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# DONNE: THE IMAGING OF THE LOGICAL CONCEIT

BY CLAUDIA BRODSKY

This essay will attempt to indicate alternating conceptions of the problem of poetic wit or conceit in Donne's erotic poetry, and to investigate an instance in the religious poetry in which that problem and the range of its versions are suspended: Donne's exhortation to "true religion," Satire 3. At the outset I should state that the long-standing dispute as to whether Donne's extraordinary displays of figuration prove him a member of the Petrarchan and self-consciously rhetorical traditions in poetry,<sup>1</sup> or the master of a purely personal style,<sup>2</sup> is one that Donne's poetry in particular, and poetry of less obvious linguistic sophistication in general, appears to me to prove moot. In her seminal study of the image patterning of Elizabethan and Metaphysical poetry, Rosemund Tuve redresses the singular emphasis of "modern criticism" upon the poet's personal experience by demonstrating the salience of logical and rhetorical concerns in the poetic practices and theoretical poetics of the English Renaissance. Her insistence, that an exclusive focus upon individual sensory perceptions is not only particularly unsuited to the study of the poets of Donne's time (who were routinely trained in formal argument) but would also be hard pressed to account for the poetry of our own era, comes closest to the view held in this investigation of the unfruitful, if not foolish, dissociation of poetry, shaped by any single "sensibility," from its traditionally recognized "sister arts":

In much modern criticism which assumes that Metaphysical images are intended to direct our attention to the quality rather than to the meaning of experience—especially to any generalized "truth"—there is considerable emphasis upon images as being conditioned not by the poet's logic but by his sensibility. I shall assume at the outset that these two are never really divorced in any poem, that no poem has ever been born out of logic by immaculate conception, and that, alternatively, no poem ever entirely lacks logical meaning. I shall thus avoid inserting constant reminders that the Elizabethans (and even myself) have no notion that "poem" and "logical discourse" are to be identified, even though they do not set the two in opposition.

Of course, all images *do* convey the poet's perception of the quality of his experience. All poetic with which I am acquainted accepts this, as a given; the task here is to look for some indica-

tions that the early seventeenth century erected it into a sufficient criterion. Much modern criticism does; modern poems which do are rather harder to find.<sup>3</sup>

Consonant with her investigation of the logical conditions upon which the structure and semantics of poetic imagery rest, Tuve defines the Metaphysical conceit as an image combining a complex number of formal categories, or “places,” in the construction of its meaning. The differing effects of Elizabethan and Metaphysical conceits may be traced, she suggests, to “differences between extended pursuit of a simple logical parallel and extended pursuit of a likeness by basing it on several logical parallels.”<sup>4</sup> Figures of the latter kind, whose “effect” is that of “sharp wit,” “cannot be framed without the use of multiple predicaments and are usually found from more than one of the places of invention.”<sup>5</sup> The dual capability of the Metaphysical conceit would thus be its power to condense many logically consistent meanings within the scope of a single image or word, and conversely, its power to expand the semantic field of an image into a multiple range of possible meanings.

Recommending Tuve’s definition for its own critical coherency, we may ask if the imagery whose complex patterning she indicates represents the tension of that complexity within its scope. Does the metaphysical conceit conceive in turn of the logical “predicaments” it presents? As Tuve helpfully recalls from a historical perspective, Donne, the master of the Metaphysical conceit, was himself fully familiar with the seventeenth-century Ramist school of logic, whose speculations included a concern with the relation of dialectical or logical argument to poetic forms.<sup>6</sup> Yet in pointing to and aligning the many sides of the poet, Tuve does not indicate that, *as poet*, Donne may have imaged the logical implications of linguistic extravagance or wit; i.e., that the poet’s imagery may reflect upon the problem it engages of making both figurative and logical sense. Responding to Tuve’s important illumination of the underlying logical structure of image patterns, we may question the status of logic as it is brought to light by the use of imagery, turning first to the figures offered in the poems of the means by which sense is constructed or conceived.

Such images would refer both to the poet’s experience of explicit circumstances and to the transformation of experience in poetic discourse, by acting as an analogical or metaphoric link between the two. As Tuve states of the signifying function of metaphor generally, the figure effects a transference of the sense commonly as-

sociated with a familiar “concrete situation” to another situation whose meaning does not ordinarily derive from that relation.<sup>7</sup> In the erotic poetry, certain images make radical claims for their own meaning by representing an exclusion (and signifying an inclusion) of all other relations. Sensual experience is imaged as itself and as the sum of all experience; the lovers’ isolation is propounded in metaphor to be the world. These metaphors, themselves hyperboles, carry the criteria of the poem’s own internal coherency, along with our conception of the subject it figures, to purposeful excess, as the totality of visible phenomena is forcefully equated with an imaged erotic realm. The problem of possible inconsistencies of meaning is eclipsed by a circumscription of all possible meanings within an emphatically specified, logical, as well as literal, “place.” In sonnets such as “The Good Morrow” and “The Sun Rising,” the lover’s sexual bond is substituted for all human intercourse: a movement of absolute inversion is effected by which the poem demands both that its dominant image be, and that it can *only* be, exhaustively understood. The outstanding metaphors of this globalization of signification are, most obviously, those of “the world,” a “sphere,” “an every where”:

