correspondences, and gradually cease to use emblems and the identification with the figures in them to establish a self-dramatisation, they tend to use images and metaphors that rely on true observation, thus offering a parallelism with the evolution of scientific empiricism.

Sloane's appreciations are really valuable, but curiously enough, she does not make much of them when she deals with Holy Sonnet I. Sloane (1981: 60-62) identifies the connection between lines 13, 14 and Georgette de Montenay's fifth emblem showing the heart of the sinner drawn by the divine magnet in *Emblèmes ou Devises Chrestiennes* (1571) (see Appendix I, Figure 14), but she fails to relate Alciato's emblem with Donne's Holy Sonnet even though she is acquainted with Alciato's work.⁹ This omission is the more strange because the relationship between Holy Sonnet I and Alciato's Emblem CXXI is a perfect example of the notion that Donne adapts emblems in their poems to express something intimate and personal. Actually, if we bear in mind Donne's biography, we can certainly give a further turn of the screw to the links between the general elements in my mind map: emblem, meditation and conceit, and the special relationship between Holy Sonnet I, Psalm 55, and Alciato's emblem CXXI, and conclude, to use a perfectly adroit expression in this context, that there is something more than meets the eye in this poem.

Following his secret marriage to Anne More and its discovery in 1601, Donne underwent a period of economic difficulties, social rejection and depression which lasted practically until 1615, the date of his ordination. Donne tried to get royal preferment for a secular post, but all his attempts were useless. As part of his struggle to gain recognition and employment by influential figures at court, Donne approached Lucy, Countess of Bedford. Lady Bedford was indeed an important person, she belonged to the Queen's entourage, and the Calvinist faction at court. She was a woman of a fine intellect and she enjoyed fostering her contacts with leading intellectuals of her time such as Ben Jonson, George Chapman, Samuel Daniel, William Drayton, John Florio, and important Puritan apologists who dedicated some of their works to her. Sometime after first meeting her in 1608, Donne managed to establish a quite close relationship with the Countess, although this did not advance his social position as much as he desired. As part of this search for friendship, patronage, and preferment, Donne addressed to her nine verse letters, wrote for her the elegies to Lady Markham, Cecilia Bulstrode, and Lord Harrington –brother to the Countess–, and composed the epithalamion for Princess Elizabeth's marriage when he was taken some notice of as a result of the Countess's good offices. He also dedicated a poem to her seat of Twickenham Park and it is possible that "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" was related to her in some way. They also engaged in poetic dialogue when the

⁹ In fact, the rhetoric of the whole Holy Sonnet I depends on the articulation of three emblems or graphic representations. This is something I intend to discuss in a future paper.

Countess borrowed the beginning of Holy Sonnet X, "Death, be not proud", in a clear allusion to this sonnet, for the opening of her elegy to Cecilia Bulstrode as an answer to Donne's own first elegy dedicated to this lady in which he wrote "Death, I recant". For Carey this suggests that "the *Holy Sonnets* also belong to Donne's relationship with the Countess, and were perhaps written for her" (1990: xxvi). Carey points out that the surprising Calvinism of the sonnets may be accounted for by his relationship with the Countess and he suggests that:

(...) the sense of rejection which the *Holy Sonnets* express, and their pleas for recognition, transfer to a religious plane the feelings of failure and exclusion, the supplications for help, and the trepidation about giving offence, which formed the basis of Donne's association with Lady Bedford. They may, in this sense, be 'about' her as well as about God. (1990: xxviii)

This observation is crucial to ascertain the full meaning of Holy Sonnet I and explain the relationship between Donne's poem and Alciato's emblem CXXI.

In this context of social and economic difficulties and the search for the Countess of Bedford's patronage, the original secular meaning of Alciato's emblem also applies. Quite clearly, Donne identifies with the figure in the *pictura* of the emblem, he participates of the self-consciousness of the intelligent and witty man who knows that he could do better in society if he were not impeded by poverty.¹⁰ Donne identifies Lady Bedford with the figure among the clouds to which the man in the illustration tries to reach out; she is the "God" who can bestow her "grace" by pushing his advancement at court. In fact, this interpretation, only dimly seen or delineated by Carey and other critics (Parfitt 1989: 70), can be better substantiated if we interpret Holy Sonnet I bearing in mind precisely one of Donne's verse epistles addressed to the Countess.

