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« As all confessing, and through-shine as I »?
Representations of transparency and discursive complexity in John Donne's poems

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Donne's poetry does not commonly pass off as easily apprehensible. Among other features, its elaborate conceits, its convoluted syntax, its learned references and paradoxes come into play to defy interpretation. In many respects, his poems read as riddles that raise new difficulties as soon as they are provisionally solved¹. Their complexities are like so many screens standing in the way of would-be definitive attempts at deciphering the texts: they opacify meaning and, time and time again, leave the reader, like the utterer from « The Broken Heart », with the impression that he « hath / All the pieces still, though they be not unite » (ll. 27-28, p. 46). A far cry from simplicity and clarity, Donne's poetic writings could often best be described as challenging their readers' and critics' attempts at gazing through them and at gaining a clear view of their meaning². As a metaphor, transparency is perhaps not the critical concept that springs immediately to mind with reference to Donne's poetics.

Paradoxically enough, the oft-underlined opacity of his poems does not preclude the presence of, and interest for, transparent objects in them. As brilliantly demonstrated by Margaret Llasera and, more recently, by Rayna Kalas, progress in optics and in the crafting of transparent optical devices largely left its mark on the inspiration of early modern writers and on Donne's in particular. « The Good Morrow » (ll. 15-18, p. 60), « A Valediction: of Weeping » (ll. 1-6, p. 89) and « Whitcraft by a Picture » (ll. 1-4, p. 91) feature lovers absorbed in the contemplation of their images reciprocally reflected in the other's eyes or tears, which become so many convex mirrors. The theory of vision through beams emitted and received by transparent eyeballs (admittedly inherited from the ancient Greeks) permeates the representation of the lovers looking into each other's eyes in « The Ecstasy » (ll. 7-8, p. 54). « The Canonization » (ll. 39-45, p. 48) transforms the lovers' eyes into complex optical instruments combining telescope-like lenses and mirrors (« so made such mirrors, and such spies », l. 42, p. 48) through which a miniature image of the world is seen as in a catoptric anamorphosis³.

¹ See, for instance, Donne's explicit references to mind-boggling « love's riddles » (l. 29, p. 64) in « Lovers' Infiniteness », or to the « phoenix riddle » said by the utterer from « The Canonization » to have « more wit / By us » (ll. 23-24, p. 47). All additional references to Donne's verse will be to the following edition and will appear parenthetically with line and page number(s): A. J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, London, Penguin, 1986.

² However, as David Novarr rightly notes, for all their complexities, Donne's poems are not gratuitously and pointlessly intricate. They may challenge interpretation but are not intended to thwart resolution: « His [Donne's] intent is sometimes hard to get at, but he does not write hieroglyphically. The surface of his poetry is normally so striking and brilliant that it calls attention to itself, sometimes to such a degree that we rest in admiration of his wit and ingenuity and do not see how they function, but with Donne there is always a relation between surface and idea. » See, « 'Amor Vincit Omnia': Donne and the Limits of Ambiguity », *Modern Language Review*, 82.2 (April 1987), p. 286-292, here p. 292.

³ Margaret Llasera, *Représentations scientifiques et images poétiques en Angleterre au XVIIème siècle*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 1999, p. 51-90. See p. 60-61 for an analysis of the reflecting eye and tear conceits in « The Good Morrow » and « A Valediction: of Weeping », p. 68-72 for Llasera's illuminating remarks on vision in « The Ecstasy » and for her comments on the optical devices represented in « The Canonization ». Rayna Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2007, esp. p. 106-132. Kalas charts the technical evolutions in glass and mirror making in the Renaissance and shows how these innovations, which fascinated authors of the time, among whom Donne, became a considerable source of literary inspiration. Her work further analyzes how the technical breakthroughs which led to the creation of crystal glass mirrors (whose quality exceeded by far that of earlier reflecting contraptions) transformed the metaphor of the book as mirror in literary works of the period. See below for remarks on her discussion of Donne's glass / mirror imagery in « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window ».

In addition to learned references to transparency inspired by old and new scientific breakthroughs, the Donnean corpus also teems with representations of sometimes mundane see-through realities: tears, windows, air, « specular stones » (one of the two occurrences of the term is found in « The Undertaking », l. 6, p. 83) and transparent liquid containers crop up in its lines, calling for attention. Indeed, beyond the sheer number of references to it in Donne's poems, such a physical property as transparency is in itself outstanding or, perhaps more importantly, oddly outstanding, that is to say remarkable in spite of itself. Indeed it conditions vision (sight is impossible outside a transparent medium) but in order to be vision-enabling, it simultaneously requires erasing the boundary between its inside and outside (like the « specular stone / Through which all things within without were shown » [ll. 29-30, p. 224], as Donne wrote in a verse letter to the Countess of Bedford) and to be at least partly invisible itself⁴. Its nature is thus one-of-its-kind: transparency has to be self-effacing to reveal the world to the eye and, unlike gaze-arresting realities, it is only and precisely noticeable because it strains to be unnoticeable. Were it only for this paradox, which sets it aside, the presence of transparency in poetic texts would be worth pointing out. Their paradoxical nature may or may not have prompted Donne's choice to stud his verse with transparent objects, but it can only lead to consider such representations as hardly gratuitous and even as significant.

This paper precisely wishes to address the role played by these objects in some poems and, more specifically, to consider how their visual transparency affects the discourse of these texts. If, from an optical viewpoint, they allow the eye to see through them, do they also enable the reader's eye to read through the poems or do they contribute to their complexity? This study thus purports to ask whether or not the foremost physical feature of transparent objects, namely their ability to let the gaze through, translates metaphorically to the tropes and to the poems. In other words, do these objects lend their clarity to the construction of meaning?

Not to put too fine a point on it, this paper will argue that in Donne's verse, visual transparency hardly ever rhymes with discursive simplicity and tends, against its own grain, to generate doubts, ambiguities and intricacies. Its representations are more often than not part and parcel of the (sometimes) extremely complex discourse voiced by the texts. Substantiating this claim will first of all require paying attention to the experience of vision through transparent realities staged by some poems. Indeed what is then seen hardly ever reveals itself entirely, with absolute accuracy or in a simple and ambivalence-free way. Such an imperfect vision calls into question the ability of see-through objects to lead to certainty or the truth, and it suggests instead transparency's kinship to relativity and complexity. One first stage of the analysis will thus point out how, on several occasions, Donne deconstructs the visual transparency / cognitive clarity paradigm. But that optical transparency should not be synonymous with intellectual limpidness does not for all that curtail its involvement in the elaboration of meaning(s). On the contrary, as this study will secondly emphasize, transparent objects in Donne's poems are pivotal to the construction of an intricate, sophisticated, multi-layered discourse. But remarkably, they become all the more opaque and cryptic as the poet turns them into mirrors, that is to say, as their translucent surface becomes reflective. The close readings of « A Valediction: of Weeping » and « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window » will try and demonstrate that by shifting representations of optical clarity towards specularity Donne further enhances the interpretative difficulties inherent in both texts.

