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POETRY AS LANGUAGE PRESENTATION JOHN DONNE POET, PREACHER, CRAFTSMAN

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John Donne is, among the last of the “gentlemen poets,” among the last of those who endowed their verse with an air of *sprezzatura*, effortless mastery of the rebellious material of language. As a poet he belongs to the 16th century, with Sydney, Daniel, and Shakespeare, more than he does with the school that bears his name. As Barbara Lewalski pointed out, it was mainly through his preaching rather than through his poems that Donne established the new, “protestant ‘poetics’ [. . .] but he left to others — most strikingly to Herbert — to make that theory the governing principle of an entire *corpus* of poetry.”¹

The importance of the change in poetics caused by the work of John Donne is not limited to the initiation of the Metaphysical School. The literary quality of Donne’s sermons contributed to the transformation of poetry from an art in which language was regarded as a material to be presented, into an art of representation, where language is regarded as a vehicle, less important than the ideas it carries. The poets of the Renaissance did not view language as a transparent medium through which “reality” can be seen, but rather as a substance which had to be modelled into delightful forms. The notion of language as representation was common to philosophical, moral writings, as it was, naturally, taken over by the religious writers; but as these writers, Donne in particular, drew attention to the poetic quality of the Biblical text and tried to imitate it in their work, the distinction between poetry and other kinds of discourse was obscured.

The idea of transferring to poetry the function of representation was only indirectly suggested by the work of Donne. For him, preaching and poetry were still two distinct kinds of discourse, two very different ways of using language, and only a small part of his religious poetry seems to combine the two functions. Poetry is present, material language, language dependent for meaning on the context in which it develops. This context is not only the literary tradition of the time but also a vast sociolinguistic system that is only partially mastered and controlled by us. The language of this poem is made present, revealed as material, by overcontextualization and intertextualization.

In contrast, the language of the sermons tends to be purified, made transparent and apt for representation. The power of language to function as a vehicle for manifesting a reality outside and beyond itself is reserved for the sacred text and its propagation. For Donne and his contemporaries, the only reality beyond language was God, whose need of representation transformed language into a vehicle and a preacher into his spokesman.

Donne's poetry is only too often forced to fit the criteria of a poetics that was only nascent in his sermons. A parallel study of the way language works towards presentation in the poems and towards representation in the sermons will show these processes at their extremes. As an author, Donne is unique in having exhausted one mode and so brilliantly established the other.

The notion of language as vehicle has dominated Western culture, especially since the 17th century, and it is central to the development of European philosophy. As Richard Rorty suggests in the title of his book (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*),² philosophy has been defined mainly as a mirror of nature. This has consolidated the idea that language function as a glass, that it can reflect, or let a reality beyond itself be seen through its transparency. Structuralist linguistics, mainly that of Saussure, has substantially contributed to the dissolution of this mode of regarding language. By defining language as a system of signs, and the indestructible unity of signifier and signified, Saussure placed meaning within language itself and eliminated the problem of reconciling it to reference. A word covers an area of meaning which is not completely covered by any other word in the language itself.

More complete and satisfactory is the definition of meaning given by Ludwig Wittgenstein: the meaning of a word is its use. Like Saussure's, this definition is contextual, but it enlarges the context taking it from the linguistic to the social level. The speaker and the interlocutor are taken into account as much as their social bond is, which makes language itself possible. Language cannot *mean* by itself, nor is it dependent on an external reality; it depends on the intentions of the speaker, but ". . . an intention is embedded in a situation, in human customs and institutions."³

Poststructuralist semantics has concentrated mainly on this pragmatic aspect of "language in action," the areas of meaning that traditional semantics does not cover. This fairly recent development in semantic studies led us to two important conclusions: first, that meaning is not always dependent upon the glassy quality of language, upon its transparency, but it is most often the result of negotiation between users; secondly, that the glassy essence of language is a notion with a history. It has certainly influenced the production of numerous texts, but when dealing with a text, the first thing to determine is whether or not its author had that notion. Language can also be manipulated in two

opposite directions: towards representation, the mirroring of an external reality, when it is conceived of as vehicle, carrier, and towards presentation when it is considered a material, meaningful only by virtue of the relationships between the speakers.

