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John Donne, 'The Crosse' and Recusant Graffiti

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Donne's 'The Cross' is usually set against the 1603 Millenary Petition and the 1604 Hampton Court conference, about the legitimacy about making the sign of the cross, in baptism and elsewhere.¹

But there may be earlier, specifically recusant associations in the poem. Barbara Lewalski argues that Donne is interested in analysing an abstract symbol, demonstrating striking parallels between Donne's list of crossing gestures (outstretched limbs in swimming, flying, or praying) and 'found' crucifixes (the cross-pieces of handles, the divisions of the globe, the sutures of the skull) and those illustrated in Justus Lipsius's De cruce libri tres (Antwerp, 1593).²

Recently, Richard L. Williams has investigated instances of late 1590s recusant ingenuity over creating crucifixes when they had been taken away. In 1597, a group of lay Catholic gentlemen, interned for their faith in Ely, repeatedly drew crucifixes over the walls of their rooms (washed off by equally determined keepers). During the six months of 1597 in which John Gerard S.J. was imprisoned in the Tower of London, he moulded crosses out of discarded orange peel.³

In both Donne's poem and in the case of the recusants, a legitimate thing becomes an illegitimate sign, hiding under its own triviality and evanescence. As a student at Oxford and the inns of court, Donne was a Roman Catholic. The earliest portrait of Donne, from 1591, shows him wearing an earring in the shape of a cross. By 1597, however, he had sailed on an expedition against Catholic Spain with the Earl of Essex and was employed by Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. The temporary nature of chalk, peel, and gesture may express an on-off conversion, hidden in plain sight.

¹ J. Donne, The Complete English Poems, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 646.

² B. Lewalski, Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-century Religious Lyric (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 255-6, figure 6.

³ R.L. Williams, 'Contesting the Everyday: the Cultural Biography of a Subversive Playing Card', in Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings, ed. T. Hamling and C. Richardson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 26-8.