I. Transparent objects and imperfect vision

The metaphorical correspondence between optical and discursive transparency, between clarity of sight and distinctness of words and meaning is one that Donne questions on several occasions in his poems and prose alike. He repeatedly presents it as problematical: see-through

⁴ The quality of vision depends on the degree of transparency of the medium through which it takes place. The less crystalline the medium, the more imperfect vision will be. When see-through media, such as glass, are coloured they do not enable a pure, undistorted vision for, in such a case, they are primarily visible themselves.

realities are hardly conducive to clear, comprehensible thoughts and feelings. A case in point appears in « Twicknam Garden », a poem which, besides staging the pangs of unrequited love, also raises doubts about transparency's ability, as a physical quality, to lead to unambiguous, clear-cut certainties in matters of love. Suffering from a woman's refusal to give him her love, the utterer tries and seek comfort in the landscape of Twicknam Garden. However, his attempt to find solace in this place fails. As he rapidly finds out, his all-pervasive sorrow makes him perceive nature's joyful liveliness around as another reminder of his own piteous state. Declaring himself from the outset « surrounded with tears » (l. 1, p. 82), he ends up begging cruel Love to take away from him the ability to feel and suffer and to make him « a stone fountain weeping out his [my] year » (l. 18, p. 82). Envisioning himself as a tear-gushing fountain in the last stanza, he offers other lovers to use his tears in order to assess the sincerity of their mistresses' love:

Hither with crystal vials, lovers come,
 And take my tears, which are love's wine,
 And try your mistress' tears at home,
 For all are false, that taste not just like mine;
 Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,
 Nor can you more judge woman's thoughts by tears,
 Than by her shadow, what she wears.
 (ll. 19-25, p. 82)

The representation of transparency is two-fold in these lines as this quality characterizes, at least implicitly, the tears shed by the utterer and by women, but also, quite literally, the container with which other lovers are to collect them (« crystal vials », l. 19, p. 82). The tears and the vessel that they fill are see-through but along these lines this optical property is transferred to the abstract realm of the heart. Even if it gradually proves inconclusive (at least as regards women), the analogy between visual perception and the cognitive discovery (and resulting knowledge) of amorous feelings underlies this stanza. In this parallel between sight and knowledge, the optical quality of transparency plays an important role. Metaphorically, it signifies and testifies to the sincerity and purity of the utterer's love and suffering (« my tears, which are love's wine », l. 20, p. 82). Encapsulated in their transparent test tube, the utterer's tears are intended to serve as the backdrop against which women's own tears and love (« woman's thoughts », l. 24, p. 82) are to reveal their truth (or lack thereof: « For all are false, that taste not just like mine », l. 22, p. 82). In this string of transparent signifiers, the utterer even includes another translucent reality. The very source of their lachrymal flows, women's « eyes » (l. 23, p. 82), could be thought at least provisionally to give access to their innermost feelings (« hearts », l. 23, p. 82) provided the regular polarities of sight were inverted and their limpid globes were peered into instead of looking out.

However, if the utterer ascertains the truthfulness of his own tears (ll. 20 and 22, p. 82), his lines deny the transparency of women's tears any reliability in expressing the truth about the latter's feelings. The logic leading from transparency to sincerity is first and foremost deconstructed as the utterer advises that women's tears be tested not so much for their visual quality as for their taste (ll. 20-22, p. 82). Admittedly, the man foregrounds this sense, initially used to carry out the test, with reference to his own tears, « love's wine » (l. 20, p. 82), whose taste is to be taken as a reference (l. 22, p. 82). But the shift in sensory paradigm does not overshadow the clarity of his own tears, which it leaves unscathed: women's tears are deceptive, as lines 24 and 25 suggest, but not the utterer's. However, this translation relegates the crystalline nature of women's tears behind their taste, in a stanza that is dominated by the sense of sight and images of limpidness (« crystal vials », l. 19, « my tears », l. 20, « eyes » and « shine », l. 23, « shadow », l. 25, p. 82). As such, this shift first hints indirectly at the shortcomings of women's tears and of their transparency. The latter is not trustworthy enough a sign to decide how genuine women's love can be. But the unreliability of women's tears and of their transparency is stressed even more radically in lines 23 to 25. The eyes, which are the matrix of those tears, do not yield the secrets of women's feelings (l. 23, p. 82) and are only falsely see-through gates to their interiority. As for tears, the utterer asserts, they are only deceptive clues. Their clearness counterfeits the reality of women's « thoughts » (l. 24, p. 82) and it lures the onlooker into believing in the sincerity of a love for which it offers no guarantee. With its Platonic undertone, line

25 suggests that the transparency of tears is just about as remote from the truth of women's feelings as a shadow can be from an idea, albeit from the clear idea of a woman's garments.

The utterer's original scheme, which consisted in experimenting on women's translucent tears, thus turns out to be perfectly pointless, for their transparency is an instrument of deceit. Far from being straightforward and sincere, it turns out to be, on the contrary, shady and manipulative. In Michael A. Winkelman's words, at the end of the poem the utterer thus comes to the realization that « tears and other signs are not reliable or legit, frustrating his deep-seated desire for transparency and good faith in matters of the heart⁵. » With the exception of the utterer's own tears, which he marshals as reliable evidence of his love and despair, the representations of transparency in « Twicknam Garden », namely feminine tears, hardly rhyme with unequivocal feelings and discourse. By depicting transparency as the tool of lies and pretence, the poem undermines its link to simplicity, sincerity and clarity. Transparency, it seems to suggest, is alien to certainty and is more likely akin to complexity and doubts. Interestingly, in the Donnean corpus, love poetry is not alone in reassessing the relation of optical transparency to intellectual certainty and assured knowledge. Donne's religious verse and homiletic works further deconstruct this paradigm.

The problematical link of transparency to clear knowledge (whether it be of the world, of self or of God) is illustrated in the long praise penned in celebration of the Countess of Bedford's deceased brother: « Obsequies to the Lord Harrington ». Donne's meditation over the virtues of Lord Harrington (which are the source of a precious, all-encompassing knowledge) takes the form of an act of vision as he initially compares the dead to an all-illuminating light and powerful magnifying glass. The translation of visual perception through this glass into intellectual apprehension is central to this poem as well, which relies on the implicit analogy of seeing and understanding and, thereby, knowing. Through the lens of the deceased, whose overwhelming transparency seems to colonize everything, the world that is seen becomes itself see-through and entirely known. But what is more, thanks to the optical instrument, the poet claims gaining crystal clear sight and full understanding of all things around and even of himself, thus overcoming the difficulties of introspection⁶:

All the world grows transparent, and I see
Through all, both church and state, in seeing thee;
And I discern by favour of this light,
Myself, the hardest object of the sight.
(ll. 27-30, p. 257)

However, the efficiency of the human glass that is Lord Harrington is rapidly called into doubt in the lines that follow. No matter how comprehensive a vision and knowledge it offers in this world, Lord Harrington's lens only provides a sight of far lesser quality than sight through the perfectly transparent and almighty glass of God, in the afterlife:

God is the glass; as thou when thou dost see
Him who sees all, seest all concerning thee,
So, yet unglorified, I comprehend
All, in these mirrors of thy ways, and end.

