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CHRIST'S BODY AS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
SIGNIFIER: A STUDY OF *BLASON*
IN LA CEPPÈDE'S *THÉORÈMES*

RUSSELL GANIM

Much of the concept of space in La Ceppède's *Théorèmes* is defined in the portrayal of Christ's body. In this text, space appears as distances or gaps—between God and humankind, grace and damnation, poet and reader — which must be overcome by contemplation of Christ's redemptive act. Within the poet's meditative framework, Christ's body acts as a physical, intermediate space in which the metaphysical principles of celestial will take form. For the meditant, the knowledge gained from reflection on Christ's body allows the transcendence from the external, physical spaces of the material world in which s/he lives, to the internal, spiritual spaces of the divine world to which s/he aspires. Generically, La Ceppède's depiction of Christ's body is often revealed in the poetic form of the *blason*, a lyric subgenre which itself plays on the dynamics between the external, physical description of the initial image or *blason*, and the more abstract, metaphysical interpretation of what is ultimately symbolized or *blasonné*.¹

¹ *Blason* is more properly labeled a "subgenre" rather than a "genre" because *blason*, like other forms such as the *ode* and the *baiser* derive from the more general literary kind of the lyric. Applying Alistair Fowler's terminology, I equate "kind" with a historical or "fixed" genre (*Kinds of Literature*, 56). In La Ceppède's era, literary criticism still adhered to the classical notion that "poetry" consisted of three "kinds": lyric, epic and tragic. Hence, *blason* is a subset or "subgenre" of the lyric. Fowler defines "subgenres" as "having the same external characteristics as their corresponding kind together with additional specification of content" (56). The sonnet form, in which the poems under consideration appear, highlights the "external characteristics" of the lyric. Thematically, the catalogue of the beloved's features, together with special emphasis on the transcendent effects of one part of the beloved's anatomy, define the poems as *blasons* as opposed to the subgenres mentioned above.

This paper will explore the relationship between the public spaces of the body and the private spaces of the heart and mind as illustrated in La Ceppède's adaptation of *blason*. La Ceppède depicts Christ's body as a physical, public text, the reading and contemplation of which enable the *dévo*t to accede to a more intimate, private link with God based on prayer and worship. The study begins with a brief history and definition of *blason*, then moves to specific textual analysis of sonnets dealing with Christ's eyes and hands.

Historically, the term *blason* evokes Marot's *Beau Tétin*, Scève's *Le Sourcil* and other works included in the *Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin*.² Despite the recognizability of *blason*, critics hesitate to give an overarching definition of it (Tomarken 139–44). However, even with the elusiveness of a global conception of *blason*, scholarship basically agrees on the points of departure for analyzing the form. In general, critics define *blason* as a short, descriptive poem focusing on one particular image as the main object of description.³ A main element in these "descriptive pieces" (Cottrell 69), becomes the catalogue or listing of features extolling the beloved's beauty. Alain Toumayan argues that the register of features stemming from a particular object, such as a part of a woman's body, conveys a Neoplatonic quality in which the *blason*:

... would ... present [the] physical or concrete reality of an object and ... transcend it by expressing ultimately its spiritual or essential quality (515).

It is this relationship between "the concrete reality of an object" and "its spiritual or essential quality" which I believe constitutes the difference between the *blason* and the *blasonné*, or between an image and its meaning.

Concomitant with the subgenre's descriptive traits is *blason*'s function of interpreting its principal image. According to Furetière, the term

² Cathy Yandell notes that this collection of poems by Marot, Scève, Saint-Gelais, et. al., was first published as a supplement to the French translation of Leone Battista Alberti's *Hecatomphe* in 1536, and then as a separate collection in 1543. See "A la recherche du corps perdu: A Capstone of the Renaissance *Blasons Anatomiques*," (135).

³ Traditional thought on *blason* stems mainly from Thomas Sebillet, who, in his 1548 manual entitled *Art poetique françois* defines *blason* as:

... une perpétuelle louenge ou continu vitupere de ce qu'on s'est proposé blasonner ... Car autant bien se blasonné le laid comme le beau, le mauvais comme le bon.

