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Donne's Unwilled Body

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Donne was acutely aware that his body—in its origin and fate, in its functions and affections—was entirely unwilled. He had not chosen to be born, he reminded himself, and would not choose to die. Meanwhile, lusting and loving, evacuating and digesting continued willy-nilly. I suggest that Donne's writing springs in no small part from a lifelong experience of visceral abjection. Unable to control his body in reality, he constructed a textual corpus on the page where he could fantasize omnipotence and rehearse abjection. Sensations of helplessness, as I hope to show, provide the material and motivation for Donne's poetry, as much in the earlier verse as in the *Anniversaries* and the *Holy Sonnets*.

Donne's meditation on his body's lack of volition was framed by the orthodox Christian schema of Fall and Resurrection, particularly as it was worked out in St. Augustine, "the Father to whom Donne turned most constantly."[1] According to *The City of God*, Adam and Eve were created as a harmonious conjunction of body and soul, but with the primeval sin they felt "*novum motum inoboedientis carnis suae*" (a new motion of disobedience in their flesh) that continues to afflict their descendants.[2] Nevertheless, through the redemption won by Christ, the

[1]Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 10:346.

[2]Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 13.13, trans. Philip Levine, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1957–1972), 4:179. For Augustine the desertion of the soul by the body follows naturally from the soul's desertion of God: since the soul "*superiorem dominum suo arbitrio deseruerat*" (freely deserted its higher master [God]), "*inferiorem*

saints expect a revivification where their bodies will be decisively immune from death by disease, and even hunger and thirst.[3] Donne accepts this narrative, but makes a unique contribution to it. He does not write of paradise, or heaven, and rarely of Christ: he writes—again and again—of his own decidedly mortal body.

In Donne's verse, theology becomes lyrical, sometimes confessional and sometimes performative, but always dramatic. Setting aside the beginnings and ends of time, he transcribes the feelings of the present moment. Asking the questions that absorbed Augustine—how are body and soul related? What is original sin?—he asked them first of all of his own body. The questions are asked, furthermore, in the sensitive terminology of the body as much as in the intellectual terms of the soul. Donne *felt* the intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth century. As I hope to show in what follows, both the social world (the subject of the first part of this essay) and the natural world (the subject of the second) imprinted Donne's senses. Religious disputes traumatized him with the visceral imaginations of martyrdom, while the Copernican revolution affected him with a sense of "vertiginous giddiness."[4]

One acutely sensitive account of Donne's visceral text already exists: John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art*. Many of Carey's unique insights, such as Donne's habit of creating metonymic proxies for his body from inanimate objects, remain permanently valid. He makes the serious mistake, however, of dismissing Donne's theology as merely figments of corporeal imagination. In particular, Carey insists that Donne either didn't or couldn't believe in the soul, a belief he thinks inimical to the "ascertainable facts" and indicative of egotistical "self-

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famulum ad suum arbitrium non tenebat" (it did not retain the service of its lower servant [the body]). All translations from the Latin are my own.

[3]Augustine, *The City of God*, 13.22, 4:221: "*Corpora ergo iustorum quae in resurrectione futura sunt neque ullo ligno indigebunt quo fiat ut nullo morbo vel senectute inveterata moriantur neque ullis aliis corporalibus alimentis quibus esuriendi ac sitiendi qualiscumque molestia devitetur*" (The bodies of the just after the resurrection will therefore need no tree to protect them from death either by disease or old age, neither will they need nutrition so that they might not suffer hunger and thirst).

[4]The phrase is borrowed from Donne's biographer, Izaak Walton (Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Death's Duel with The Life of Dr. John Donne by Izaak Walton* [New York: Random House, 1999], p. 219).

importance."[5] This materialistic prejudice is entirely unsustainable in view of Donne's lifelong engagement, playful and serious, erotic and devout, with the ways in which the soul could join, leave, and survive the body. Donne's view of the body and soul was in fact the orthodox view of a mysterious duality and unity at once. In Augustine's words, "*quanquam enim duo sint, anima et corpus, et neutrum uocaretur homo, si no esset alterum*" (for although they must be two, body and soul, one is not called a man without the other).[6]

Ramie Targoff's more recent *John Donne: Body and Soul* deserves grateful praise for reinstating the centrality of the soul-body relationship to the entirety of Donne's oeuvre. Indeed, on the very first page she quotes Donne's paraphrase of Augustine's formulation (without noting it as such) as paradigmatic of his output: "the body is not the man, nor the soul is not the man, but the union of these two makes up the man."[7] Despite this beginning, however, Targoff's analysis is carried forward one-sidedly in the cognitive language of the soul, rather than in the sensual vocabulary of the body. This essay, by contrast, insists that Donne's body was not a universal. It was his own particular body—and no other—that continually perplexed him, and it is with that body that we must start. In order to do so I adopt a literally "sensitive" type of close reading: one that takes the primary context of Donne's work to be his skin, flesh, and bones and integrates secondary contexts—historical, theological, and medical—only insofar as those realities imprint his feeling body.