In his first letter to the Countess (see Appendix II), Donne praises the Countess's virtues by using theological and medical notions, a combination of flattery and wit clearly intended to draw the addressee's attention to the writer's skills. What is really interesting for my discussion is that, right at the beginning of the poem, in the first two lines, he equates her with God and he refers to both "hands" –two of the powers of the soul, Reason and Faith– as instruments to reach her spiritually and see her good nature: "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right, / By these wee reach divinity, that's you" (l. 1). In his reference to the left hand, Donne points to the inelegance of "lefthandedness" –a Western, Christian cultural prejudice rooted in the Bible–¹¹ punning with theology on

¹⁰At this stage, I cannot help quoting Parfitt's words, which seem to paraphrase Alciato's emblem in connection with Donne's life (italics are mine): "The writings of this period of Donne's life are shot through with reference to fettering, imprisonment and graves. *After his marriage Donne was under great pressure, both to fulfill his responsibilities to his wife and children and to satisfy an ego which was aware of its talents and ambitions. The fact that others knew he was talented may have increased the pressure, and the whole situation is further complicated if we accept –as we should– that Donne wanted to know and understand as much as possible.* In the circumstances it would be remarkable, and suspicious, if Donne seemed consistent. The inconsistencies are to be expected; more than just plausible. In depression personalities, already complex, fragment. Donne is no exception" (1989: 62).

¹¹Notice the opposition between the negative meaning of "sinister" and the positive one of "dexterous", which is of Biblical origin, and see the many medieval representations of the Day of Doom, based on Biblical references, in which those saved are to the right of the *Pantocrator* and those sent to eternal damnation in hell are to his left. Among the many biblical references to the opposition and division between the left and the right hands, see, for instance, Mark 10:37-40: "They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be

“ungracious”, thus foregrounding the pseudo-religious nature of his wit. Then, he justifies the use of the left hand as an essential part of the body and, as it stands for “Reason” symbolically, the need of being rational to understand (and praise) her. The following lines: “So would I, not to increase, but to expresse / My faith, as I beleeeve, so understand” are the consequence of such a justification, they state that he will indeed use “Reason” to try to reach and define Lady Bedford, but at the same time they are also a declaration of his ‘Faith’ –i.e. not only his opinion about Lady Bedford, but also his own religious persuasion– and the implicit equation between his beliefs and ‘Reason’. His persuasion is not identified in the second stanza, but it is indicated, again implicitly, in the third stanza when he develops the association of Lady Bedford with God and manages to allude to her Calvinism when he calls the Countess’s friends –and *protégés*, we can also surmise– her “Saints”, who are glorified by her “election” (l. 10). Her activities (“deeds”), social relations (“accesses”), self-limitations (“restraints”), readings, and writings (“what your selfe devize”) show that she is ‘divine’ –so to speak–, thus furthering the reference to Calvinism by taking her behaviour as the key to ascertain that she is one of the ‘elect’, i.e. that her moral and virtuous behaviour are an indication that she has been predestined by God to be saved, an idea that he later develops by making her an angel that mediates between men and God. Thus, Donne’s way of ‘understanding’ Lady Bedford is informed by Calvinism – ‘as he believes, so does he understand’ her– and serves the triple purpose of 1) witty, courtly flattery to a prospective patroness; 2) as I said before, the identification of Calvinism with ‘Reason’, a virtual declaration that Calvinism is the only reasonable and true persuasion; and 3) consequently, showing his own religious and political alignment with the Calvinist faction at court to which Lady Bedford belonged, being one of its most prominent and influential members.