See the pages cited in the Tomarkens' article for the application of this idea in criticism on the *blason*.

"blasonner," "signifiait aussi Expliquer les symboles, les mystères de l'email et les figures du Blâson" (I, 1649). As the *blason*'s origins are heraldic, what emerges from these definitions is a poem where the poet often introduces an external, material signifier in order to announce an internal, ethereal signified.

Within this Neoplatonic framework, what is *blasonné* or praised is not the object in and of itself but what the object represents in terms of an ideal. The physical, public world of the material *blason* is only meaningful in terms of the private realm of the *blasonné*. By "public," I mean what is universally familiar, discernible or understood. "Public" images, when envisioned with respect to the body, translate into commonplaces such as the face, eyes or mouth. The "private" is less accessible, more personal in its conception. Allusions to ostensibly ineffable sensations or figures may be considered "private" because, within the narrative, they are originally perceived only by the poet. Consequently, private experience, especially within the realm of devotion, becomes much more intimate and particular, often lying outside many readers' direct reach. In short, a cause-effect relationship exists between *blason* and *blasonné*, because the unworldly references the poet makes to communicate the *blasonné* are often the direct result of witnessing a physical attribute which comprises the initial *blason*.

In Neoplatonic fashion, La Ceppède's first poem dealing exclusively with Christ's physical attributes, sonnet 51 of Book I, describes the beloved's eyes, suggesting the symbolic importance of the physical in terms of the metaphysical:⁴

Ce ne sont pas sans plus ses paroles puissantes,
Qui courbent ces mutins: Il sort de ses beaux yeux,
Tant d'éclats tant d'éclairs, que ces medians Hebrieux
Ne peuvent soustenir leurs flammes terrassantes [.]

O beaux yeux, beaux Soleils, ô beautez ravissantes,
Qui passez de bien loing les beautez de ces lieux,
Qui donnez estre, & lustre à la beauté des Cieus,
Qui pourroit soustenir vos clartez doux-forçantes?

⁴ I follow Robert Cottrell's suggestion that in the Neoplatonic interpretation of the body, "what is higher is purer and less physical than what is lower." Consequently, the upper reaches of the body, such as the neck and head, reveal a spiritual superiority to parts of the lower body. See "Scève's *Blasons* and the Logic of the Gaze," (68).

Moyse après avoir à l'Eternel parlé
Fut contraint de tenir son visage voilé,
Pour n'esblouir les yeux du peuple Israëlite.

La face de mon Christ brilloit bien autrement
Vous en fistes preuve, ô peintre Abigarite,
Lors que son jour frappa vos yeux d'aveuglement (200).⁵

Structurally and thematically, this poem constitutes a *blason* since it focuses on a single image of the beloved's body which is described and interpreted through a series of apostrophes, stichic anaphora and relative clauses (Saulnier 75–82). As will be seen, there is a clear movement from the presentation of a material *blason*, i.e., the eyes, to what is truly *blasonné*, i.e., spiritual qualities which the eyes represent.

The narrative context of the poem elucidates the dynamic between public and private spaces within the meditative sequence. La Ceppède follows the Gospels to recount Judas's betrayal and Christ's subsequent return to Jerusalem for trial and execution.⁶ The "mutins" in verse two denote Roman soldiers and their Hebrew cohorts. Two sonnets earlier in sonnet 49, the force of Christ's identification of himself as Jesus of Nazareth knocks his potential captors to the ground, much in the same manner of his gaze in the first quatrain of the current sonnet. With respect to the interplay between public and private spaces, it is important to note that Christ's blinding gaze takes place in the open, public space of Gethsemane outside Jerusalem. The eye, a common image in a common space, is celebrated because it provides most readers with a quick identification of Christ as a beauty and as a lover.⁷

Nonetheless, this image assumes its fullest meaning only when it is interiorized and interpreted not simply through the Petrarchan conceit of "eyes as suns," but through the poet's attempt to decipher the meaning in verse 8: "Qui pourrait soustenir vos clartez doux-forçantes?" The paradox of the "clartez doux-forçantes," as well as the interrogative form in which it is presented, suggest that the accessibility or understanding of the image, and the divine mystery behind it, are beyond the sphere of

⁵ All quotes from the *Théorèmes* are taken from volumes 1 and 2 of Yvette Quenot's 1988–89 critical edition.

