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Real versus Imputed Righteousness: The Speaker's Soteriological Oscillation in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*¹

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One of the most divisive issues in the Reformation era was that of justification. Whether a believer is made or counted right, coupled with the question of whether he can work towards his own justification at all, divided Catholics and Protestants. How this tension is represented in the *Holy Sonnets* by John Donne, who was born and raised in a Catholic family but joined the priesthood of the Church of England, is what this brief essay will explore.

A summary of the Protestant and the Catholic views on justification is in order². Based on their core belief of *sola-gratia*, Protestants stressed that whatever righteousness counts toward justification cannot be located within a believer but is clothed on or *imputed* to him by God from outside. “This is a marvelous definition of Christian righteousness: it is a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ,” asserted Luther in *Lectures on Galatians*³, while Calvin argued in *Institutes* that “man is not righteous in himself but the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation.”⁴ Concomitantly, the notion of forensic justice, which holds that

¹ This essay is based on the paper I read at the 22nd ACMRS Conference, at Arizona State University on February 8, 2016. In publishing that paper in the current form, I made some additions and amendments. Quotations from Donne's poems are based on Helen Gardner (ed.), *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) unless otherwise noted. Quotations from the Bible are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

² In preparing this overview, I owe much to Alistair McGrath's account in *Reformation Thought: an Introduction* (2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 86-119.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Lectures on Galatians Chapters 1-4: (Luther's Works: vol.26. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 233-234.*

⁴ John Dillenberger (ed.), *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (Scholar Press, 1975), 450..

in justification a sinner is *declared* rather than made righteous. In *Lectures on Romans* Luther wrote that justified Christians are “in truth...sinners, but in the eyes of God they are righteous, because He reckons them so.”⁵ In thus distinguishing between real and imputed righteousness, or between *being* just and being *reckoned* just, there is a potential element of nominalism in Protestant soteriology that may sunder justification from sanctification.

That potentially nominalist element was what Catholics vigorously opposed. The Council of Trent declared that in justification we “...are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and we are not only reputed, but are truly called and are, just”⁶, while anathematizing anyone who “saith, that men are justified...by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ”.⁷ In the Catholic understanding justification does not mean merely God’s outward covering of sins but involves inner sanctification of a believer: man is not passively *reputed* just but *is* just, and his agency becomes both possible and required, so that he can cooperate with the infused divine grace. “If any one saith, that by faith alone he is justified...that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his free will, let him be anathema”, declared another of the Council’s Canons.⁸

Driven by a sense of sinfulness as well as by fear of damnation, Donne’s speaker in the *Holy Sonnets* often resorts to the doctrine of imputed righteousness with a hope of being justified despite his lack of merit. Yet just as often the same speaker, discontented with potential nominalism of the doctrine, seeks real renewal of his self and in so seeking desires to share in the redemptive violence experienced by Christ. Below I will discuss four Holy Sonnets— “This is my play’s last scene”, “If poisonous minerals”, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God” and “I am a little world made cunningly”. How is the rift between the Catholic and the Protestant views on justification represented in these sonnets? How are the theologically incompatible desires of a believer—to be counted righteous without merit and yet to become substantially right—dramatised in the oscillations of their speaker?

⁵ Hilton C. Oswald (ed.), *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia* (*Luther’s Works*: vol. 25. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 258.

⁶ Decree on Justification, Chapter 7 in H.J. Shroeder (tr.) *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Original Text with English Translation* (St. Louis: Herder, 1950), 33.

⁷ Decree on Justification, Canon XI in Shroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 43.

⁸ Decree on Justification, Canon IX in Shroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 41.

2

“This is my play’s last scene” is a meditation on Death and Judgement filled with fear. Registered in the five-time repeated “last” is the dramatic immediacy of imagined death to the speaker, but no less striking is the intense fear he feels in the event’s forensic as well as ontological aspects. The “unjoynt[ing]” [l.5] of body and soul is terrifying enough, yet just as terrifying is God’s condemning gaze which “shakes every joynt” [l.8] of the speaker.

This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint
 My pilgrimages last mile; and my race
 Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,
 My span’s last inch, my minutes last point,
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoynt
 My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space,
 But, my’ever waking part shall see that face,
 Whose feare already shakes every joynt:
 Then, as my soule, to’heaven her first seate, takes flight,
 And earth-borne body, in the earth shall dwell,
 So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
 To where they’are bred, and would presse me, to hell.
 Impute me righteous, thus purg’d of evill,
 For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devill.