The left hand or ‘Reason’, then, constitutes the element that can advance him in the power circles. Quite significantly, that is precisely the hand that the figure in the versions of Alciato’s emblem CXXI that Donne may have known uses to try to reach Fame and success. Therefore, ‘Reason’ would be the equivalent to the wings of the emblem and ‘Faith’, the right hand, the one that bears the weight of ‘poverty’ or any other impediment. In fact, in the third stanza Donne explains the nature of that impediment symbolised by the right hand. The reasons why Lady Bedford is loved by everyone are so many that they grow out of the mind’s reach making it impossible to understand this phenomenon fully, so Donne has to resort to other ideas to explain all this. Again he uses a theological concept to express this difficulty and, quite significantly, he employs the word “fall”, reproducing the dynamic tension of the emblem. As Reason cannot fully grasp Lady Bedford’s virtues he must resort to another valid, yet inferior, means of coping with this truth. Consequently, he relies on another Protestant tenet: “implicit faith”, i.e. faith as a result of the justification of the sinner through God’s granting his grace.¹² The pun in “And rest on what the Catholique voice doth teach” (l. 16) introduces both the acknowledgment that Lady Bedford is *universally* acclaimed as good,¹³ and the idea that, contrary to reason, he still has Catholic leanings and, as opposed to the elevation of ‘Reason’ and Calvinism, Catholicism is the rock bottom in this “fall”, and bearing in mind Alciato’s emblem, it is the impediment, the weight hanging from his right hand, that thwarts his aspirations and success in life.

Donne extolls the Countess’s constancy and fortitude by using the metaphor of the fixedly rooted rock, an image of an emblematic quality which also depends on Biblical inspiration, as particularly in the Psalms and Matthew 7:23, God is a rock on which the sinner can find security and stability.¹⁴

given to them for whom it is prepared”. See also, for the distinction between the ‘right’ and ‘left’ with a different meaning, Ecclesiastes 10:2: “A wise man’s heart is at his right hand; but a fool’s heart at his left”.

¹²For a summary of Protestant theology, see Rivers (1994: 106-124).

¹³Clements interprets “Catholique” as universal in his edition (91 n8).

¹⁴Psalm 18:2: “The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.” Psalm 62: 6: “He only is my rock and my salvation: he is my defence; I shall not be moved.” Psalm 71: 3: “Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress.” Matthew 7:

After praising Lady Bedford in medical terms, in the final lines Donne very artfully conveys the message that actually she can do a lot for him at court. On the one hand, Donne uses theological concepts to praise the Countess, and he develops his identification of her with an angel. Donne develops the idea that the Countess is an angel, a “Factor”, an intermediary and messenger between God and men. She is to return to heaven, where she really belongs, and secure election for Donne so that he achieves eternal life, the continuation of this earthly existence (“Make your returne home gracious; and bestow / This life on that; so make one life of two”). The final couplet: “For so God helpe mee, I would not misse you there / For all the good which you can do me here” (ll. 37, 38) expresses then the identification of heaven (“there”) as the Countess’s proper and wholly deserved place, and Donne’s generous and just renunciation to her angelic intervention in earthly life (“here”). On the other hand, the word “Factor” undoubtedly introduces connotations of mundane suits, petitions, and court business. Thus, the Countess of Bedford is an intermediary between those seeking preferment at court and the King, she is the one that can speak in Donne’s favour, and get him royal support –“election”– so that he keeps on living.¹⁵ Bearing this in mind, the fanciful wording Donne uses to express his desire for “eternal life” makes more sense. In his appeal to the Countess, he writes: “bestow / This life on that; so make one life of two”, this means that his present life is added to the new life granted by “God”, not the other way round which is the correct, more theologically sound way of imagining salvation as a continuation or extension of earthly life as heavenly life awarded or preordained by God. This phrasing expresses a “movement” towards the source of the new life, rather than an action or movement on the part of the giver towards the beneficiary of the reward. This is of course compatible with the depiction of the Countess as an angel. We must understand that the angel, as God’s “factor”, will take Donne’s soul to heaven, but this way of putting it, also allows for the idea that the Countess is to manage to get Donne into court, and to my mind, this is Donne’s true meaning in his petition. Thus, the final couplet expresses Donne’s preference for the Countess’s being at the right place, where she can help him most, rather than at the place where he is now. The two deictics “there” and “here” can be understood as indications to Heaven and Earth respectively, but their very indefiniteness (shared by the quite vague “that”, too) enables us to associate them with the more secular meaning of “Factor” and interpret that “there” is the Court and “here” Donne’s place outside it, probably his house in Mitcham, Surrey.¹⁶ Thus, Donne manages to express hyperbolic flattery coupled with renunciation, which, nonetheless, still is a reminding of his needs, and, on a different level, an open avowal of the importance of the Countess’s influence which borders on cynical selfishness. This combination surely would not be an insult to the Countess, since, for all its effrontery, she would construe it as a true expression of wit and a display of excellent rhetorical abilities, precisely some of the requirements to draw the attention and support of one of the sophisticated minds of the Jacobean court.