⁶ See Matthew 26:47–50, Mark 14:43–47 and Luke 22:3–6 in the Vulgate.

⁷ The eye is a well-known object of *blason*. See Saint-Gelais's *L'Oeil* in Anne-Marie Schmidt's *Poetes du XVIe siècle* (312–13).

public or common apprehension. What the meditant requires is more focused scrutiny, such as that provided by extended, private meditation.

In the sestet, the poet gives a partial answer to the question posed at the end of the octave. At the sonnet's conclusion appear two typologies which provide biblical examples of those unable to sustain the beauty and power of God's light. The first tercet contains references to Exodus (34: 29, 33, 35) where Moses, after having spoken to God, was forced to cover his face so as not to blind the Israelites. Similarly, the second quatrain relates the experience of the Abigarite painter who, upon exposure to the illuminative powers of the divine, went blind.⁸ As part of the internalization process, the reader must ask her/himself if s/he would be capable of apprehending such an overwhelming presence.

Accordingly, the poet must ask if the esthetic and spiritual ideal that Christ's body represents could ever *be* portrayed in the lyric, or any other art form. La Ceppède hints that internalization, even personalization, of this experience is possible when, in verse 12, he refers to "La face de *mon* (emphasis mine) Christ." During spiritual contemplation, the image of an Almighty Christ casting a blinding gaze yields to the poet's intimate look upon *his* Christ's face. Public, or outward fear of Christ's power gives way to private, inward assurance of His beneficence. What is *blasonné*, then, is not so much the open spectacle of Christ's force and the power of his eyes, as it is the ineffable, inscrutable beauty of his essence.

The same movement from initial apprehension of a part of Christ's body in a public space, to eventual contemplation and understanding of it in a private, meditative, space occurs in La Ceppède's *blason* of Christ's hands. Drawing on the biblical notion that the hand of God reflects divine will, La Ceppède, in Book III, devotes a number of Crucifixion sonnets to the portrayal of Christ's hands.⁹ The consignment of a number of poems, as opposed to a single sonnet, to a part of Christ's body comprises La Ceppède's greatest contribution to the *blason* subgenre. Apparent from the poet's narration of the physical, or public de-

⁸ Annotation 4 of La Ceppède's sonnet gives the biblical references to this typology.

⁹ With respect to Renaissance esthetics, George Ferguson observes that "the origin of this symbol rests in the frequent scriptural references to the hand and the arm of the Lord, symbols of His strength, power and will." Earlier in the same work, Ferguson suggests that "the presence of the Almighty was frequently indicated by a hand . . . that hid the awe-inspiring and glorious majesty of God." *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (47–48).

struction of Christ's flesh (largely marked through the hands), is the concurrent spiritual, private re-membering of Christ's being through references to His will and majesty. Occurring simultaneously is a re-membering of the text itself. The reader/meditant, in order to grasp the logic, as well as the totality of Christ's physical dismemberment and subsequent metaphysical re-memberment, must refer to previous sections of the text, reading it as a continuous, self-referential narrative rather than as a discreet, loosely connected assemblage of sonnets.

La Ceppède begins the hand/will sequence in the sestet of Sonnet 14, Book III:

A peine le pauvret acheva de s'estendre
 Sur la Croix, que luy mesme encommença de tendre
 Sa main gauche premiere à la mercy du fer.
 La gauche avec le coeur a plus de voisinage:
 Pource il veut que premiere en l'oeuvre en temoignage
 Qu'il leur ouvre son coeur pour nous fermer l'enfer (486).