There is a notable confusion in the speaker’s argument. On one hand, somewhat complacently, he speaks of the trichotomic, instead of the usual dichotomic, “unjoynting” of himself after death, claiming that each will depart to their place of origin: his soul to heaven, his body to the earth and his sins will “fall...to hell” [ll. 11-12]. This is as if one’s sins were separable from one’s body and soul and as such neither part had to suffer the sins’ consequences. On the other hand, he does not seem convinced with his own argument, either: if only in the subjunctive, he is referring to the possibility of his sins “presse[ing]” [l.12] him (this time his self apparently indivisible) down to hell, It is in such salvific confusion that the speaker invokes the notion of imputation of righteousness, as he petitions that God may “impute [him] righteous” [l.13].

There is a further confusion in the fact that this petition for imputed

righteousness is followed by an assertion of purity. If the speaker is, as he claims to be, already “purg’d of evil” [l.13], he deserves justification and need not ask to have the divine righteousness imputed. Seeing in this confusion the poet’s return to the more Catholic logic of merit, Richard Strier argues that the lines here have not “take[n] print” of the Protestant understanding of justification.⁹ Though I agree with him, as I will show in the next section, that Donne in *Holy Sonnets* does reveal his residual Catholicism, it seems to me that the poet here is embodying in his speaker the extreme anxiety of a believer, who turns to the Protestant concept of imputed righteousness for assurance in spite of his claim to purity. In the acute awareness of his sinfulness, the speaker, needing some firm hope to latch onto, is resorting to a doctrine that, if only God so wills, may give him a chance of being justified while remaining in essence a sinner¹⁰.

A similar fear is behind the soteriological confusion in “If poisonous minerals.” Its octave consists of a series of mutterings or “dispute[s]” [l.9] on what he sees as the contradiction and injustice of God. Why is man alone condemned for wrongdoings while plants, animals and minerals are not? [ll.1-4a] Why does he have to be counted all the more heinous for his reason and free will? [ll.4b-6] Most importantly, why does the God of mercy turn to wrath [ll.7-8] Yet in the sestet the speaker, like Job restraining himself after his complaints to God (Job 40:3-5), corrects himself away from such disputations and addresses God in the second person, seeking instead remission for his sins. The trouble is that the petitions he is making are confused, and confused doubly.

If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree,
Whose fruit threw death on else immortall us,
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damn’d; Alas; why should I bee?
Why should intent or reason, borne in mee

⁹ Richard Strier, “John Donne Awry and Squint: The *Holy Sonnets*, 1608-10” (in *Modern Philology*, vol. 86, No. 4 [1989], 357-384), 383.

¹⁰ The idea of “God’s will” is inseparably linked with the idea of divine predestination, on which Calvin was more unambiguously theocentric than Luther. Though on one hand Donne was seriously attracted to that hallmark doctrine of Calvinism as it would free him from the sense of spiritual underachievement, on the other hand he could not fully embrace it in the end, for it left absolutely no room for human involvement in the process of the Election while emphasizing the prerogative of God as Savior. See my discussion on “Batter My Heart” in the next section (6-8), especially note 14.

Make sinnes, else equall, in mee more heinous?
 And mercy being easie, and glorious
 To God, in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee?
 But who am I, that dare dispute with thee
 O God? Oh! of thine onely worthy blood,
 And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood,
 And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie;
 That thou remember them, some claime as debt,
 I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

The first confusion is over whether he wants to have his sins remitted solely through the Redeemer's action or through, if partially, his own agency. If the speaker strictly adheres to the principle of *sola gratia* like Luther and Calvin in claiming that the Redeemer's blood is indeed "onely worthy" [l.10], he does not have to invoke his own "teares" [l.11] in which to "drowne" [l.13] his sins, since they are, technically, ineffectual. But the fact that he does invoke them leads us to suspect that the speaker is attracted to the Catholic view of salvation, which gives a believer some role to play towards his own salvation¹¹.

The second, and more serious, confusion is over whether he would like to have his sins *actually* remitted or to be treated *as if* there had been no sins in the first place. While on the one hand drawn to the Catholic soteriology for its allowance for human cooperation, the speaker on the other hand dare not to fully embrace its realistic aspect but is inclined to the more nominalist Protestant soteriology. Let us look at the sonnet's concluding couplet again. In line 13 the speaker does refer to the idea that his sins are a real debt, which God first needs to remember if only to forgive later (in fact an idea, as Gardner points out, that Donne himself was to preach later in life), but here it is dismissed as not his own but what is "claime[d]" by "some" [l.13]¹². The idea the speaker instead espouses in this sonnet is one in which God's

¹¹ Tears as a sign of contrition are a commonplace in religious poetry, but the idea of "drowning" sins in a "flood" of a believer's tears, even if the tears are mixed with the Savior's blood, does suggest, for its violence, the desire on the part of the speaker to claim some agency for his justification through physical pains. A more marked example of this desire for purification through "drowning" is found in "I am a little world made cunningly" as well. See the next section of this essay (8-10).

