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JOHN DONNE'S SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES IN HIS SACRED POETRY: TEMPTING' THE LORD, 'TESTING' AND 'TRYING' LOVE

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("Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one"¹: Gird
on Thy Paradox and Walk!)²

In his 'holy sonnets', John Donne appears as the most intrinsically and consistently duellist voice of the age. His views are fundamentally contradictory and paradoxical, and his poetry thrives on the contradictory and the paradoxical as it seeks not only to hold in the same act of vision--with the same degree of theoretical validity and experiential relevance--the constant and the inconstant, the consistent and the inconsistent, the platonic and the carnal, the spiritual and the sexual, the serious and the flippant, and the compelled and the volitional, but also to prove the former by, and in, the latter. While traditionally, biographical critics have seen in the move from the polarity lover/ beloved (connected with the frivolousness and fever of John Donne's young manhood) to the polarity lover/ Love (connected with the fervour and fervency following John

(1) *John Donne: A Selection of His Poetry*, edited with an introduction by John Hayward (England, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), p. 173. (As the numbers allotted to John Donne's 'holy sonnets' tend to differ according to the various editions, we shall refer to each individual holy sonnet by its first line or part of it.)

(2) Apart from the obvious biblical echo, suggested by the phrase (bear the cross) and the image (gird up your loins: prepare for action), this part of the epigraph is also intended to recall to the Arab reader, in particular, the famous phrase ta'abbata sharran (literally: He put mischief under his armpit). While George Herbert, for instance, sets out in "Redemption" to ask a favour from the Lord, John Donne is thus seen as setting out to argue with the Lord.

Donne's taking Holy Orders and becoming Dean of St. Paul's) a shift from the secular to the sacred, our approach proposes that all the pairings mentioned above, insisting on the disparateness of the states of the lover, represent not only an attempt to "secularise" divine love ("physicalise" it in order to better apprehend it), but also an attempt to "sacralise" human love ("spiritualise" it in order to confer a certain holiness upon it, it being an aspect of divine love). In addition, by abusing the requirements of the 'religious poem' in his 'holy sonnets', as illustrated not only by his calculatingly argumentative verse, but also by his provocative, daring, 'tempting'--and even impudent--voice, John Donne emerges more as a negotiator with arguments on his side, a tough negotiator with a true cause, a legitimate claimant asking for his due, than as a humble repentant begging for a favour. While the body critic has so far basically seen in the provocative strategies used in 'holy sonnets' a dramatisation of the states of a tortured soul (Cf. Leishman, as a case in point), the present contribution seeks to prove how the poet's 'spiritual genuineness' actually lies in, and is actually furthered by, his tactical ingenuity, if not his intentional 'religious incorrectness'.

Indeed, one is led to affirm, after reading the sacred poetry of Donne, alongside with that of such other major seventeenth-century religious poets as George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and John Milton, that none of these cultivates as systematically as Donne the figure of the duellist and achieves, through a systematic cultivation of the contradictory and the paradoxical, but--above all--of the outright subversive, both the genuineness of an impassioned voice testing and trying a lover/ Love relationship and the ingenuity of a provocative voice asking provocative questions and making provocative claims. If there is any relaxing of tension in Donne's 'holy sonnets', and there is hardly any, it is not so much that of a Herbert (whose initial hesitation, rebellion, or despair is part of an exercise that concludes on confidence, submission and hope³), nor so much that of a Vaughan (whose major religious poem "The

(3) A recognisable pattern of order following the storm in Herbert's religious poetry makes the reader expect, and actually anticipate, a melodramatic ending: thus, "Love", "The Collar" and "Redemption", for instance, start with hesitation, rebellion and despair and end on confidence, submission and hope, respectively.