The question of the union of body and soul worried Donne—as it had worried Augustine—throughout his life. Both authors, furthermore, were attracted to a Platonic account of the soul that proved inadequate. Plato held that the soul was "older than Body and prior in birth and excellence, since she was to be the mistress and ruler and it the ruled

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[5]Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art* (London: Faber, 1981), pp. 199–200.

[6]Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* (On the Catholic and the Manichean Ways of Life), 1.4, trans. Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher, The Fathers of the Church Ser. 56 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), p. 7.

[7]Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 1; Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, 2:261–262.

. . . ."[8] The soul was happy before it descended to the body and now desires to escape from the tomb of the body, "in which we are imprisoned like an oyster in its shell."[9] It is in this tradition that Donne claims, in "Air and Angels" that his soul "Takes limbs of flesh" (8) and in the prolonged out-of-body experience of "The Ecstasy" describes how the lovers' souls "to advance their state / were gone out" (15–16). Again, in the *First Anniversary*, Elizabeth Drury's soul "to heauen did clymbe" (8), liberated from its womb and tomb, her body (453).[10]

In these poems, Donne fantasizes a state where the soul exercises monarchial will over the body, control exhibited in active verbs: "takes," "advance." This control is performed, however, precisely because it is physically lacking. Donne turns to Platonism as a conventional poetic resource: ante-incarnate souls, the union of lovers as mirrors of one another, and the ascent from earthly to heavenly beauty are all commonplaces to be found besides Donne in Sidney, Shakespeare, and—most markedly—Spenser.[11] But when in more confessional mood in the *Second Anniversary* he turns to discuss the origin and fate of his *own* body, the relationship is abruptly reversed: the soul—it now turns out—does not control the body, but the body the soul.

After a long meditation on and preparation for death, Donne switches back and in a less conventional move imagines his own conception. Both skeleton and fetus are chastening examples of the *memento mori*, for both indicate lack of will: the poet will no more choose

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[8]Plato, *Timaeus*, 34c, in *Plato*, rev. ed., trans. R. G. Bury, 12 vols. (1929; rprt., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1952), 4:65.

[9]Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250c, in *Plato*, trans. Harold North Fowler, 12 vols. (1914; rprt., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1977), 1:485.

[10]All references to the *Anniversaries*, *Elegies*, and *Holy Sonnets* will follow the *Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., 4 vols. to date (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995–). References to the *Songs and Sonnets* will follow *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. Donald R. Dickson (New York: Norton, 2007).

[11]See, for example, Edmund Spenser, "Heavenly Beautie," in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al., 11 vols. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1932–1957), 1:224; these are lines 82–84 of the poem.

to leave his body than he chose to join it. Yet there is more. For Donne, the union of soul and body is not a single instance of his lack of will, but its cardinal cause. His attempt to press back beyond his earliest memories was motivated by the same search as Augustine's consideration of his infant self in the first book of the *Confessions*—the quest for original sin:

> This curded milke, this poor vnlittered whelpe
> My body, could, beyond escape, or helpe,
> Infect thee with original sinne, and thou
> Couldst neither then refuse, nor leave it now.
> (*Second Anniversary*, 165–168)

Physical disgust is registered in Donne's description of his body as a cub and in the comparison to a semen-like mass of "curded milke" (the poet has not heard of the symmetrical unfurling of the ovum). But that disgust is not caused by distrust of the body per se—in fact Donne was unusually fond of and attentive to his body. Nor is sin located in the soul—souls are guiltless as they enter bodies; they "come in innocent."[12] Donne's panic derives, rather, from the discovery that a primordial fall has given him the inherited infection of "original sinne" in the very *conjunction* of body and soul.

The notion, obscure as it might seem, continued to be significant for Donne. In the *Devotions*, appearing twelve years after the *Second Anniversary*, Donne repeats his insight. "That which destroys body and soul," he says, "is in neither, but in both together. It is the union of the body and soul, and, O my God, could I prevent that, or can I dissolve that?"[13] The same note of helplessness echoes from the earlier poem to the later meditation, and both reverberate with an authentically Pauline distress: "O wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"[14]

Whatever its merits as a theological theory (here is not the place to consider them), Donne's conception is an attempted answer to a quandary that Augustine never solved. Augustine was certain that even

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[12]See "To the Countess of Bedford (To have written then)": "As men to our prisons, new souls to us are sent, / Which learn vice there, and come in innocent" (59–60).