And now good morrow to our waking souls,  
 Which watch not one another out of fear;  
 For love, all love of other sights controls,  
 And makes one little room, an every where.  
 (“The Good Morrow,” 8-11)

Thou sun art half as happy as we,  
 In that the world’s contracted thus;  
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be  
 To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.  
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
 This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.  
 (“The Sun Rising,” 25-30)<sup>8</sup>

Image patterns focused upon hyperbolic conceptions induce a “centre” and sufficiency of vision by command. They elude the classical question of the objective adequacy of their diction by admitting no external objects of comparison. At the same time, however, by figuring on a level indicative of everything, these images necessarily portray the particularities of nothing. The transformation of “one little room” into “an every where” and the transference of the predicament of human mortality to the sun (“Thine age asks

ease . . .”) extend and immortalize the lovers by effective default, just as the least qualified and most striking of Donne’s hyperboles, “Nothing else is” (“The Sun Rising,” 22), enforces the lovers’ ontological status as fact by precluding any understanding of its mode. Metaphors intending to global dimensions can by their own claims neither make distinctions in the matter they signify, nor, therefore, render it recognizable. Imaged signification that defies logical examination denies itself in turn as an access to knowledge.

An alternative to figures whose successful totalization of meaning depends upon a principle of nondiscrimination is a more selective visual metaphor, that of the portrait or “picture.” The signifying potential of pictorial images is specifically thematized in *Elegy 5* and the sonnet, “Witchcraft by a Picture.” The subject of the portraits referred to in both poems is identified as the poet. In *Elegy 5* a comparison is played out between the poet’s verbal portrayal of his future appearance (“When weather-beaten I come back . . .” [5–10]) and the literal picture of himself that he leaves behind upon departing: “So foul, and coarse, as oh, I may seem then, / This shall say what I was . . .” (12–13). In “Witchcraft by a Picture,” the image of the portrait is from inception a compound conceit, its appearance represented by a teardrop in which the poet sees himself reflected. The “art” of this doubly imaged “picture” is thus made to disappear by his departure:

But now I have drunk thy sweet salt tears,  
And though thou pour more I’ll depart;  
My picture vanished, vanish fears  
That I can be endamaged by that art . . .

(8-11)

Implying in conclusion that his absence in this case will be permanent, the poet evokes the replacement of the present teardrop portrait by “One picture more . . . / Being in thine own heart, from all malice free . . .” (13-14). Particularized pictorial images, as the differing arguments of these poems demonstrate, seem to grant universal grounds for comparative cognition. In proffering portraits of varying figural dimensions to the lover from whom he takes leave, the poet suggests as much; in composing the image of the portrait into their dominant theme, the figural patterns of the poems seem to indicate the same.

Understood as a reflective mimetic form, the picture would perform the double role described above: that of supplying the means both of a consistent understanding of experience and of the coher-

ent construction of imagery within a poem. Yet at the moment they achieve their formal mediative function, the pictures imaged in the poems are themselves referentially invalid. They attain logical efficacy when representing what no longer is: an appearance whose impermanence is engraved in the very purpose of portraiture, as is made explicit by the stated departure of the subject it depicts. The meaning of each picture can only be derived in comparison with a substitute image (the poet's radically dissimilar figure upon return;<sup>9</sup> the picture he may not return to see, nor could, since it is in his lover's "heart") to which it bears no resemblance. The specifically logical significance of the image as portrait depends upon its divergence, upon analysis, from the appearance and associated experience it reflects. Thus the image of the picture acts as the critical wedge of the poetry, poised between the consequential understanding of its figural pattern and the claim of fidelity to the referent the figure portrays.

If we move from conceits whose metacritical dimension is visually or externally bound, to conceits that comment upon their own internal basis—the infinite capability, within language, to substitute and combine—the problems posed for the criterion of logical coherence as arbiter of the “truth or untruth”<sup>10</sup> of poetic imagery become more clear. In an attempt to convince his lover to undress (Elegy 19, “To his Mistress Going to Bed”), the poet compares the clothed body to a picture but further specifies that visual image as being like the “covering” of a book. The conceptual force added to his argument by the second conceit is that a book cover, unlike a picture, derives its meaning from a content within. While the removal of a picture reveals nothing more than additional space, a book cover turned aside displays the purpose of its appearance, the text it announces, protects, or adorns. The movement of figural transformations, from picture to covering to book, is intensified by a change in poetic diction from the stated comparison (“like,” 39) of simile to the abrupt copula (“are,” 41) of metaphor:

Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made  
 For laymen, are all women thus arrayed;  
 Themselves are mystic books, which only we  
 Whom their imputed glance will dignify  
 Must see revealed.