The poetics of the tradition, at whose end Donne the poet should be placed, clearly regarded language as material. Most of the theoreticians of the time, including Sidney, Fraunce, Puttenham, call the poet a "maker" and insist on the independence of his creation from anything outside the mind. A poem is "conceived," "invented," and only afterwards finds its matter: ". . . and indeed the name of *making* is fit for him, considering that whereas other arts retain themselves within their subject, and receive, as it were, their being from it, the poet only bringeth his own stuff, and does not learn the conceipt out of the matter, but taketh matter for a conceit. . . ."⁴ The conceit in-forms the materiality of language; it is not something to be expressed by it.

The Renaissance poets and theoreticians alike are obsessively preoccupied with form, the substantiality of language apparent in its musical potentialities. Meaning is subordinated to the forms which are not only of musical nature, but can also create fantastic geometries. The subordination of meaning does not lead to its exclusion. The poet is judged, according to Puttenham, by his capacity to fill the form with sense, sometimes even to write on cue: "And bycause ye shall not thinke the maker hath premeditated beforehand any such fashioned ditty, do ye your selfe make one verse whether it be of perfect or imperfect sense, and give him for a theame to make all the rest upon: if ye shall perceive the maker to keep the measures and rime as ye have appointed him, and besides do make his dittie sensible and ensuant to the first verse in good reason, then may ye say ha is his crafts maister."⁵

As the pre-eminence of form does not lead to a loss of meaning, the notion of an empty language, of words without value beyond their sound, simply does not exist for Puttenham. As long as the discourse of one person is understood and accepted by another, there is language and meaning. Puttenham's notion of language itself is remarkably close to Wittgenstein's, including the interaction of all the members of the community, which leads to stability, but also allows for change, for the permanent process of negotiation that engenders meaning: "But after a speach is fully fashioned to the common understanding, and accepted by consent of a whole contrey and nation, it is called a language, and receaveth none allowed alteration, but by extraordinary occasions by little and little, as it were, insensibly bringing in of many corruptions that creepe along with the time. . . ."⁶

Another characteristic of the Renaissance poetics is not equating poetry with figurative language. Figures belong to the art of speaking, which can manifest

itself in any kind of discourse. Their use, however, may be different, according to the purpose of the discourse. Here is the way in which Abraham Fraunce defines a trope: "A trope or turning is when a word is turned from his natural signification, to some other, so conveniently, as that it seems rather willinglie ledd, than driven by force to that other signification. This was first intended of necessitie for want of words, but afterwards continued and frequented by reason of the delight and pleasant grace thereof."⁷

Poetry is defined by its purpose, which is to give pleasure to the senses, but chiefly to the mind. The quality of this art was the sign of superiority of a society at a time when progress was measured by a nation's mastery of its language. An attentive look at Donne's poetry will show that it grew out of this poetics which treats language as a material presence and not a vehicle for carrying ideas. At the same time, his poetry shows the signs of an exhaustion of a tradition that had to make room for new developments: the superimposition of tropes, the overcontextualization of individual words, the pronounced parodic character of many of his poems, show that it was time for a change.

Donne, like any other Renaissance poet, is aware of the fact that, in order to produce pleasure in the reader, he has to work upon the language, to make it present without mediation. The fact that he creates in the already established context of a poetical tradition makes it possible for him to achieve this goal through more sophisticated means than simple pattern or musicality. Pattern and rhythm are not absent from Donne's poetry, but they are not the most important ways in which language is made present. Donne is able to use the conceit, which, in the sense derived from "conceit" and "to conceive" used by the Renaissance theoreticians, would seem to work towards making language transparent, in order to achieve its materialization. In doing this, Donne works with set phrases, meaningful utterances, units of an already stabilized language, a language with fully developed capacities of representation. In representing, revealing or reflecting, language becomes absent, imperceptible. It can be kept present only if it is not made to reveal or reflect. A phrase like, "his eyes dwelt on his mistress," for instance, can make us picture an enamored young man, staring at the woman he loves. We imagine his looks, conjecture his feelings, his thoughts, in a word, we represent him, to the point where the phrase disappears in its transparent evocation. But when Donne "conceives" an elaboration of the phrase, the work of our picture making imagination is blocked, and the phrase becomes itself present:

Send home my long strayed eyes to me
Which (oh) too long have dwelt on thee

Yet since there they have learned such ill,
 Such false fashions,
 And false passions,
 That they be
 Made by thee
 Fit for no good sight, keep them still.

