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"Wee are now againe at Plymouth quasi ply mouth": Self-referential Discourse and Poetical Folds in the Poems of John Donne

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To a large extent under the influence of Izaac Walton's *The Life of Dr. John Donne* (1640)[1], Donnean scholarship has for a long time had it that Donne's personality, supposedly reflected in his writing, was split across the rift of his apostasy and ensuing appointment as Minister of the Church (1615).[2] Along with their respective works, Jack and John Donne, the unruly, licentious young Catholic and the Dean of St Paul's, have often been regarded as standing poles apart.

Recent studies, however, have attempted to stress that, beyond appearances, Donne's most flippant love poems and most serious religious prose, his *Sermons*, crossed paths in more ways than one. Contrasting sharply with previous analyses, such a critical approach has not itself gone criticism free. As argued by Jeanne Shami (1995, 384), it has resulted in a tendency to read the *Sermons* as subtext to the poems, regardless of the context in which the former had been written, and to use the homiletic corpus in order to shed critical light upon the poetical work, often without any firm grounding:

> Generally, the sermons are read as authoritative reference texts, a body of material which can be appropriated literally by readers to provide glosses on Donne's poetry and earlier writings, to confirm a biographical profile, or to support generalizations about Donne's beliefs. Inherent in such appropriations are at least three faulty assumptions. One is that the sermons are straightforward, unequivocal, and easily understood. […] A second assumption is that the sermons can be taken as a whole. For the purposes of quotation, chronology and occasion are irrelevant. […] A third assumption is that fragments of sermon text, taken out of context, are sufficient to prove a point.

Shami's unsparing assessment needs qualifying in the sense that, as literary texts, both poems and *Sermons* are poetically self-sufficient, relevant and meaningful and need not necessarily be read through a contextual lens. Moreover some studies

have largely contributed to debunking the commonplace of Donne's supposed schizophrenia by highlighting the multifarious continuities in his thought and stylistic features.[3] Yet, it is worth underscoring, after the Canadian critic, that these two parts of the Donnean corpus do not stand on either side of a literary fold in which they would play the respective and interchangeable roles of work and commentary on the work. With the exception of a few letters containing sketchy hints to his own writing, Donne seldom remarked on his literary techniques from one of his works to the other.[4] There is no such thing in his production as a poetical art offering theoretical guidelines and enlightenment on how to approach the meaning and style of his work or discussing the principles upon which they are modelled. Does it mean for all that that Donne did not leave any comments upon his texts? Do poetic concerns about his own work never crop up in his production? They do, and they are particularly palpable in his poetical works. In them, poetic theory appears as a watermark, as the mirrored image of their surface discourse, as the barely visible other side of a fold. Donne's poems are indeed fraught with self-referential remarks which, now scant, now more substantial, read as self-reflexive, meta-poetic discourse developed by the texts and the act of writing that gives them birth. Such discourse, folded up in the different layers of meaning contained in the poems, defines the poetic principles by which they abide. Interestingly, the figure of the fold is not merely a conveniently coined metaphor with which to describe the link between poems and theory, both being united, as the two parts of a folded sheet and echoing each other as principles and their simultaneous enactment. The fold is both one of the motifs and theoretical cornerstones upon which some of these texts hinge.

Along a series of close readings, this paper wishes to show how, while defining itself as expiration, breathing or air stream, the act of writing at work in some poems leads the latter to be indirectly self-represented as the envelops or lungs (which are so many folds) that it inflates, and fills with its presence. As it turns out, the theoretical, self-applied discourse in these texts conceives of poetic writing as the unfolding of initially folded up, empty structures. Another form of reflexivity will then need considering in a poem which, while describing folds, specifically those of

sails, mirrors such folds in its very texture, thus reflecting both its subject matter and the theoretical representation of writing and texts developed in other poems.