Retreat" starts with a longing to recover a lost "Angell-infancy" and ends on the recognition that only a death to life (back to dust) will ensure recovery by the soul of its initial state), nor is it so much that of a Milton (whose "Sonnet on His Blindness" stages a debate between "murmur" and "patience" in which the voice of patience has the last word: "They also serve those who stand and wait")⁴. Rather, it is that of the negotiator who has played his part in full. I have argued elsewhere⁵ that John Donne's daring and provocativeness, as well as other aspects of his "devout fitts" (Holy Sonnet: "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:"), not to speak of his longing for 'enthrallment and ravishment' by Love in Love's bed-chamber (Holy Sonnet: "Batter my heart..."), recall al-Hallaaj's definition of repentance as "to see your daring to provoke the Lord and to see His patience with you"⁶, Sufi intimacy of address to God and Sufi striving towards a consummation of human-divine union.

The present paper focuses on John Donne's religious poetry. It is my assumption in the following pages that, though the speaker in Donne's 'holy sonnets' appears under various guises, and most frequently under that of an apparently meek lover pleading with Love from an essentially humble position (frequent reference to tears, fear and begging), though he in "prayers, and flattering speeches... court[s] God" (Holy Sonnet: "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:"), he is, in fact, a duellist who fundamentally believes he has arguments on his side. His is not so much a plea to make as it is a cause to defend, hence the presence of a more negotiating than a pleading tone, and hence the subversive nature of a religious poetry ("Holy Sonnets") where the speaker addresses Love in

(4) It is interesting to note, here, how John Donne's daring and enterprising Satan anticipates, in certain respects, Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

(5) "The 'Metaphysical Canon': John Donne", in *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (Egypt: South Valley University/ Qena Faculty of Arts, 1997), No. 7.

(6) Al-Husain ibn Mansuur al-Hallaaj al-Baidhaawi al-Baghdaadi (b. 866 A. D./ d. 931 A. D.), a major figure of Islamic Sufism, tortured and executed on a charge of heresy; qtd. in Michel Farid Ghraayib, *al-Hallaaj 'aw Wudhuu'-d-Damm: Qissah Suufiyyah Taariikhiyyah* ["al-Hallaaj or the Blood Ablution: A Historical Sufi Story"] (Beirut: Ghaayib Publishers, n. d.), p. 49 (my translation). Still, one needs to point out that, in a John Donne's 'holy sonnet', final assurance is denied, and that there is no way of telling even whether 'God shows any patience with you', as uncertainty is the last word to which a John Donne's 'holy sonnet' seems to be geared.

a manner not so different from the speaker's addresses to his shy, or indifferent, or passive profane mistresses ("secular love poetry), the supreme aim remaining, of course, to assuage a condition of doubt and uncertainty as to one's relationship and position with Love.

Indeed, "a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text"⁷ reveals certain disruptive elements that call into question the apparently merely pleading attitude, undermine the established, common codes of meekness and humbleness in addresses to God, reveal that the speaker is, instead, not so much a man asking for a favour as he is a negotiator with a legitimate cause, claiming a right that is his due, thus favouring--in a religious context--an unusual daring encounter with a higher authority, rather than self-effacement before that higher authority. The constitutive codes of a sacred poem on repentance (meekness of voice, humbleness of attitude, and appeal for grace as an act of mercy), that is the common ingredients of a 'religiously-correct' attitude, are disrupted and given various twists in Donne's poems by means of paradox and ambivalence, which features are intended to serve as resources in the duel. Placing the issue in terms of an experience-inspired, passion-driven lover/lover relationship, rather than in a fancy-inspired, thought-guided devotee/subject of devotion relationship, John Donne can thus handle man's attitudes in actual impassioned moments⁸. The present paper sets out to highlight--through a selection of John Donne's 'holy sonnets' ("If poisonous minerals,...", "Batter my heart...", and "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:")--the disruptive elements

(7) Barbara Johnson, cited by David Buchbinder in *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry* (South Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia PTY Ltd., 1991), p. 57. (Further references to Buchbinder's book will be included in the text, abbreviated *CLT*.)