(The Message)

The "strayed eyes" in the poem are not the linguistic representation of the lover's actual eyes, nor are they representing the idea of loving. They are part of a phrase, a fact of language, revealed to the reader *instead* of the image. The phrase becomes substantial, we gain awareness of its presence, of its history of the metaphor that generated it. At the moment of its presentation in the poem, the forgotten, dead metaphor is alive again. The meaning of the phrase no longer resides outside language, in a reality that has to be represented; on the contrary it consists in making the reader apprehensive of the movement of significance in the order of discourse.

Donne manages to produce contexts in which the words may have several, sometimes contradictory meanings at once, a process which closely resembles punning. Instead of having a unique, precisely defined and non-negotiable significance, the words are put forth with all the ballast of meaning that they can bring, with all the traces left on any speaker's memory by their previous uses. There might be an obvious difference between the lexical meaning of the word, its semantic value and its actual use in language. Stressing that difference, Donne makes us realize that the words have their own existence and meaning independent of the reality they represent. A word like "nothing" can create a trope out of a grammar twist, as in "The Broken Heart,"

Yet nothing can to nothing fall,

or a whole poem, as in "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day," solely by enlightening us to the fact that every time we say *nothing* we mean something:

If I an ordinary nothing were
 A shadow, a light and body must be there.

The whole poem vainly strives towards the representation of nothingness, of the absolute void, but all it can achieve is to impose the presence of the word, its opaque reality. The word means what we make it mean; its significance springs from our mutual acceptance and understanding of each other's intentions.

The traces of the words' uses are most often left by the conversational situations of the spoken language. In such situations, the uses of the words appear to be perfectly normal and we hold the illusion of having correctly represented them (if we manage to communicate). But when two such uses are brought together in the same context, when they are superimposed in the manner of Donne's poems, this illusion disappears, and the impression of "contraries brought by violence together" which Dr. Johnson detected in his poetry is created. The contrast between a wet sponge and dry cork is plain to the common-sense. But when, by contrast to a woman with "spongy eyes," another woman, who does not cry, is called "dry cork," the representation falls short of both visual and logical power. The phrase harks back to an association of signifiers that crystalized itself in language and is independent of the relation between the things in the extralinguistic order. The words are acknowledged in their existence as such, and they no longer serve as vehicles of an extralinguistic reality. It is Donne's way of creating the meaning at the interstices of the text, of relating his text to the conversation of his age.

A look at the way Donne uses metaphors also demonstrates his capacity of making the language present. The fact is the more remarkable since metaphor is a figure which can be particularly useful for representation, and Donne is very effective in putting it to such use in his sermons. Metaphor, "the figure of transport," as Puttenham calls it (freely translating Aristotle), is not a guarantee of representation, even though it is the chief device to achieve it. It is just a mechanism that can be used for various purposes. When the purpose is representation, the "transport," i.e., the transfer, is made "out of necessity" to supply a missing name, or to replace an inadequate one. The similitude of the two terms involved is thus stressed to the point where the replaced one can be totally eliminated from language. When used to create pleasure, metaphors operate incomplete transfers, preserving the differences while revealing the similitudes. In this way, the linguistic units can acquire that kind of independence which is necessary for a poem to achieve effect. The power of representation is lost by the very excess of significance. When Donne finds an analogy between his mistress and the moon, fairness, the property that would justify the use of the new name, is not in question. Instead, the attractiveness of the lady is replaced by the quite literal attractiveness of the moon and acquires the overwhelming force of a cosmic phenomenon, without losing the malevolence of the human reality:

O more than moon,
 Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere,
 Weep me not dead, in thine arms, but forbear

To teach the sea, what it may do too soon.