Writing as breathing into empty textual folds

Teeming with images coined after the medical and alchemical theories that fostered the scientific debates of his days, Donne's poems frequently refer to such natural elements as fire, water and earth. Informing his convoluted conceits, they partake of highly intellectual and witty arguments about love, its joys and predicaments, or about the agonies of an ailing faith.[5] Unsurprisingly, air, with its musical undertone –at least in French–is not alien to such a collection of poems as the *Songs and Sonnets* and it is involved, too, in complex arguments about, for instance, the angelology of love in "Air and Angels". Air is of peculiar interest for it does not merely blow through Donne's lines as a recurring poetic motif conjured up for the sake of illustration or argumentation in the thematic economy of the texts. Conceived of as "breath" (the poetic name given to "voice"), it becomes the metaphorical counterpart to the act of writing which, self-represented in the poems, stages itself as air stream filling a textual fold.

Cast in the form of a pneumatic theory, this self-portrayal of writing appears from the start of "The Will". Shortly before dying from the pangs of love and breathing his last, the utterer who expresses himself in the poem draws up the list of those to whom he will bequeath his riches. Remarkably pointless, for they will be of no use to those who will receive them, these gifts, or rather the references to them, do, however, fill out the page. Introducing his long enumeration, the utterer declares:

> Before I sigh my last gasp, let me breathe,
> Great Love, some legacies;
> (ll. 1-2, p. 90)

The poem being entitled "The Will", the noun "legacies" (l. 2) reads as a clear echo or reflection of this title and strikes as self-referential. The text describes itself as the series of "legacies" it is about to draw to Love's and the reader's attention. If the "legacies" are the very written text on the page, then the terms "sigh", "gasp" and "breathe" (l. 1), which, from the start, set the poem on a respiratory key, are

themselves endowed with a self-reflexive quality. "Breathe", with its first person subject, puts on a par the live, vocal utterance of the will and its poetic composition. Through this series of equations, the act of writing mirrors and defines itself as expiration from a dying man's chest. As for the legal text or pre-text, it is but the empty structure, calling for this breath to fill it, make it meaningful and expand into a poem. With the outstandingly strong breath of the dying lover, the text is written, it inflates as an empty bag would and grows with the sundry remains of love, now as volatile as air. Self-reflexive and self-programming, the act of writing refers to itself as the sigh which generates and unfolds the text and the latter is indirectly sketched as the empty fold meant to receive it.

A similarly pneumatic conception of writing crops up in "The Triple Fool". Bitter sweet and witty sighs also fill the lines of this poem whose utterer scathingly declares himself a fool. His love is indeed unrequited and yet, out of sheer foolishness, does he go on to sing in poems this feeling which causes him so much sorrow. The self-referential and even performative tinge to the text stands out for, dedicated as it is to the hardships of love, it turns out to be itself one of the love poems described in its lines. A co-substantial thread unites "The Triple Fool" and the texts it refers to. Thus, as the poem hints at the composition of such love poems, its own mode of writing is indirectly conjured up in its lines, in a self-mirroring fashion. From the first few lines, the love-inspired act which leads the utterer to write poems, and this poem in particular, describes itself as a painful breath, heaved by a sorrowful lover:

> I am two fools, I know,
> For loving, and for saying so
> In whining poetry;
> (ll. 1-3, p. 81)

The noun phrase "whining poetry" (l. 3) applies to both the poetry written by the utterer and to "The Triple Fool" and, with its self-referential quality, it puts into clear words the poetic principle informing their composition: a barely heard, sad and, possibly, pathetic breath. With such a phrase, the act of writing that engenders the text becomes its own mirror and describes itself as the production of airy discourse

blown into a poetic piece. This self-representation also speaks volumes in another respect for it indirectly implies that the written poems along with "The Triple Fool" must be viewed as structures made to grow with the air that wheezes its way into them. They are originally a collection of empty, flat, folded up rag bags, namely the commonplace of miserable, unrequited love. In a further and remarkable twist, "The Triple Fool" sets itself apart from the poems it mentions for, with its obvious self-definitional, self-derisive tone, it inflates way beyond the pedestrian clichés of the Petrarchan poetry it lampoons. "The Triple Fool" intertwines poetry and brief, self-applied, theoretical remarks that belong to the field of literary criticism. Stitched together as in a further fold, these two layers of meaning also appear in a verse letter entitled "To Mr R.W.: Kindly I envy thy song's perfection".