[13]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 141.

[14]Romans 7:24; I quote from the King James Version of the Bible.

newborns were afflicted by original sin, and in his *Confessions* presents a rather ghoulish picture of infantile jealousy and rage. Yet he was never able to explain how, where or when that sinfulness originated. "*Si in iniquitate conceptus sum*," he wrote, "*ubi aut quando innocens fui?*" (But if I was conceived in iniquity . . . where or when was I innocent?).[15] Augustine was unable to say that the body was itself sinful—that would be to espouse a heretical Manichean or Gnostic view of material. Yet neither could he espouse the unorthodox view that the individual soul had sinned before it entered the body. But if neither the body nor the soul was guilty, what was left of original sin?

Donne had recognized as early as 1607 that the problems of the soul's origin and of original sin's nature were deeply and mysteriously implicated. As Targoff reminds us, Donne's letter to Henry Goodyer expresses his dissatisfaction with both the theory of traducianism (that the soul is propagated by the parents) and creationism (that it is poured into the body immediately by God).[16] Both theories run into serious problems. The traducian view casts doubt on the immortality of the soul—for why should something generated from matter last forever? The creationist view, however, makes it difficult to defend the doctrine of original sin, since "the soul is forced to take this infection and comes not into the body of her own disposition."[17]

A partial solution to the problem was offered by the Aristotelian-Thomist notion that a tripartite soul (vegetative, sensitive, intellectual) is successively formed in the womb with the distinctively human soul appearing last. This is the doctrine Donne alludes to in the *Second Anniversary* when he distinguishes the intellectual soul which he addresses from the earlier "second soule of sence, and first of growth" (162). From a theological standpoint, the advantage of this theory is that it safeguards the immortality of a specially created soul (Aquinas insists that the intellectual soul is infused directly by God), whilst allowing for the picture of tainted stock descending through the parents from Adam

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[15]Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.7, trans. William Watts, 2 vols. (1912; rprt., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 1:23.

[16]Targoff, pp. 12–13, 82.

[17]Donne, "Letter to Sir Henry Goodyer" (9 October 1607), in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (1990; rprt., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 145–146.

and Eve.[18] Yet for Donne this handy notion provokes only alarm. Elsewhere, he uses the tripartite soul in erotic and delightful contexts,[19] but here it hammers home only the message of painful, existential irony: the distinctively human, thinking and reflecting self comes to consciousness in a body and soul already afflicted with an unwilled malady; it arrives, like a detective, after the crime.

Although apparently picayune, these theological subtleties reward our attention, not as logical puzzles, but as Donne's perception of the deepest truth about himself. The Aristotelian development of the fetus is a window onto Donne's self-perception and his work. In both cases, body comes first, soul second. Both temporally and ontologically, sensation precedes cognition. Donne never outgrew the feeling of being carried unwillingly in his body, and anxious passivity is inscribed throughout his work. The ontological priority of Donne's body over his soul should also be our epistemological guideline in reading his verse. We will uncover the wellsprings of his poetic talent not in the poetic and intellectual tradition as such, but in the points where that tradition coincides with Donne's own feeling body. In what follows I trace one such instance, Donne's powerful usage of the traditional poetic trope of body as vessel.

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Donne's verse epistle "The Storm," addressed to his friend Christopher Brooke, ostensibly concerns the tempest of July 1597 that drove the English Azores expedition back to Plymouth. But the nightmare of imprisonment, execution, and graves in the poem points to barely submerged earlier obsessions. The craft of the ship in "The Storm" is ultimately Donne's own body and through its description he transcribes images of inescapable incarceration, disease, and unavoidable death. The passage from passive parturition to passive partition informs

[18]Aquinas denies the pre-existence of souls, and is quite sure that God creates the intellectual soul directly. He leaves open the question of whether the first two souls are generated in a purely natural fashion through the semen (*Summae Theologicae*, 1.90, art. 4; 1.118, art. 2–3, trans. Dominican Fathers of the English Province, 60 vols., [1964; rprt., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 13:10–15; 15:150–161).