(A Valediction; of Weeping)

There are at least two ways in which Donne handles metaphors both in his poems and in his sermons. One is to take a conventional analogy and explore its possibilities, thereby expanding the metaphor. The other procedure consists of defining a thing by a number of various separate analogies. The same method may have different effects according to the purpose of representing or presenting. When the mechanism of expanding a metaphor is used in a poem, a visual representation can be achieved only by stretching the limits of the imagination towards the comic and the absurd:

If thou unto thy Muse be married
Embrace her ever, ever multiply,
Be far from me the strange adultery
To tempt thee and procure her widowhood.

(To Mr. B.B.)

The married, adulterous and widowed muse is not only difficult to visualize; she asserts a reality which is not her own, but of the phrase that engendered "her."

When Donne accumulates a number of metaphors for the purpose of definition in a poem, the effect is the opposite of what we usually understand by defining. The metaphors evoke so many incongruous contexts that visualization becomes impossible. It is another way of asserting the presence of language. The second stanza of "Love's Growth" is a good example. The abstract notion announced by the title is defined as the stars made visible by the sun, blossoms on a bough, the circles stirred in water and the taxes imposed by princes in times of war. What love's growth is does not become clear. The stanza catalogues the contexts the word "growth" can function in, contexts which are more different than similar. It informs us about the many ways in which we can use the word, and shows us how little it is connected with the reality it may, at times, represent.

Metaphor, as well as overcontextualization exploits the conventions of language in order to make it present. A special case of language presentation is the exploitation of the literary conventions of courtly love poetry. The phraseology of courtly love, the meanings with which the words were invested by its context, give occasion to witty elaborations. Stock formulae like, love is a God, love is eternal, love is the union of two souls, two lovers are one person, the mistress is in the lover's heart, etc., are taken for granted and explicated in a manner that looks like a parody of the sermon pattern. The phrases conven-

tionally representing love are so expanded or juxtaposed as to blur any image they might be able to evoke. In the process, they assert their materiality and their inadequacy as a medium. A figurative phrase is taken literally and expanded with comical effects, as in "The Broken Heart," where the heart is literally broken, love literally strikes blows, etc.:

I brought a heart into the room
 But from the room, I carried none with me;
 If it had gone to thee, I know
 Mine would have taught thy heart to show
 More pity unto me: but Love, alas,
 At one first blow did shiver it as glass.

The comic breakage does not spoil the tenderness of the whole passage, but what we learn is that the words are tender, not the feeling that they are supposed to represent.

The "heart" phraseology is also taken up in "The Damp," where the lover is dissected and his mistress' image is found in his heart; and in "The Legacy," where the lover expresses his intention to leave his heart to his mistress after his death, but he cannot do so, because it had been "stolen" by her already. The convention of the lover "giving" parts of his body to his mistress leads Donne to operate as many dismemberings as this vocabulary contains, and to joke more than once about the most valued but unnamable "part."

One of Donne's favorite targets is the neoplatonic vocabulary. He often develops the neoplatonic cliché of representing love as the union of two souls and confronts it with the belief, derived from Aristotle, that there is an essential unity between body and soul. As a logical consequence, the despised, "bodily" love becomes more spiritual than the one developed only in the soul. The neoplatonic convention is thus constantly undercut. The conventional platonic lover would start at the bottom of the ladder of love, with physical attraction and would climb, by degrees of understanding, toward the spiritual height where the beloved becomes no more than a symbol. In Donne's "Air and Angels," the lover starts at the top and climbs, or rather tumbles down the ladder out of the necessity to find a body for his objectless, spiritual, urge.

In "The Ecstasy" the souls of the lovers become one in the air only in order to bring them down with the commonsensical remark that they cannot stay too long separated from their bodies. As the souls are united, the bodies cannot choose but unite, and the "spiritual" love is thus fulfilled down on earth.

Such mixings of conventional vocabularies, of contexts which are usually kept apart for the purpose of representation, give a pronounced parodic charac-

ter to many of Donne's poems. Parody is one of the ways in which language is made present, as it derives its signification from the relationship with another literary work, another linguistic structure. As meaning does not depend on anything transcending language, the reader is made strongly aware of the presence of the words. Donne's parodic gusto is at its peak in poems like "Love's Infiniteness," "Love's Alchemy," "Love's Deity," which expand, each in its turn, a conventional representation of love. "Love's Diet" reaches the limits of the grotesque by outblowing the convention of representing love as a human being that "feeds" on sighs, blushes, glances, etc. In Donne's version, the symbol grows fat on them and has to be subjected to a diet.