This epistolary poem, probably addressed to Donne's friend Roland Woodward, praises the latter for his literary achievements. In particular, the poet confesses his deep admiration for the flawless and well-balanced composition of one of his friend's poems. As a perfect body, it contains the right proportion of all elements: earth, fire and water. But above all, this poem is the very air which stimulates the poet and triggers his own writing, thereby filling out the so far empty fold of his literary inspiration. Donne thus notes:

> And as air doth fulfil the hollowness
> Of rotten walls; so it mine emptiness,
> Where tossed and moved it did beget this sound
> Which as a lame echo of thine, doth rebound.
> (ll. 9-12, p. 205)

The poet's internal vacuity ("emptiness", l. 10) is akin to a wall's empty, lacunar structure ("hollowness", l. 9). It is like an ailing fold or matrix into which, explicitly compared to air in the initial simile, his friend's text blows. The latter fills out the empty echo chamber ("fulfil", l. 9), bounces in it ("tossed and moved", l. 11) and, as if by a process which appertains equally to an acoustic phenomenon and to a sexual intercourse, it generates ("it did beget", l. 11) a weaker sound-cum-offspring ("a lame echo of thine", l. 12) in and out of the poet's poetic imagination ("doth rebound", l. 12). With its demonstrative article, used as a deictic, the noun phrase

"this sound" (l. 11) is a clear self-reference to and in Donne's poem, whose surface thus becomes reflexive. The text describes itself as "echo" (l. 12), that is to say, as air vibrating in the poet's inspiration.

A first shift occurs between this text and the previous ones for self-reflexivity stems here primarily from the poem and not from the act of writing. However, it involves an analogous set of equations. If indeed the text is self-defined as air, a theory of writing is indirectly voiced too, as "echo" or negative sound to this self-definition. Poetic composition obliquely refers to itself as a pneumatic principle, as air set to move, to inflate an empty fold that it fertilizes before being blown out again. Admittedly, Donne's verse letter to Woodward conforms to the codes of poetic praise and its humility need not be taken at face value. Still, commenting upon itself, the act of writing suggests in a self-mirroring way that poetic composition results from a chain reaction of inspiration and that its outcome is "short of breath", that is to say, weaker than the original air.

This poem contrasts with the earlier examples in another respect too. The figure of the fold does not apply so much to the text itself as to the poet's imagination in which it is given birth. Nevertheless the fold remains here too the one figure through which Donne's writing reveals its specular stance and through which it theorizes, even if briefly, on the nature of poetic writing regarded as air breathed in and out of an empty, folded structure.

Specularity branches off in another but cognate direction in Donne's poems and it involves the figure of the fold too. It appears in texts which seem governed by the poetic principle of writing as unfolding hinted at in other poems. Referring to folds, these texts seem to duplicate them in their very verbal fabric. If they are reflexive indeed, it is also in a mimetic way.

Fold upon fold: mimetically reflexive texts

Occurring in several of Donne's poems[6], such a mimetic and reflexive process can be underlined in "The Storm", a verse letter sent by the poet to his friend Christopher Brooke.

This epistolary poem (followed by its companion piece, "The Calm") narrates the misfortunes of the English fleet struck by a storm during an expedition to the Azores headed by Essex, Howard and Raleigh in the summer of 1597 and in which Donne took part. Following the storm, the fleet sailed back to Plymouth, from which it had left, before going out to sea again and being caught in a calm which put an end to its commanders' hope of conquering the Spanish stronghold of the Azores. In another letter written in prose between these two piteous episodes, during the stopover in Plymouth (August 1597), Donne (1945, 439) recalls the disarray that had seized the English sailors at sea and their weariness now on land:

> Sir,
>
> The first act of that play which I sayd I would go over the water to see is done and yet the people hisse. How it will end I know not *ad ego vicissim*. It is true that Jonas was in a whales belly three dayes but hee came not voluntary as I did nor was troubled with the stinke of 150 land soldiers as wee; and I was there 20 days of so very very bad wether that even some of the marriners have beene drawen to thinke it were not altogether amisse to pray, and my self heard one of them say god help us. For all our paynes wee have seene the promised land of Spaine; whether wee shall enter or not I guesse no; I think there is a blott in their tables but perchaunce this is not on our dice to hitt it. Wee are now againe at Plymouth quasi ply mouth; for we do nothing but eate. [7]