As in the *blason* of Christ's eyes, the sonnet's narrative context helps establish the bond between public and private spaces. Christ's persecutors orchestrate his punishment at Golgotha as a public spectacle of torture and humiliation. His agony becomes "public" not only in the sense that it takes place in front of a large group of people, but from the standpoint that Christ gives the impression that he no longer controls nor owns his body. To the unsophisticated reader, Christ's suffering and weakness are cause for despair. However, for the initiated *dévo*t, the external or public display of acquiescence belies a private realization of Christ's will to subject himself to death in order to redeem man. The poet's language reveals that Christ's death is the latter's choice, as the reflexive "s'estendre" in verse 9, and the idea that Christ "himself" (emphasis mine) offers his hand to the stake in verses 10 and 11, suggest. La Ceppède emphasizes Christ's will again in verse 13 as he explains Christ's actions in terms of His own volition: "Pource il *veut* (emphasis mine) que premier en l'oeuvre en temoignage." Christ stretches his left hand because, as stated in verse 12, "La gauche avec le coeur a plus de voisinage." Christ's body thus obeys the dictates of his will, as the opening of the hand to the spike foreshadows the opening of the heart which enables humankind's salvation.

Sonnet 15 continues the *blason* of the left hand by noting Christ's silence upon the stake's entry. Silence connotes submission, further emphasizing that Christ's downfall is by his design. More significant, however, is the conclusion of the *blason* in Sonnet 16. Here, La Ceppède describes the nailing of Christ's right hand as the poet begins the catalogue of the destruction of Christ's entire body. Christ's breaking body mirrors a break in the narrative. La Ceppède's narrative focus shifts from the public spaces of Golgotha and the Crucifixion to the private, intimate spaces of the mind's deep meditation. The change is best exemplified three poems later in sonnet 20, a poem written as a *blason*-like *éloge* of Christ's love. This sonnet re-members and reconstructs Christ's glory by alluding to His ultimate victory over death:

L amour l'a de l'Olympe icy bas fait descendre:
 L'amour l'a fait de l'homme endossé le peché:
 L'amour luy a des-ja tout son sang fait espandre:
 L'amour l'a fait souffrir qu'on ay sur luy craché:

. . . Belle pour qui ce beau meurt en vous bien-aimant
 Voyez s'il fut jamais un si cruel supplice,
 Voyez s'il fut jamais un si parfait Amant (497).

The internalization process takes place not only in the near prayer/kyrielle structure of the first quatrain, but in references to Christ as a lover. The images of "ce beau [qui] meurt en vous bien-aimant" (v.12), as well as the final interpretation of Christ as "un si parfait amant" (v.14), reflect the emotional *frisson* a meditant would experience by receiving not only Christ's grace, but his love. Intimacy is strengthened by the poet's direct appeal to the *dévo*t through the use of the personal pronoun "vous". The statement that "ce beau meurt en *vous* bien-aimant" (emphasis mine) establishes a causal relationship between Christ's death and his love of humankind, forcing the meditant to recognize his/her direct involvement, if not guilt, in the bien-aimé's sacrifice.

Thus, while Christ's body and being may belong to his persecutors in the public spaces of Gethsemane and Golgotha, it belongs to the poet and *dévo*t in the private, less accessible reaches of the contemplative mind and heart. In order to bridge the distance between public horror and private rapture, the reader must interpret the often harsh reality represented in the physical image of the *blason* as a cognitive point of entry into understanding what the poet truly intends to *blasonner*. Frequently,

the *blasonné* in La Ceppède's adaptations of the subgenre is the poet's certainty that Christ's victory over death will redeem mankind. *Blason* focuses on a part of Christ's earthly existence in order to *blasonner* the glory of the celestial whole. The move from *blason* to *blasonné* mirrors that from physical to metaphysical, showing how portrayal of the body yields insight into the soul.

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