⁵ Michael A. Winkelman, « Sighs and Tears: Biological Signals and John Donne's 'Whining Poetry' », *Philosophy and Literature*, 33 (2009), p. 329-344, here p. 333. Winkelman's physiological and psychological approach to sighs and tears in Donne's poetry demonstrates very convincingly how such biological phenomena can be used to « dissemble » all the more effectively as they are difficult to counterfeit. They are therefore spontaneously taken to signify sincerely (p. 331-332).

⁶ Élisabeth Soubrenie analyzes the desire by many XVIIth century authors, including Donne, to probe the innermost recesses of self and she points out their attempts to overcome the lack of transparency inherent in human nature, which remains unfathomable. However, she argues that Renaissance authors took advantage of such resistance of self to their inquiring gaze. Their introspective writings play with the encoded nature of self and with the imperfections of the instruments intended for vision. For Soubrenie, enigmas lie at the core of their aesthetics. See: « L'énigme du miroir : De la difficulté d'écrire sur soi au XVIIe siècle », in Norbert Col (éd.), *Écritures de soi*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007, p. 41-48.

Though God be our true glass, through which we see
 All, since the being of all things is he,
 Yet are the trunks which do to us derive
 Things, in proportion fit, by perspective,
 Deeds of good men;

(ll. 31-39, p. 257)

Although Donne acknowledges the value of the deceased as optical device and source of moral knowledge, he nonetheless stresses the imperfection of the contraption. Genuine vision hides nothing, not even (about) the onlooker, for it is achieved through God's panoptic lens, which is fused with what is seen thanks to it (ll. 31-32 and 35-36, p. 257). The sight achieved through the divine glass is thus unmediated: it joins subject, object and device into one and lets the onlooker's gaze reach entirely through it (« through which we see », l. 35, p. 257). Praiseworthy though it may be, the human optical device embodied by Lord Harrington is first and foremost far less transparent than specular. The deceased's life and death are « mirrors » (l. 34, p. 257), which admittedly provide a reflection of « all » there is to see (l. 34, p. 257). However, the fullness of the reflection is debased by the onlooker's (the utterer's) fallen state. He is an « unglorified » (l. 33, p. 257), not yet resurrected and impure sinner, whose vision cannot be perfect. The knowledge provided by these mirrors is thus far less comprehensive than the knowledge acquired by seeing through God. This is confirmed by lines running from 37 to 39. The image seen through Harrington's lens or, for that matter, through the lenses of other remarkable men (« trunks », l. 37, p. 257) is only incomplete, only partly accurate for these lenses offer just as good a sight as can be apprehended in this world (« by perspective », l. 38, p. 257). The transparency of the medium (the virtuous « deeds of good men » such as Lord Harrington [l. 39, p. 257]) is only « in proportion fit » (l. 38, p. 257) for this fallen world. The sight and the knowledge such see-through human lenses give access to cannot compare to the full vision and understanding given by God, « our true glass, through which we see / All » (ll. 35-36, p. 257). In « Obsequies to the Lord Harrington », the imperfection of physical and conceptual vision in this world is supported by references to the unworthiness of the onlooker, by the surreptitious transformation of the lens into a mirror and by the relative inaccuracy of transparent lenses just as if Donne denied the possibility of genuine transparency in human life as well as the possibility to reach certain knowledge.

The contrast that this poem delineates between the crystalline, all-encompassing divine lens and sight and the obscure, fragmentary human glass or mirror is taken up again in a sermon on 1. Cor. 13:12 preached by Donne on Easter Day 1628. This sermon echoes directly « Obsequies to the Lord Harrington » in two respects. First, each of these texts draws a parallel between sight and knowledge or, more precisely, to consider the sensitive experience of vision as a metaphor for the experience of intellectual apprehension, that is to say for knowing. In both texts, sight and knowledge are presented as resulting from strictly analogous processes and constitute one single paradigm. Secondly, just like the poem, the sermon revolves around the Pauline distinction between sight in this world and sight in the next. The only vision and knowledge worth having are of God, Donne asserts. In this life, the book of creatures, or created nature, is the optical instrument with which God is seen and the preacher's words are the means to get access to the knowledge of God. However, as instruments of vision for the eyes and the mind, the glasses of nature and preaching only provide an obscure, fragmentary, blurred and still enigmatic sight of God. Only in the afterlife does this vision gain sharpness and perfection for it is an utterly transparent and direct apprehension of God. Then indeed, Donne points out, « God himself is the place, we see Him, in Him; God is our *medium*, we see Him, by him⁷. » Just as the poet in « Obsequies to the Lord Harrington », the preacher insists in this sermon that the vision of God available to man after death will be crystal clear precisely because it will be unmediated. The optical instrument will not differ from the object of the sight, namely God himself:

For, here we see God *In speculo, in a glasse*, that is, by reflexion, And here we know God *In aenigmate*, sayes our Text, *Darkly*, (so we translate it) that is, by obscure representations, and therefore it is called a

⁷ John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, éd. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1959-1962, VIII, 9, p. 220.

Knowledge but in part; But in heaven, our sight is *face to face*, And our knowledge is *to know*, as we are *known*⁸.

The transparency of the human glass leaves in this text as well much to be desired and it falls short of enabling distinct and fully clear vision and knowledge. Indeed, unlike vision in heaven, it is not achieved by means of a perfectly see-through medium which, combining lens, onlooker and object seen into one single whole, joins man to God in a reciprocal, all-uncovering gaze. Prior to death or rather prior to the resurrection, man's sight and knowledge of God are only images reflected at the surface of imperfect mirrors, namely created nature and the preacher's words. These devices lack transparency and do not enable one to see through them but, like screens, they only bear at most an image on them. They do not present but re-present God and, in the process, they distort these representations. The latter are shadowy and incomplete (« obscure representations », « *Knowledge but in part* ») and they remain perplexing, encoded riddles (« *In aenigmate* »). The human lenses are therefore no efficient means to get access to certainty: they only offer a relative sight and a far from illuminating, partly undeciphered knowledge.

