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« In What Torn Ship Soever I Embark »: Spiritual and Poetic Crossings in John Donne's Religious Verse

Guillaume Fourcade

Notice

Agrégé d'anglais, Guillaume Fourcade est maître de conférences au Département des Langues de l'université Pierre et Marie Curie (Paris VI) et membre de l'E. A. 4085 VALE (Paris Sorbonne). Soutenue en 2005, sa thèse s'intitule *L'écriture et ses miroirs dans les poèmes et les Sermons de John Donne (1572-1631)*. Son travail de recherche continue à s'inscrire dans l'étude des liens entre le corpus poétique et le corpus homilétique de Donne. Il s'intéresse plus particulièrement au caractère spéculaire de l'écriture, que celui-ci révèle la dimension programmatique des textes ou leurs effets d'auto-déconstruction et d'auto-ironie. Ses derniers travaux en date sont consacrés aux figures de l'artifice (2009), du pli (2010), à la question du geste d'écriture (2012) ainsi qu'à celles de la transparence (2013) et de la marge (2014) dans la poésie de Donne.

Abstract

In a Latin verse epistle to George Herbert dated January 23, 1615, Donne comments on the new seal which, as a substitute to that of his family, he was to use after his ordination. It represents Christ's cross whose lower part extends to form the two bows of an anchor. Donne scholars have shown that, while emphasizing Donne's new official functions in the Church, his new crest reveals a spiritual transition from an old, sin-stained life to absolute faith in Christ's redemptive power. He is the anchor ensuring stability and salvation. However, readers of Donne may not have given the symbol of the anchor all the attention it deserves. An anchor is indeed primarily used aboard a ship following a crossing, which associates it first and foremost with maritime journeys. If Donne's new arms represent a transit ending with a safe anchoring in Christ, the former is to be understood as a voyage. The cross-cum-anchor is above all the sign of a spiritual crossing. This article explores the reverberated presence of the motif of crossings in two of Donne's religious poems, « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » and « The Cross ». It shows that, whether or not inspired by an actual voyage, both texts represent man's aspiration to be reunited with Christ in the form of a

hazardous or painful transit from his sinful, earthly existence to the everlasting peace of heaven and Christ's eternal love. While analyzing the representational, spiritual, and ontological crossings staged by both poems, this study argues that they are reflected by a poetics of transition, marked by numerous shifts or crossings of the signified. Meaning is thus itself constantly in transit.

Article

In « To Mr George Herbert », a Latin (later translated) verse epistle dated January 23, 1615, Donne comments on the seal he chose for himself to replace that of his family after he had taken holy orders. His new impresa represents Christ on the cross whose lower part extends into the two branches of an anchor:

A Sheafe of Snakes used heretofore to be
 My Seal, The Crest of our poore Family.
 Adopted in Gods Family, and so
 Our old Coat lost, unto new armes I go.
 The Crosse (my seal at Baptism) spred below,
 Does, by that form, into an Anchor grow.
 Crosses grow Anchors; Bear, as thou shouldst do
 Thy Crosse, and that Crosse grows an Anchor too.
 But he that makes our Crosses Anchors thus,
 Is Christ, who there is crucifi'd for us¹.

(ll. 1-10)

While emphasizing Donne's new official functions in the Church, his new seal reveals a spiritual transition from an old, sin-stained life to absolute faith in Christ's redemptive power, as He is the anchor ensuring salvation and stability. If man (and Donne himself) agrees to withstand the hardships of this life, then he will conform to

¹ Herbert J. C. Grierson (ed.), *Donne: Complete Poetical Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 369. The following reference to the poem is from this edition and is documented parenthetically.

Christ who redeemed mankind, died and was resurrected to eternal life. Saved, he will find stasis in God's safe h(e)aven².

Critics have very persuasively discussed Donne's desire to reclaim his old arms in the verse epistle as he goes on to underscore their symbolic unity with the new ones³:

Yet may I, with this, my first Serpents hold,
 God gives new blessings, and yet leaves the old;
 The Serpent, may, as wise, my pattern be;
 My poison, as he feeds on dust, that's me.
 And as he rounds the Earth to murder sure,
 My death he is, but on the Crosse, my cure.

(ll. 11-16, p. 369-370)

If indeed the snake epitomizes both man's fallen nature and his inevitable death through sin, it also represents Christ, the crucified serpent, and His redemptive power. It is both a *pharmakon* and its own anti-*pharmakon*. Donne's adoption of a new seal may reflect his eagerness to leave his former, sin-imbued life for the pious course imposed by holy orders and, as such, his spiritual transition as well as his firm belief in Christ's salvific work. The ambivalent symbolism of his old crest had nonetheless already prepared this departure and set his existence under the sign of redemption.

For all their enlightening comments on the serpents on his family's crest and on the cross-anchor hybrid which adorns his new insignia, readers of Donne have paid comparatively little attention to the intrinsic symbolism of the anchor. An anchor is indeed primarily used aboard a ship, which associates this object, along with Donne's seal, first and foremost with maritime journeys. If Donne's new arms flaunt that he has begun a transit, which he believes will end in redemption and in his safe anchoring in

² According to Raymond-Jean Frontain, in these lines where he asserts that he has relinquished his fallen self to give himself up entirely to the hope of salvation in Christ, Donne is seen to undertake a spiritual journey. « In addition to describing a mere formal change of seals, » the critic notes, « these lines imply a spiritual conversion. More significantly, they encapsulate the three stages of the Protestant's spiritual progress: birth into original sin, as symbolized by the serpent, the cause of man's fall and punishment; redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which is granted to each individual at baptism when the cross is 'sealed' on his forehead in sin-cleansing waters; and, finally, recognition that Christ is one's anchor and sole hope, signified by one's giving oneself to Him. » See: « Donne's Biblical Figures: The Integrity of 'To Mr. George Herbert' », *Modern Philology*, 81.3 (1984), p. 285-289, here p. 285.

³ For an analysis of the symbolic continuity of the serpent and Christ images as well as for Donne's comments on it in his Sermons, see: Raymond-Jean Frontain, *ibid.*, p. 287-288 and Evelyn M. Simpson, « Two Notes on Donne », *The Review of English Studies*, 16.62 (1965), p. 140-150, esp. p. 140-142.

Christ, this journey is to be understood as a voyage. The cross-cum-anchor is therefore above all the sign of a spiritual crossing.

Drawing on the nexus of symbols found on Donne's later seal, this paper will consider its echoes in his divine poems. Focusing primarily on two examples of his religious verse, « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » and « The Cross », it will show that these poems model man's aspiration to be saved *after* and *as* different sorts of crossings⁴. If the motif of the hazardous sea voyage serves as a pattern for his transit from his earthly existence to the everlasting peace of heaven, this spiritual journey also involves the conversion from one type of representation of the world to another, as well as the painful conformation to, and even re-enactment of, Christ's sacrifice⁵. However, the analysis of the spiritual crossings which, in these two poems, precede the stable anchoring in God in the afterlife, will underline that these transits are mirrored by a poetics of transition, marked by the instability, shifts, and crossings of the signified.

I. « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany »

In early 1619, Donne was appointed chaplain to the Earl of Doncaster's diplomatic mission to Germany, which was to mediate a peaceful settlement in the conflict opposing Catholics and Protestants in Bohemia⁶. Donne departed for the Continent in May 1619 and returned to England in late December 1619, early January 1620. As noted by Jeffrey Johnson, prior to his journey to Europe, Donne repeatedly expressed his fear that he might never return to England alive⁷. If his correspondence

⁴ Subsequent quotations from Donne's poems will be documented parenthetically and will refer to the following edition: A. J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, London, Penguin, 1986.

⁵ For reviews of the pervasive motif of maritime journeys in Donne's Sermons as well as in his profane and religious verse, see: Stephen Burt, « Donne the Sea Man », *John Donne Journal*, 16 (1997), p. 137-175 and Evelyn M. Simpson, op. cit., p. 143-150.

⁶ Regarding the context of Donne's departure to Germany, in which the poem was written, see in particular: Jeffrey Johnson, « Gold in the Washes: Donne's Last Going into Germany », *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 46.3 (1994), p. 199-207; John J. Pollock, « A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors Last Going into Germany », *Explicator*, 38 (1980), p. 20-22; Paul R. Sellin, *So Doth, So Is Religion: John Donne and the Diplomatic Contexts in the Reformed Netherlands, 1619-1620*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1988.