In this poem we find metaphoric elements and concepts quite similar to those that appear in Holy Sonnet I when read in the light of Psalm 55 and Alciato’s emblem: the imagery of hands to reach out for divinity, which is obvious in the emblem, the use of an image with Biblical resonances and a quasi-emblematic quality, and the fusion of religion and court affairs with the identification between Lady Bedford and the King with God, grace and election with patronage and court clientelism. The two poems are inextricably related, and this relation clearly shows that establishing a secular interpretation of Holy Sonnet I is quite adequate.

23: “And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and that beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock”.

¹⁵No doubt, the Countess of Bedford was one of the “many persons of worth [that] mediated with his Majesty for some secular employment” (Walton 1973: 45) on Donne’s behalf.

¹⁶Donne referred to his verse epistles addressed to his friends and patrons as “the sallads and onions of *Mitcham*” (Donne 1977: 63, qtd. in Patrides 1991: 34).

Coming back then to the questions I proposed above, we can see that the religious content of the poem is not the only one; actually, Donne succeeded in introducing a secular subtext in a real exercise of wit. We must change our understanding and appreciation of the poem and see that its meanings and implications are richer than they appear at first sight. This double nature of the poem makes it participate of the two of the characteristics of the emblems: their capacity for allowing for different associations and meanings, and in so doing, their use as a form of 'esoteric' language in which much is shown, but much is concealed from those who are not in the knowing.¹⁷ Donne's sonnet would just read like a religious poem, an exercise in meditation based on Psalm 55 for those of his contemporaries who did not know about Alciato's emblems, or if they did, but ignored his dire circumstances and the special relationship he had with the Countess of Bedford, the poem would just sound like a *contrafactum* or sacred-parody of the emblem or a retaking of the original motif of the Psalmist. For those in the knowing, especially Lady Bedford herself, the poem certainly would be sheer ingeniousness and wit. No doubt, on writing Holy Sonnet I, Donne was making the most of his capacity for complex writing and he was fully aware of his possible 'audiences',¹⁸ offering two distinct, compatible roles in the same performance: that of the repentant sinner, and the one, closer to reality, of the intelligent man afflicted by poverty. Indeed, in this coupling of simultaneous meanings Donne's Holy Sonnet I, we can see a perfect ingenious example of the complex strategies of Renaissance self-fashioning and theatricality.¹⁹

¹⁷For a brief discussion of this characteristic see Maravall (1990: 114). Maravall rejects the esotericism of the emblems, he sees that they enhance their didactic polysemy precisely by being enigmatic, but he holds they are far from being inaccessible to a wide Renaissance audience.

¹⁸Again, Parfitt is absolutely right when he points out we cannot see one sole recipient or an audience of one single person in poems dedicated to Bedford and other individuals, or even his religious poetry, but a potential wider audience: "In fact it is seldom if ever accurate to think of an audience of one in connection with Donne's work. We may be tempted to do this with his religious lyrics, defining their audience as the poet himself or God, but this is misleading. This is so partly because if you write religious verse you are participating, whether you like it or not, in a tradition and this entails a plural audience; partly because we know that at least some of Donne's religious poems were sent to other people (thus *La Corona* is dedicated to Magdalen Herbert); and partly because the dramatic quality of the poems –and especially their striking projections of images of the poet figure– forcefully suggests awareness of onlookers who are neither just God nor just self. This audience of onlooker may at first seem very general but the wit and allusiveness of the poems in fact define an audience which is exclusive in the manner of satires, rather than inclusive in that of the medieval religious lyric. At the same time, we should not underestimate the degree to which the religious poems –or at least the hymns and Holy Sonnets– belong to the puritan tradition of self-scrutiny and are thus part of that process of self-examination and restructuring which goes on throughout his period of Donne's life and which leads eventually to ordination. Donne's most private scrutinies have a social dimension" (Parfitt 1989: 69-70).