(39-43)

Initiating the same verse paragraph is a linguistically less complex, and logically less persuasive, manipulator's sleight of hand:

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“As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be, / To taste whole joys” (34-35). A moment’s reflection reveals the insubstantial argument of this relatively uncomplicated conceit: by blasphemously comparing “bodies” with “souls,” the poet elevates what is more or less conventional and dispensable (clothing) to the level of that which is mortally indispensable (the body), thereby forming a pseudocorrelation between the essential (“unbodied”) quality of the soul and some equally essential quality of the body “unclothed.” The latter, however, within the terms of the analogy constructed, could only be its starting point, the soul. Ending where it began, figuration here, rather than completing a transference of meaning, breaks down into deductive circularity. As a rhetorical and logical means of persuasion, however, the image of “mystic books” works far more successfully; for it is understood within the conceit of the written text (in distinction from that of “bodies” or “pictures”) that the object it refers to contains its own coherency, the meaning by which its printed surface is defined.

Yet the significance that the image convincingly conveys, through a perfect coordination of its structure and its referent, does not rest within the poem at the purpose of revelation. “To see revealed” is finally not the organizing motive of the poem’s figural movement, nor the final intention of the poet speaking as lover. Once removed to render visible the “mystic” text beneath it, the “gay covering” of this imaged “book” will be replaced by another of far greater externality. The conceit of the disclosed text only proves itself truly effective when concealed by a further “covering” that bears no intrinsic relation to its content: the body of the lover made seducer by that fact. The poem concludes by reversing the relevance of its major figure: “To teach thee, I am naked first, why then / What needst thou have more covering than a man” (47-48). The image of the book, of language made into meaningful, coherent form, shows itself persuasive for its own appearance of depth, yet persuades—as the lover’s playful but persistent argument makes evident—to a submission of depth to superficialities, of revelation to eroticism: a textual *and* referential event whose experience runs contrary to the meaning the image evokes.

The conceit of the “revealed” text arises in a related context at the end of “The Ecstasy.” The intention and tone of the voice in the poem do not appear, as in *Elegy 19*, to be directly motivated by erotic designs. The image of the body as book is introduced to represent the necessary end of love, rather than to serve as a discour-

sive means of seduction. Furthermore, the tension of the figural pattern in which it participates lies not between the cover and content of the book itself, but between the book as a finite corporeal phenomenon and the continual growth of “Love’s mysteries in souls”:

To our bodies turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love revealed may look;  
Love’s mysteries in souls do grow,  
But yet the body is his book.

(69-72)

“Book” here is not equated with “souls,” but understood to be a bodily translation of their distinct, though unspecified, power of animation. “Bodies” articulate, but are not identical to “mysteries,” which “grow”; as such they effect an inevitable, while perhaps only minimal, difference in their meaning, an observable but “small change”:

And if some lover, such as we,  
Have heard this dialogue of one,  
Let him still mark us, he shall see  
Small change, when we’re to bodies gone.

(73-76)

The bodily text, the poet asserts, displays and maintains (at least most of) an underlying discourse of love: “this dialogue of one.” Yet if the image of coherent imagery, the “book,” is assured significance by its subservience to the always partially invisible subtext of “souls,” the image of the potency for imaging, “language,” offers no such certainty of correspondence or control. In introducing the image of language, the poet indicates the possibility of coherent patterns of meaning that, while true to their own internal logic of grammar and syntax, may be devoid of the truth of their semantic sense.

The “language” to which I refer might best be initially distinguished as phenomenal in nature; it is linked, in *Elegy 7*, to the visual and tactile senses. The poet reminds an unacknowledging lover that she owes her literacy in this mode of signification to him:

Nature’s lay idiot, I taught thee to love,  
And in that sophistry, oh, thou dost prove  
Too subtle: Fool, thou didst not understand  
The mystic language of the eye or hand . . .

(1-4)

In “The Ecstasy” the poet refers to a language contrastively free of all phenomenal appearance, the “soul’s language,” intelligible to “any, so by love refined . . .” (21-22). Prior in the poem to its argument for sexual union (“But O alas, so long, so far / Our bodies why do we forbear?” [49-50]), the image of “soul’s language” suggests a means of communication without bodies and without books, a language absolved equally of phenomenal referent and phenomenal manifestation: a language, in short, which takes no shape. This hypothetical mode of meaning, relying upon no images of its own (letters, characters, or signs of any kind), nor supplying sense through the images it composes (whether understood as literal denotations or figural substitutions), would be a language lacking the properties by which language is defined. The logical paradox spelled out by “language” here is perhaps not so prominent, but, upon inspection, equally as problematic, as the comparison of the body with the soul in *Elegy 19*. The second part of the poet’s analogy is again deficient in its final term: the “language” named cannot be considered a metaphor (or must be considered an inherently failed one) for something else. A wholly nonphenomenal or noumenal “language” is not a language. To designate it as such is not even to effect a catachresis, since in this case, as opposed to that of an apparent object without a proper name, no objective or phenomenally based assertion can be made that this unarticulated medium exists. Indeed, before the understanding of “soul’s language” could be hypothesized, the lovers’ bodies, in making “sense” appear, “first” made their love apparent to one another—a fact for which the poet turns to them with gratitude:

We owe them thanks, because they thus,  
Did us, to us, at first convey,  
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,  
Nor are dross to us, but allay.