⁷ Jeffrey Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 200-201. Johnson quotes a number of letters dated April 1619. In an epistle to Edward Herbert, written on April 4th, 1619, Donne asks his friend to keep a place for his book *Biathanatos* in his cabinet; a letter to Sir Robert Ker from the same month instructs him what to do with the book, whose content smacked of brimstone now that Donne had taken holy orders. Should he die during his journey to Germany, the work was neither to be destroyed, nor to go to press. Finally, in a letter from the same month addressed to the Countess of Montgomery, along with a copy of a sermon preached at

bears witness to his apprehensive state of mind, in a sermon on Ecclesiast. 12:1, preached on April 18, 1619, therefore a little under a month before his departure, the preacher openly envisions his death and voices the hope of being reunited with his congregation after the Resurrection. He urges his audience to pray:

that I, (if I may be of use for his glory, and your edification in this place) may be restored to you again; and may come to him with my prayer that what *Paul* soever plant amongst you, or what *Apollos* soever water, God himself will give the increase: That if I never meet you again till we have all passed the gate of death, yet in the gates of heaven, I may meet you all, and there say to my Saviour and your Saviour, that which he said to his Father and our Father, *Of those whom thou hast given me, have I not lost one*⁸. (*Sermons*, II, 11, 248)

« A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » echoes the valedictory sermon in many respects but most of all in that it brings forth a sense that his voyage to Europe will spell both the poet's demise and his eternal return to God. The poem therefore takes Donne's journey to Germany as its contextual frame. However, the actual physical crossing, which on the surface at least is its subject, is throughout the text submitted to a translation or transfer process. Besides the preparation for a maritime journey, the poem reads as the hope for a spiritual transit. Forsaking and repenting his earlier, sinful life, Donne gives himself up entirely to Christ/God, whom he petitions to grant him salvation and eternal love.

This reading thus purports to underscore that Donne's actual voyage to Europe serves as a template for the spiritual conversion the poem reveals he aspires to. However, while analyzing the translation from a physical to a spiritual journey, this paper will point out that it is reflected by a number of poetic crossings. Fluctuating, the poem articulates simultaneously a literal and a symbolic discourse; its signified depart from one meaning to cross over to another.

Whitehall two months before, Donne reasserts his anxiety that, by leaving England, he might be leaving life altogether.

⁸ Quotations from Donne's Sermons will refer to the following edition: George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (eds.), *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols., Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1953-1962. References will be documented parenthetically as follows: Sermons, volume number, sermon number in the volume, page(s).

1. From a maritime to a spiritual crossing

Although the structure of the « Hymn » is comparatively straightforward, such clarity is counterbalanced by the striking ambivalence of the poet's discourse. Indeed, the latter interlaces two seemingly distinct sets of considerations: the maritime journey Donne is about to undertake and his desire to be (re-)united with Christ – whom he addresses directly – in the hope of enjoying His everlasting love. The text constantly hovers between both. Thus the first two stanzas voice Donne's hope that the crossing, no matter how perilous and potentially fatal, will be accompanied by the assurance of God's saving hand and will result in his salvation; accordingly, he resolves to abandon his earlier life and to give himself up entirely to God and to His eternal love. Stanza 3 suspends his assurance and, in a moment of doubt, brings across the poet's fear that Christ may not love him and therefore may refuse him the gift of Himself and of salvation. In stanza 4, however, harmony is restored as the poet requests that God/Christ sever his moorings with his earlier loves. As the poet asserts his desire to « 'scape stormy days » (l. 31), the sea-tossed ship upon which he is about to embark in the first stanza seems en route for its final destination and Donne takes his leave towards the contemplation, presence, and security of God alone (« I choose / An everlasting night », ll. 31-32).

However, more than merely uniting two unrelated fields of experience, the text seamlessly stitches them together and uses the projected maritime journey as the starting point and pattern for the poet's hoped-for spiritual transit from a sin-stained life to salvation and the safe anchor of God's/Christ's love:

In what torn ship soever I embark,
 That ship shall be my emblem of thy ark;
 What sea soever swallow me, that flood
 Shall be to me an emblem of thy blood;
 Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise
 Thy face; yet through that mask I know those eyes,
 Which, though they turn away sometimes,
 They never will despise.

I sacrifice this Island unto thee,
 And all whom I loved there, and who loved me;
 When I have put our seas 'twixt them and me,
 Put thou thy sea betwixt my sins and thee.
 As the tree's sap doth seek the root below
 In winter, in my winter now I go,
 Where none but thee, th'eternal root
 Of true love I may know.

(ll. 1-16, p. 346-347)

The motif of the voyage permeates chiefly the first two stanzas with the references to the poet's « ship » (ll. 1 and 2), to his departure (« I embark », l. 1), to the perilous sea (« What sea soever swallow me », l. 3), and to the stormy weather he might have to sail across (« clouds of anger », l. 5)⁹. The poet furthermore hints at the insularity of the country he is to leave (« I sacrifice this Island unto thee », l. 9) and at the distance that will separate him from his loved ones (« When I have put our seas 'twixt them and me », l. 11). Finally, with his repeated use of « go » (« in my winter now I go », l. 14; « I go out of sight », l. 30), he confirms that his crossing to the other shore is impending.

The anticipation of the maritime journey and of its enfolding is nevertheless merely the superficial layer of the poet's discourse. It serves as a metaphorical crux within which Donne embeds a different purport, namely his resolution to accomplish a spiritual conversion. Indeed, as of the first stanza, the preparation for the voyage is indissociable from a direct address to God (« thy », ll. 2, 4, and 6; « thou », l. 5). His eyes (l. 6), which guide him through his hazardous undertaking, are believed by the poet never to forsake him (« They never will despise », l. 8). This first inflection, which makes the poem's discourse ambivalent from the start, suggests that the sea journey is above all thought of as a passage to the Almighty.

⁹ In his article dedicated to Donne and the travel-writing tradition, Anthony Parr argues that if Donne's fear of the crossing seems overdramatic, the anguish suggested by the first stanza and especially by its first line (« In what torn ship soever I embark ») should not be taken literally, as an anticipation of the perils of the voyage. For the critic, it refers rather to his unfortunate circumstances at the time he was to undertake this trip. What caused his distress « was not the journey itself but his [Donne's] particular circumstances and state of mind before departure, and there is every indication that illness and financial worries were besetting him and that he feared he would not return alive. » See: « John Donne, Travel Writer », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70.1 (2007), p. 61-85, here p. 77.

The interlocking of the maritime and spiritual discourses is further achieved as, in stanza two, the poet's departure from his country is declared to equate with a personal renouncement for Christ: « I sacrifice this Island unto thee » (l. 9). His physical journey thus appears to pave the way for a peregrination towards the sacred. This is reinforced as his pledge to be separated from his loved ones by the sea (l. 11) is completed by the request that Christ, in turn, separate him from his earlier sins and save him. Through His cleansing blood, Christ purges the sinner and keeps his sins at bay: « Put thou thy sea betwixt my sins and thee » (l. 12). The poet's assertion that his journey will lead him into winter (l. 14), that is to say death, is qualified by the assurance that, like sap contracting to the tree's root in winter (ll. 13-14), he will, through death, contract back to the essence of all love, namely Christ (« th' eternal root / Of true love I may know », ll. 15-16). His physical journey hides a return to Christ.

Having tied the maritime and spiritual crossings closely in the first two stanzas, Donne only develops spiritual concerns in stanza three in which he despairs that unless Christ frees him from other loves (ll. 21-22), he has no assurance of his Saviour's love (ll. 23-24). Central to the poet's complaint is his jealousy: « as thou / Art jealous, Lord, so I am jealous now » (ll. 19-20). Such an acknowledgement, together with the desire not to be sidetracked from his love for Christ by other objects, suggests a tension towards the Lord and the poet's hope to be able to journey to Him. Drawn to Christ, from whom he wishes signs of love, the repenting sinner asserts his thirst for His love alone. Admittedly, stanza three is deprived of explicit references to a physical journey. Yet it is as if the poet's discourse on his maritime crossing had so permeated the first two stanzas that it underlies stanza three as a watermark. As if negatively, his spiritual hopes sketch a crossing too.

Less directly than in the first two stanzas, which abound in terms openly referring to a voyage, the last stanza does bring forth a sense of the poet's departure, albeit within a discourse informed by the legal metaphor of divorce: « Seal then this bill of my divorce to all, / On whom those fainter beams of love did fall » (ll. 25-26). The imperative form of the direct address to Christ as well as the poet's continued references to the wrong « loves » (l. 27) or « (false mistresses) » (l. 28) of his « youth » (l. 27) underline again that the departure he wishes to undertake with Christ's help is above all spiritual. Freed from his former, sinful pursuits, he will be able to transit towards God:

Churches are best for prayer, that have least light:

To see God only, I go out of sight:

And to 'scape stormy days, I choose

An everlasting night.