In this letter written before the poem "The Storm", Donne's pun, which runs against the rather despondent tone of the passage, revolves around the figure of the fold. Idly whiling their time away by eating, Donne and his fellow sailors are in Plymouth "quasi ply mouth", that is to say, with folded out mouths, filled by the abundant absorption of food. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* first of all defines the noun "ply" as "fold; each of the layers of thickness produced by folding cloth" and also as "a bend, a crook, a curvature". Undoubtedly, such an allusion to folds is significant for it was written following a stormy episode during which the folds of the English sails were blown out by the wind, and before the poetic narration of this unfortunate event: "The Storm". Just as Donne's mouth is described in the

prose letter as a filled out fold, the poem "The Storm", produced by this very mouth, gives pride of place to folds.

Remarkably, the reading of this poem that Donne entices his reader to embark upon amounts to an unfolding process. In the form of a *captatio benevolentiae* to the poem's addressee, Sir Christopher Brooke, the opening lines of the text are quite telling in that respect. Donne indeed compares the lines he submits to his friend's assessment to miniatures by Nicholas Hilliard. If such tiny paintings contain more meaning and are more eloquent than greater size, narrative works by untalented artists, then the excellence and eloquence of Donne's poem should be revealed by Brooke's reading:

> and, a hand, or eye
> By Hilliard drawn, is worth an history,
> By a worse painter made; and (without pride)
> When by thy judgement they are dignified,
> My lines are such: 'tis the pre-eminence
> Of friendship only to impute excellence.
> (ll. 3-8, p. 197)

Reading, these lines suggest, is not only an act which, provided the reader's judgment is backed up by expertise and friendship, reveals the quality of a text. It also essentially consists in unfolding the implications held or folded up in its lines. They contain, wrapped up in them, as much meaning not even as a miniature by Hilliard, but as the smallest anatomic details in it ("a hand, or eye", l. 3). Spanning over lines 3 to 5, Donne's hyperbolic conceit brings together realities that stand on both extremes of the spectrum of size ("a hand, or eye", l. 3 and "an history", l. 4) and puts them on an equal footing in terms of eloquence. There ensues that for such eloquence to be discovered, observing the painted details or reading Donne's lines implies opening the hand or the eye and folding out their content. The pictorial image conjured up in the poem thus delineates the figure of the fold in at least two respects. First, such a theoretical representation of the poetic text, self-reflexively expressed by the poem, involves a self-referential discourse on and by the act of writing: a poem is a folded structure and writing consists in conflating meaning in its

lines just as in a series of tightly connected folds. Secondly, the critical discourse briefly penned in these lines brings forth a cognate theory of reading, which amounts to opening up the written words and setting free the various, interconnected layers of meaning contained in them.

In this poem, the reflexive quality of words and of the fold is stretched out even further, for the written text applies its built-in critical discourse and mimics the folds it evokes. Donne's narration indeed follows the motions of the violent wind which, at the beginning of the expedition to the Azores, blew into the sails of the English fleet, and his poem seemingly finds in its gusts the motivating principle of its own development. Blowing out of the bowels of England and gathering momentum, the wind which hit the English sails is described as follows:

> The south and west winds joined, and, as they blew,
> Waves like a rolling trench before them threw.
> Sooner than you read this line, did the gale,
> Like shot, not feared till felt, our sails assail;
> And what at first was called a gust, the same
> Hath now a storm's, anon a tempest's name.
> (ll. 27-32, p. 197)

Fusing the situation of utterance (in other words the reading of the poem) and the wind's blows into a single time sequence, the comment addressing the reader directly ("sooner than you read this line", l. 29) reads as a performative remark: it leads to imagine that the poem develops under the force of the wind just as the folded cloth of the English sails is inflated by its strengthening gusts. This initial reference to the text as fold is spun out further for its texture duplicates the shape of a fold.