(53-56)

Ingratitude for instruction given in the art of conveying sense is the ground of the poet’s complaint in *Elegy 7*. Having “taught thee to love,” he reproaches a mistress (who was evidently once his own as well as “Nature’s lay idiot”), he should be awarded the sexual fidelity which is his due. Yet just as faithfulness here implies exclusive rights to a wife’s adultery, so “love” is itself an image for a learned erotic skill. Similarly, the term “mystic” is equated with and substituted for “sophistry” in describing the “language” ac-

quired. That “language” performs the function in the poem of a highly effective and, as defined by Tuve, properly Metaphysical conceit. Its significance combines the logic of different individual semiotic modes, ranging from the faculties of physical emotion (“the air of sighs”; “the eye’s water” [5-7]) to calculations of gesture and aesthetic effect (“the alphabet of flowers . . . devisely being set” [9-10]), with that of their model, “words” (13, 25). The grievance of a jealous lover and teacher makes its reference clear:

Remember since all thy words used to be  
To every suitor, *Ay, if my friends agree*;  
Since, household charms, thy husband’s name to teach,  
Were all the love-tricks, that they wit could reach;  
And since, an hour’s discourse could scarce have made  
One answer in thee, and that ill arrayed  
In broken proverbs, and torn sentences.  
Thou art not by so many duties his  
That from the world’s common having severed thee,  
Inlaid thee, neither to be seen, nor see,  
As mine: who have with amorous delicacies  
Refined thee into a blissful paradise.  
Thy graces and good words my creatures be;  
I planted knowledge and life’s tree in thee,  
Which oh, shall strangers taste?

(13-27)

The formal claims to possession enumerated by the speaker only serve to heighten the side-effects of the linguistic forms he has taught. For proficiency in the logic of “love,” like fluency in any “language,” entails an aptitude that, once learned, exceeds sexual and pedagogic dominion. To gain as lover one who was “severed” from “the world’s common” through an education in the semiotics of eroticism may be to transform her into a “blissful paradise,” but it is also, inevitably, to lose her to the “common,” or community in which that semiotics circulates. For a knowing “paradise” differs from an “idiot” of “Nature” only in so far as it is more difficultly dominated, improbably “inlaid.” Future scenes of sequestration will always be disrupted by “strangers” who share the same linguistic ability. The reader of *Elegy 7* may respond to the speaker’s frustration with the satisfaction of finding he has received his just deserts, or further recognize the possibility that as poet he may be parodying his own demands as lover. Yet an additional aspect of this “sincere” or implicit self-conscious complaint renders it disturbing on another level. That dimension is made most strikingly

apparent in the poem's final substitutions for "sophistry" and "language": "knowledge and life's tree." What we have accepted to mean a learned licentiousness is here equated with both the desire to discern truth and the symbolic origin of organic nature as figured in Genesis 2.3. The figural use of the verb "to love" to describe the ability he has engendered was immediately offset by the *doubles entendres* of the poet's opening, less than loving, address: "Nature's lay idiot. . . ." The sense of the ineffable conventionally accorded to "mystic" was similarly countered by the further qualification of its object, "language," as being "of the eye [or] hand." But the reference to "knowledge and life's tree," while opposed in gravity of meaning by the mock-serious stance taken throughout the poem, returns to reflect upon the logic of its opening conceits. To equate "sophistry"—the skill of persuading to apparent truth through an antonymical manipulation of the articulation of appearances, "language"—with "knowledge" may be considered a fitting and itself perfectly logical hyperbole, since the power to persuade might just as well be called "knowledge" with respect to a subject who formerly could be called an "idiot." But in additionally claiming to have "planted" "life's tree" in that subject, the poet indicates that "language" has endowed with living nature her who had been its uncomprehending adjunct. If "sophistry" was opposed to "Nature" in the initial patterning of the lover's complaint, "knowledge," a substitutive figure for "sophistry," is allied to an image of nature as that pattern proceeds. Furthermore, this image of the origin of nature is introduced as inhering within the successful student, rather than as a personified and external universe in whose obedience her ignorance was unbroken or maintained. What should be, and is thematized throughout the poem as, an acquired second nature is made to appear more indigenous, more natural to the subject it inhabits than a "Nature" without significance, or from which one cannot learn.

As a reflection upon the relation between linguistic meaning and linguistic logic, the development of the conceit of language within the poem coherently questions its own signification. "Language," equated with "sophistry," is condemned for its functional ability to confuse appearance with truth. Yet the equation of "language" with "knowledge and life's tree" posits it as the means of a specifically human "nature" to discern correctly between the two. Unlike the images of the picture or book, the image of language offers no mimetic point of reference or underpinning in "love's mysteries."

Instead, figured as the medium necessary to the progress of erotic pursuits and being the matter of which books are made, it undermines the meaning of the latter image as a mere vehicle or faithful translation of those “mysteries.” The image of the disclosed, or figuratively dis clothed, book in Elegy 17 revealed the purpose of providing another “covering.” The image of language in Elegy 7 reveals that “love” or erotic virtuosity, truth or appealing appearances, may with equal coherence be the meaning it is used to convey; that the “knowledge” that should lie behind or beneath its use may instead be co-extensive with its surface; that “language” may conceal a depth of meaning or may not be concealing at all. Nor can the problem of logical signification raised by the poem’s organizing figure be dismissed from a supposed position of poetic mastery: the bitter lover of Elegy 7 has already made that discovery; his newly literate mistress is bound to. To lack “language,” on the other hand, is to be excluded from the very endeavor of deriving meaning from logical competence: to be an “idiot”—that is to say, incapable of recognizing even a single side of the paradox from which the activity of imaging devolves.