(ll. 29-32, p. 347)

Echoing stanza 1, and thereby giving the poem a circular structure, Donne recalls the storm at sea (l. 31) he mentioned in lines 3-6. However, he is determined to weather it and his journey clearly appears as his radical conversion to God, towards whom he is faring. He radically casts aside his earlier life and its vicissitudes (« I choose », l. 31; « to 'scape stormy days », l. 31), and he relinquishes his former self (« I go out of sight », l. 30) to enjoy the beatific vision of God alone (« To see God only », l. 30) and His eternal presence in the afterlife (« An everlasting night », l. 32). The departure from, and erasure of, the « I(-sland) » (ll. 9 and 30) appear at the end of the last stanza to have been the necessary transitions to accomplish for the « eye »/« I » to see God. The final stanza thus confirms that, besides the physical crossing which, on the surface at least, is the subject of its first twelve lines, the poem revolves around a spiritual transition. The maritime journey serves both as a prompt and as a model for a symbolic peregrination in which the poet turns away from his sinful life and, in an act of conversion, travels towards Christ and God.

The poem's ability to accommodate two discourses within its frame or to cross over from the physical to the spiritual, from the literal to the metaphorical, is largely due to the various transitions which affect its signified. In « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany », the latter are indeed made to shift, to derive from one anchoring to another port of call. Such linguistic crossings reflect the voyage and the conversion around which the poem hinges.

2. The signified in transit

The translation repeatedly featured by the poem from a literal journey to a spiritual voyage is underpinned and mirrored by at least three varieties of poetic crossings. Through each of them, the original signified appears to fluctuate, to alter, and to derive towards another meaning. The first type of verbal transit is illustrated by

words which are made to signify both in the material and the spiritual realms. Poised between a literal and a metaphorical or spiritual context, these terms achieve a transition from one to the other. Indeed, their initially concrete meaning gradually lends itself to a metaphorical interpretation. The first stanza offers several examples of such a process:

In what torn ship soever I embark,
 That ship shall be my emblem of thy ark;
 What sea soever swallow me, that flood
 Shall be to me an emblem of thy blood;
 Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise
 Thy face; yet through that mask I know those eyes,
 Which, though they turn away sometimes,
 They never will despise.

(ll. 1-8, p. 346)

A gradual translation of the signified occurs in lines 1-2. In line 1, associated with the adjective « torn », which underscores the poet's fear of a potentially fatal journey, as well as with the verb « embark », the word « ship » first of all signifies literally. Its meaning is anchored in a material context, and this literal reading is prepared by the biographical tinge of the title, which just precedes it. However, as of line 2, the term « ship », which recurs anaphorically (« That ship »), is drawn towards a different context, which is this time symbolic and biblical: « thy ark ». The possessive adjective « thy » and the noun « ark », which immediately calls to mind Gen. 6-7, highlight that the poet is addressing God and that if a journey is anticipated, it is endowed with a spiritual significance. The ship is to become the typological double of Noah's ark and therefore the crossing aboard this vessel is to be understood as leading the poet, through a sea of trouble, to his salvation. Thus within these two lines, a transition takes place from the literal to the metaphorical for the noun « ship » is gradually made to shift or to « embark » towards a symbolic meaning. Its signified transits between two poles, just as if it precisely undertook the voyage that, along with the noun « ark », it conjures up. This transfer in meaning is gradual, as pointed out by the repetition of « ship » (l. 2), which

serves as a turning point. The word, just like God's eyes « sometimes » (l. 7), is meant to « turn away » (l. 7) from its initially literal meaning.

But this conversion process is also explicit. Donne indeed depicts his ship as « my emblem of thy ark » (l. 2) and he endows his discourse with a self-explanatory and even self-referential quality. In his day, an « emblem » was first and foremost the combination of an image with a moral intent and of a short text decoding or explaining it; the term also referred to a symbol¹⁰. The introduction of the word « emblem » in line 2 first leads one to read the opening two lines as a poetic emblem. Donne has created the image of an unsafe ship and perilous crossing in line 1 and, in line 2 he decodes this image by phrasing in full words its moral or spiritual caption. The ship is the ark thanks to which he will be saved and his crossing is therefore a spiritual one too. Secondly, explicitly referring to an art form in which the meaning of an image is deciphered through verbal discourse, that is to say an art form based on the transfer from the visual to the textual, the word « emblem » reads as a self-referential comment. With it, the text openly points out that, as of line 2, « ship » is to be read symbolically or metaphorically¹¹. The term « emblem » therefore constitutes a marker through which, in a self-mirroring fashion, the text highlights that the noun « ship » is made to cross over from a literal to a metaphorical, from a material to a spiritual meaning. Caught between two contexts, the signified is thus made to journey from one to the other and the poet elaborates a poetic crossing within the space of two lines.

The same transfer process is repeated in lines 3 and 4. The « sea », whose dangers the poet foresees (« what sea soever swallow me », l. 3), first signifies literally in the context of his departure to Germany. However, that « sea » and the physical hazards that are likely to cost him his life are translated onto a symbolic level. By line 4 indeed, the expanse of water is transformed into « thy blood », in other words into the liquid

¹⁰ On the influence of emblem books on Donne's poetry and on the poet's creation of verbal emblems, see: Joseph Lederer, « John Donne and the Emblematic Practice », *Review of English Studies*, 22.87 (July 1946), p. 182-200.

¹¹ David K. Anderson argues convincingly that Donne's choice of the word « emblem » should not be considered iconophile. To him, by explicitly using this term in relation to his « ship » and to the « sea », and by implicitly applying it to the « clouds », the poet does not affirm seeing manifestations of the Godhead in these three realities. They do not constitute a case of « cosmic iconography ». Rather, the word « emblem » suggests that they are « allegorised » to « represent spiritual properties metaphorically ». They are « comforting symbols of redemption ». See: « Internal Images: John Donne and the English Iconoclast Controversy », *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 26.2 (2002), p. 23-42, here p. 31-32.

symbolizing Christ's sacrifice for mankind and the poet's redemption¹². Just as in lines 1 and 2, the crossing completed by the signified is explicit, the poet resorting to the same metapoetic comment with the word « emblem » (l. 4). He elaborates an image (that of a potentially lethal sea) and openly points out its symbolic significance. But that crossing is also gradual. Instead of a second occurrence of « sea », which might have been expected after the fashion of line 2, the poem refers back to the word with « that flood » (l. 3). Besides being a hyperbolic reference to the vastness of the sea, the term not only echoes the biblical episode going by the same name in the Bible (Gen. 6-7) but also the simile of the « ark » in line 2. With its simultaneously literal and metaphorical implications, « flood » is thus used as a transitional element, as a turning point, in the translation from a literal to a symbolic discourse. The word « sea », or rather its signified, is continuously made to derive from its literal meaning towards a spiritual one. The journey the poet is about to undertake may indeed precipitate his death but it is also a voyage through cleansing, regenerating waters, which, like or by re-enacting Christ's sacrifice, will lead him from his fallen state to his rebirth and salvation. Echoing the image of Christ's redemptive blood, lines 9-12 further translate the maritime journey into a spiritual transit:

I sacrifice this Island unto thee,
 And all whom I loved there and who loved me;
 When I have put our seas 'twixt them and me,
 Put thou thy sea betwixt my sins and thee.

(ll. 9-12, p. 347)

The first three lines seemingly refer to Donne's departure for the Continent (l. 9), to his renunciation of his loved ones (l. 10), and to the physical separation from them

¹² For a discussion of Donne's fascination with the blood shed by Christ for human redemption, from His circumcision to the piercing of His side, see: Julia J. Smith, « Donne and the Crucifixion », *The Modern Language Review*, 79.3 (1984), p. 513-525, esp. p. 520. Smith remarks that Donne frequently resorts to the image of Christ's blood swollen into a redemptive sea, such as in a sermon dated March 1617 where he « urges his congregation 'never to shut your eyes at night, till you have swept your conscience, and cast your foulness into that infinite sea of the blood of Christ Jesus, which can contract no foulness by it' » (Sermons, I, 3, 205). For the critic, a direct echo of this image is found in lines 3-4 of « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany ». She adds that this image is taken up again in the valedictory sermon Donne preached in April 1619, as he was to depart to Germany with Doncaster's embassy: « Though we must sail through a sea, it is the sea of his blood, where no soul suffers shipwreck » (Sermons, II, 11, 249).