Although with different concerns, « Twicknam Garden », « Obsequies to the Lord Harrington » and this Easter sermon call into doubt the quality of sight through transparent realities or, as the case may be, contraptions intended for observation. All three question the quality of such sight by underlining its shortcomings and pointing at its unreliability. As such, they undermine the analogy of optical transparency and intellectual clarity, they sap the commonplace which makes optical translucence rhyme with certain and full knowledge. Instead, in these two poems and in this sermon, the representations of transparency paradoxically veer off towards doubt and dissimulation, incompleteness and complexity. Reading these texts, it seems that for Donne nothing is more alien to transparency than simplicity. Remarkably in the tribute to Lord Harrington as well as in the 1628 sermon, Donne deconstructs the optical transparency / cognitive clarity paradigm by resorting to the ambivalent word « glass », which can both refer to a see-through lens and to a mirror. In both texts, true transparency is restricted to God's lens whereas man's is rather a reflective instrument. What results from this distinction is first indeed that man does not have access to true transparency and full knowledge but, above all, that for all their imperfections, the mirrors with which he is left do not abdicate their ability to signify. Man's « glasses » may not be truly see-through, they do, however, provide meaning, albeit of the complex, obscure, mind-puzzling kind. The shift exemplified in these texts from transparency to specularity, from clear understanding to sophisticated and intricate meaning is not one that Donne limited to abstract and generalizing considerations on the sincerity of love or the true knowledge of self or of God. As some poems illustrate, its implications extend to the very construction of meaning in them. There remains to show how, using apparently transparent objects within his texts, the poet transforms them into mirrors and makes them the cornerstones of a very complex discourse on the union and on the separation of beings and of signs.

II. Tears and window: the specular tools of discursive complexity

Donne's interest in mirrors has been repeatedly noted by critics. Underlining more particularly the recurrent images of convex mirrors in the poems, their comments chiefly discuss these tropes in aesthetic terms⁹. For instance, the eyes of the lovers in « The Good Morrow » are indeed mirrors thanks to which, as the utterer notes, addressing his beloved:

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁹ For a discussion of Donne's mannerist and baroque inspiration, see Robert Ellrodt, « L'esthétique de John Donne », in *Le continent européen et le monde anglo-américain aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Actes du Colloque de la Société d'Études Anglo-américaines des 17e et 18e Siècles (24-25 octobre 1986), Reims, PUR, 1987, p. 50-61. Margaret Llasera develops some illuminating comments on the optical distortions occurring at the surface of the lovers' eyes in « The Good Morrow ». *Op. cit.*, p. 58. For a classification of Donne's mirror images, albeit with numerous inconsistencies and interpretative slants, see G. R. Wilson, « The Interplay of Perception and

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,
(ll. 15-16, p. 60)

before asking:

Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west?
(ll. 17-18, p. 60)

Mirrored in the other's eye, the image of each face inflates considerably as each eye becomes one half of a perfectly spherical earth. The half ball of each eye swells suddenly (« hemispheres », l. 17, p. 60) and its reflective surface completely distorts the perspective thus far limited to human proportions (ll. 15-16, p. 60). The shift from a miniature (ll. 15-16, p. 60) to the image of a planet (ll. 17-18, p. 60), which occurs on the same curved specular surfaces, is visually very surprising and is part of the aesthetic features that have led readers of Donne to label his inspiration at times mannerist and at other times baroque.

This paper will not discuss the relevance of such terms nor examine whether or how such images relate to mannerist or baroque features in the visual arts. However, one element needs stressing that studies of Donne's tear conceits tend to leave aside or to take for granted¹⁰. That the tears or the eyes represented in these poems should reflect the face(s) of the lover or of his mistress constitutes *per se* a translation, if not a transgression, of the most elementary visual experience. An eye, just as a tear, is first and foremost a transparent reality, not a specular one. But the poet's choice to craft conceits which obscure their transparency and foreground their specularity is noteworthy. Mirrors indeed offer a much more problematical type of vision than transparent contraptions, one that can be fraught with alterations and distortions. But this transformation of transparency into specularity is not limited to being a visual effect. In « A Valediction: of Weeping » and « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window », the complexities brought about by looking at the reflective surface of mirrors translate to the elaboration of meaning. The visual intricacies entailed by specular sight become instruments in the construction of a sophisticated, convoluted purport.

A farewell poem, « A Valediction: of Weeping » unfolds as a dramatic monologue in which, as he is about to leave her, the utterer addresses his beloved. He does not explain the cause of his departure and merely alludes to what will follow: a perilous sea voyage, from which he might never return (ll. 19-22, p. 89) and, at first glance perhaps less radically, the couple's separation, each standing « on a divers shore » (l. 9, p. 89). Whichever scenario occurs, its outcome is identical, for if the sea ends up spelling the man's demise (« drown me », l. 20, p. 89), the lovers' separation in two parts of the world will annihilate them both as well as their union: « So thou and I are nothing then » (l. 9, p. 89). The death- and « nothing »-haunted sequel to the utterer's departure is the roughly-sketched background to his address, the poem focusing instead on the moments preceding the couple's separation, framed by the utterer's time reference « whilst I stay here » (l. 2, p. 89). The here and now with which the poem is concerned, and which coincides with its utterance in typical Donnean dramatization of the instant, is imbued with tears. The lover's performative utterance in the opening two lines, « Let me pour forth / My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here » (ll. 1-2, p. 89), marks the start of the poem and of the man's tear flow. However, its stream quickly swells to Flood-like proportions as the lady's lachrymose downpour combines with it: « Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow / This world, by waters sent from thee » (ll. 17-18, p. 89). These tear-suffused moments may well occupy the forefront of the poem, they are nonetheless nothing but a miniature, but a prefiguration, but a rehearsal of the deadly plight, which the utterer quickly hints at and which awaits

Reflection: Mirror Imagery in Donne's Poetry », *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 9.1 (1969), p. 107-121.

¹⁰ Such conceits are found, for instance, in « The Good Morrow », « A Valediction: of Weeping » or « Witchcraft by a Picture ».

the lovers. Their sobs indeed appear as the forerunning signs and means of their impending separation and ensuing ontological dissolution, which they actualize:

Let me pour forth
 My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
 For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
 And by this mintage they are something worth,
 For thus they be,
 Pregnant of thee;
 Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
 When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
 So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.

On a round ball
 A workman that hath copies by, can lay
 An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
 And quickly make that, which was nothing, all,
 So doth each tear,
 Which thee doth wear,
 A globe, yea world by that impression grow,
 Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
 This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so.
 (ll. 1-18, p. 89)

These first two stanzas of the poem are fraught with interpretative knots which can only be tentatively untied. But their opacity is to a large extent bound up with the central conceit of the tears whose various sides appear from line to line. First and foremost, the imperative of the first line (« let me pour forth », l. 1, p. 89), combined with the reference to the utterer's temporary presence (« whilst I stay here », l. 2, p. 89), dramatizes the appearance of these watery beads and emphasizes their outstanding worth, for they are fragile and transient. They are from the start what both the lady and the reader are to look at, just as if they objectified or crystallized a revelation. Meant to be seen, they are also singled out as the focus of the utterer's discourse, as appears as early as line 3, which opens the commentary the latter develops on them. From the start of the poem, therefore, they are presented as significant and meaningful both visually and discursively. Their double bind to the realms of sight and words therefore ensures that what they reveal to the eye translates into discourse.