Indeed, the wind's assaults are repeated and Donne keeps referring to them as if every sequence in the second half of the 74 line poem was triggered by a new gale. The wind blows along thick clouds that overshadow the sunlight and make the sailors lose the sense of directions (ll. 37-40); thunder and rain rage (ll. 43-44); the ship aboard which Donne has embarked is tossed about and its sails blown out to rags (ll. 53-58) and eventually, under the force of the wind which blends all realities

and covers them in darkness, nothing in this chaos has kept its initial shape and identity:

> Since all forms, uniform deformity
> Doth cover;
>
> (ll. 70-71, p. 198)

Each of the images or series of images in this sequence, which runs from about the middle to the end of the poem, explores a new face of the wind-caused disaster affecting the English fleet. Each of them adds up another layer to the meaning of the poem, puts into words one of the manifold or multi-faceted consequences of the wind but is connected to the previous and following one by one common thematic thread: the unrelenting and strength-gathering gales that storm about. The second half of the text thus seems to develop as a series of folds, curving out one way and then the other, but still continuously tied together by its unifying principle: the wind. Under its influence, the passage inflates and undulates, just as the English sails. Dedicated to these sails, blown out by the initially gentle wind when the ships set out, a few lines from the beginning of the poem accurately describe the inflating and surface-rippling process which informs the very poetics of the text. Donne indeed writes about the wind:

> As to a stomach starved, whose insides meet,
> Meat comes, it came: and swole our sails, when we
> So joyed, as Sara, her swelling joyed to see.
>
> (ll. 20-22, p. 197)

At every stage in the second half of the poem, Donne's writing, which develops with reference to the wind's blows, reads as the mimetic double of the sails, of the food-filled stomach or of the pregnant womb, that is to say, as a series of folds.[8] The inflated, folded structures depicted by the images in lines 20-22 are thus duplicated in a mirroring way by the inflation and rippled development of the writing in the poem's second part.

In addition, Donne's writing conforms to, and applies the fold poetics self-reflexively described at the beginning (ll. 3-8) as it frames within 74 lines the

narration of a twenty day sea voyage and encapsulates in its images the turmoil, material damage and human disarray brought about by the storm. Like the details of a miniature by Hilliard, it speaks volumes. Eventually, with its wind-driven narrative, "The Storm" coheres and connects, too, with Donne's self-referential theoretical discourse expressed in other poems: a poem is an empty folded structure, here the concept of storm, and writing consists in blowing air into it, that is to say, the wind-inspired, elaborate conceits which make up this verse letter.

Donne's taste for paradoxes no longer needs demonstrating. Permeating both poems and *Sermons*, it is also evidenced in one of the very few epistles preceding his poetical works, "Metempsychosis" (1601). This meta-discursive letter brings forth Donne's intentions in writing this poem, which he wishes his reader not to misunderstand. The poet pays tribute to Pythagoras, who coined the theory of metempsychosis, as well as to those who have led him to such a source of inspiration ("Epistle", ll. 17-22, p. 176). However, he swiftly adds that even if his poem borrows from this theory in order to describe the migration of a soul through different bodies, he does not intend it as a paedagogical text aimed at teaching this theory. In no way does he wish his role as a writer to be considered close to that of a lecturer: "All which I bid you remember," he argues, "(for I would have no such readers as I can teach) is, that the Pythagorean doctrine doth not only carry one soul from man to man, nor man to beast, but indifferently to plants also" ("Epistle", ll. 22-25, p. 176). For all it says, this self-referential assertion is blatantly self-trapping for, while denying giving his readers instructions on how to read his text, Donne simultaneously does the very opposite. Whereas they assert the contrary, there oozes out these lines a theory of reading and writing: the poet's role does not consist in faithfully repeating the Pythagorean doctrine whose essential principles are merely kept to write a satirical poem. The writing of poetry is not backed up by any didactic aim and the reader's experience should not in the least amount to a learning process.