An extreme case of parody is the self reflexive poem, the poem that parodies itself, its subject matter being displaced by its language. Such poems make not only language present but also themselves as artifacts, as objects. In "The Apparition," the lover plans to send his ghost to tell something frightening to his mistress. As he imagines her already frightened by the apparition, he decides not to tell. The poem was written to tell, but it does not, for reasons to be found only in itself. The words communicate no message: they are just there, catalyzing the destruction of the love they were supposed to represent:

What I will say, I will not tell thee now.
Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent,
I had rather thou shouldst painfully repent;
Than by my threatenings rest still innocent.

"The Undertaking" starts and ends in the determination to be silent, spending its eloquence to surround its purpose, rather than revealing it. The moral of the fable remains hidden as the poem unwrites itself:

Then you have dine a braver thing
Than all the worthies did,
And a braver then will spring
Which is to keep it hid.

There are extreme cases of self-reflexivity which bear the sign of exhaustion of a poetic mode. Poetry as language presentation, the delight of creating the meaning on the fringe where it threatens to vanish found its last and most brilliant representative in John Donne. It did not altogether die after him; poetry is a kind of discourse where language always has the chance to become present, but the name of Donne marks the ending of its most flourishing period.

Donne's preaching is pervaded by an entirely different attitude to language. Biblical exegesis involved philological problems ever since the beginning of

the spread of the Christian doctrine. Paul and his followers had the difficult task of reconciling the Hebraic pattern of thought with the Greek philosophy whose principles dominated Gentile thinking. In the process, the Fathers developed a linguistic theory which made the figurative richness of the Bible a vehicle of representation for a transcendental reality. It was mainly Augustine's theory of signs that influenced Medieval Biblical exegesis, that was influenced mainly by Augustine's theory of signs, and Donne, although he was writing in the spirit of the Reformation, conspicuously adheres to it. Augustine established the distinction between *vox* and *res*, words and things. Words are signs, which stand for, or represent things; but things in their turn signify spiritual realities. By raising the empirical data the things, at the level of signification, Augustine established "reality" at the transcendental level, denying language any possibility of presence, of materiality.

Donne's adherence to the Augustinian theory of signification is not motivated only by respect for tradition. The Reformation had revived the interest in the interpretation of the sacred text, and as a consequence many contradictory interpretations appeared. Initially a revolt against the authority of the Catholic Church and an assertion of the national spirit, the Reformation was in danger of producing anarchy within each nation, by encouraging differences in matters of faith. It was therefore necessary to impose a discipline to religious thought, to create an authority to which all controversies could be referred. Religious writings inevitably acquired a political coloring, which was most often openly recognized. Richard Hooker, whose work has been singled out as expressing the same ideology as represented by Donne,⁷ openly proclaims the Church a political authority and recommends that the work of interpreting God's words should be done only by its representatives. The text's meaning is generally plain to any Christian, but "Other things also there are belonging (though in a lower degree of importance) unto the offices of Christian men: which because they are more obscure, more intricate and hard to be judged of, therefore God hath appointed some to spend their whole time principally in the study of things divine, to the end that in these doubtful cases their understanding might be a light to direct the others."⁹

Preaching the word of God for the consolidation of the Anglican, national Church at a historical moment when its unity was threatened by sectarian and puritan movements, Donne was very much in the position of the Early Church Fathers, who had consolidated christianity as an international, universal doctrine. If the linguistic theory of Puttenham reflected the process of stabilization of a national language whose specificity was its vital point, the Augustinian theory of signs reflects a tendency towards universalization. Placing reality at the transcendental level, Augustine could hope to achieve a transnational,

universal understanding. A unique, non-negotiable meaning, an accurate representation was the guarantee of the Church's authority. Acutely aware of the purpose of his discourse, both in the case of his poems and of his sermons, Donne would use language for representation with the same ease and vigor that he had displayed when using it for non-representation.