¹⁹Greenblatt has explained this authoritatively in the book that has introduced the term self-fashioning in common academic parlance. Certainly, the Renaissance men and women were obsessed with the appearances they offered before an 'audience', and the distance between those appearances and the inner reality. This is especially reflected in most Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The portraits of Spanish ladies characterised as saints to which I referred above belong to the same phenomenon.

Appendix I Emblems



FIGURE 1. From Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili* (1499), reproduced from Mario Praz (1975: 36).



FIGURE 2. From Anton Francesco Doni, *La Zucca* (1552), reproduced from Ripa (1987: I, 17).

Physicæ ac Metaphysicæ differentia.



*NATURÆ multa est cognatio mobilis, atque
Prodit æternus, illa que nosse monet.*

FIGURE 3. From Jean Sambucus, *Emblemata* (1564),
reproduced from Praz (1975: 35).



FIGURE 4. From Hadrianus Junius, *Emblemata* (1565), reproduced from Praz (1975: 38).



FIGURE 5. From Alciato's *Emblematum Liber* (Augsburg, 1531: A7v^o), downloaded from:

<<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/images/31-121.gif>>

(Accessed 22 October, 1999)

Armuert verbindet manchen kluegen
verstand, das er nit furkumbt. XV.

Mein rechte händ ein stayn beschwert,
Die linck erhocht ein feder ring:
Der stayn zeucht doch so vast zu erd,
Das ich mich nit in dnoch erschwing.
Was zaygt vnns an ein solich ding?
Mancher ist wol geboren zu kunst,
Die in zu hohen ehren bring,
Doch so er arm, ist alls ymb sunst.



FIGURE 6. From Alciato's *Emblemata* (Paris, 1542), first German translation, reproduced from Daly *et al.*, (1985: II, n. p.). The woodcut is the same as that of 1534 edition (Paris, Wechel) and the first French translation *Le Livret des Emblemes* (Trans. by Jean Lefevre. Paris, Wechel, 1536).

*Che la pouertà impedisce i sommi
ingegni di leuarsi ad alto.*



*La destra tiene vn fasso, e l'altra mano
L'ali sostien; e quanto auien che leue
La piuma ad alto me misero in vano,
Tanto a basso mi tira il peso greue.
Così l'ingegno, ch' alto s'ergeria,
A basso tien la pouertade ria.*

FIGURE 7. From Alciato's *Diverse imprese*, Italian translation by Giovanni Marquale (Lyons, 1551). The woodcut is different from the Latin, French and Spanish 1549 Lyons editions, contrary to what may be inferred from the affirmations of Sebastián (1993: 257) and the "Alciato's *Book of Emblems*. The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English". Reproduced from Daly *et al.* (1985: II, n. p.)



FIGURE 8. "Povertá" from Ripa's *Iconología* (1603), reproduced from Ripa (1987: I, 25).



FIGURE 9. From Lambert Krahe, *Idea vitae beatæ* (n. d.) reproduced from Ripa (1987: I, 18).



FIGURE 10. Woodcut from the 1549 Lyons editions. Reproduced from Alciato (1993: 159).

EMBLEMA CXXI

Paupertatem summis ingeniis obesse ne provehantur



Dextra tenet lapidem, manus altera sustinet alas:
Ut me pluma levat, sic grave mergit onus.
Ingenio poteram superar volitare per arces,
Me nisi paupertas invida deprimeret.

FIGURES 11. This is emblem CXXI from the 1621 Padua edition of Alciato's *Emblems*, which reproduces with slight differences the woodcut used for the Latin (1547 –198 emblems–, 1548 –201 emblems–), Spanish (1546), French (1549), and Italian (1549) Lyons editions published by Guillaume Roville and Mace Bonhomme. The original editions include ornamental frames surrounding each emblem. Illustration and Latin text downloaded from the Alciato webpage maintained by the Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada):

<<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/index.html>>

This Latin version corresponds to the following page:

<<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/121.html>>

EMBLEM CXXI

Poverty hinders the greatest talents from advancing



My right hand holds a stone, my other hand bears wings.
As the feathers lift me, so the heavy weight drags me down.
With my intellect I could be soaring among the highest peaks
If envious poverty did not pull me down.