[19]See "A Valediction of my Name in the Window": ". . . as all my souls be / Emparadis'd in you, (in whom alone / I understand, and grow and see)" (25–27).

the narrative description throughout. The wind sent by England is imagined as a swelling stomach: "From out her *pregnant* entrails sigh'd a wind" (13) which "swole our sails" (21), causing the sailors a gladness like that of the once barren Sara who nevertheless "her swelling joyed to see" (22). But the pregnant wind serves only to multiply images of death: distracted from a "foreign grave" (10) and no longer "withering like prisoners" (18) in port, the English sailors witness the approach of a watery mass grave, "a rolling trench" (28), and feel the deadly spray of "shot" (30). It is an ordeal that leaves the men dead, "coffin'd in their cabins" (45), and the ship itself diseased, its mast quaking with fever, the timbers bloated with dropsy. The sustained imagery gestures to existential concerns that exceed the immediate occasion of Donne's verse, linking the sailors who are carried before the storm to the poet and the reader who are carried from birth inevitably towards death.

The general worry over passive death is focused by Donne's peculiarly anxious position as a recusant writer. Images of judicial torture, lurking just beneath the surface of the poem, speak of a memory traumatized with images of religious persecution. In a telling moment at the hiatus of the poem we pass from the storm's sound and fury to a scene of eerie quiet. Drawing back from present tense narration to a past event, there appears—as if through the wrong end of a telescope—the swinging remains of an executed criminal: "And from our tattered sails, rags drop down so, / As from one hanged in chains a year ago" (57–58).[20] The unexpected comparison between ripped sails and moldering clothes—slight, apparently irrelevant, a mere quirk of sensual association—reveals the uneasy slumbering of a dormant memory. We are not here in the textual territory of mythological or Biblical reference. The decaying corpses of executed criminals, hung in chains from gibbets at public spots such as crossroads, were the everyday bugbears of the English populace. Vesalius's upright, flayed cadavers in *De Corporis Fabrica* (1543), corpses dangling incongruously at country roadsides, were not restricted to medical textbooks.[21]

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[20]Carey's edition of the poems has "tottered" instead of "tattered," a variant pointing up the eerie suggestion of the sails as the cut-down body of a criminal (*John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey, p. 44).

[21]See Vesalius, *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, trans. William Frank Richardson, 5 vols. (San Francisco: Norman Publishing, 1998–2009).

The reference, furthermore, to "a year ago" is interestingly exact, and may point to a particular hanging. Donne was writing in 1597. Eleven years previously, in September 1586, fourteen conspirators were taken to St. Giles and there hanged, drawn, and quartered after the discovery of the Catholic Babington plot to assassinate Elizabeth. More personal terrors, too, could hardly have failed to resonate. In 1593, four years previously, Donne's brother Henry had died of the plague in Newgate after being accused of harboring a Roman priest. The priest, one William Harrington, was—like the Babington conspirators—hanged, drawn, and quartered. Quartered bodies as well as whole bodies were sometimes hung in chains, and Donne may have had one or both of these events in mind. In the executed criminal he likely saw his brother—and himself.

In "Love's War," Donne articulates the comparison between sailing vessels and execution carts explicitly: "ships are carts for executions" (26). In "Love's Exchange" he taunts Love to "kill and dissect" him, with the crowing rejoinder that a body mangled on the rack would be useless for dissection: "Kill, and dissect me, Love; for this / Torture against mine own end is: / Rack'd carcasses make ill anatomies" (40–43). In the context of an obscene piece of anti-Petrarchan bawdy, the grim remains of the priestly conspirator are gleefully described: "sun-parch'd quarters on the city gate" ("The Comparison," 31). These references are shot through with witty insouciance, the disconcertingly hardened jocularity that Donne was to adopt towards judicial execution. In the early verse of the "The Storm," however, there is only the alarm of an unconverted recusant who feared the gallows family members had been sent to, a suppressed alarm issuing obscurely in nightmarish sensations. The tense pizzicato of cracking—a "snapping, like too high stretched treble strings"—is made to suggest the hanging noose and a dropping man.

The comparisons upon which Donne's verse here depends are frail, tactual, visual, and auditory links—comparisons sensible rather than rational—and the ingenious changes rung upon them are motivated by hopes and fears rather than driven by logical inference. A full sail: a pregnant stomach; a tattered sail: the remains of a criminal's body. The same object is transformed, apparently arbitrarily, through quite different metaphors. The mechanism at work here is what Coleridge would identify as the tyranny of sensual association, and it is driven at base not

by the rationalizations of the soul but by the sensations of the body.[22] The process of composition, nevertheless, transforms these painful feelings into something pleasurable. As sensual association becomes imaginative association, inarticulate fear is harnessed as an engine of writing and becomes paradoxically exhilarating. "The Storm" is a poem brimful of youthful gusto.