The shift in Donne’s poetry from erotic to religious concerns is not accompanied by an abandonment of the conceit for less extravagant poetic forms. Frank Kermode has argued that the strength of Metaphysical wordplay made it particularly apt to the task of “preaching the Word,” itself discernible only through biblical figurations. He further suggests that Donne’s Christian belief underlay his “understanding” of poetic wit:

How did “strong lines” go with the preaching of the Word? First: their cultivation did not mean that the Word was neglected. It was stated, divided, illuminated, fantastically explicated. . . . Secondly: the Word itself gives warrant for all the devices of the learned preacher. The style of the Scriptures is “artificial”; indeed, the Psalms are poems. . . .

Donne’s wit, of course, depends on the assumption that a joke can be a serious matter. Wit, as he understood it, was born of the preaching of the Word, whether employed in profane or in religious expression.<sup>11</sup>

Kermode describes the Satires as a cycle of poems sharing the characteristics of their genre but not particularly distinguished for their conceits:

they have the usual energy, a richness of contemporary observation rather splenetic, of course, in character. Pope thought

them worth much trouble, but it is doubtful if, except for [Satire 3], they play much part in anybody's thinking about Donne.<sup>12</sup>

Kermode identifies Satire 3 as the poem in which the style of the erotic verse and the subject of religious devotion earliest met, “show[ing] that even in his youth Donne considered the language of passionate exploration and rebuke appropriate to religious themes. . . .,”<sup>13</sup> but also notes a discrepancy between the unsettled affective tone of the poem and the seriousness of its purpose: “What makes the poem odd is the brusque impatience of its manner, an exasperated harshness proper to satire but strange in a deliberate poem about religion.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the tension in the poem that Kermode indicates becomes more fundamentally apparent when its terms are reversed. We may ask why “a deliberate poem” should evoke a sense of “impatience” with regard to its own patterning, or why the persuasion to “true religion,” an enterprise Donne would be the last to satirize, designates satire as the genre within which its imagery is to be understood.<sup>15</sup>

The salient earnestness of Satire 3, unconventional by generic definition, also marks it as an unusual moment within the canon of poems particularly appreciated for the significance of their figurations. While offering no precise explanation of his praise, Coleridge singled out the poem for its “force and meaning” and suggested its value as an exercise in the teaching of reading—one whose mastery would make the reading of Milton appear light:

If you would teach a scholar in the highest form how to *read*, take Donne, and of Donne . . . [Satire 3]. When he has learnt to read Donne, with all the force and meaning which are involved in the words, then send him to Milton, and he will stalk on like a master *enjoying* his walk.<sup>16</sup>

The poem has also been paid specific attention by J. B. Leishman, who argues that its singular effect rests in the rare balance struck by Donne between an interest in his own imagery and in the subject he portrays. The brilliance of logical invention is further invested in the poem with the poet's intention of articulating truth:

We often feel that Donne is far more concerned with the working out of his ingenious similes than with the subject (whatever it may be) which they profess to be illustrating and illuminating. However, in his Third Satire, on the search for true religion, Donne *is* inspired by his subject in itself, and his wit and his similes never get out of hand. . . . The rough lines of this satire

are penetrated by an intense eagerness for truth, for what to the young Donne, no less than to Spenser, was saving truth. . . .<sup>17</sup>

The “eagerness for truth” to which the critic refers is presented clearly in the poem as the purpose of its argument. At the opening of the second verse paragraph, the *Satire*’s first full pause, the poet states directly and with outstanding dramatic effect: “Seek true religion” (43). The persuasive power of this literal command is heightened by the extended image patterns that precede it. As concise a semantic and syntactic unit as can be found in Donne’s poetry, it unequivocally affirms the significance of the subject it invokes, just as “Nothing else is” denied the possibility of being, and therein of meaning, to any subject other than the lovers for which it stands. “True religion” emerges as the single alternative to endeavors described figuratively, and defined appositely, as false. Both the “easy ways” lacking the “merit of strict life” (14-15), and the acts of courage imaged next in close succession (17-32), are paralleled in the second verse paragraph by alliances struck too simply with one, every, or no religious order (43-69). While the mundane pursuits imaged in the first verse paragraph are condemned for their improper investment of passion, the miniature narratives of the second verse paragraph portray the poor logic of witless sectarianism. Facile adoptions of religious doctrine remain as far from the truth as contests for merely material rewards. To be sought above them, and positioned in the poem between them, cannot be “religion” as such, but specifically, and exclusively, “true religion.” The perceivable stress in the poem upon distinguishing truth is not only a stylistic effect of its imagery:<sup>18</sup> it is conceived as the meaning that structures that imagery, introduced here in modifying rather than figural form.