(8) It is interesting to note here how such a feature of Donne's 'sacred poetry', where the lover seeks assurance of love returned, by raising the issue not as a merely speculative issue, an abstract problem, but as a physical concern, a personal issue, recalls the other feature of Donne's 'secular poetry' which Helen Gardner finds worthy of praise. Referring to such 'secular poems' as "The Good Morrow", "The Anniversarie" and "The Canonisation", Gardner says that they "raise [the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses] not as an abstract problem, but in the effort to make the experience of the union of human powers in love, and the union of two human beings in love, apprehensible" (*The Metaphysical Poets* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: 1957), pp. 25-26).

in Donne's texts, to show how John Donne's religious poem undermines the traditional poem's constitutive codes (that is, how the apparently merely pleading attitude is belied by an underlying attitude of challenge, defiance and, even, dispute with the Omnipotent) and to argue that the sustained argument with the Lord in John Donne's 'holy sonnets' is a strategy and a pretext to provide room for a different angle of approach to redemption and salvation.

A deconstructive approach to the text of Donne's 'holy sonnets' is sure to thrive upon many an *aporia*⁹. In addition, the way the text is constructed does lend itself to a reading that is informed by Derrida's *différance*. First of all, the sonnet form used by Donne (division into octave and sestet; absence of resolution) invites a consideration of the sonnet as being made based on its *différance* from the English sonnet. This already recalls in contrast the Shakespearean sonnet, with its established, settled and predictable structure. It recalls, in contrast (that is in order to differ), a structure of established wisdom. Second, by withdrawing from a form that tends to propose some problematic issue and then resolve it, Donne's sonnet not only defers any settlement of the issue, but also has all the appearance of an issue in progress, thus inviting the reader to invoke such

(9) In *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, David Buchbinder defines an *aporia* as "a rhetorical term meaning a paradox or ambiguity which prevents us from knowing which sense is the appropriate one". (65) Accordingly, one is led to wonder whether it was not grace as "debt" that the speaker in Donne's Holy Sonnet ("If poisonous minerals...") ultimately invokes, as against the text's reference to it as "mercy", the speaker reminding us, as it were, in passing, that some do actually claim that act (of grace) as debt. In "Batter my heart...", although the usurped town and the soul are admittedly too weak to resist the power of God's enemy, disruptive elements in the text undermine the besieged city/ woman-in-distress line of argument, thus displacing the focus from such an apparently obvious--and expected--meaning, to a questioning of divine will to act (or a questioning of past divine decision to have appointed a "weak or untrue" viceroy in him, thus leaving the speaker to rely on his own devices). While the sonnet is supposedly about a plea for salvation, such disruptive elements as (love/ indifference; hatred/ betrothal; God's viceroy proving weak or untrue) invite us to consider the sestet more as a provocation of the deliverer (liberator) than as merely a wish to be delivered and an assumption that delivery can be contemplated, more as a protest against a forced betrothal and against what looks like 'indifference' to a poignant plight, than as an admission of a personal weakness invoking (appealing for) support. A true relationship with the Lord cannot be assumed, it has to be apprehended experientially.

associations of speech (vs. writing) as: immediacy of experience and natural treatment of it; genuineness of voice; spontaneous, transparent, uncontaminated expression of meaning¹⁰.

Here again, the conversational mode--at perhaps its most direct and most artifice-free as used by John Donne in such instances as "But who am I that dare dispute with thee?/ O God, Oh!..." (Holy Sonnet: "If poisonous minerals,..."), which is apparently a genuine volta (turn of thought) from the almost blasphemous questions of the octave to the above-quoted sober rhetorical question about necessary self-restraint--proceeds nonetheless by tropes, a device which is by its very nature a figure of speech whose significance belongs more in the figurative than in the literal. Being thus itself contaminated by the rhetorical artifices of the written, it only gives the impression that the duel is over and that it is more likely deployed in order to make the defiant tone of the octave acceptable since the same voice that has dared to engage in the dispute now, as in an afterthought, qualifies it as daring, without--significantly enough--denying the validity of the questions that are part of it. The whole design seems to be to cultivate ambivalence so that, while the speaker dons certain features of attitude (complaint, request, restraint, fear), which is the "thing" expected because of the assumptions we tend to make about devotional poetry, something else (questioning, demand, defiance, daring) is likely to be the "thing" given priority. (Ever since Derrida's theory about prioritisation or hierarchisation, we have been alerted to the positive value given the first term and the negative value given the second term in any pair of opposition, so that in "restraint"/"tempestuousness", for instance, the former is given a positive value in a religious context.) This is, precisely, what John Donne's poetry challenges: by subverting the order of the predictable, John Donne endows the speaker in his 'divine sonnets' with a genuineness of voice and, hence, with a cause.