With Donne, the cognitive angel is always dragged behind the feeling animal. Sensation precedes thought in both secular and sacred contexts, in *jouissance* and in repentance. Lust moves the faulty syllogisms in "The Flea," and sense is the driving force for Donne in devotional mode. He admires scriptural style, for instance, for its far-fetched metaphor, fecund typology, and wandering trajectory of associative thought: "thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too; a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors . . . types and figures overspread all, and figures flowed into figures, and poured themselves into further figures"—Donne's Bible sounds very much like Donne's lyric.[23]

Beginning with Donne's body reverses the usual terms of the critical discourse. Criticism typically sets out assuming the precedence of the thinking critic over the passive body of Donne's corpus, and of Donne's cognitive self over his sensitive self. In both cases, so the argument goes, thought comes first, and feeling second. Even T. S. Eliot's famous celebration of the *unity* of sense and sensibility in Donne tacitly retains this order: "what we find in Donne," he says, is a "direct sensuous

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[22]In the fifth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge surveys philosophical treatments of mental association, distinguishing the presence or absence of will in each system. Ultimately, Coleridge argues that the will affects thought in a way that renders it irreducible to merely mechanistic association (*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 16 vols. [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983], 7:89–105).

[23]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 119. For a fuller discussion of Donne and his contemporaries on scriptural style as a model for preaching and praying, expository and devotional speech, see Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 213–231.

apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling."[24] I would suggest, conversely, that in Donne the usual agent is the sensitive body, and that the reflective soul trails behind, attempting to salvage and arrange sensation into coherent patterns. Eliot's phrase thus requires inversion: "what we find in Donne" is not the "recreation of thought into feeling" but the "recreation of feeling into thought."

Though frail, the sensual associations forged in "The Storm" were indelible and frequently recycled. Fully fifteen years later the experiences of being forcefully carried in a vessel and suffering the passivity of a penal execution were still fused elements in Donne's sensitive imagination. In the *Second Anniversary*, searching for examples to show how the world could continue after its soul (Elizabeth Drury) had left, he slips without pause from the image of a driven ship to that of an executed man:

> But as a ship which hath strooke saile, doth runne,
> By force of that force which before, it wonne,
> Or as sometimes in a beheaded man,
> Though at those two Red seas, which freely ran,
> One from the Trunke, another from the Head,
> His soule be saild, to her eternall bed,
> His eies will twinckle, and his tongue will roll,
> As though he beckned, and cal'd backe his Soul,
> . . . . . .
> So strugles this dead world, now shee is gone. . . .
> (7–14, 21)

In the earlier verse of "The Storm," a literal vessel provoked Donne to think of figurative deaths; here a literal death provokes Donne to think of a figurative vessel. In both usages of the trope, the underlying theme remains constant: soul's separation from body. The scene is ghoulish because the body's movements seem intentional but are in fact automatic. "His eies will twinckle, and his tongue will roll, / *As though* he beckned, and cal'd backe his soul" (emphasis added)—whereas in fact the soul has already sailed, and all that remains is the winding down of the bodily instrument.

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[24]Eliot's review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), was first published in the *Times Literary Supplement,* 20 October 1921.

Different sources could be suggested for this remarkable observation. The vision of the body as an automaton that only *seems* to be possessed of a ghost suggests René Descartes's mechanistic physiology, but Donne's verse predates the publication of Descartes's works by several decades.[25] The grim realism in the close-up twinkle in the eye, the suggestion of a stage-edge view of the rolling tongue, more likely derive from Donne's personal experience. He reports a Paris execution in a 1612 letter to Henry Wotton, and there was no shortage of other possibilities.[26] Yet it is ultimately the symbolism of the beheading that fixes it in Donne's memory, imagination, and verse. Early modern beheadings were self-consciously symbolic occasions where the criminal's body became a spectacularly public index of the transgressed order of the sovereign's body.[27] For Donne, however, this particular beheading is charged with religious as well as political meaning. He refers to the "Red seas" of the criminal's blood, and for Donne the red sea is always typological of Christ's blood, through which Christians are saved as in the Exodus-type the Hebrews were saved by passing through the waters parted by Moses.[28] The sovereign body here appears to be Christ's as much as James I's, mediated through a Pauline as well as a monarchial hierarchal metaphor.

This overlaying of religious and political symbolism takes on a clear significance in the immediate context of the Oath of Allegiance

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[25]Descartes's mechanistic human physiology is worked out in *Traite de l'homme*. Upon hearing of the condemnation of Galileo in 1633, he decided not to publish: it first appeared in Latin translation in 1662, and in the original French in 1664 (see Descartes, *Treatise of Man*, trans. and commentary Thomas Steele Hall [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003]).

[26]See the letter of February 1612 in *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), pp. 122–123.