¹² "As much as David stands in fear of this Judge, he must intreat this Judge, to remember his sinnes: Remember them O Lord, for els they will not fall into my pardon[.]" in George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson (eds.), *The Sermons of John Donne*, vol. 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984),

mercy lies in His move to “forget”[l.14] the sins of a believer. On this claim Barbara Lewalski observes that it is precisely what justification means in Calvinistic terms — “that God will not see the sinner himself and his own sins, but remember him only in Christ”¹³. Though I doubt if, as she goes on to claim, this brings him “a kind of victory over his sins”, Lewalski is right in noticing the speaker’s tilt towards the Protestant soteriology. For a believer sorely afraid of the likely damnation, the nominalist “forgetting” of his sins is felt to be less intimidating, if not more comforting, in that it will altogether remove the prospect of having his unworthiness exposed in God’s eyes and thereby make the question of merit (or lack thereof) irrelevant to justification.

A believer despaired by a sense of utter sinfulness might find solace in the doctrine of imputed righteousness in that it freed him from the question of merit. Donne captures the psychology of such a believer in the language of the speaker in the above-discussed two sonnets.

3

The Protestant doctrine of imputed righteousness can give some solace to an agonized Christian, as it assumes that he will be justified without merit and solely through God’s grace. Yet for the very reason it separates real from reckoned justice, the doctrine may not satisfy a believer anxious for actual sanctification. In spite of the taught ineffectuality of good work, such a believer cannot rest with that teaching but try to work some way of his own towards salvation, so that he may feel the imparted divine righteousness has become really his.

This restlessness is dramatically captured in “Batter my heart, three-person’d God.” In language at once passionate and paradoxical, the sonnet conveys the sense of man’s total depravity stressed by Reformers, with the corollary desire for God’s powerful intervention. At the same time it conveys its speaker’s no less powerful urge to play some salvific role of his own by way of appropriating Christ’s corporeal sufferings, as he pursues real rather than imputed justice.

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine and seeke to mend;

320-321. Gardener, 69.

¹³ Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyrics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 270.

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
 I, like an usurpt towne, to 'another due,
 Labor to 'admit you, but Oh, to no end;
 Reason, your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
 But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.
 Yet dearely' I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
 But am betroth'd unto your enemye;
 Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I,
 Except you'enthral mee, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.

The speaker's overwhelming sense of sinfulness is voiced in a series of violent petitions in the first quatrain in which he seeks not the mending but the complete re-making of himself ("breake, blowe, burn and make me new"[1.4]. Note how the violence is conveyed to us aurally as well through the repetition of plosive [b]s coupled with the consecutive stresses). This is followed in the second quatrain by the comparison of his helplessness to that of a "usurpt" [1.5] town, the usurper being Satan who has taken control from its viceroy, reason [11.6-7]. In the sestet the imagery is switched to that of a betrothal (the speaker, the unwilling bride; Satan, technically the bridegroom; Christ, the bride's true love), which allows the speaker in the final lines to resort to nearly blasphemous paradoxes: he charges God to "enthral" [1.13] and "ravish" him so that he can be free and "chaste" [1.14]. Apparent, in these verbal gestures, is the extreme passiveness of the speaker, who seems to be submitting himself to his Lord's grace which he hopes will sanctify him, violently but irresistibly¹⁴.

This apparent passiveness of the speaker can, however, be taken as soteriological activism in disguise. Let us consider the series of his violent petitions again: in that they involve the copying of Jesus's death and resurrection, in which He was "o'erthrow[n]" and then did "rise" [1.3], those petitions to God to "breake,

¹⁴ In an article in Japanese I wrote several years ago I considered this seeming passiveness of the speaker as a gesture of his radical dependence on God. Kensei Nishikawa, "Amae in the Religious Poetry of Donne and Milton: An Anatomy of Dependence" in *Seventeenth-Century English Society* (ed.), *Seventeenth-Century English Literature and Science* (Kinseido: Tokyo, 2010), 164-191.

blowe [and] burn” [l.4] him constitute attempts, if awkwardly masochistic, at imitating the Son, and as such at accumulating merits towards justification. In other words, by corporeally appropriating Christ’s pains, he is seeking through the pains thus appropriated to claim some role in his own justification. This is a departure from the Protestant notion of imputed and passive justice: for, instead of letting God unilaterally and outwardly clothe His righteousness onto him, the speaker is in effect going out of his way to *earn* the righteousness, by asking to make what the Son has suffered his own¹⁵. We may add that in this salvific forwardness the speaker sounds highly egotistical as well, uttering the first-person-singular pronoun (*I, my, me*) no fewer than 14 times in the sonnet’s as many lines.