Yet the form of devotional truth, of a passionate link between logic and meaning, must finally be afforded its particular appearance in the poem, if its own logic is not to signify a thinly disguised facticity, its conceits fail to make comparative, conceptual sense. In order to achieve logical significance, the descriptions of mistaken pursuits must be completed, by analogy, in the imaged pursuit of truth. The figural pattern within the poem requires that “true,” a quality describing a referent (“religion”), become “Truth,” a formal image made meaningful by that pattern. The most significant of modifiers must be turned into a figure. Viewed thematically as an invocation to genuine religious devotion, or metacritically as a commentary upon the claim of poetic imagery to truth, the poem, in

attaining its own coherence, must image both true meaning and the form of its recognition. The theme and structure of Satire 3 preclude the poet from “covering,” as persuasive lover, what he reveals, or asserting his rights over signification by complaint. Instead, if aiming to instruct the reader to “Truth,” the poet must appear to set the art of persuasion aside.

His approach is in fact singularly free of marked conceits. A genealogical path to truth is first advised:

. . . ask thy father which is she,  
Let him ask his; though truth and falsehood be  
Near twins, yet truth a little elder is. . . .

(71-73)

The heuristic fiction of the precedence of “truth” over “falsehood” is presented here with precise and elegant effect. Logically, however, it implies a disturbing ratio of inquiry: knowledge of truth will increase in proportion to its distance from its present pursuit. The problem of deception, or at least, of inadequate definition, is also involved here, since whatever is offered as prior knowledge may appear, by the criterion of precedence, to be true. After proceeding to propose a course of unrelenting skepticism (“To adore, or scorn an image, or protest, / May all be bad; doubt wisely . . .” [76-77]), the poet pauses abruptly for a second time in the Satire, replacing the notion that “image[s]” are most “wisely” viewed with “doubt,” with the poem’s own image of “Truth.” A blank image named within a visual context, it appears with unexpected and decisive power within the poem, as if it itself were suddenly sighted by the satirist with surprise.<sup>19</sup> The passage is one of the most moving in Donne’s poetry:

. . . doubt wisely, in strange way  
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;  
To sleep, or run wrong is. On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must go;  
And what the hill’s suddenness resists, win so . . .

(77-82)

The imaging of “Truth” as an unqualified figure, poised upon a “huge,” discretely figured “hill,” combines the sense of a perfectly controlled poetic emblem with that of an overwhelming of poetic expression such as is most commonly associated with the Romantic sublime. The Satire represents the ineffable in name alone, yet

situates it in specifically modified, terrestrial terms. Departing radically from the formal complexities of the conceit, and from the factual referents figured throughout the poem (i.e., historical events and individuals; actual religious trends), the poet presents a highly persuasive portrait of truth while suspending the dilemma of logical persuasion. His convincing narrative of resistance overcome also provides, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, a perfect summation of the observations made by otherwise differing critics as to the difficulties involved in discerning his own poetry's significance.<sup>20</sup> "Truth," the final term of the poem's structural analogy, and the final test of significance for the poetic conceit, is imaged without access to analogical comparisons and in the absence of even a modest display of Metaphysical wit.

The formidable effect of the passage is not reduced by the consideration that its directness and simplicity of diction are strikingly uncharacteristic of Donne. The lines are in fact, as Milgate's commentary indicates, an adaptation by Donne of familiar ancient topoi. In a special appendix to this section of the Satire, on which Donne is reported to have "bestowed so much care in revision,"<sup>21</sup> Milgate outlines "the remote origins of the image" from Hesoid's *Works and Days*, through Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, to Kebes' *Tabula*, with other "possible sources" given as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (later paraphrased in Bacon's "Of Truth" and *Devise on the Queen's Day*) and St. Augustine's *Confessions*.<sup>22</sup> Milgate states in conclusion: "By Donne's time, these images and ideas, often intertwined, had become commonplaces, and it is impossible to point to a precise source of the lines in the Satire."<sup>23</sup> Whatever the degree of specific reference or influence to which it owes, Donne's representation of truth is primarily a rewriting of well-known, traditional images. The leading innovator in the development of the conceit returns to recognizable topoi in figuring for the poem's reader, or the inquirer of religion, the approach and appearance of meaning whose status is that of "Truth." Commonplace conceptions are substituted for the complex places of logical invention: the conceit does not, or cannot, represent the truth of its own coherency, the coincidence of its logic with its significance.

At a third and final pause in the poem, however, another extended conceit is introduced. The development of its logical structure and meaning display them in the process of breaking apart. The motor of that process, as designated by the conceit, is "power." The poem's rushing cadence is again brought to a sudden halt and

an earthly scene presented, its figural status underscored by an explicit exposition of the conceit's basic simile:

That thou mayest rightly obey power, her bounds know;  
Those past, her nature, and name is changed; to be  
Then humble to her is idolatry.  
As streams are, power is; those blessed flowers that dwell  
At the rough stream's calm head, thrive and prove well,  
But having left their roots, and themselves given  
To the stream's tyrannous rage, alas are driven  
Through mills, and rocks, and woods, and at last, almost  
Consumed in going, in the sea are lost:  
So perish souls, which more choose men's unjust  
Power from God claimed, than God himself to trust.

