THE VAN DER PAELE ALTARPIECE

In grateful memory of Erwin Panofsky

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In Jan van Eyck’s *Madonna with the Canon Joris van der Paele*, 1434-36 (Fig.1), the kneeling Canon on the right of the Madonna’s throne as you enter is being recommended by his name saint, George; on the opposite side is Donatian, the patron saint of Bruges. It is usually said that the Canon is being presented to the Madonna and that his attention is focussed on her, unless it be on the Child. St. George, it is added, is lifting his helmet in a gallant, knightly salute to the Madonna—one of those quaint gestures, we must believe, that belongs to the order of chivalry. But these explications, though they have the advantage of preserving piety and convention, do not meet the test of simple observation. It is clear that the Canon is not on a line with the Madonna and must be somewhat in front of that line since she hardly needs to turn her head to look in his direction. The Canon, for his part, does not turn back toward the Madonna and Child as he would need if he were to meet their glance. As a fact, his head and shoulders are toward St. Donatian, and his eyes—unless we wish to say that he throws a mere backward look at the enthroned Pair—are directed at the cross at the top of Donatian’s staff. St. George, again, stands well before the throne, but as his face is in profile he must be addressing St. Donatian, immediately opposite him. George’s helmet and his left leg are turned at an angle toward the picture plane and therefore away from the throne. His right arm, moreover, blocks his line of vision of the Madonna—hardly a graceful, not to say courteous, gesture if his intention is to address her.

As I read the picture, St. George is commending the Canon to St. Donatian who responds by looking towards the kneeling ecclesiastic in acknowledgment. The Madonna and Child also cast their eyes on him with benignity. In this arrangement, the protagonist of the drama is the Canon, not the Madonna. It is on him that the strongest light falls. His kneeling posture, his modest place to the side and rear express a virtuous humility, but that
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humility is not so abject as to prevent the display—in symbolic form, at least—of other notable virtues, especially those of Temperance and Prudence.

The Canon’s white gown, the surplice, is a symbol of the mortification of the flesh, as Durandus explains. Its name, superpelliceum, comes from having originally been worn over a tunic of pelt, the symbol of flesh, and the artist expresses this by showing a thin line of fur that just emerges at the neck and is repeated on the bottom hem of the tunic, seen behind St. George’s right foot (Fig. 2). The surplice is, then, a symbol of continence, a part of Temperance.

The Canon’s tightly closed lips, which we might take for a mere habit of expression if it were not in such deliberate contrast with St. George’s half-open, smiling mouth, is also to be read as a sign of Temperance. The tight lips for silence are homologous with the old, quaintly literal symbol of a bridle placed on the mouth. One should not fail to notice, however, that Christ holds a parrot, symbolizing eloquence, in the direction of the Canon, for not only silence is golden, speech is golden too. Thus one virtue sometimes obscures the glory of another.

It is probable that the horn-rimmed spectacles with their black case that hangs from the string, have symbolic meaning too, either as Prudence or as still another sign of Temperance—at least spectacles are held in the hands of Attremance in the well-known illuminated manuscripts of Somme le Roi.

1 Rationale divinorum officinarum III, i, 11.

2 St. George’s smile does not, it seems, please the critics. In the volume of the Corpus of Flemish painting that describes the Van der Paele Altarpiece, A. Janssens de Bisthoven and R. A. Parmentier, Les Primitifs flamands (Bruges, Antwerp, 1951), p. 38, there is the confession, “son expression a été généralement mal comprise et qualifiée de niaise, grossière ou mal réussie.” The authors think that he is speaking as he presents his client. In fact, none of the other figures in the picture close their mouths as determinedly as does the Canon. The tightly closed lips is referred to by implication in the statue of Samson forcing open the lion’s mouth that occurs to the Canon’s right. The statue has the meaning not only of Fortitude but also of Temperance, since Samson is presumed to have torn out the beast’s tongue (Judges 14:6); see Jacobus Typotius, Symbola, Frankfort, 1642 (ed. prim. 1601-3) II, p. 115 ff. (Hierographia IX).