What they reveal is, however, problematical. Remarkably, these tears do not enable the lady's or the reader's gaze to reach through them as the utterer immediately side-tracks their transparency and turns it into specularity: « before thy face » (l. 2, p. 89). Yet even such specularity is oddly elusive as it is not mentioned in full words but indirectly hinted at with reference to various printing techniques and artefacts. The tears are transformed into minted coins showing the face of a sovereign (ll. 3-4, p. 89), they are like engravings combining a picture and a text (« emblems », l. 7, p. 89), like balls covered with printed world maps (ll. 10-16, p. 89) or clad with an image of the lady (« each tear, / Which thee doth wear », ll. 14-15, p. 89). Their transparency is displaced, but their specularity is oblique, almost made invisible or transparent itself, as if to give pride of place to what is seen at their surface. But this surface itself is paradoxical for it may not be as shallow as may first be thought and it proves difficult to decipher. The first stanza indeed constantly shifts from surface to interiority, from sign to being. The conceit of the coin imprinted with the lady's face (ll. 3-4, p. 89) is comparatively straightforward. Her image reflected by the surface of the tear is reminiscent of a coin stamped with a monarch's face: the latter gives it legal tender and guarantees its value. However, the justification provided by lines 5 and 6 is extremely intriguing. Admittedly, the value of the tears is beyond precise reckoning (« they are something worth », l. 4, p. 89), because they bear the priceless image of the beloved. But the utterer insists that what gives the tears their « worth » is that they are « pregnant of thee » (l. 6, p. 89). This image inverts several polarities (a reflected image is indeed the inverted copy of what stands in front of the mirror) and in the process it raises several difficulties. First of all, as if sexual roles were swapped, the utterer's own teardrops become like so many wombs which contain his beloved and make her the foetus resulting from their union. Secondly, the polarities of two- and three-

dimensional representation are also altered. Indeed, even if « pregnant » is not taken in its physiological sense, the conceit also inflates the so-far two-dimensional mirror-like surface. The image of the woman's face reflected on the tear as if it were stamped on a coin is interiorised and reaches a third dimension. Just as if the mirror of the teardrop densified, it « contains » the woman.

The visual addition of a third dimension also translates conceptually with the addition of another dimension to the sign that is the woman's reflected image. With the metamorphosis of the tear-cum-mirror and what it gives to see, the poem's discourse on the separation of the lovers in turn becomes even more complex for its implications are ontological. The tears indeed « speak » more than they initially seemed to do and, just as in « emblems » (l. 7, p. 89), their visual form is echoed by the utterer's verbal elaborations on signs and beings. Indeed, the reflections of the lady are not just formal, empty signs echoing her presence on the tear, but they embody her. These signs, the utterer seems to claim in Neoplatonic fashion, are not pure representations, but incarnations of the lady herself: « When a tear falls », he points out in line 8, « that thou falls which it bore ». The « emblems of more » (l. 7, p. 89) may well be the forerunning signs of more « grief » (l. 7), they are also more than just images. As each tear flows and runs down the man's cheek to finally drop to the ground, the image and the entire being of his lady are annihilated and turn into « nothing » (l. 9, p. 89). However, the discourse developed on and with the specular tears reaches a further level of complexity with the comparison of line 9: « So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore. »

This hint at the desolate future awaiting the couple when separated by oceans is problematical. In itself the Petrarchan overstatement does not constitute a major difficulty: the lovers once far away from one another, their love will be reduced to « nothing » and, in the absence of the other, each of them will die from sheer lack and desperation. What considerably complicates this line is the comparison with what precedes entailed by « So ». Indeed this adverb logically implies that if both the utterer and his beloved die or become « nothing » when distance separates them, then both also disappear « When a tear falls » and when « that thou falls which it bore » (l. 8, p. 89). Bouncing back on line 8, the comparison involves that when each tear drops, the « thou » (the lady) carries the « I » (the utterer) down in its fall, in other words, that the tear representing the lady and containing her whole being also contains the utterer's. Not only is each tear a mirror held up to the mistress and the receptacle of her whole being, but it also encapsulates the utterer's essence. The text does not offer any clue to decipher what constitutes the ontological mystery that it constructs with the visual ploy of the reflective tear. Is each tear from the utterer's eyes a « quintessence » of himself which absorbs the woman as her image is printed on it? Or is the woman so much part of the utterer's being, are their beings so interlocked, that her disappearance also entails his, as only the last stanza of the text can remotely lead to surmise when the utterer notes that « thou and I sigh one another's breath » (l. 26, p. 89)? The extreme intricacy of the utterer's argument resists resolution.

The transparent tears turned into mirrors as early as line 2 generate visually complex and changing images all through the first stanza. But they are also the crux of a discourse which goes from the surface of representation to the depth of being, which posits the presence of being in specular images and the annihilation of being with erasure of the sign. If anything, the translation of transparency into specularity is a source of considerable discursive complexity.

The latter is far from resolved by the second stanza. Its first seven lines conjure up the image of an artist or scientist applying maps onto the surface of a sphere that, thus, becomes a globe. His art consists in making « that, which was nothing, all » (l. 13, p. 89). His craft, if the utterer's words are anything to go by, is not only to imprint a design onto a blank surface. It gives the latter being and ontological density of the highest kind. Likewise, the lady's image applied to the surface of the tear makes it undergo the same transformational process as the workman's sphere for it « A globe, yea world by that impression grow[s] » (l. 16, p. 89). As in the first stanza, the sign reflected on the tear's surface endows it with ontological dignity, makes it become three-dimensional and reach planetary dimensions: the tear encapsulates everything of a world. However, the utterer rapidly envisions the destruction of this miniature universe: « Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow / This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so » (ll. 17-18, p. 89). The dissolution the utterer foresees

results from the flow of the lady's tears, which, adding up to his own, makes the reflection of the woman disappear and drowns the world contained in each of the man's tears. What the utterer suggests through the conceit of the dissolved specular tears is that, by crying, the woman destroys her own being (« this world », l. 18, p. 89) thus depriving him of his « heaven » (l. 18, p. 89), in other words of his « all » (l. 13, p. 89), and therefore of himself too. As in the first stanza, the sophisticated image of the tear-turned-mirror does not only serve the construction of visually surprising conceits, which conflate references to map-making, astronomy, the Flood, together with sudden changes in the scales of the represented objects. It is also the means with which the poet elaborates a challenging and difficult discourse, in which he equates signs with beings and the disappearance of signs with ontological annihilation.