(l. 11). But his journey is transformed little by little and takes on a spiritual significance. By line 12, the « sea » the poet hopes for is Christ's blood and the voyage across this sacrificial liquid turns out to be one from his earlier, sin-stained life to his redemption and new life, at Christ's side and away from his former vicissitudes (« betwixt my sins and thee », l. 12). The transition from the literal to the symbolic is achieved through the word « sea » (ll. 11 and 12), which serves as an interface. It can indeed signify both literally and metaphorically as a reference to the blood shed by Christ through his sacrifice. This symbolic meaning is prepared by the previous transformation of the sea into a « flood » and into Christ's « blood » (ll. 3 and 4) so that, by its third occurrence in line 12, the word « sea » conflates both its concrete and metaphorical signified. The shift from the literal to the symbolic is also constructed through the parallel syntactic patterns « When I have put our seas 'twixt » (l. 11) and « Put thou thy sea betwixt » (l. 12) as well as by the passage from « I » to « thou » and from the plural (« seas », l. 11) to the singular (« sea », l. 12). With the address to the Lord (l. 12), the distance imposed by the sea has become a spiritual one. Interestingly, this transfer in meaning is anticipated as of line 9 with the pronoun « thee » and the ambiguous verb « sacrifice ». It indeed hints both at the poet's renouncement of his insular country for Christ but also at his becoming a Christ-like figure. He, too, is sacrificing himself and hoping, through his sufferings and participation in Christ's sufferings, to be saved.

In lines 5 to 8, which conclude the first stanza, the poetic translation of the signified is both more subdued and more concise than in the first four lines. The « clouds » (l. 5), which make the actual voyage the poet is preparing for threatening, are indeed immediately given a metaphorical undertone, « of anger » (l. 5). The early appearance of the pronoun « thou » (l. 5) also contributes to the crossing from the literal to the symbolic. The clouds are thus both the natural phenomena which make the journey potentially dangerous and the signs of God's wrath. They may hide His love for mankind (ll. 5-6) but, at the same time, they offer the assurance that He is always there behind them (l. 6) and will not forsake His creature (ll. 7-8). The final element mentioned in the anticipation of the voyage, the word « clouds » is also involved in a process of transition. Just as the poet is about to travel across the sea but also towards his salvation and the love of God, the literal signified associated with « clouds » is transferred towards a metaphorical meaning.

Throughout the first stanza but also in the first half of the second stanza with which it is strongly linked, Donne elaborates a two-fold discourse. The crossing he is about to undertake is both a physical journey and the passage from an older life to his salvation and the eternal love of God. Indeed, as noted by Jeffrey Johnson in his very enlightening study of Donne's use of biblical allusions in lines 1-8, the poet features himself as re-enacting biblical figures symbolizing salvation. His voyage may be about to take place physically, but it is above all spiritual for he is « aligning himself typologically with Noah and Moses¹³. » The ambivalence of his discourse is achieved through the poetic crossings which he crafts. Some of his words (« ship », « sea », « flood », « sacrifice », « clouds ») are indeed chosen as in-betweens, selected so as to make sense both literally and metaphorically. Deftly positioned between literal and symbolic contexts, they bridge the distance between them. Their signified are altered along the way; they are in transit.

However, besides the words performing the function of interfaces between the physical and the spiritual, the poem exemplifies two other types of linguistic or poetic crossings. Through them, the poet makes the signified fluctuate just as if they mirrored the actual sea voyage and the spiritual crossing towards salvation and God's love that he aims at bringing across.

The second type of verbal translation represented in the text lies in the variety of realities blended together in the construction of discourse. This feature is far from unusual in a Donne poem, where the most diverse fields of experience are frequently assembled into dauntingly elaborate conceits and arguments. However, in « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany », whether or not they are involved in metaphors or similes, the objects of discourse keep shifting while at the same time all denoting forms of departures and journeys. Not only is language constantly on the move from one realm to the other, but the latter are themselves variations on the notion of transit. At a formal level, such doubled up linguistic translations reflect the voyage to

¹³ Jeffrey Johnson, op. cit., p. 204. Donne's typological allusion to Noah is clearly apparent through the reference to the « ark » (l. 2). However, Johnson provides an interesting insight into the image of the « clouds of anger » (l. 5) which « do disguise / Thy face » (ll. 5-6) as a « mask » (l. 6) hiding « those eyes » (l. 6). For the critic, the clouds are a reference to those which surrounded God on Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments from Him (Exodus 19). Exodus 33 furthermore notes that in this episode Moses did not see God's face. Thus even if the poet does not see God's eyes, such concealment does not involve that the deity forsakes him, but it suggests the re-enactment of the revelation to Moses and the people of Israel. Through the biblical allusion and the typological fashioning of his fate, Donne also asserts his trust in salvation and in God's everlasting presence.

Europe and the crossing towards redemption staged by the text. Thus while stanza one and the first half of stanza two (ll. 1-12) are dominated by representations of the anticipated voyage, of the elements, and of their biblical as well as metaphorical counterparts, the second part of stanza two turns to imagery borrowed from the land:

As the tree's sap doth seek the root below
 In winter, in my winter now I go,
 Where none but thee, th'eternal root
 Of true love I may know.
 (ll. 13-16, p. 347)

Surprising though it may be, the sudden change in references does not constitute so abrupt a breach in thought from the previous lines as may at first be thought. With their simile of the tree's sap, lines 13-16 represent indeed two transitions, which metaphorize a spiritual transit. The first one is chronological, from milder seasons (presumably spring and summer) into winter, from a life of unessential concerns to one whose core is Christ alone. The second one is spatial, from the surface to deeper roots, from man's superficial love for God to his genuine worshipping of God, from his shallow to his full experience of God's love. The chiasmatic construction of the stanza (« root », l. 13; « winter », l. 14; « winter », l. 14; « root », l. 15) reflects this double transit, which is further brought home to the reader by the dynamic verbs « seek » (l. 13) and « go » (l. 14). Lines 13-16 are characterized by a shift in representation from the first twelve lines and yet, despite such a transition, they contribute to constructing the self-same discourse. Through them, the poet indeed further develops on his departure for a different time and place and, metaphorically, on his journey to God. They participate in the transformation of his physical crossing into a spiritual transit.

The second major change in the constituents of the poem's discourse occurs in the first four lines of the final stanza where the poet requests that God break once and for all the ties still binding him to his earlier life. He declares:

Seal then this bill of my divorce to all,
 On whom those fainter beams of love did fall;
 Marry those loves, which in youth scattered be

On fame, wit, hopes (false mistresses) to thee.

(ll. 25-28, p. 347)

In this self-referential address, whereby the poet consciously refers to his own words by means of the deictic « this » (l. 25), the poem is transformed into a legal document (« bill », l. 25) that God is to give the binding force of law to (« seal », l. 25). Remarkably, these lines are again a far cry from the semantic field of the sea voyage or from the horticultural concerns referred to earlier. And yet they, too, participate in the elaboration of the poem's discourse on crossings. A divorce is indeed above all a separation from former attachments and a transit towards a new life. The request that Christ « marry » (l. 27) the poet's earlier « loves » (l. 27) bestowed on « (false mistresses) » (l. 28) reinforces the sense that he wishes to be translated to a different existence in which God no longer plays a marginal but a central role. By relieving Donne of his false loves, and by transforming them into love for Him alone, Christ will cleanse him, transfer him from a sinful to a righteous life, and achieve his redemption.

The final stanza thus completes the shift in references that informs the poem all along. The variety of the fields introduced into the text constitutes a continuous verbal transit. Paradoxically, the latter should nonetheless be qualified in the light of the coherence underpinning those manifold realities. All are about translations and way-faring. Through their multiplicity and the dynamism they imply, the various areas of experience conjured up duplicate at a poetic level the actual and spiritual crossings the poet is about to start.