[27]Following the analysis of the judicial mutilation of failed regicide Robert-Francois Damiens that Michel Foucault presents in *Discipline and Punish* (1975; trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Pantheon, 1977]), literary scholars have examined the theatricality of earlier judicial executions. See, for example, Margaret Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

[28]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 131.

controversy. The schismatic rending of Christ's body over the issue of who the head of the Church was—the Pope or the English monarch—is aptly symbolized in a *beheaded* criminal. The issue was certainly on Donne's mind at the time he was writing the *Second Anniversary*. Shortly before he had published *Pseudo-martyr*, a prolix defense of the king's right to issue the Oath enjoining all his citizens to an obedience negating the Pope's claim to depose or excommunicate a sovereign. There was, he argued no real clash between civil and ecclesiastical authority, and the English Catholics were not genuine martyrs, since no article of the Roman faith was touched in the required declaration. Obdurate Catholics going to the gallows were not compelled to die for the faith; rather—misled, petulant, above all *willful*—they were behaving like suicides.

Ironically, Donne also defends suicides in *Biathanatos* (a work not published until after his death but written during the same period) for exactly the same willfulness. Suicide is there defended from the attacks gathered from natural, civil, and ecclesiastical law precisely because it is chosen. Elaine Scarry makes the point well: "He defends suicide in *Biathanatos* . . . not to endorse or encourage it, but to reinterpret the state of being alive as something one does with one's own volition: free to kill oneself, one's breath becomes one's own."[29] It is easy to argue that *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Biathanatos* refute each other's central argument. Donne appears to have prevaricated: Does one choose to die? Or are we all passive victims at the moment of death? Are martyrs suicides, suicides martyrs—both to be praised, both to be condemned? Donne appears to have wanted it both ways.

The very incoherence of the polemical tracts, however, draws attention to the salient feature of Donne's work here examined—his fascination with the possibility of actively willing one's death. For a poet fascinated with the body's indifference to the soul's wishes, death was the final abandonment, the moment when the body failed the soul completely and finally. Donne's answer to the powerlessness of inevitable death was to practice for it. When on his deathbed Donne "disposed his hands and body into such a posture as required not the least alteration by

[29]Scarry, "Donne: But yet the body is his booke," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 94.

those that came to shroud him," he made the final gesture in a life spent assiduously rehearsing for death.[30]

The densest thicket of reflections upon his own death in Donne's oeuvre is *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, occasioned by a 1623 illness which Donne thought might kill him, but many of the thoughts gathered there were not new, and conceits can frequently be traced to very much earlier poems. The truth is that Donne had never stopped thinking of death; the recycled images in the *Devotions* simply apply to himself what had previously been applied to others. A few examples ought to suffice. The famous intimations of a tolling bell ("never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"[31]) can be found in the anticipation of death in the *Second Anniversary*: "Thinke thee laid on thy death bed. . . / . . . . / Thinke that thou hearst thy knell. . ." (93, 99). The bed as tomb ("Every night's bed is a type of the grave"[32]) is a trope explored in the lovers' bed-tomb of "The Relic" and the textual tombs of sonnet rooms in "The Canonization." Even the strikingly original conception of the prostrate body in bed as a human sacrifice stretched upon an altar ("thou hast made this bed thine altar, make me thy sacrifice"[33]) can be found in "The Calm," written more than twenty-five years previously, where we find stranded sailors in the same position: "And on the hatches as on altars lies / Each one, his own priest, and his own sacrifice" (25–26).

Both versions of the latter conceit originate in Augustine's characterization of Christ as at once Priest and Sacrifice, *Sacerdos* and *Sacrificium*.[34] The verbal echo comes fraught with significance. Christ's dual role as Victim and Victor, Sovereign yet voluntarily subjugated, continuously informed Donne's reflections on his own mortality. Christ's body provided the antitype to the universal abjection of other human bodies, for—according to Donne—Christ died willingly and now exists in a resurrected body incapable of decay and unrestricted by the material

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[30]Izaak Walton, *The Life of Dr. John Donne* (1640), in *Devotions*, p. 220.

[31]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 103.

[32]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 13.

[33]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 17.

[34]Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.6, trans. David S. Wiesen, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1968), 3:276.

world. The extent of Donne's identification with Christ's body would, as we shall see, become shockingly apparent when Donne imagined himself *as* Christ in his sonnet "Spit in my face."

Louis L. Martz has linked Donne's lyrics to the devotional genre of the meditation,[35] but there is something stronger and stranger in these attempts "by feigned deaths to die" than a pious self-humbling of the kind practiced in Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. Donne appears instead to be attempting something closer to the crazy ambition of Jaromir Hladik in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Secret Miracle," a character gripped by the notion that if he could imagine his death in sufficient detail he would be able to prevent it. Knowing death to be inevitable, Donne repeatedly attempts to pre-empt its bitterness with an imaginary embrace, to cheat fate or God by willing beforehand that which would in any case befall him, transforming passivity into pro-activity. This is already so in the *Songs and Sonnets*, but it is a dynamic sharpened to an agonizing pitch in the *Holy Sonnets*.