If transparency does not amount for Donne to simplicity, « A Valediction: of Weeping » illustrates that when translucence is turned into specularity, the discourse of the text becomes itself extremely convoluted. This process is taken one step further by « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window ».

Just as in « A Valediction: of Weeping », the occasion for this poem, or rather the fake oral discourse it pretends to voice in the artificial form of a dramatic monologue, is its utterer's separation from his beloved. On several occurrences, the man alludes to his departure (« I go », l. 65, p. 89) and to his undated return (« Till my return », l. 31, p. 88; « Till I return », l. 41, p. 88). These two moments delineate a time frame¹¹. Within it the utterer will be away and his absence is the focus of his concern in the first ten stanzas out of eleven. His anticipated departure gives rise to a fear which, although brought to words at a rather late stage in the text (in stanzas 8 through 10), holds together the man's entire development. It is the fear of the decay and eventual destruction of their love caused by his mistress's imagined unfaithfulness (« And if this treason go / To an overt act », ll. 55-56, p. 88).

This anxiety raises a question, which the whole poem seems to be an attempt at answering: in the face of absence, of potential betrayal and ultimate loss, what can be the « means our firm substantial love to keep » (l. 62, p. 88)? The problem to overcome for the utterer is therefore to circumvent absence and its effects, that is to say to ensure that the love uniting him to his mistress remains resolute, essentially unchanged and truly existing all along. The poem revolves around the ploy devised by the latter in a bid to bridge his absence, around the substitute which he hopes will guarantee his presence at his lover's side while he is away. This ersatz is his name, engraved on the transparent glass of a window pane.

It might as well be noted from the outset, the utterer ultimately denies it any efficiency. Claiming in the last stanza that « glass, and lines must be / No means our firm substantial love to keep » (ll. 61-62, p. 88), he even disparages his entire discourse on his stratagem as the totally inconsistent and pointless babble (« idle talk », l. 65, p. 89) produced by a man that his departure, as a form of death, pushes onto the brink of unconsciousness (« Near death inflicts this lethargy, / And this I murmur in my sleep », ll. 63-64, pp. 88-89; « For dying men talk often so », l. 66, p. 89). In spite of this self-denial, the utterer's conceit of the name-engraved glass deserves looking into, through, or perhaps simply at, which is precisely what the man also entices the lady to do. Indeed, this representation of transparency gradually transforms into a representation of specularity, which becomes pivotal in the poem's intricate speculations on signs and the union of beings.

The first two stanzas of the poem anticipate stanza 11 by presenting the means to keep the couple's « firm substantial love » intact (l. 62, p. 88) for it is precisely on the firmness of the tool that the poem opens:

My name engraved herein,
Doth contribute my firmness to this glass,

¹¹ It is one of the many frames of the poem, which includes that of the window and the « wit or land » of another man (l. 45, p. 88), which « New battery to thy [the woman's] heart may frame » (l. 46, p. 88).

Which, ever since that charm, hath been
 As hard, as that which graved it, was;
 Thine eye will give it price enough to mock,
 The diamonds of either rock.

'Tis much that glass should be
 As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
 'Tis more, that it shows thee to thee,
 And clear reflects thee to thine eye
 But all such rules, love's magic can undo,
 Here you see me, and I am you.
 (ll. 1-12, p. 87)

The conceit, which spans over these two stanzas, raises more questions than this paper will attempt to answer and only tentatively so. The first stanza indeed immediately sets the utterer's words in a realm that resists interpretation, just as the glass resists breaking. Its « firmness » has indeed been magically transferred to it by the man's name, which must therefore be construed as encapsulating his essence: the engraving, the signature contains the utterer's being. But what is more, such a quality has also been scratched into the glass by the instrument (perhaps a diamond) used to carve the name. This translation or crossover of a property (which was first of all moral before becoming physical) from a man to an etching tool, to a series of letters and finally to the glass surface appertains to magic: it is a « charm » (l. 3, p. 87)¹². Even if the lady ultimately grants the window its value by looking at it, it prodigiously embodies from the start the utterer's unflinching love¹³. Both because of its engraving and the name that it bears, the window pane has magical and therefore enigmatic properties. Its transparency is occult. Interestingly this originally see-through piece of glass is used by the utterer to develop just as enigmatic, occult or complex a discourse on the merging of signs and beings.

The structure of the second stanza is articulated around a fault line (« But all such rules, love's magic can undo », l. 11, p. 87), which introduces a shift from considerations of the strictly optical qualities played out at the surface of the glass (ll. 7-10, p. 87) to a comment on its ontological property (l. 12, p. 87). Both concerns are ultimately linked by line 12 whose simple, paratactic structure joins into one the action of seeing and the state of being: « Here you see me, and I am you ». Before examining how they are « undone », the optical properties of the window need considering as well as what the utterer gets the lady and the reader to « see » with them.

These rules are revealed in sequence along a gradation (« 'Tis much », l. 7, p. 87; « 'Tis more », l. 9, p. 87), which signals a translation. Just like the utterer's tears in « A Valediction: of Weeping », the window pane is first of all represented as a transparent medium (« all confessing, and through-shine », l. 8, p. 87) before being transformed into a specular object (« it shows thee to thee, / And clear reflects thee to thine eye », ll. 9-10, p. 87). However, the similarities in both poems extend further for the representations of transparency and specularity in « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window » are also far from participating in the construction of a simple, straightforward meaning. In fact, should the see-through surface not raise enough difficulties, its transformation into a specular one reinforces the discursive complexity of the text.

First and foremost, the comparison in line 8 constructs the window's transparency as analogous to psychological or moral qualities of the utterer (and not the other way around), but the latter are problematical. «Through-shine » may metaphorically suggest that just as the truth about the

¹² This is not the utterer's only reference to supernatural forces in the poem. Stanzas 6 and 7 indeed hint at the occult transfer of stars' properties (« virtuous powers », l. 33, p. 88) to letters written when those heavenly bodies are at their highest point. With this conceit, the utterer posits that, just like such letters, his name is endowed with his uttermost sorrow and love as it was carved when the latter were themselves at their zenith.