"If poisonous minerals,..." consists of an octave that addresses to God a series of eager questions which the volta ("But who am I that dare dispute with thee?/ O God Oh!") apparently comes to qualify as imper-

(10) It should be pointed out here that, for Derrida--as Buchbinder notes (*CLT*, 59)--speech (being itself, too, liable to tropes, etc) is not any less contaminated than writing.

minent. Apparently, again, the impatient, irascible, tempestuous (if not outright defiant) voice in the octave is called to order by the rhetorical question of the volta, as if the mind would now take over from the heart, sobriety from intoxication, and reason from foolishness. One is led to expect, indeed, that the defiant voice would be subdued, hushed, silenced. However, the expectation of a genuine turn is no sooner aroused than cancelled, which runs against a whole set of expectations. The sonnet form in itself arouses many such expectations: the volta (here, from arrogance to humbleness) should normally announce a denial of the validity of the questions asked; some form of diminishing returns whereby the questioning of God's fairness would be brushed aside, and rebellious dissatisfaction would give way to stoic acceptance of His will, or at least, the claim for fair treatment would be substituted by a request; and, as is the case with sonnets, in general, a sense of restored order, resolution or pithy conclusion would bring the argument made or issue raised to a close. However, the rhetorical question of the sestet qualifies the questions of the octave as belonging in a "dispute", and a dispute is normally settled after due hearing of the parties.

This sends the reader back to the subject of the dispute. The speaker appears to be complaining about a case of unfair treatment, of negative discrimination, which becomes his cause. The argument runs thus: there is an evil aspect in all creatures made by God; out of all these, the speaker argues, I am the only one to be endowed with intent or reason; why should this "make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?" Such intent or reason is "born in me", i. e., I have not chosen to be endowed with it in the first place and, thus, is it fair that I should be the only one, of all God's creatures, to be held accountable for his deeds? The ambivalence of "dispute", as well as of the pairings "mercy" (here, granted to the intrinsically sinful)/ "debt" (here, denied the genuinely repentant) and "remember" (an acknowledgement of a debt)/ "forget" (an act of mercy), allows for a reading against the grain that exploits the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in the language. Thus, while a linear reading of "If poisonous minerals,..." finds that the octave asks questions that are impertinent, if not outright blasphemous, a back reading of the same finds that it asks legitimate, or at least plausible, questions which remain unanswered.

The shift from the direct questions of the octave (marked by their impetuosity) to the rhetorical question of the sestet (marked by its apparently subdued tone and its call for restraint) may seem to signal a denial of the appropriateness, if not a questioning of the validity, of those direct questions. But this is found, upon a second reading (or, rather, a back reading) to be mere lip service or make-believe, as the speaker plays on the ambiguity and ambivalence of "debt" and "mercy". "Debt", in fact, recalls Christ's sacrificial act. The speaker, then, is forwarding his case by bringing to the fore the fact that salvation has already been paid for. Using modern economic terminology, we may say that "mercy" is a form of hedging, in case recognition of that debt does not obtain. The questions of the octave, which cannot be eclipsed, or brushed aside, by the rhetorical question of the opening of the sestet, do make of the act of grace a "debt" in spite of the speaker's condescendingly saying: let it then be an act of mercy. What Barbara Johnson calls "the warring forces of signification within the text" (see Note 3 to the present article) seem to lie, in the context of this sonnet, in the forces of commonness (grace as mercy) as challenged by the forces of "eachness", to borrow a term dear to the American poet E. E. Cummings (grace as debt), thus granting greater authority to the impassioned, even irreverent, tones of the octave as against the apparently subdued tones of the sobering sestet. Indeed, the rhetorical question, opening the sestet (and serving as the turn or volta), is to be found, upon a consideration of the warring forces in the text, as rather confirming the initial status of the speaker as negotiator with arguments on his side. Indeed, the ambivalent relationship of the sestet to the octave (the apparently reasoned sestet attempting to counteract and reverse the 'spontaneously' uttered octave), may be found to confer more credibility upon the claim than the plea. It is, accordingly, the penultimate line which--by way of diversion, perhaps--ascribes the act of salvation as a debt, which serves as a closure to the sonnet's argument. Forgetting the speaker's sins is, in this case, actually a debt. The act of mercy, invoked in the last line of the sonnet, would thus be a hedge¹¹.