By converting from cradle Catholicism to the reformed faith, Donne obviated the feared passivity of a real-life execution at the cost of a complete spiritual passivity. Remaining a Catholic meant risking the life or death sentence dealt by an absolute state. Convert to the reformed faith, however, and Calvin's God dealt life and death yet more absolutely. For the guiding principle of Calvinist soteriology—"man's utter helplessness in his corruption and total dependence upon God's grace in every aspect of his spiritual life"[36]—left Donne spiritually far more helpless than before. Knowing that regeneration, justification, and sanctification are given by God without any regard to human merit, Donne is forced to plead with God to act for him against him—to imprison, enslave, and rape the unregenerate, unjustified, unsanctified sinner that he could not help but will himself to be.[37]

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[35]Martz's article, "John Donne in Meditation: The *Anniversaries*" (*ELH* 14 [1947]: 247–273), is a particular application of the larger argument made in his *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954).

[36]Lewalski, p. 272.

[37]See "Batter my Heart": "Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (12–14).

Thus far was standard reformed piety, albeit forged with a red-hot violence of expression. But another kind of death is invocated in the collection, momentarily and as part of a larger argument, in the identification of himself with Christ on the cross which opens "Spit in my Face" (the thirteenth sonnet in the Westmoreland sequence and seventh in the revised sequence). Here Donne enacts a proactive passivity, a death which is chosen as well as suffered—indeed suffered because chosen: "Spit in my face ye Jewes, and pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoff, and scourge, and crucify me" (1–2). These are orders; Christ willed his own death. In the divine drama of the crucifixion, Donne's sonnet intimates, apparent and real power were revealed: the Jews who spat and the Roman soldiers who pierced, buffeted, and scourged were God's stooges, unwittingly affecting his purpose. In his final sermon Donne would find in Jesus's dying words—"into thy hands, O my God, I commend my spirit"—evidence of a willed death; there was, he said, "nothing more free, more voluntary, more spontaneous than the death of Christ," and his dying on the cross was a "*voluntary* emission" of spirit.[38] By imagining himself in Christ's position, Donne finds the ultimate example of actively willing that-which-must-be, God's will, and he does so even at the risk of blasphemy.

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Between unwilled birth and unwilled death Donne's body leaks. No other Renaissance poet (with the possible exception of the Spanish satirist Francisco de Quevedo) pays such scrupulous attention to its ungoverned fluids; nobody laid out for public view so often those embarrassing, involuntary emissions. The unwilled blood of a male erection, Augustinian case study for Paul's notion of the disobedience of the body, is prominent in the "upright flesh" of "To his Mistress going to bed" (although in a context of libidinal delight rather than Augustinian *pudor*).[39] Blushes, another involuntary suffusion of blood, are seen in the

[38]Donne, "Deaths Duell" (Lent, 1630), in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10:244, 248.

[39]Augustine, in *Marriage and Concupiscence*, 1.7, picks out the penis as exemplary of bodily disorder: "Well, then, how significant is the fact that the eyes, and lips, and tongue, and hands, and feet, and the bending of back, and

mistress's, Elizabeth Drury's, and Donne's own face.[40] Involuntary tears and Donne's inability to weep voluntarily occasion his outburst to God in the "I am a Little World" sonnet: "Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might / Drown my world with my weeping earnestly" (7–8). The issue of sweat, menstrual fluid, and pus from the body are merged into one horrid effluence, "spermatic issue of ripe monstrous boils," in "The Comparison" (8).[41] Vomit features in the vindictive "Jealousy" (7), excrement in *Satyre V* (17) and the *Second Anniversary* (337).

Donne also applies the dense materiality of the body to the soul. John Carey remarks Donne's description of the soul's bones, blood, wounds, diseases, even heart and liver.[42] Other critics have noted that in the sermons, division is a fracturing, worldliness a dislocation, blasphemy a wound, and excommunication a mutilation of the Body of Christ, the Church.[43] These somatic metaphors are part of the apostolic and Patristic tradition. St. Augustine talks of spiritual organs, addressing God as the bread of the interior mouth of his soul—"*panis oris intus animae meae*"[44]—and complaining of the corporal distractions that buzz in the ears of his heart—"*corporalia figmenta obstrepentia cordis mei auribus*."[45] Yet Donne makes a distinctive contribution to that tradition. Where Augustine's somatic metaphors (and later Bernard of Clairvaux's) center on the feeling eroticism of spiritual love, Donne imports a distinctively early

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neck, and sides, are all placed within our power—to be applied to such operations as are suitable to them, when we have a body free from impediments and in a sound state of health; but when it must come to man's great function of the procreation of children the members which were expressly created for this purpose will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if it had legal right over them, and sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against its will!" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, rev. Benjamin B. Warfield, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. [1887; rprt., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956], 5:266).