¹³ The phrase « either rock » (l. 6, p. 87) may allude to two mines in India, which were known and documented in Donne's day, and from which highly-valued diamonds were extracted. See Blakemore G. Evans, « Two Notes on Donne: 'The Undertaking' ; 'A Valediction: of My Name in the Window' », *Modern Language Review*, 57.1 (January 1962), p. 60-62.

utterer is visible through him, light goes undistorted through the crystalline medium of the window. Neither, in short, arrests the gaze. Likewise, « all confessing » asserts that the glass reveals everything inside and behind it, much as the utterer hides nothing of himself or his intentions. The adjective suggests that he is being fully honest. This interpretation may come into line with the man's acknowledgement of the inconsistency of his entire enterprise in the last stanza. However, the hint at the religious ritual of confession implies that the utterer should be ready to lift the veil over previously committed sins and to make them visible or audible through his words¹⁴. Remarkably the poem does not disclose anything of the sort so that, working against its own grain, the adjective « all confessing » seems instead to qualify as an instance of « bad faith » and to point at unrevealed secrets. The transparency it conjures up is suspicious if not downright fake: it pretends to dispel darkness only to hide it the better. But if the utterer's transparency is debatable, what about the window's, which is supposedly modelled after it (« as I », l. 8, p. 87)? If the utterer's sincerity is not as unquestionable as may seem at first sight, what can then be seen through the window? Probably not much, which is rather surprising for a piece of glass. This inconsistency can only call into doubt the logic of the initial comparison, which may only well be a cunning trick. Affecting respect for logic, the utterer asserts that the translucence of the window is fashioned after his own, when the comparison can obviously only work the other way around. This inversion deconstructs one step further the transparency the utterer claims for himself and reveals the complexity of his discourse. Asserting his utter honesty even at the expense of logic is only a clever means intended to ensure that in his absence the lady will herself remain perfectly honest and faithful and that her love will stay unchanged. She will « have the pattern with her [you] still » (l. 18, p. 87), he notes further down. It thus appears as early as these first few lines of the stanza that the representation of transparency is involved in a manipulative rhetoric and that it is fraught with discursive opacity. Visually the see-through window only ensures that, by contrast, the lady sees (« here you see me », l. 12, p. 87) the white scratched name¹⁵, which embodies the utterer, but which, as noted by David Novarr, is paradoxically never revealed¹⁶. In this respect as well, the pane's transparency is subservient to more mystery than clarity.

Secondly, the transformation of the glass surface into a mirror-like one is introduced as the mere addition of an optical property by the phrase « 'Tis more » (l. 9, p. 87). However, such a shift is again way more complex than the utterer's words would have the lady or the reader believe. Indeed, line 8 insists on the absolute transparency of the window (« *all* confessing, and *through*-shine ») whereas line 10 stresses the perfect quality of the reflection of herself that the lady can see in it (« And *clear* reflects thee to thine eye »). If glass does have these two optical qualities, they cannot be fully enacted simultaneously and one has to take over at the expense of the other. In other words, for the window to become a mirror held up to the lady and to reflect her image clearly implies that it stops

¹⁴ Gary Stringer strains to demonstrate that in « A Valediction: of My Name in the Window » an implicit subtext of biblical references constructs the lover as Christ and the woman he addresses as his Disciple or as the Church. According to the critic, the whole poem recasts in pagan terms Christ's parting from his Disciples at the Ascension. Grounded in an admittedly impressive knowledge of Holy Writ, his arguments are hardly convincing for the parallels drawn between Donne's verse and the Bible often rely on the presence of only one or two words both texts have in common. Moreover, Stringer's analysis does not demonstrate what the poem gains from being read as a cryptic refashioning of Christ's Ascension. Interestingly, he does not at all comment on the adjective « all confessing », which is perhaps the only word with an undoubtedly religious undertone in the entire poem. See: « 'Hard and Deepe': Biblical Allusion in Donne's 'A Valediction: Of My Name, in the Window' », *The South Central Bulletin*, 33.4 (Winter 1973), p. 227-231.

¹⁵ Rayna Kalas's analysis of « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window » is thought-challenging and stimulating, but some of its assumptions are debatable. Most noticeably her study hinges on a misrepresentation of the visual features of the name engraved on the piece of glass. Throughout, the critic's developments return to the idea that this name, as a « sign » embodying the utterer, is « transparent ». Even if she partly acknowledges the figurative tinge of this adjective (the scratched name would be the abstract, disincarnate essence of the utterer and of his enduring love), this reading is visually contradicted by the poem. Indeed, how could a name be made visible (« Here you see me », l. 12, p. 87) if it were a see-through combination of letters applied onto an itself transparent surface? How could this name be said to be the utterer's « ruinous anatomy » (l. 24, p. 87), his etched skeleton, if it were not white and thus at least partly opaque? *Op. cit.*, p. 199-205.

¹⁶ Novarr aptly remarks about the utterer that: « Despite his focus on the significance of his engraved name, particularly its effects upon his lady, he never reveals his name. » *Op. cit.*, p. 288.

being translucent. If the utterer's mistress is to see her reflected image accurately on the window pane, the condition to meet is that the latter be no longer transparent. The realization of this transformation therefore depends on a shift in perspective that remains fully implicit in the poem and that participates in its discursive intricacy: the onlooker's, namely the lady's viewing position or the angle from which light strikes the glass surface has to change.

But then, what are the « rules » (« all such rules », l. 11, p. 87) that are « undone » or deconstructed by what the utterer claims to be « love's magic » (l. 11, p. 87)? They cannot be the principles of optics alluded to in lines 7 and 8 or in lines 9 and 10 for what line 12 visually suggests is that the woman sees her reflected image (« I am you » testifying to the persisting presence of her reflection on the window pane) together with the engraved signature embodying the utterer (« Here you see me »). The latter being etched, its white shape remains visible at the surface of the glass together with the lady's reflection. The utterer has thus forsaken the window's transparency to the benefit of its specularity (« 'Tis more », l. 9, p. 87). This does not invalidate the former but requires that the lady's viewpoint on the pane be translated or that light fall onto it at a particular angle. The physical « rules » that prevail in the man's representation of the window as of line 11 are those of mirrors¹⁷. The « rules » that are overturned are thus neither those appertaining to transparency nor to specularity, but those establishing « seeing » and « being » as different and separate realms. For all their ambiguities and the difficulties inherent in decoding the shift from window to mirror, lines 7 to 10 were only concerned with acts of vision (« all confessing, and through-shine », l. 8, p. 87; « it shows thee to thee », l. 9, p. 87; « And clear reflects thee to thine eye », l. 10, p. 87). What line 12 asserts is however that through love's arcane working, which is therefore imbued with mystery and occult powers, the lady does not merely see a collection of scratched letters, a « sign », but her lover himself (« you see me », l. 12, p. 87), and that their superimposed images ensure the fusion of their beings (« I am you », l. 12, p. 87).