Inseparable from this forwardness is the speaker’s desire for a *real* as against forensic justification. The doctrine of imputed righteousness holds that the righteousness imputed never inheres but remains *alien* or outside of a believer. Donne’s speaker cannot be content with such a nominal and external mode of justification but is anxious for a more actual and inner renewal, to earn sanctity as a felt, even somatically felt, fruit of justification. As Achsah Guibbory reminds us, the speaker in one of Donne’s love poems asserts that “[L]ove must not be, but take a body” (“Air and Angels”[l.10]).¹⁶ Likewise the speaker in this *Holy Sonnet* believes that the redemptive relation with God also requires a body—on which God works His powerful grace and through which the believer receives the violent yet wholesome disciplines of His love. This is why he charges God in erotic paradoxes to “enthral” [l.13] and “ravish”[l.14] him, as he fervently hopes for his real-cum-corporeal “free[dom]” [l.13] and “chast[ity]”[l.14].

Such a desire for salvation through physical pains is also voiced in “I am a little world”. In this sonnet, using the traditional ideas of the macro-cosmos and micro-cosmos, the speaker defines himself as “a little world”[l.1] which, though originally

¹⁵ Even if we grant the speaker’s desire for God’s irresistible grace is orthodoxly Calvinistic, petitioning, let alone demanding, for that grace is not so, or at least futile, in light of Calvin’s emphasis on predestination. As Oliver notes, “‘Batter my heart’ contains a brusque demand for something which Calvinists believed was entirely at the divine discretion”. P. M. Oliver, *Donne’s Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion* (London: Longman, 1997), 124.

¹⁶ Achsah Guibbory, “Donne’s Religious Poetry and the Trauma of Grace” in Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr (eds.), *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 236. The quotation from “Air and Angels” are from: Helen Gardner (ed.), *Donne: The Elegies and Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). And conversely, one can speak of how Donne’s poems of erotic love are suffused with theological language, as is the case with “The Flea” or “The Canonization”, to name but the two most conspicuous examples.

“made cunningly”[1.1], is now “betraid” [1.3] to the state of depravity. For the purification of that corrupt “world”, he asks for two violent measures, both of which have already been mentioned in the two sonnets discussed above: by flood (“[D]rown...my sins’ black memorie” in “If poisonous minerals”[1.12]) and by fire (“[B]reak, blow, burn and make me new” in “Batter my heart, three person’d God” [1.4]).

I am a little world made cunningly
 Of Elements, and an Angelike spright,
 But black sinne hath betraid to endlesse night
 My worlds both parts, and (oh) both parts must die.
 You which beyond that heaven which was most high,
 Have found new sphears, and of new lands can write,
 Powre new seas in my eyes, that so I might
 Drowne my world with my weeping earnestly,
 Or wash it, if it must be drown’d no more.
 But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire
 Of lust and envie have burnt it heretofore,
 And made it fouler; Let their flames retire,
 And burn me, ô Lord, with a fiery zeale
 Of thee’ and thy house, which doth in eating heale.

First, the speaker prays to be cleansed through the tears of repentance (“weeping earnestly” [1.8])¹⁷, and as if wanting to experience the Biblical Flood in the micro-cosmos or in the “little world” [1.1] that is him, he bids his contemporary discoverers of the new “sphears” [1.6] and “lands” [1.6] to flood his eyes with the waters of their “new seas” [1.7]. This petition for purification through the cosmic

¹⁷ See note 8 above as well. In discussing “literature of tears” in the 16th and 17th centuries, Martz considers the influence of Southwell, especially of his *Saint Peter's Complaints*, on Herbert (“My grief hath need of wat’ry things / That nature hath produc’d” [“Grief”, ll.3-4] or on Crashaw (“Hail sister springs! / Parents of silver-forded rills...I mean / Thy fair eyes, sweet Magdalene”[“Saint Mary Magdalene or The Weeper”[ll.1-2, 4-5]]), but Southwell may well have influenced Donne’s violently watery lines here, too. See Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 199-203. The quotations from Herbert and Crashaw are, respectively, from: F. E. Hutchinson (ed.), *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941) and L. C. Martin (ed.) *Crashaw's Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Flood is a sign, if only by allusion, of the speaker's desire to achieve real sanctification in that it involves violently corporeal pains.