(100-10)

Similar to the passage presenting "Truth," the imaging of "power" is preceded by advice to a skeptical stance in her regard. The effect of the scenes described by the simile also lies in their crossing of emblematic qualities with images of nature. (The polysyndeton of l.107 in particular almost reads as if written by Wordsworth.) The poet's argument here is comparably persuasive in its structure. Yet the logical patterning of its imagery entails a strange semantic turn. In figuring man's natural subservience to the proper source of power, "God himself," the poet invokes the image of "blessed flowers that dwell . . . thrive and prove well" (104-05). That image must be presented in a second version, however, if it is to encompass within its meaning the occasion of power's pursuit. Thus a natural image is forced, by the pattern upon which it is constructed, to perform in a most unnatural manner: "those blessed flowers" are next depicted as "having left their roots, and themselves given / To the stream's tyrannous rage," by which they "are driven through" a succession of unsubordinated natural objects. Although it remains unclear if these "flowers" are directly endowed with volition, they are at the very least disturbingly capable of motion—not a displacement of petals ascribable to other causes, but an independent leave-taking of "their roots." Some "souls" may "choose," the poet states, completing the conceit and concluding the poem, to "trust" "men's unjust / Power from God claimed" (109-10). In so doing, they may simply be said to sin, or perhaps to act against their nature. But to carry out the intention of its argument, i.e., to demonstrate that these actions may be logically and linguistically understood, the poem must contain them within the scope of its conceit, with the result that a coherent

pattern of imagery refers to two opposing meanings: one of a natural state of power, the other of a nature with a power of its own. The logical structure of the conceit is consistent; the meanings of “power” that it structures cannot be. In persuading to the “power” of “true religion,” Satire 3 images powers that diverge. Its final passage may be suggestive of the persuasive *and* critical capabilities of the poetic conceit: the power to structure imagery into apparent sense and the power to image in movement against that structure. The falsity, or failure, of the conceit would thus be tantamount to a forced, or weak, convergence of the two;<sup>24</sup> its truth, which it cannot image or by logical argument “win,” would lie in the tenacity of resistance between them.

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#### FOOTNOTES

I wish to thank Thomas M. Greene and Geoffrey H. Hartman for their helpful readings of an earlier version of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Brian Vickers’ comprehensive study of a single dominant trope in Donne’s poetry: “The Songs and Sonnets and the Rhetoric of Hyperbole,” in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 132-74. Noting that an ignorance of the rhetorical tradition from which Donne’s poetry draws and a consequent failure to recognize his conscious use of specific figures may just as easily result in the condemnation of the poet’s immorality, as in the wholesale praise of his unstudied “sincerity,” Vickers argues for a homology between Donne’s variations upon the figure of hyperbole and the history of its definition from ancient to Renaissance rhetoricians.

<sup>2</sup> Expanding the praise of Donne’s personal style, as most prominently advocated by T. S. Eliot, to include a “select circle” of “intimate friends” by whom it was understood, A. Alvarez distinguishes Donne and the Metaphysicals for their substitutions of “sensibility” for rhetorical “formality”:

The most important common principle in the “Attic” writers was . . . this: rhetoric was formal, public and self-conscious, and its devices were designed to cajole the listeners into attention; hence to abandon rhetoric, the art of public speaking, was to abandon, in principle, the art of public pleasing. They replaced formality by personal sincerity and wrote in a deliberately off-hand manner for the pleasure of their intimate friends. . . . This means that, by the canons of professional Elizabethan poetry, Donne wrote in a specialized way which would not have been generally familiar, possibly not even acceptable to, the wider audience of published poetry. And he wrote this way not merely because this was the way his sensibility worked but because this was the expression of the taste and sensibility of a whole group, his circle.

(*The School of Donne* [New York: Pantheon, 1961], pp. 41-42.)

Moving from the Metaphysicals to an overview of the entire English tradition, Alvarez later posits rhetoric as the formal dimension dividing both English from the Romance languages and good from bad English poetry:

Claudia Brodsky

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Compared with Romance languages English is extraordinarily non-rhetorical. Too many important British writers have said their most profound say in a more or less off-hand manner, as though they were improvising at full stretch of the spoken language, heightening and sharpening that, rather than handling a medium that was at all formally apart. . . . The difference between the two traditions is that the French, Italian, or Spanish creative intelligence naturally formalizes; it works perfectly and fully through rhetoric. Whereas in English, rhetoric is nearly always a substitute for intelligence.

(pp. 101-02)

<sup>3</sup> Rosemund Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), p. 165.

<sup>4</sup> Tuve, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> Tuve, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup> Tuve explains that dialectic and logic are the principal modes of both epistemological and rhetorical argument in the seventeenth century:

The dialectical acuteness and ratiocinative temper of early seventeenth century poetry are commonly recognized; during the same decades Ramistic ideas were taking down the barriers between political discourse and dialectic.

Dialectic, which had been popularly thought of as disputation, came under the Ramists to include any reasonable "explication" or attempt to distinguish truth and falsity—and logically careful axiomatic statement [the reference is to Tuve's former mention of Donne's "bullet"-like images], general or particular, was its primary instrument, rather than the formal syllogism.

(p. 352)

Robert Ellrodt (*Les Poètes métaphysiques anglais* [Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1960]) views the relationship between the Metaphysicals and the Ramists as antagonistic. The common interest in rhetoric (as a system of figures capable of logical composition) attributed to them by Tuve is interpreted by Ellrodt to be their point of dispute, the logicians attempting to render poetry "une simple province de la rhétorique" (p. 368; see Ch. 8 in Ellrodt, "La Rhétorique").