FIGURE 12. English translation of Alciato's Emblem CXXI. Downloaded from from the Alciato webpage maintained by the Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada):

<<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e121.html>>

152 *Paupertatem summi ingenii obesse ne prouebantur.*
Ad Doctiss. virum Dn. W. MALIM.



ONE hande with winges, woulde flie vnto the starres,
And raise mee vp to winne immortall fame:
But my desire, necessitie still barres,
And in the duste doth burie vp my name:
That hande woulde flie, th'other still is bounde,
With heaueie stone, which houldes it to the ground.
My wishe, and will, are still to mounte alofte.
My wante, and woe, denie me my desire:
I shewe their state, whose witte, and learninge, ofte
Excell, and woulde to highe estate aspire:
But pouertie, with heaueie clogge of care,
Still pulles them downe, when they ascending are.

Inuenialis.

*Haud facillè emergunt, quorum virtutibus obstas
Res. angustia domi, &c.*

Pro bona

FIGURE 13. Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* (1586). The illustration is the same as that of Alciato's Emblem CXXI. The English epigram is not a translation, but an adaptation of the original Latin text. Reproduced from Whitney (1971: 152).



FIGURE 14. Fifth emblem from Georgette de Montenay's *Emblemes ou Devises Chrestiennes* (Lyons, 1571). Reproduced from Montenay (1973: 5).

Appendix II

Texts

HOLY SONNET I; **ERROR!** MARCADOR NO DEFINIDO.

Thou hast made me, And Shall thy worke decay?
Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
And all my pleasures are like yesterday,
I dare not move my dimme eyes any way, 5
Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
Such terrour, and my feeble flesh doth waste
By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doeth weigh;
Onely thou art above, and when towarsh thee
By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe 10
But our subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one houre my selfe I can sustaine,
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,
An²⁰ thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.

TO THE COUNTESS OF BEDFORD²¹

*Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right,
By these wee reach divinity, that's you;
Their loves, who have the blessings of your light,
Grew from their reason, mine from faire faith grew.*

But as, although a squint lefthandednesse 5
Be' ungracious, yet we cannot want that hand,
So would I, not to encrease, but to expresse
My faith, as I beleeve, so understand.

*Therefore I study you first in your Saints,
Those friends, whom your election glorifies,* 10
Then in your deeds, accesses, and restraints,
And what you reade, and what your selfe devize.

But soone, the reasons why your' are lov'd by all,
Grow infinite, and so passe reasons reach,

²⁰Most editions read "And", but, to my mind, the syntax and logic of the final couplet improves if we read "An", meaning "If". "And" and "An" were easily mistaken by scribes.

²¹Italics are mine.

Then backe againe to'implicite faith I fall, 15
And rest on what the Catholique voice doth teach;
That you are good; and not one Heretique
Denies it: if he did, yet you are so.
For, rockes, which high top'd and deep rooted sticke,
Waves wash, not undermine, nor overthrow. 20

In every thing there naturally growes
A Balsamum to keepe it fresh, and new,
If'twere not injur'd by extrinsique blowes:
Your birth and beauty are this Balme in you.

But you of learning and religion, 25
And vertue, 'and such ingredients, have made
A methridate, whose operation
Keepes off, or cures what can be done or said.

Yet, this is not your physicke, but your food,
A dyet fit for you, for you are here 30
The first good Angell, since the worlds frame stood,
That ever did in womans shape appeare.

Since you are then Gods masterpeece, and so
His Factor for our loves; *do as you doe*,
Make your returne home gracious; and bestow 35
This life on that, so Make one life of two.
For so God helpe mee, I would not misse you there
For all the good which you can do me here.

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- [Padua]: apud Petrum Paulum Tozzium ... [Petro Paolo Tozzi] (ex typographia Laurentij Pasquati) [Laurentio Pasquati].
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for the virtuous, to their incoraging: and for the wicked, for their admonishing and amendment....
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