The final type of verbal crossing that mirrors the journeys around which the poem revolves are its grammatical ambiguities and amphibology. The latter are involved in a logic of transition for, by constructing and suspending several possible meanings simultaneously, they lead words and the reader's apprehension of the text to journey indefinitely from one to the other. In this respect, the equivocations from stanza three reflect the transits the poem is concerned with all along. In this stanza, the poet expresses his doubts about the success of his voyage, but above all about the success of his journey towards salvation and the assurance of Christ's love. Several double-entendres construct crossings in meaning, and this is as if, through them, the poet sought to actualize the crossing he petitions God and Christ to help him achieve. Fearing that Christ may not love him and may reject his abandonment to Him, he notes:

[...] I am jealous now,
 Thou lov'st not, till from loving more, thou free
 My soul;
 (ll. 20-22, p. 347)

In these lines, « loving more » is grammatically ambiguous and can refer to excessive temptations of all sorts in this world, but also to the poet's love for others than Christ alone. Undecided and undecidable, meaning hovers and crosses from one signified to the other precisely as the poet pleads for a definite departure towards Christ's love. Likewise in lines 22-24, Donne asserts:

[...] who ever gives, takes liberty:
 O, if thou car'st not whom I love
 Alas, thou lov'st not me.
 (ll. 22-24, p. 347)

Two meanings are suggested in line 22 and both are equally valid. The first possible interpretation is that loving anything or anyone else than Christ (that is to say giving one's love to anything or anyone else) is a way of taking leave from Him and of being unfaithful to Him. However, a second likely reading of line 22 is that if Christ loves the poet, He will take away from him the liberty to love anything or anyone but Him and thus prove His love by joining the poet to Him forever. The fluctuations in meaning affecting this stanza through its ambiguous and amphibological statements thus constitute poetic crossings which, in the poem's texture, echo or double up the poet's desire for a definitive crossing to Christ.

« A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » is in many respects a poem about transits. Articulating Donne's fears about an actual voyage to the Continent, the text translates his discourse on crossing the sea into one on leaving for God, Christ, and salvation. The poem's tour de force, however, consists in reverberating the transitions it brings forth by means of its poetics. The multiple transitions of the signified all along the text constitute the reflecting, poetic counterparts of its discourse on physical and spiritual journeys.

However, « A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » is not the only one of Donne's poems to give pride of place to crossings. Although it does not use an actual voyage as the pattern for a symbolic journey, « The Cross » is also primarily a text about spiritual transitions. Going further than the quest for Christ's/God's love and salvation, these departures and the poetics of transits which reflects them need closer examination.

II. « The Cross »

This poem was written in response to the Millenary petition of 1603. Signed by Puritan ministers and presented to James I, the petition revealed their dissatisfaction with the state of the Church of England and advocated further reforms to entrench its separation from Rome. Among their requests, which were for the most part turned down by the King at the Hampton Court conference in 1604, the Puritan reformers asked that the sign of the cross in the sacrament of baptism be abolished¹⁴.

« The Cross » radically opposes such an erasure of the symbol of the cross. It reads first and foremost as an unambiguous anti-Puritan and anti-iconoclastic piece, voicing the poet's (or his speaker's) attachment to the representation of Christ and of His sacrifice¹⁵. The series of questions opening the poem are so many moral indictments against attempts at suppressing the sign of the cross, the visual representation of Christ's redemptive sufferings:

Since Christ embraced the Cross itself, dare I
His image, th' image of his Cross deny?
Would I have profit by the sacrifice,
And dare the chosen altar to despise?
It bore all other sins, but is it fit

¹⁴ For detailed comments on the content and signatories of the Millenary petition, against which the poem was written, see: David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 124-148, quoted by Michael Carl Schoenfeldt, « 'That Spectacle of Too Much Weight': The Poetics of Sacrifice in Donne, Herbert, and Milton », *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31.3 (2001), p. 561-584, n. 6 p. 582; William A. McQueen, « Donne's 'The Cross' », *Explicator*, 45.3 (1987), p. 8-11; A. J. Smith, op. cit., p. 646.

¹⁵ For discussions of Donne's complex attitude towards Church imagery and, above all, iconoclasm, see: David K. Anderson, op. cit.; Ernest B. Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation: Down Went Dagon*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986 and « 'To Adore, or Scorne an Image': Donne and the Iconoclast Controversy », *John Donne Journal*, 5.1-2 (1986), p. 63-100.

That it should bear the sin of scorning it?

(ll. 1-6, p. 326)

However, even if the cross is a symbol the poet/speaker affirms he will not depart from, the text paradoxically endows it with considerable dynamism. Indeed to justify preserving it in baptism and to demonstrate its fundamental role in man's salvation, the poem appropriates the sign of the cross and, through it, develops a discourse on, and informed by, multiple transitions. Far from being synonymous with doctrinal permanence or conservatism alone, the cross appears as the principle at work behind a number of interrelated spiritual, ontological, and poetic departures.

This study will first of all underscore that the conceit of the cross, which is multiplied and transformed in the text, is pivotal to an original representation of the world, which constitutes one first type of translation or crossing. The latter comes into line with another metamorphosis involved by the cross. The place where, having taken a human shape, the deity was sacrificed is also conceived of in the poem as a corrective instrument and, as such, as the means of man's crossing from his fallen state to his salvation through his conformity with Christ. Man's spiritual transformation achieved by the cross or by crosses (which are variations on Christ's cross) thus leads ultimately to an ontological cross-over, whereby he participates in the Godhead. However, as this close reading of the poem will show, whether directly performed or recommended, the various transitions around which it hinges are underpinned and echoed by the dynamism of Donne's poetics. Meaning is throughout subject to metamorphoses and is itself constantly in transit. The representational, spiritual as well as ontological crossings brought across by the text are reflected by a dynamic poetics of translation. Through the manifold conceits and puns he devises, Donne organizes constant shifts of the signified, which is unstable, always relocated, and made to cross over from one meaning to another.

1. Reading signs of God: the passage from ignorance to enlightenment and its poetic echoes

Early on in the poem, Donne/the speaker envisions human existence if it came to be deprived of the symbol of the cross, that is to say of the hope of salvation once

actualized by Christ's sacrifice. In a series of paradoxes, he immediately repudiates such a perspective as utterly unbearable:

[...] for, the loss
Of this Cross, were to me another cross;
Better were worse, for, no affliction,
No cross is so extreme, as to have none.

(ll. 11-14, p. 326)

But after imagining the ineffable sufferings that could result from the erasure, or absence, of the cross, Donne/the speaker considers an altogether different reason for its preservation. If this sign cannot be crossed out, it is also because its presence saturates the creation, which bears its marks at all levels.

In his outstanding analysis of Donne's religious imagination, Raymond-Jean Frontain argues that a pervasive characteristic, if not the unity of Donne's writing, lies in its relentless attempt to negotiate the transition from a mundane, incoherent, and profane « existence » to the order and transcendence of the sacred. As such, his love lyrics and religious verse are fraught with endeavours to leave the one for the other, in other words with peregrinations and crossings¹⁶. Frontain identifies such a quest for the sacred in a number of features in Donne's writing. Yet the critic gives pride of place to Donne's belief in the emblematic nature of the world upon which God has imprinted multiple signs of Himself, which point back to His unavoidable presence. The world is thus far from being as chaotic and meaningless as it seems for, should it be read and deciphered properly, it voices a discourse which points back to God throughout: « Essentially, » Frontain notes, « Donne's is a concretic, emblematic imagination »¹⁷. The foremost tool used by the poet to achieve the crossing from the profane and disorganized to the sacred and coherent is his conceited style. According to Frontain, by binding the concrete and the transcendent, Donne's conceits reveal the presence of the sacred in mundane experience. As such, they compel the reader to complete a transit from a blind, ignorant representation of the world to the awareness of God's presence at

¹⁶ Raymond-Jean Frontain, « 'Make All this All': The Religious Operations of John Donne's Imagination », in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (eds.), *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, Conway, UCA Press, 1995, p. 1-27, here p. 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

every level of its seemingly meaningless materiality. Donne's conceited writing constitutes an attempt to read the world as imbued with signs of God and to decode them. It explicates God's emblems as inscribed in the creation and, as such, it makes the reader fulfil a crossing from blindness to enlightenment. « The Cross » is a blatant example of the dynamism of Donne's conceits as its « speaker protests his sense of a revealed or emblematic world, one inhering with divine meaning if only the human eye can be brought to see it »¹⁸. Lines 17-24 are informed by a series of conceits which, by depicting the world as divine grammar, that is to say as saturated with crosses, discloses God's/Christ's ubiquitous presence. The poet/speaker asks:

Who can deny me power, and liberty
 To stretch mine arms, and mine own cross to be?
 Swim, and at every stroke, thou art thy cross,
 The mast and yard make one, where seas do toss.
 Look down, thou spiest out crosses in small things;
 Look up, thou seest birds raised on crossed wings;
 All the globe's frame, and sphere's, is nothing else
 But the meridians crossing parallels.