The window therefore becomes in this poem as well the specular surface on and thanks to which the utterer develops an extremely elaborate and complex discourse on signs and on their ontological status. Indeed, « love's magic » performs a series of analogical correspondences. First of all, pretty much as the « charm » mentioned in the first stanza (l. 3, p. 87) transferred the utterer's « firmness » (l. 2, p. 87) to his engraved name and ensured that the signature literally contained his essence, under the influence of « love's magic » (l. 11, p. 87), the separation of signs and beings is overcome. The mistress's reflection becomes her incarnation and her lover's too (« I am you », l. 12, p. 87). At the end of stanza two, both signs on the window's glass are therefore endowed with a full ontological dignity. Secondly, the mysterious force invoked by the utterer cancels the differences in nature between two series of signs (a reflected image and engraved letters) to blend them into one single visual object (« I am you », l. 12, p. 87). But what is more, it does away with the distinction between « seeing » and « being » the other. It transforms the visual perception of otherness into becoming such otherness (« Here you see me, and I am you », l. 12, p. 87). What is thus achieved on the window pane is much more than the conflation of images of different kinds: it is the fusion of two beings into one self-same whole¹⁸. The prodigious force of « love's magic », decreed by the utterer,

¹⁷ Again, this reading of the poem is at odds with Rayna Kalas's assertion that « it is the capacity of the glass to function as both window and mirror that allows both full disclosure or confession and also clear self-reflection. » Her remark fails to acknowledge that glass cannot be simultaneously fully see-through and specular, and that its transparency has to recede if the lady, as the poem suggests, is indeed to get a thoroughly faithful reflection of herself. *Op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹⁸ For a study of the way in which the poem stages the gradually dissolving coherence of the concept it intends to bring across, namely the permanence of love, and of the conceit used to represent it (the window pane engraved with the utterer's name), see D. H. Roberts, « 'Just Such Disparities': The Real and the Representation in Donne's Poetry », *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 41.4 (November 1976), p. 99-108, esp. p. 99-102. Roberts' illuminating developments start from the initial assumption that this poem, among others, illustrates the collapse of « correspondent theory » with the advent of the new philosophy. Arguably, however, the poem does revolve on at least one correspondence sustained until almost its very end: that of « signs » and « beings ». The lady's image and the utterer's name embody their respective essences and their fused « signs » are meant to incarnate their everlasting union.

lies in its ability to bind the lovers to their respective signs, to tie these signs together and therefore to ensure the lovers' everlasting union and the permanence of their love in spite of the man's departure.

As noted by Barbara Estrin, the conceit of the window-cum-mirror, which enables the utterer to claim the fusion of his and his beloved's beings, or identities, can be construed as a cleverly devised ploy aimed at safeguarding the male lover's empowerment and control over the lady. Even if the utterer later on acknowledges the failure of his scheme (ll. 61-62, p. 88), asserting that he is she by means of his optical and ontological trap, he intends to convince her that in his absence she will not yield to the « charm » of any other¹⁹. The utterer's earlier claim to « transparency » (l. 8, p. 87) was already a shrewd attempt at concealing his manipulation of the lady. But the transformation of the window's transparent glass into a mirror-like surface further sharpens his deftly crafted rhetoric meant to secure the woman's lasting love and to lure her into faithfulness. In « A Valediction: of my Name in the Window », transparency and specularity are thus both instrumental to the elaboration of a deceptive and veiled discourse, which does not openly reveal its end. The latter remains shady, hidden in the meandering convolutions of a conceit and an optical contraption that blind the onlooker by giving too much to see and to be. But the opacity affecting transparency as well as specularity reads in the poem at the power of two, as the shift from one to the other is the cornerstone of a very elaborate discourse on the ontology of signs. Clad in the simple, straightforward syntax and rhyme pattern of the first two stanzas, this discourse is in fact far from being immediately and fully apprehensible. Its formal clarity conceals its conceptual density. As the utterer ends up acknowledging in the course of the poem, its « learning » is (perhaps « too ») « hard and deep » (ll. 19-20, p. 87).

Beyond their differences, the figures of transparency in Donne's poems have in common their involvement in strategies of resistance. This appears first and foremost as they seemingly challenge the link so commonly conveyed by language between visual and intellectual clarity, between crystal-clear sight and perfect understanding. In the poems where it is represented, transparency hides secrets or does not offer any full and perfect view. Ultimately, it spawns doubts, raises questions and it disappoints attempts at gaining certainties through it, whether in matters of love, in the knowledge of God or of self. This initial resistance to the expectations transparency may elicit is amplified as Donne, giving them a different slant, transforms see-through realities into mirrors. The reflective surfaces that the poems give the reader to see are then cornerstones in the development of very elaborate arguments. Donne exploits their ability to reflect light and images in order to explore the intricate links between signs and beings. The perplexing difficulty of his ontological discourse is nonetheless only one aspect of the opacity introduced into the texts when transparency is turned into reflexivity. Indeed, the rhetoric constructed with mirror conceits may also verge on manipulation: undisclosed, obscure intentions back up in this case conceptual complexity.

Donne's poems thus reveal that transparency is far from being synonymous with simplicity of meaning and with full and crystalline comprehension. They illustrate a paradox highlighted by French philosopher Michel Guérin in his study of transparency's metaphysical and aesthetic implications. Genuine transparency is to him what perhaps compels the eye and the mind to see nothing but the transparent object itself and therefore nothing behind or beyond it. This essential feature grants transparency uttermost complexity in at least two respects. First, its simplicity resists investigation tools, debunks analysis and interpretation, thus making it perhaps more obscure than it could be thought to be at first sight. But the ultimate difficulty it entails is perhaps that, directing gaze and thoughts towards it only, true transparency leads them to experience sight in a mirror and therefore to

¹⁹ Barbara Estrin remarks: « When the 'I' says 'I am you', he means: 'I want you to think I am you – and I want to make myself think you are – so that I can be assured that your fidelity and love are what I propose them to be: unfoundering'. » See « Framing and Imagining the 'You': Donne's 'A Valediction: of my Name in the Window' and 'Elegy : Change' », *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 30.3 (Fall 1988), p. 345-362, here p. 346.

contemplate myriads of puzzling self-reflections. Donne's poems enact this translation of transparency to specularity, challenging in the process the reader's ability to make sense of them and making him face the obscurity of meaning played out at the surface of their mirrors. They reveal, in Michel Guérin's admirable words, that:

Le monde de la transparence n'est pas celui où l'on voit enfin clair, après avoir dissipé les poches d'opacité : c'est celui qui, ayant usé tous ses substituts et décidé de se passer désormais de lieu-tenance (de médiation, de symbolique, d'analogie), se voit forcé à la situation inédite de voir la vitre elle-même, plus que les objets à travers. Pour ramasser le paradoxe : le paradigme de la transparence signifie que la transparence est maintenant face à son double. Elle se voit. En d'autres termes, elle découvre qu'à *être envisagée*, la transparence est ombreuse. Elle n'est limpide que lorsqu'elle fonctionne comme truchement et, car c'est lié, dans un antagonisme bien cadré avec l'opacité²⁰.

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²⁰ Michel Guérin, « D'un réel sans appel ou la fin des phénomènes », in Michel Guérin (éd.), *La transparence comme paradigme*, Aix en Provence, Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2008, p. 21-42, p. 22.

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