<sup>7</sup> "It is not the sensation part of a metaphor that does the transmuting. In this image an idea we may not grasp is put into analogical relation with another *idea* we probably will grasp, because of the simplicity and familiarity of the concrete situation from which we should deduce it. This is the usual, ordinary, immemorial mystery of metaphor, perfectly traditional and perfectly astounding" (Tuve, p. 169n.).

<sup>8</sup> *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971). All quotations are from that edition.

<sup>9</sup> A differential comparison of appearances is also extended to the mistress left in *Elegy 5*: "Do his hurts reach me? doth my worth decay? / Or do they reach his judging mind, that he / Should now love less, what he did love to see?" (14-15).

<sup>10</sup> The assumed link between the identification of logical coherence and significant truth is so much a convention of all logical investigation of poetic imagery that it often goes unstated. I cite Tuve's passing reference to the issue of truth and falsity in her explanation of the "modern" aversion to logical inquiry: "The criterion of significance is uncomfortable to a modern mind in that it pushes the ultimate test of the poet's imagery into the level where what we must judge is the poet's coherent (logically coherent is generally implied) ordering of nature, and even onto the level where we must judge of his imitation as truth or untruth" (p. 164).

<sup>11</sup> Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 141, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Kermode, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Kermode, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Kermode, p. 136.

<sup>15</sup> Conscious of its generic irregularities, W. Milgate isolates the movement after the break in verse paragraphs as the “properly ‘satiric’ part of the poem,” since it “deals with the trivial reasons why men adopt a form of religion” (*John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967], p. 140).

<sup>16</sup> *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham: Duke University Press, 1955), p. 521.

<sup>17</sup> J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1951), p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> The only comparable critical reference I have found to the status accorded truth in the Satire is made by Stanley Fish in relation to Donne’s sermons (in “Georgics of the Mind: The Experience of Bacon’s *Essays*,” Ch. 2 of *Self-Consuming Artifacts* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972]). The analysis of a discontinuity imaged in the poems between an understanding of the conceit (as a logically complex, poetic means) and the issue of its truth is most closely paralleled by the opposition Fish indicates between an inductive “phenomenal” truth (the goal of Bacon’s *Essays*) and a truth transcending phenomena aimed at in the sermons. Citing Milton on “Truth,” Fish writes:

The Truth to which the understanding will be made “fit and proportionable” is for Plato, Augustine, and Donne a truth above the phenomenal world, while for Bacon it is a truth about the phenomenal world. . . . While Bacon’s insistence on rigor and precision and on the making of finer and finer distinctions is directly related to his goal—the accurate and exhaustive description of the empirically verifiable—in Plato’s dialogues and Donne’s sermons the making of distinctions is only a preliminary stage, a clearing away of the ground before the mind prepares to transcend the empirical.

(p. 153)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Fish’s description of the disjuncture between truth and discourse in the sermons: “In . . . Donne’s sermons . . . the moment of insight is a moment of revelation, and when it comes, if it comes, it does not follow directly from the discursive gestures that precede it” (p. 154).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Kermode: “. . . the wit is of the kind that depends both upon a harsh strangeness of expression and upon great acuity of illustration and argument. We are asked to *admire*, and that is why the poet creates difficulties for himself, choosing arbitrary and complex stanza forms, of which the main point often seems to be that they put tremendous obstacles in the way” (p. 128); Ellrodt: “Toujours s’affirme le souci de vérité ou le sens du ridicule en face des conventions qui masquent la réalité de la nature humaine ou de la société contemporaine. Cette exigence s’étend à l’expression littéraire. On veut que le style laisse voir l’homme même, reproduise la pensée même en son jaillissement . . . ce style convient à l’expression du scepticisme comme à la poursuite d’une vérité qui n’est pas une vérité transmise mais une vérité qui se cherche et ne s’atteint pas d’emblée” (p. 397); Tuve: “Donne’s images are for one thing a series of strenuous attempts to make us put our feet in exactly the path that will lead us through an inquiry; unexplained qualities of the images stick out awkwardly at all sides, if we try to cover them with the aim now oftenest assigned him, faithful description of his processes of mind” (p. 174)

<sup>21</sup> Milgate, p. 146.

<sup>22</sup> Milgate, pp. 290-92

<sup>23</sup> Milgate, p. 291.

<sup>24</sup> With regard to Donne's prose texts, Fish offers a similar observation on the organizing "tension in the Anglican sermons, between the logical superstructure and the problems it is unable to solve," specifying that "while Bacon uses this tension as a 'caution' against assuming too easily that the job is done, the sermonists use it to insist that the job can *never* be done, at least not by rational means or rational beings" (p. 154). The insoluble "problems" and resulting "tension" Fish points to are compounded in the conceit by the fact that both are identifiable *with* its "logical superstructure"; i.e., its tension lies not between formal argument and example, but in its poetic performance of both those discursive functions, which, like the "flowers" moving at cross-purposes in Satire 3, can be of no "use" beyond being powerful reminders of each other.