(ll. 17-24, p. 326)

These lines uncover the many crosses duplicating Christ's in the creation. Whether at a microcosmic level in man, who is to himself a cross, as suggested by the reflexive images in lines 18 and 19, on ships at sea (l. 20), in the infinitely small below (l. 21), in the animal realm above (l. 22), or at a macrocosmic scale (ll. 23-24), the shape of the cross can be seen everywhere. These many crosses can only be interpreted as copies of Christ's own symbol and they direct the gaze to Him. They are as His seal, imprinted upon the entire creation; they reveal His pervasive presence and, in this respect, they are reminiscent of His sacrifice and of His redemptive work. In the light of its omnipresence, the poet/speaker suggests, attempting to suppress the sign of the cross in baptism (« Who can blot out the Cross, which th'instrument / Of God, dewed on me in the Sacrament? », ll. 15-16) is downright unthinkable.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

However, beyond the doctrinal conclusion implicit in these lines, their chief interest lies in the representational and verbal translations they carry out. First and foremost, by pointing out the ubiquitous crosses in the creation, in other words, by deciphering the world as engraved with signs echoing Christ's cross, the poet/speaker leads the reader away from a mundane, piecemeal, and profane representation of the world to a radically different apprehension of the creation, united by the sign of the cross, the sacred, and the promise of salvation. But the conceits which are instrumental in the accomplishment of this journey also need considering closely. The multiple crosses in the world are revealed by the examples of man's body, whether he stretches out his arms or swims (ll. 18-19); of the ship, whose mast and yard intersect into a cross (l. 20); of birds' wings perpendicularly affixed to their bodies (l. 22), or of the cross-like shape delineated by meridians intersecting with parallels (ll. 23-24).

Remarkably, these conceits themselves enact verbal, poetic crossings. Each of them unites two seemingly unrelated areas of experience and simultaneously achieves the transition from one to the other, as well as from the profane to the sacred, by revealing or suggesting their overlap. They may be rhetorical instruments through which « the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together by violence », as Samuel Johnson famously criticized, but they nonetheless weave a thread between them and bring forth their unity¹⁹. They perform a verbal crossing from one to the other and, as such, they make the reader's apprehension of reality complete a crossing too. The latter not only shifts from one field of experience to another, from the concrete to the divine, but also from the blind perception of their isolation to the awareness of their underlying ties. Man, a ship, birds, the globe, seemingly have nothing in common and nothing in common with the place of Christ's sacrifice, and yet all are cross-shaped and reminiscent of Christ. In each conceit, the geometrical figure of the cross is thus the turning point enabling the passage from one mundane, trite, and profane reality to Christ's cross, His sacrifice, and salvation. Amid these conceits, those of man's breast stroke (l. 19) and of the ship's rigging (l. 20) are particularly noteworthy. Indeed, their obvious association with a transit across water (whether it be a mere human motion or a voyage) doubles up the crossings between sundry realities and from the profane to the sacred which they enact.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, « Cowley », in *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781), rep. in Arthur L. Clements (ed.), *John Donne's Poetry*, New York, Norton, 1992, p. 142-145, here p. 143.

2. From the profane to the sacred: man's journey towards becoming a Christ-like figure

The shift from a blind to a clear-sighted apprehension of the world and of the sacred in it is not the only crossing taking place in the poem. Indeed, it entices the reader to take an active part in another conversion. If man is to be saved, it is not enough for him to merely see the many physical crosses in the world, even if the latter are unambiguous signs of Christ's presence. Man is to cross over from the mere contemplation of material crosses to the acceptance of the spiritual crosses offered to him. Lines 25 to 32 thus invite the reader to accomplish a transit from the realm of sensory to that of spiritual experience, from the mere visual representations of crosses to the afflictions of this life:

Material crosses then, good physic be,
 And yet spiritual have chief dignity.
 These for extracted chemic medicine serve,
 And cure much better, and as well preserve;
 Then are you your own physic, or need none,
 When stilled, or purged by tribulation.
 For when that Cross ungrudged, unto you sticks,
 Then are you to yourself, a crucifix.

(ll. 25-32, p. 326)

These lines are dominated by the extended conceit of medical treatments (« physic », l. 25 and l. 29; « extracted chemic medicine », l. 27; « cure », « preserve », l. 28; « stilled », « purged », l. 30) and therefore by the perspective of a crossing from a state of illness to one of restored health. The explicit comparison of « material crosses » (l. 25) and their « spiritual » (l. 26) counterparts together with the poet's/speaker's pronouncement that the latter have a greater efficiency (« chief dignity », l. 26) suggest that man is in the grip of a spiritual illness. His proclivity to sin is thus hinted at in lines 25-26. The treatment prescribed against it is the acceptance of (« ungrudged », l. 31), and submission to « spiritual » crosses (l. 26), that is to say the « tribulation » (l. 30) or

afflictions of his existence. Their action is analogous to that of alchemical remedies (« extracted chemic medicine », l. 27; « stilled, or purged », l. 30), namely of refined or distilled essences, which purify the soul and ensure its integrity (« preserve », l. 28) much more (« cure much better », l. 28) than representations of the cross (« material crosses », l. 25), here indirectly represented as Galenist treatments²⁰. This life's hardships cleanse (« stilled, or purged by tribulation », l. 30) the sinfulness in man.

While underpinned by the shift from a physical to a spiritual perspective as well as by a transition from ill to good health, these lines delineate another journey or crossing. The reflexive images of lines 29-30 (« Then are you your own physic, or need none, / When stilled, or purged by tribulation ») and 31-32 (« For when that Cross ungrudged, unto you sticks, / Then are you to yourself, a crucifix ») enjoin man to be his own medicine, to let himself be cured by his own sufferings. However, with their obvious references to the Passion, the terms « tribulation » (l. 30), which conveys the idea of intense pain, « Cross » (l. 31), which suggests that man's pains should be like Christ's in His crucifixion, and « crucifix » (l. 32) give the cure, and therefore the crossing completed through it, a further extension. Through his submission to the sufferings in his life, man is to become analogous both to the cross onto which Christ was nailed (« crucifix », l. 32) but also thereby to Christ Himself (« Then are you to yourself », l. 32). Just as Christ purged mankind of its sins by giving himself up to the torment of the cross, man is to undergo the hardships of this life to recover spiritual health and to be saved. Lines 29 to 32 thus imply that his redemption is conditioned by his conformation to Christ's figure. They delineate a symbolic crossing which leads him to imitate the Godhead for his salvation²¹.

Man's transformation into a Christ-like figure is further buttressed in line 31. Indeed, the latter substitutes man's « tribulation » (l. 30) with the very instrument of

²⁰ On alchemical and Galenist medical theories in the Early Modern period, see: Margaret Llasera, *Représentations scientifiques et images poétiques en Angleterre au XVII^e siècle*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 1999, p. 217-221 and p. 245. The implicit in Donne's lines is that refined extracts have greater curative virtues than Galenist treatments of humoral imbalance through contraries.

²¹ In her analysis of the event of the crucifixion in Donne's writing, Julia J. Smith underlines the poet's and preacher's repeated desire to replicate the figure of Christ crucified. For the critic, Donne's belief in salvation was indeed rooted in the idea that man should participate in Christ's sufferings. Such a voluntary submission to torments thus leads him to depart from his sheer humanity and to cross over towards divinity. Smith refers in particular to a sermon on Mat. 4:18-20, preached in The Hague in December 1619, in which Donne expresses his desire to join Christ on the cross and to suffer there with Him in order to « bring himself into complete and literal conformity with Him »: « So when my crosses have carried mee up to my Saviours Crosse, I put my hands into his hands, and hang upon his nailes [...]. I put my mouth upon his mouth, and it is I that say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? » (Sermons, II, 14, 300). Op. cit., p. 513 and p. 522.

Christ's sacrifice, here unambiguously spelt with an upper-case « C » (« Cross »). In the process of purification man is to give himself over to, his sufferings are to become analogous to, and even to duplicate Christ's torments on the cross. Line 31 thus conjures up the representation of man crucified and anticipates the reflexive image of the « crucifix » he is to become to himself in line 32. His voluntary submission to pain does therefore much more than merely perform a curative act. It makes him embark upon a crossing which glorifies his humanity and makes him transit towards the divine through his conformation to it²².