Donne's acceptance of the Augustinian view of language is by no means mechanical. He was in the same position as the Early Church Fathers and, rather than slavishly imitating their style, he was given the same options for using language. Paradoxically, it is the same linguistic sensitivity which enabled him to make the words present by de-stabilizing their context that gives the grace to his gesture of purifying and crystallizing their meaning for the purpose of representation. Donne's philological sagacity, his scrupulous analysis of synonyms, his comparisons of the original Hebrew text with its various translations, his attentive look at the movement of the tropes, are well known qualities of his sermons. What critics have been slow to notice is his constant effort of disciplining the figuratively rich and slippery language of the Bible towards the transparency and clarity of pure representation.

The task was not an easy one, because language can never achieve pure representation. The very fact that it is dependent for its existence on human subjects, who can manipulate it, allows for the development of meaning between and around the pure contours of the concepts. However, it is up to the speaker to make language as transparent as possible. The choice of representation is most often politically motivated, it is dictated by the necessity of ensuring unity of action on the basis of the unity of vision. Consequently, the language of representation is the language of authority.

As mentioned above, Donne benefited from the efforts of the Early Church Fathers to use representational language in propagating the Christian doctrine. Augustine had made of God a transcendental referent, a signified that functions not only outside language but indeed completely outside human reach. This signified remains absent and in need of a representation. In addition, Patristic writers had made the attempt to minimize the contextual ramifications of meaning. The Old and the New Testaments are already two quite different texts, where even the respective meanings of the word God can be at variance. The Early Church Fathers solved this problem by defining the figures of the Old Testament as types of Christ and their actions as prefigurations of his actions. In this way, if context is not altogether dispensed with for meaning, at least it is stabilized and homogenized.

Another factor that hindered representation in the interpretation of the Bible was the figurative richness of the text. The multiplicity of meaning, allowed by rhetorical figures, worked against clarity. To solve the problem, the patristic

tradition used the notion of allegorical meaning, which at once admits figurativeness and restricts the possibility of plural interpretation. But even allegory could not reduce the meaning of the text to univocity. Sometimes the unique meaning was considered threefold and finally entered tradition as fourfold: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical. Donne followed the Patristic tradition on its general lines, but there are some important differences, which demonstrate his personal talent and his awareness that, for the purpose of preaching, language has to produce representations.

Like Augustine, Donne places meaning, reality, outside the changeable flow of language. Truth is Donne's word for meaning: it is unique and unchangeable and partakes of divinity: "And so, in a large acceptation, every truth is the word of God; for truth is uniforme, and irrepugnant, and indivisible as God."¹⁰

Donne does not try to obscure the political purpose of his discourse. He justifies the action of preaching as an effort to impose a unique, stable and non-negotiable meaning. Speaking, language, is a very important factor in achieving a unity which would make the Anglican Church as secure and respectable as the Catholic Church. Here is the way Donne describes his profession: "So that *preaching* is that *calling*; and therefore, as if Christ do appear to any man, in the power of a miracle, or in a private inspiration, yet he appears but in weakness, as in an infancy, till he speak, till he bring a man to the hearing of his voice, in a settled Church, and in the Ordinance of preaching . . ."¹¹ Language is clearly regarded as the essential mediator, not only because Christ can no longer be present, but because his image, his representation, has to be the same for all the people. It is this representation itself that unites them under the authority of the Church.

Donne's linguistic sensitivity is most often used to minimize the ramifications of meaning that an unstable context might produce. In the sermon on the Psalm 89:48, "What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?", he is dissatisfied with the value that the context gives to the word *man*. For clarification, he invokes the Hebrew original, in which, out of four synonyms existent in language, the text uses the one with the most proper significance: "Not *ishe*, not Adam, not Enos; but it is *Mi Gheber*, *Quis Vir*; which is the word always signifying a man accomplished in all excellencies, a man accompanied with all advantagess . . ."¹² In this case, the return to the original makes the meaning unambiguous.