(11) To hedge means securing oneself against loss, especially when betting, by compensating transactions; such a reading is encouraged by the reference to "debt" in the sonnet.

John Donne's "Batter my heart..." thrives on paradox. The metaphor of the speaker's soul as a "usurped town" ("Reason", God's "viceroy[,] proves either weak or untrue") is superseded by that of the speaker's soul being "betrothed unto [God's] enemy": she cannot be "free" unless she is 'enthralled', nor "ever chaste" unless she is 'ravished'. Yet, though the two metaphors may be considered, at face value, as developing--respectively--the situation of a besieged town and of a lady in distress, both appealing for help (I say "at face value" because a reading against the grain of the same metaphors discovers and uncovers that both the town and the lady are only apparently *appealing* for help); in effect, they are both *claiming* a necessary act as by right, the burden of the proof rests not with man (as a town governed by a weak or untrue viceroy appointed by God Himself, and now finding itself 'usurped' by God's "enemy", or as a lady who is married to someone against her will but showing as much love as she can towards her true but, apparently, indifferent lover), but with the king who appointed a badly qualified viceroy, or with the truly loved one who does not seem to be jealous enough to act.

As in all conflicts and challenges--let alone warfare--¹², diversion is a common practice, and John Donne is here a diversionist. Indeed, what the paradoxes in "Batter my heart..." actually seek to achieve--when the warring forces of signification within the text have been teased out--is a shift in focus from the responsibility of the betrayer/ sinner (here, usurped town and lady married against her will) to the responsibility of the supreme power who appoints viceroys and of Love who sanctifies marriage deeds. Indeed, a teasing out of such forces reveals, beyond the speaker's apparent call to be treated violently ("break, blowe, burn and make me new", rather than "knocke, breathe, shine, and seek to mend" [me]), a reminder to the Lord not to allow that loyal towns under His

(12) John Donne's frequent conceits draw upon such fields as exploration, commerce and warfare. As far as the latter field is concerned, one may quote from Donne's "The Extasie":

As'twixt two equall Armies, fate
Suspend uncertain victorie,
Our soules, (which to advance their state,
Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee.
(Gardner, 75)

sovereignty remain under siege, nor to remain Himself, as Love, indifferent to His lover. In terms of Donne's "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors Last Going into Germany", "O, if thou car'st not whom I love/ Alas, thou lovs't not mee". In this same poem, the speaker has sacrificed earthly loves: "I sacrifice this Island unto thee,/ And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd me". This now needs to be repaid: "When I have put our seas twixt them and mee,/ Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee".

In "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one", Donne's speaker plays on the paradox of an "inconstancy" of "vowes" and "devotione" that has become in him a "constant habit". The overwhelming question of the octave is how to bring to constancy a soul whose inconstancy has "unnaturally" begotten that constant habit. The wavering is confirmed by repetition ("change"/ "humorous"/ "distemper'd"), and the contraries appear under the form of a series of antonymous pairings ("cold and hott"/ "as praying, as mute"/ "as infinite, as none". Apart from attesting to the usefulness of the amatory for the evocation of the spiritual in Donne's 'holy' verse, the two phrases "my prophane Love" and "I court God" reveal the weight of the wordly upon the speaker even as he now feels a fearful longing for union with God (note that, like "God", "Love" is capitalised). It is this wavering between the senses and the spirit, it is this burden of the "prophane" (having now crystallised into a habit of frivolousness from which it is difficult to recover), that bodies forth a surface paradox and a deeper one.