3. Re-enacting Christ: ontological peregrination and conceited crossing

The poem goes further than merely sketching man's crucifixion through his afflictions and therefore his becoming a Christ-like figure. Lines 33 to 36 radically assert man's ontological crossing and boldly bring forth his becoming Christ himself. Indeed, as if crossing to a different plane, Donne's/the speaker's discourse departs from considerations of man's mere imitation of Christ. By totally embracing his pains, man should complete a transition from his mortal to Christ's glorified nature and he should no longer be a copy of Christ but become the Redeemer himself. The poet/speaker declares:

As perchance, carvers do not faces make,
But that away, which hid them there, do take:
Let crosses, so, take what hid Christ in thee,
And be his image, or not his, but he.

(ll. 33-36, p. 326-327)

The crossing mentioned in lines 33 to 36 is two-fold. Within the economy of the poem, it involves a transition from representational (« image », l. 36) to ontological

²² According to Alan Fischler, whose conclusions cohere with Julia J. Smith's, this symbolic cross-over is part and parcel of the figure of the cross. In his analysis of the image of the cross as a geometrical pattern connecting man's and God's spheres in Donne's religious poems, the critic indeed points out its essentially transitional symbolism. Fischler notes that the cross « combine[s] the divine and the human within itself, just as the redeemer who died upon this instrument combined the two ». However, whereas man is merely seen to mimic Christ in lines 29-32, God actually took a human form in Christ. See: « 'Lines Which Circles Do Contain': Circles, the Cross, and Donne's Dialectic Scheme of Salvation », *Papers on Language and Literature*, 30.2 (1994), p. 169-186, here p. 179.

(« but he », l. 36) concerns; as regards man, it implies his transformation through his sufferings from a mere imitator of Christ to Christ himself. As noted by Paul W. Harland, man is to « take up the crosses, abundantly provided by nature and circumstances [...] so as to imitate Christ, not in a literal or mechanical way, but in order to reincarnate the real presence of Christ in the world »²³.

Remarkably, such a metamorphosis is reflected at words' level by a linguistic crossing. The simile of the wood- (or stone-) carver, who chisels matter away so as to reveal the pre-existing shape of a face in it (ll. 33-34), qualifies as a conceit when considered in its full extension in lines 35-36 (« Let crosses, so »). Indeed, it binds two totally separate realms, namely art and man's sufferings in this life. In lines 34 and 35, the chiasmatic repetition of « hid » and « take » underlines the link between these two different spheres of experience, that is to say the unveiling of images or shapes through the removal of gaze-arresting screens that concealed them. Wood-/stone-carving and man's tribulations are thus both conceived of as purification or refinement processes achieving a revelation. One brings to light the faces contained in matter, the others Christ's spiritual imprint, his presence in man. However, for all the rhetorical devices aimed at explaining the underlying logic of the comparison (« as », l. 33; « so », l. 35; the repetition of « hid » and « take », lines 34 and 35), the reader is compelled to accomplish a long transit between two fields which are at first sight far from cognate. The conceit leads him therefore to depart from one type of representation, in which the two fields of art and afflictions are isolated from one another, to one in which they become analogous.

Moreover, as noted by Frances M. Malpezzi, the conceit of the wood-/stone-carver and of man's « crosses » is also significant from a metapoetic point of view. By pointing out the analogy between art and spiritual purification, it enlightens the reader and reveals the presence of the sacred in man, and even man's ability to become Christ, provided he submits himself to the appropriate hewing process. Through this extended simile, the reader accomplishes a journey from ignorance to the revelation of Christ in him and to his possible re-enactment of Christ. Besides transferring him from one type of representation to another, the poet's words thus enable the reader to perform a second crossing, from a state in which Christ is invisible in/to him to the awareness of how to see and how to become him. As such, the conceit doubles up at a textual level the

²³ Paul W. Harland, « 'A True Transubstantiation': Donne, Self-Love, and the Passion », in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, op. cit., p. 162-180, here p. 170.

work of the wood-/stone-carver (and the action of the « crosses ») that it mentions. It participates in a revelation, that is to say, in a cognitive journey: « As poet, » Malpezzi argues, Donne « functions like the carver cognizant of the face within the wood; his words whittle through the world to reveal its sanctification »²⁴.

In lines 33 to 36, the poem is informed by a shift from spiritual considerations (developed as of lines 25-26) to an ontological discourse. It turns away from man's sheer imitation of Christ, and from the discovery of Christ's image in him, to envisage his possible re-enactment of Christ. Such a crossing, from the surface of the image to the depth of being, is once more supported and echoed poetically by the crossings accomplished by the central conceit in these lines.

4. Man's transit to salvation and puns as poetic transitions

But how is man to accomplish the transformation that will lead him not only to mimic or to discover Christ in him but to reincarnate Christ crucified? From line 37 to line 64, the poem provides an answer by reviewing in greater details the afflictions he is to subject himself to in a bid to accomplish the journey from his fallen state to his salvation. The various « crosses » which are conjured up are the instruments of so many crossings for they are ancillary to man's conversion from sinfulness to spiritual rectitude:

But, as oft alchemists do coiners prove,
 So may a self-despising, get self-love.
 And then as worst surfeits, of best meats be,
 So is pride, issued from humility,
 For, 'tis no child, but monster; therefore cross
 Your joy in crosses, else, 'tis double loss,
 And cross thy senses, else, both they, and thou
 Must perish soon, and to destruction bow.
 For if the eye seek good objects, and will take

²⁴ Frances M. Malpezzi, « Donne's Transcendent Imagination: The Divine Poems as Hierophantic Experience », in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, op. cit., p. 141-161, here p. 145. Malpezzi's reading of the conceit as an instrument of revelation of the sacred in profane materiality coheres with Raymond-Jean Frontain's analysis of Donne's conceited writing as an attempt to decipher the signs testifying to the presence of God in the world. See: Raymond-Jean Frontain, « Make All this All », op. cit., p. 13-14.

No cross from bad, we cannot 'scape a snake.
 So with harsh, hard, sour, stinking, cross the rest,
 Make them indifferent; call nothing best.
 But most the eye needs crossing, that can roam,
 And move; to th'others th'objects must come home.
 And cross thy heart: for that in man alone
 Points downwards, and hath palpitation.
 Cross those dejections, when it downward tends,
 And when it to forbidden heights pretends.
 And as the brain through bony walls doth vent
 By sutures, which a cross's form present,
 So when thy brain works, ere thou utter it,
 Cross and correct concupiscence of wit.
 Be covetous of crosses, let none fall.
 Cross no man else, but cross thyself in all.
 Then doth the Cross of Christ work fruitfully
 Within our hearts, when we love harmlessly
 That Cross's pictures much, and with more care
 That Cross's children, which our crosses are.

(ll. 37-64, p. 327)

Man should first and foremost refrain from deriving joy from his sufferings and from spawning « self-love » (l. 38) and « pride » (l. 40) from the contemplation of his « self-despising » (l. 38) and « humility » (l. 40). His senses, the poet/speaker warns, should be arraigned so as not to make him fall prey to temptation and damnation (ll. 43-44). They should instead be submitted to what they do not take any pleasure in (ll. 45-48). Man should ultimately counterbalance the joys acquired through his senses by unpleasant sensations so that he will become « indifferent » (l. 48) to the former and will « call nothing best » (l. 48). His eyes should be the objects of particular attention for they can « move » (l. 50) to seek gratifications (ll. 49-50). The heart, which is the seat of his emotions, should also be fiercely trained in order to make it refrain from being unduly despondent (l. 53) or from anticipating unhealthy joys (l. 54). The brain, whose bones join in a cross-shaped pattern, should be tamed into not seeking the easy satisfactions of

wit (ll. 55-58), the poet/speaker points out in a most witty fashion. Finally, the enumeration of « crosses » ends with the request that man should seek any affliction he can (l. 59) and that he should not rebuke others for their imperfections but only blame himself for his blemishes when he sees them embodied by the others (l. 60). The last four lines (ll. 61-64) reassert the overall transition the poem has accomplished, from merely material considerations to spiritual and ontological ones, from the sheer physical realm to the sacred. Images of Christ's cross (« That Cross's pictures », l. 63) should be sought as they participate in man's salvation, but he should be cautious to covet above all pains (« That Cross's children », l. 64), which reproduce Christ's suffering in the Passion. If both are the means to ensure man's redemption, the latter have a far greater efficiency and « work » more « fruitfully » (l. 61) towards his salvation. They crown and double up Christ's salvific sacrifice with man's own. The list of afflictions drawn up in these lines and in their conclusion constitutes the various steps in a peregrination or crossing for it is intended to make man depart from his natural proclivities to seek a virtuous course.