Theoretical comments on his own writing are not absent from Donne's poems, but very much as in this example, they are generally found in the form of sketchy hints. Such poetic theory appears in the self-mirroring, self-reflexive remarks

scattered in the texts, in those passages where, holding and viewing themselves with critical distance, the poems seem to be folded up upon themselves. The fold is precisely a key self-representation in Donne's poetical works and a cornerstone in their self-applied, theoretical discourse**.** This theory is at work in poems which turn out to be reflexive at another remove as the folds they take as objects of discourse end up being mirrored and mimicked in their very form and in the layout of their images. Cascading upon one another, they ripple the surface of these texts as so many folds. In that respect, if conceived of as bodies or corpus, these poems seem to echo the baroque aesthetic standards defined by Gilles Deleuze (1988, 164) with reference to the Renaissance garment:

> Si le Baroque se définit par le pli qui va à l'infini, à quoi se reconnaît-il, au plus simple ? Il se reconnaît d'abord au modèle textile tel que le suggère la matière vêtue […]. S'il y a un costume proprement baroque, il sera large, vague, gonflant, bouillonnant, juponnant, et entourera le corps de ses plis autonomes, toujours multipliables, plus qu'il ne traduira ceux du corps : un système comme rhingrave-canons, mais aussi le pourpoint en brassière, le manteau flottant, l'énorme rabat, la chemise débordante, forment l'apport baroque par excellence au XVIIe siècle.

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NOTES

[1] The schizophrenic split affecting Donne as well as his early and later works is highlighted by Walton (1640, 200). Praising his long-lasting poetical gifts, he does not fall short of distinguishing between the flimsy texts written in his youth ("facetiously composed and carelessly scattered") and later, faith-inspired sacred poems ("divine sonnets and other high, holy, and harmonious composures") and argues that Donne himself wished the former "had been abortive, or so short-lived that his own eyes had witnessed their funerals".

[2] John Carey's book (1981) whose approach to Donne is now frequently questioned by scholars in the field, ranks amongst the latest pieces of criticism to rely upon a clear-cut divide between Donne as author of love poetry, and Donne as divine and religious poet.

[3] See, to name but a few, studies which, with differing critical approaches and along diverse thematic lines, have highlighted converging features in the thought and poetics of both poems and *Sermons*: James Baumlin (1991), Thomas Docherty (1986), Robert Ellrodt (1973), Magaret Llassera (1999), Paul M. Oliver (1997), Terry G. Sherwood (1984).

[4] In his correspondence, though, Donne discussed the epistolary genre. For a study of Donne's remarks on the writing of epistles developed in his very own letters, see in particular Cecile M. Jagodzinski (1999, 86-93).

[5] See Donne's use of elemental, medical and alchemical references in such poems as "The Dissolution", "Holy Sonnet 5: 'I am a little world'", "Love's Alchemy" or "A Nocturnal upon St Lucy's Day", to name but a few. All subsequent quotes from Donne's poems will refer to *The Complete English Poems* (1986). In the body of the text, these quotes will be documented as follows: "ll. , p(p)." (lines, page[s]).
[6] Another case in point is "Satire 1: Away, thou fondling motley humorist", where the courtier's fold-rich and preposterous attire, which is the butt of the utterer's biting sarcasms, is mimetically mirrored by a downpour of interrelated images that aim at ridiculing the vain, shallow character (ll. 53-64, p. 156). Linked by one common satirical goal, they overlap on, and echo each other, and yet slightly differ from one another as they refer to sundry realities. Bound up, but nonetheless distinct, they are reminiscent, in their layout, of a series of folds.
[7] Letter quoted by Stephen Burt (1997, 150).
[8] In a very illuminating article in which he underscores the presence of mannerist elements in Donne's poems, L.E. Semler (1993, 55) comments on lines 20-22 from "The Storm". According to the critic, the written text is modelled as a curve. He demonstrates that the metaphors of the stomach, applied to the sails, and of pregnancy, in charge of conveying the sailors' joy, are harmoniously articulated around what he calls a "turning joint", namely here, the verb "swell". With its two distinct meanings, this verb is used as a supple transition allowing to switch over from one metaphor to the next without any breach in meaning. In Semler's view, such an easy transition in the images is the verbal equivalent to the *linea serpentinata* in mannerist painting. The verbal curve thus designed is also reminiscent of the figure of the fold.