For the same purpose, Donne capitalizes on typology. As Winfried Schleier observes, "Donne is so familiar to the biblical allegory that he can use the word *type* figuratively: the transfiguration of Christ is a 'type' of the transfiguration that will occur in the general resurrection (3:120, 4:224), the

natural man is a 'convenient type' of the spiritual man (3:85, 2:418)."¹³ The extension of typology to the human affairs is part of the effort to make the meaning of the text unique and stable.

The success of representation does not only depend on the coherence and precision of the meaning. The preacher has to take into account the audience's capacity to grasp it. Understanding by sight is one of the characteristics of the Western civilization, a habit of thought which developed out of Plato's metaphor of the eye of the mind. But the Hebraic heritage, apparent in the text of the Old Testament implied another way of understanding based on the reality of the words and the negotiation of their meaning.¹⁴ Like the early Church Fathers before him, Donne uses words for their power of visualization. He produces, in his sermons, a visually coherent imagery which may surprise the readers of his poems whose imagination is never visually satisfied. The "eloquence of things" discovered by St. Augustine is used in the sermons to represent in visual terms an abstract reality. Things have properties familiar to the audience who is thus unambiguously directed towards the meaning of God's words, as in the representation of sin as a mark to shoot at: "At the beginning of the sinners Sin, God bends his bow and whets his arrows, and at last he shoots; But if there were no sin in me, God has no mark to shoot at; for God hates not me, nor anything that he hath made. (8:316, 14:163)"¹⁵

Certain things may sometimes have contradictory properties and be able to represent contradictory notions. The lion, for instance, can represent God, insofar as it is bold, and the devil, insofar as it is a devourer. But, as Schleier doesn't fail to notice, ". . . not all the wide range of properties would be operative in a given system; in a specific context one lion would not mean both Christ and the devil. Proper selection of significant qualities was the object of all spiritual interpretation."¹⁶ Purity and integrity are all important. One word cannot be doubly used, present two meanings at the same time, if it is supposed to represent accurately.

The fact that Donne does not always stick to the fourfold interpretation of the Bible is another proof that he did not mechanically apply the rules of interpretation established by Patristics; however, he never departed from the purpose of accurate representation, which he tried to perfect by manipulating the figurative richness of the text. He often drew attention to the metaphors of the Bible and used them as starting points for his own figures. The main characteristic of the biblical metaphors, according to him, is their clarity. The analogies convey without equivocation a clear and precise meaning. By elaborating and expanding these metaphors, Donne carefully excludes the possibility of multiple interpretation. It was by the same procedure that he obtained a totally opposite effect in the poems; but in the sermons, the stream of the

meaning is channeled with a direction. In this way, Donne explains the meaning of the Psalmist when he says: "In the shadow of thy wings I will rejoice": "That though God do not actually deliver us, nor actually destroy our enemies, yet if hee refresh us in the shadow of his wings, if he maintain our subsistence (which is a religious Constancy) in him, this should not only establish our patience (for that is but half the worke) but it should also produce a joy, and rise to an exultation which is our last circumstance, Therefore, in the shadow of thy wings, I will rejoice."¹⁷

Another device by Donne used in his poems to materialize language and make it present was the accumulation of metaphors in a sort of mock definition. The same device functions in the sermons to create an accurate, clear definition which satisfies the requirements of representation. Things help define through their properties, and the more things Donne finds that display the same property, the more accurate his representation becomes: "John Baptist bore witness of the light, *outward things* bear witness of your faith, The exalting of our *natural faculties* beare witness of the supernatural. We do not compare the master and the servant, and yet we thank the servant that brings us to the master. We make a great difference between the *treasure* in the chest, and the key that opens it, yet we are glad to have the key in our hands. The *bell* that calls me to *Church*, does not catechize me, nor preach to me, yet I observe the sound of that bell, because it brings me to *him* that does those offices for me. The light of *nature* is far from being enough; but as a *candle* may kindle a *torch* so into the faculties of nature well employed God infuses *Faith*."¹⁸

If the use of the language in the sermons is clearly different from its use in Donne's love poetry, the language of his religious lyrics sets itself apart for reasons easy to understand. Their status as poems requires from the Renaissance poet a handling of language towards presentation, but the subject matter, the substance of Faith itself obliges the Protestant believer to place signification beyond language and therefore achieve representation. Although it was the tendency towards representation that mostly influenced subsequent poets and makes Donne conspicuous as the founder of a School, his divine poems are still dominated by presentation of language. The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed analysis of the whole body of Donne's religious poetry. A few examples will be enough to show that the language of his lyrics still tends towards presentation, although it begins to be interrupted by representations because of the subject matter.