Remembering, however, God's promise of no more flood in Genesis 9:15 (cf. "if it must not be drowned"[l.9]) as well as how his "fire / Of lust and envie" [ll.11-12] have put him deeper into the state of sin, the speaker switches imageries in line 10 and seeks to be cleansed by fire rather than by flood. Given the macro-/micro-cosmos analogy drawn at the sonnet's beginning, we may at first surmise that the fire to be invoked is the eschatological one in which "the earth...and the works therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:12). Yet what the speaker wishes to be burned with turns out to be the "fiery zeal" [l.13] of Jesus with which He drives out merchants and moneychangers to purify the Temple. If we remember that that episode in the Gospel of John is followed by Jesus's own prediction of His Death and Resurrection ("Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" [John 2:19]), we will notice that the speaker in his fervent wish for purification is in fact petitioning for what has occurred to Jesus to occur to him as well: if not exactly through the Crucifixion but through an extreme heat which, like the Cross, is both destructive and redemptive ("doth in eating heale"[l.14]), he is seeking to share both in the violence the Son has gone through and in the victory He has achieved¹⁸.

On the similarly caloric closing lines of "Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward" ("Burne off my rusts, and my deformity, / Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace" [ll.40-41]), Michael Schoenfeldt observes that, despite the increasing reluctance in seventeenth-century religious poetry to speak corporeally of the Passion, those lines in which the speaker prays for his renewal through fire "nudge the poem into the realm of Catholic theology, which emphasized merit rather than grace" and that "an emphasis on how Christ suffered for humanity precipitates a devotional mode in which humanity longs to suffer for God"¹⁹. I think these observations are applicable to this Sonnet, too: for the speaker is petitioning to appropriate the Son's sufferings in the form of a corrective fire, with a hope of being

¹⁸ In these fiery lines, too, as Martz suggests, Donne is likely to have owed to Southwell, especially to "The Burning Babe", where the infant Jesus, describing his heart as a furnace where "wrought are / Men's defiled hearts" [l.12], is Himself "on fire"[l.13]. Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, 75-83. The quotation from the poem is from: Alexandar B. Grosart (ed.), *Complete Poems of Robert Southwell* (New York: AMS Press, 1971).

¹⁹ Michael Schoenfeldt, "That spectacle of too much weight: The Poetics of Sacrifice in Donne, Herbert and Milton" in *Journal of Mediaeval and Early Modern Studies*, vol. 31, no.3 [2001], 562-585), 570-571

really sanctified through the corporeal reenacting of his Redeemer's experience²⁰. Again this is a departure from the doctrine of imputed and passive justice, seeking as he is to imitate the supposedly inimitable Passion of Jesus and in effect claiming some salvific role of his own.

A believer who has anxiety over his salvation may not find content in the doctrine of imputed righteousness, for though it emphasizes justification without merit on one hand, it does not guarantee simultaneous actual sanctification on the other. The two *Holy Sonnets* discussed in this section capture this soteriological dissatisfaction in the restlessness of their speaker, who seeks to appropriate the somatic pains of Jesus in the hope of achieving real inner renewal.

4

The soteriological rift in the Reformation era put an earnest Christian in an extreme unease. The Protestant view with its emphasis on imputed righteousness could remove his anxiety over lack of merit yet might fail to satisfy his desire for more than forensic justification. The Catholic view with its emphasis on real righteousness was capable of fulfilling his desire for substantial sanctification but did not allay his anxiety over possible spiritual underachievement. Neither view could remove both anxieties at the same time.

The speaker of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* embodies this salvific dilemma. In some Sonnets he resorts to the Protestant doctrine in his fear of damnation and seeks comfort in the possibility of God reckoning him just. In other Sonnets he is drawn to a more Catholic doctrine as he invokes corporeal violence, with a view to earning real sanctification through the imitation of suffering Christ. Such oscillation dramatizes the salvific tension that must have been experienced by the poet as well as by any anguished soul in the Reformation era, torn as they were between the two views on justification, i.e. real versus imputed righteousness.

²⁰ On this re-enacting of the Passion on the body of Donne's speaker and then in his poetical lines, see also my "How (Not) to Represent the Passion: A Reading of Some of Donne's Divine Poems", an article I wrote in Japanese for: Tetsuya Ogoshi, Midori Niino and Saeko Yoshikawa (eds.): *Kotoba-to-Iu-Nazo: Eibei Bungaku no Aforia (Enigmata in Words: Aphorisms in English and American Literature and Culture*. Osaka: Osaka Kyoiku Toshō, 2017), 36-51.

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