Remarkably, the journey delineated by lines 37-64 is mirrored by a poetics of transitions, that is to say, by poetic crossings. Indeed, if these lines describe and prescribe man's conversion from his sinful state to his redemption, they also achieve manifold verbal conversions. Over a little less than one half of the poem (28 lines), the word « cross » and its derived forms are repeated 17 times out of a total of 32 occurrences. Not only do they literally criss-cross these lines, but their meanings are constantly made to shift. They are indeed involved in numerous puns whereby one meaning of the word « cross » is taken up only to be gradually translated towards a different, albeit related one. Through its inflections, each signified is made to depart and to reach a variant of itself. In the process, the reader is compelled to follow such cross-overs and his apprehension of the text to accomplish swift journeys from one meaning to another.

Lines 41-42, where Donne/the speaker warns against the pride or pleasure taken in one's pains, constitute an example of meaning derivation through the repetition of the word « cross »: « therefore cross / Your joy in crosses, else, 'tis double loss ». In its first occurrence, as a verb in the imperative in line 41, the term « cross » reads as a first case of inflection. It is an injunction to renunciation and it commands that one accepts the pain of not contemplating one's sufferings with delight. Even if the verb echoes Christ's

sacrifice as He submitted Himself to torments to redeem mankind, what is foregrounded with it is not this original meaning but its derived, more mundane and trite connotation of « renounce », « annihilate », or « cast away ». Even if it loosely associates the notion of pain and conjures up the visual image of a cross, the use of the verb « cross » departs from Christ's cross in both grammar and meaning and it brings forth the need to merely forsake impure satisfactions.

However, another transition of the signified occurs in the following line. In its second occurrence, as a noun in the plural in line 42, « cross » is endowed with a different, though symbolically cognate meaning. « Crosses » is a metaphor referring to man's afflictions or pains, namely to his renouncement of sinful joys. As such, the term describes the human equivalents to the torments suffered by Christ on His cross (« That Cross's children », l. 64) and to His renouncement of life. Through this metaphor, meaning is twice derived. Indeed, Christ's cross is first and foremost a synecdoche referring to His sufferings in His sacrifice, the instrument of His Passion becoming the symbol of His pains. Secondly, from the material place and symbol of Christ's torments, the signifier is translated grammatically into the plural (« crosses », l. 42) and the signified is transferred to the human level to denote the pains suffered by man in this life, which are reminiscent of Christ's. The two meanings of « renounce » and « pains », respectively expressed by the verb and the noun, are semantic and visual variations on Christ's cross and, as such, they constitute a first poetic transit. The departure from one to the other in their close succession is a second verbal journey. Within two lines, the reader is made to keep up with a swift transition across the spectrum of the signified harboured by almost identical signifiers (« cross »/« crosses ») and by Christ's cross. The verbal crossings represented in lines 41 and 42 thus reflect and enact poetically the spiritual and ontological crossings man is to accomplish in order to reincarnate Christ and for the sake of his salvation.

The same pun is repeated throughout lines 43 to 60, where Donne/the speaker alternates seven verb forms (« cross »/« crossing ») with the meaning of « renounce » or « humiliate » (« cross thy senses », l. 43; « cross the rest », l. 47; « the eye needs crossing », l. 49; « cross thy heart », l. 51; « Cross those dejections », l. 53; « Cross and correct », l. 58; « Cross no man else, but cross thyself in all », l. 60), twice the noun « cross » in the singular or plural to signify human pains, sufferings, or afflictions (« For if the' eye seek good objects, and will take / No cross from bad », ll. 45-46; « Be covetous of

crosses », l. 59), and a visual reference to Christ's cross replicated in the human body (« sutures, which a cross's form present », l. 56). By interlacing grammatical forms and by constantly translating the signified, the text mimics poetically the spiritual conversion from sinfulness to redemption that man is to achieve along with his ontological transformation from his sheer humanity to Christ's divinity. But it also compels the reader's understanding to journey from one meaning to the other and to accomplish cognitive crossings.

Donne/the speaker finally exploits the pun on the word « cross » slightly differently in lines 61-64, where he uses it four times as a noun only. The initial reference to the « Cross of Christ » (l. 61) is first of all derived into « That Cross's pictures » (l. 63). The place and symbol of Christ's sacrifice and torments contributes to man's redemption if he cherishes its representations, namely the symbols of a symbol. Against puritan assaults, lines 61-63 thus reaffirm the essential role played by the sign of the cross in ensuring man's salvation. Yet the poet/speaker insists that the « cross » should not only be granted a symbolic role. Transferring meaning again, this time not only from a symbol to other symbols, but from the divine to the human plane and from sheer representation to experience, he asserts that « That Cross's children » (l. 64), or « our crosses » (l. 64), namely human sufferings and re-enactments of Christ's torments, are paramount to achieve man's salvation (« Then doth the Cross of Christ work fruitfully / Within our hearts, when we love [...] / with more care / That Cross's children », ll. 61-64). Within these few lines, the term « cross » has constantly fluctuating denotations and it shifts from one meaning to another. Donne / the speaker indeed leads the reader to negotiate the passage from the locus of Christ's Passion, to its metaphorical implications (Christ's sufferings are His redemptive sacrifice), to its visual or material reproductions, and finally to its duplication in the form of man's own sufferings. The journey from one meaning to the other constitutes the poetically reflected image of the transition from material to spiritual crosses (advocated as of lines 25-26), of man's spiritual transit, and of his ontological crossing towards Christ.

In spite of the ideological context that it echoes, and for all its doctrinal discourse, « The Cross » reads far less as a dogmatic piece advocating sacramental *status quo* than as a poem on man's departure and journey towards the cross, in other words towards Christ and salvation. « The Cross » is thus mainly concerned with crossings, from man's ignorance to the revelation and deciphering of God's signs, from his fallen

nature to his spiritual purification, from his imitation of Christ to his re-enactment of the Redeemer. Through the many peregrinations which inform its lines, the poem echoes other examples of Donne's religious verse, such as « Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward », whose speaker, after riding away from the Saviour, ultimately turns or converts back to Him. « The Cross » may lack the extremely sophisticated and, to some extent, cryptic images of « Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward », and its structure is an altogether plainer one. But the poem's major interest lies in the reflexivity of its poetics. The representational, spiritual, and ontological crossings around which it revolves, and which it entices the reader to undertake, are remarkably echoed in its very verbal fabric. Its numerous conceits and its puns are indeed all extremely dynamic figures which organize constant shifts in the poem's meaning. Reading « The Cross » thus becomes for the reader a playful experience in the instability of the signified and it also amounts to a constant crossing.

Conclusion

« A Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany » and « The Cross » are in many respects two poems about crossings. Both voice Donne's or his speakers' desire to be saved and to enjoy eternal life in God and they stage primarily the transition from man's fallen lot to his redemption. If this journey is seemingly prompted by an actual voyage which lends it its pattern in the « Hymn », it is above all conceived of as a shift in man's apprehension of the world and as a spiritual and ontological conversion to or into Christ in « The Cross ». For all the differences between the two poems, these translations are central to their discourses. But an even more outstanding feature common to both texts is the reflexivity of their writing. Through their varied conceits, their ability to make words lend themselves to literal and symbolic meanings at the same time, their puns, and their ambiguous syntax, the two pieces inscribe dynamism into their very letter. The figures of transit which inform their poetics are the echoes or mirrored images of the spiritual and ontological crossings both texts call for.

Donne's pervasively transitional writing in these two poems may be interpreted as a nod to the biblical style, which, as noted by Frontain, he praises in « Expostulation

19 » of his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624)²⁵. The style of the Holy Ghost in the Scriptures, which is above all intended to ensure the worshippers' thorough conversion and adherence to God, indeed compels them to embark upon journeys from the literal to the symbolic and spiritual, from one field of experience to another, through numerous transfers in meaning. By paying tribute to the unequalled verbal crossings and translations in Holy Writ, Donne wittily reminds his reader of the transference power etymologically inherent in metaphors. The preacher's/poet's admiration for the biblical style is obvious when he addresses his God as one:

in whose words there is such a height of *figures*, such *voyages*, such *peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*, such *extensions*, such *spreadings* [...] as all *prophane Authors*, seeme of the seed of the *Serpent* that *creepes*; thou art the *dove*, that flies²⁶.

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²⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁶ Quoted by Raymond-Jean Frontain, *ibid.*, p. 13.

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