The sequence entitled *La Corona* is probably the most conspicuously conceived as language presentation. The aspect of these poems is obviously different from that of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*: they are not sparkling with wit and jocularly. But language presentation is not to be confused with witty-

cisms. The careful formal design of the sequence, the repetition of the last verse of one sonnet as the first verse of the next, the circle described by the whole structure, are factors which concentrate the reader's attention on the material presence of the words. Besides, the poems make sense only on the basis of previous knowledge of the Bible and biblical exegesis. Unlike the sermons which represent God's reality on the basis of the biblical representation which they take for granted, the sonnets approach the sacred text at the linguistic level. They bring together notions which the extralinguistic reality sets widely apart, like conception in the mind and physical conception; making by begetting and making by hand:

Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
 Wast in his mind, who is thy son, and brother,
 Whom thou conceiv'st conceived; yea thou art now
 Thy maker's maker, and thy father's mother,
 Thou hast light in dark; and shut'st in little room,
 Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

(Annunciation)

The *Divine Meditations*, though seemingly closer to the spirit of the sermons, display the same characteristics of language presentation achieved by accumulating different, often contradictory meanings in the same context. Their metaphoric texture seems less surprising and far-fetched than that of the love poems because the contexts in which the religious vocabulary can function are limited. As in the sermons, Donne deals here with three basic contexts: The Old Testament, the Gospels and secular speech. Characteristically for poems, however, these contexts are superimposed, and a word acquires at least two meanings simultaneously. While the sermons tend to homogenize the context, make it pure and apt for representation, *The Divine Meditations* stress the contradiction contained in the word, making us aware of its reality, to which we, the speakers, attach the meaning. Here is an instance of juxtaposing the contexts of the Old and the New Testaments:

'Twas much, that man was made like God before,
 But that God should be made like man, much more.

(Sonnet 15, *Divine Meditations*)

While in the sermons Donne uses typology to give an elegant account of the similarity between Adam and Christ, in the poems he uses two phrases similar in form but meaning different things in their original contexts of which they are hardly detached: making by craft and begetting. The similarity lies only at the linguistic level, which thus gains its own presence.

The same effect is obtained when a scriptural context is superimposed on a secular one:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

(Sonnet 14, *Divine Meditations*)

Even when one takes into account that the person addressed is God, the statement remains paradoxical, unless the meanings of the religious text are kept into two separate contexts. The poem does not allow this separation, the words being kept together on the basis of their association in the secular vocabulary.

Although undoubtedly the Work of a Renaissance poet, of a "maker" for whom the presence of the language is all important, *The Divine Meditations* reach the point where poetry turns towards representations. The *you* addressed in the poem is not another speaker, a possible interlocutor, but God, a transcendental signified. *He* cannot be incorporated in a linguistic structure, *he* is the reality outside it, and an absent reality stands in need of a mediation. Language begins to reach beyond itself. If some of the words of the biblical text are still "present," others, especially those related to religious feeling, seem to bridge a gap, mediate between the speaker and a transcendental reality. Soul, love, death, words that Donne could so easily overcontextualize in his love poems, seem now to point to something beyond themselves and the speaker. Compare the meaning of "die" as value given by the speaker and accepted by the interlocutor in "The Legacy":

When I died last, and, dear, I die
 As often as from thee I go

to the representation of death in sonnet 10 of *The Divine Meditations*,

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men
 And dost with poison, war and sickness dwell,
 And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well
 And better than thy stroke: why swellst Thou then?
 One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

The tendency to represent will become dominant in poetry after the age of Donne. By perfecting the language as representation in his sermons and introducing it in his religious lyrics, Donne not only founded the Metaphysical School but also established a poetical attitude that reaches far beyond his

century. The poetics of representation was dominant until modernism began its demolition, and, ironically, it has made us perpetually ignore the quality of the language presentation in Donne's poetry.

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