The surface paradox is that the speaker is constant in being inconstant. This recalls his habit of courting *more than one* mistress, constantly 'changing' in "vowes, and in devotione" and not 'viewing heaven', a past that serves as a backdrop to a present in which, impelled by "true fear", he has to set his mind on heavenly things and "court" the '*One*'. The present requires from him, indeed, a change from a 'changing devotion' to 'constant devoutness'. Yet, all he can muster is a series of "devout fitts that come and go away/ Like a fantastique Ague", with the exception that, while the best days of the past were those of carefree frivolousness, his "best dayes" now are when he shakes with "feare". The simile insists on the sporadic nature of the feeling that feeds the new passion which has all the symptoms of weaning. The speaker has, as it were, come of age, which

requires from him to forsake his 'loves' and court one Love. At surface level, the move is all the more a painful experience as the past is, *apparently*, not only of no help at all, but also rather a hindrance. The expert profane lover seems, paradoxically enough, to be unarmed in the face of a new passion; the lover who has courted many, now shakes with fear at the outset of a new love experience. Again, paradoxically enough, rather than bringing serenity in its wake, the new experience 'distempers' and destabilises, bringing with it an intermittent fever, begetting a constant inconstancy of another kind.

The deeper paradox requires "a careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text" (see Note 3 to the present article). Indeed, this underlying paradox is twofold: had the speaker been constant in constancy, he would not have aspired, in the first place, to effect the shift that "to day" claims from him; and, without his realising the inconstancy of 'loves' of the past, he would not be able to set his mind on 'Love', substitute the new 'Love' for the old, and aspire thus to achieve constancy. Accordingly, the two-pronged paradox sustains the dialectics which enacts change and in which this 'final' move towards constancy in "courting God" will thrive. It is actually this very "constant habit" of change, begotten by "inconstancy", that leads all the way to 'courting the *One*'. Thus, while the surface paradox seems to blame the substitution of the true subject of courting (God) by passing amours, the deeper paradox invites us to consider the hint that it is thanks to the passing, 'prophane loves', that the lover has come to feel the need for a truer subject for his love, 'Love Himself'. In other words, it is that "inconstancy" that 'has begotten a constant habit' of frivolousness which now "elements" (to borrow a Donnian term from "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning") the courting of a new love, Love (or God). So, the poem seems to invite us, first, to invoke the usual negative associations of "inconstancy"--indeed, this has led us to talk of 'frivolousness'--only to lead us to reassess those associations in terms of a deeper significance.

In fact, while apparently condemning his frivolous past (one meaning of "contrition" is repentance), the speaker is also crediting it with a guiding role. Donne thus establishes at least two meanings which operate concurrently: to admit his new-found 'Love', while not denying his past "prophane Love[s]". He owes them the spirit of the adventurer, of the

suitor, of the quester. In his Introduction to his *John Donne: A Selection of His Poetry*, John Hayward rightly points out that the "passion with which he [Donne] had courted those whom he called his 'profane mistresses' became sublimated in a fearful longing for union with God." (9) Although Hayward considers the shift in the subject of passion from a biographical point of view (indeed, he adds that, "[i]n his later years the lust of the spirit demanded satisfaction no less than the lust of the flesh had done in the heyday of the blood" (9)), in John Donne's 'holy sonnet' ("Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:"), the time span in the poem is not that distinct (in fact, the time of the 'prophane mistresses' and that of 'courting God' almost overlap: "yesterday; and to day"). The overlap, or juxtaposition, confirms that the speaker in the poem is a negotiator: he is using the octave, in a sense, as a measure of his sacrifice; although born inconstant, he is now seeking to be constant in constancy, seeking to channel all his love/ loves towards the 'One'. He has succeeded in turning passion into the site of a battle; he has assessed the various claims on his soul; and he is now seeking to bring himself to going by the way of 'devoutness' to 'God'.

John Donne's 'holy sonnets' seem to derive their poignancy from the paradoxes that are the medium of the dialectics underlying them. The whole design seems to be to cultivate ambivalence so that, while the speaker dons certain features of attitude (complaint, request, restraint, fear), which is the "thing" expected because of the assumptions we tend to make about devotional poetry, something else (questioning, demand, defiance, daring) is often found to be the "thing" given precedence. In the three poems proposed in the present article, the linear development of signification is subverted to support the speaker's attitude as diversionist and negotiator: in "If poisonous minerals,..." the speaker's claim of unfair treatment substantiates more the case of a "debt" that needs to be settled than the case of an act of "mercy" that has to be begged; in ("Batter my heart..."), the thrust of the argument ascribes the usurpation of the speaker's soul to the weakness of his defender (God's viceroy); and in ("Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:"), the speaker puts forward the extent of his sacrifice in order to tip the balance in favour of his case as someone used to love many who now aspires to love one. The binary structure of octave and sestet serves John Donne's

purposes to perfection: it is used not only as the medium of voicing paradoxical claims while seeking to resolve inner conflicts, but also as a way of maintaining the validity of the initial point made in the octave, which the sestet confirms even as it apparently seeks to infirm.

Relying on ambivalence, ambiguity and the duplicities of meaning inherent in the terms used, John Donne appears as a diversionist and a negotiator who is capable of 'turning the tables'. Thus, the apparently normal sequential evolvment of experience, the seemingly normal linear development of thought, in John Donne's 'holy sonnets', is a strategic manoeuvre whose purpose is to subvert the usual development of signification. Indeed, the first element posited in the sonnet, that is the initial situation given in the octave, which the shift in the sestet seems to question and infirm (and which is, traditionally, the proposition to be overturned, the problem to be solved, the motive to be revisited and to be found wanting), is found--upon a back reading (from sestet to octave)--to be the one granted validity as part of the speaker's arsenal in the duel. Only by such a reading that seeks to discover and uncover those disruptive forces at work at a deeper level in a John Donne's 'holy sonnet' can one appreciate Donne's genuineness of voice which tips the balance in favour of the spontaneous initial prompting. His is the art of being spiritually genuine by being religiously incorrect.

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Avant-propos

A table! J'invite les lecteurs à un repas où chaque service est un article consacré à l'étude de la nourriture dans un dossier intertextuel composé d'art et de science: pictural, littéraire, publicitaire, anthropologique, psychanalytique avec tout l'intérêt mis en lumière sur des aspects d'œuvres différentes et complémentaires.

L'alimentaire se trouve ainsi à la croisée de plusieurs domaines d'étude, ses aspects sont multiples. Il se rencontre particulièrement dans les théories de la perception, de la représentation et de l'affectivité. Distinguons une richesse de significations des habitudes alimentaires façonnées par la culture: le lien affectif déterminant une sphère de l'oralité, le rituel s'exerçant selon les codes sociaux, la poétique de la nourriture marquant la relation de l'aliment au référent et la transformation des produits naturels subissant cuisson et croyances. La nourriture ainsi transcendée fait écho à Brillat-Savarin dans sa *Physiologie du goût* qui élève la gastronomie au sublime faisant travailler l'imaginaire.

Depuis Barthes et Lévi-Strauss, il semble que la sémiotique de l'alimentaire soit passée d'une théorie du signe essentiellement linguistique et discursive à une théorie du signe incluant la référence à l'objet. Dès lors, l'aliment apparaît comme participant de l'enjeu du désir et de la corporéité, conçu dans un double statut d'intériorité et d'extériorité. Dans le rapport interne l'aliment s'assimile au corps le transforme en se transformant; dans le rapport externe l'aliment participe d'une *sémiosis* culturelle fonctionnant comme signe et rendant compte d'un certain nombre de systèmes sémiotiques.

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Carmen Boustani