[40]See line 30 of "On His Mistris" and line 12 of "O My Black Soul."

[41]See Carey's evocative commentary in *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art*, p. 127.

[42]Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art*, pp. 135–137.

[43]Terry G. Sherwood, *Fulfillng the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 99.

[44]Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.13, 1:38.

[45]Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.15, 1:194.

modern sense of the body as object—thick, messy, more complicated than anyone had imagined—as if laid open to the dissection knife.

Critics including Nancy Selleck have argued that for Donne and his contemporaries the body was essentially humoral, but we should be wary of such premature conclusions.[46] The emissions that Donne examines—blood, sweat, pus, menstrual fluid, tears, sperm, vomit, urine, faeces—far exceed the fourfold scheme of blood, phlegm, and yellow and black bile. Donne, indeed, viewed the humor theory as an already exploded notion for precisely this reason: "Have not all soules thought / For many ages, that our body is wrought / Of Ayre, and Fire, and other Elements? / *And now they think of new ingredients*" (*Second Anniversary*, 263–266, emphasis added).[47] Sellek makes Donne too naïve. In fact, his anatomical and medical knowledge was that of a keen amateur (perhaps partly due to the influence of his stepfather, John Syminges, President of the Royal College of Physicians) and he was very aware that recent geographical and astronomical discoveries had obviated many classical to medieval commonplaces relating microcosm to macrocosm.[48] His examination of the leaking body is driven, not by any desire to continue pressing an already antique analogical habit, but rather by the same intuition that informs his examination of the soul in relation to the body: the sense of helplessness. He was continually aware that we can no more control

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[46]Selleck, "Donne's Body," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 41 (Winter, 2001): 149–174. For a more balanced study, see Kate Narveson, "Flesh, Excrement, Humors, Nothing: The Body in Early Stuart Devotional Discourse," *Studies in Philology* 96 (Summer, 1999): 313–333.

[47]For many of Donne's contemporaries, too, the theory of the four humors was already a metaphor. Robert Burton ridicules the reduction of melancholy to physical substance or medical symptoms in his *Anatomy* (1621).

[48]For a fuller description of the abandoned, beautiful medieval picture of the four humors within corresponding to the four elements without, with the tripartite rational, sensitive, and vegetable soul in harmony with the angelic, animal, and vegetable life of the universe see C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964). The first chapter of Leonard Barkan's *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 8–60, provides a useful chronological survey of the idea of human body as cosmos from the ancient world to the Renaissance.

bodily functions than we can will our birth or death. We are born—we breathe, digest, cry, blush, evacuate—and die.

The bygone notions of a little world, the harmony of the spheres, a circulating balance of elements—these illustrated tranquil co-ordination, therapeutic proportion. But jarring dissonances and troubling incoherence had been revealed instead by Galileo's telescope, by Copernicus's solar-centric system, and by Kepler's elliptical orbits. Accordingly, where he continues to treat man as a little world and the world as a little man, Donne stresses not shared health but shared diseases. Galileo's tube had revealed for John Milton an acne-pitted moon, a "spotty globe,"[49] and Donne points out cosmic spots, "warts, and pock-holes in the face / Of th'earth" (*First Anniversary*, 300). Prehistory and the end of time, the flood and the apocalypse, are also punctuated by diseases: "The heavens have had their dropsy, they drowned the world; and they shall have their fever, and burn the world."[50] The ultimate cause of all these maladies was the primeval fall, presented by Donne, in the *First Anniversary*, as a violently literal tumble which cripples the world's infant body. The still swaddled world, only a week old, "did in her cradle take a fall, / And turned her brains, and took a general maim, / Wronging each joint of the universal frame" (196–198). Henceforward, she limps around like a sufferer from rickets, "lame" (192), with her legs "bent awry" (304).

In Donne's images, the human body has swallowed up the world. For all the chiming references to a "general maim" and a "universal frame" we are left with only a highly particularized body. Donne dramatically elides the entire welter of Renaissance anatomical cosmography: the astral correspondences of organs to planetary stations; Jacob Boehme's theory of signatures, where the whole is mysteriously present in the part; the physiognomic signs which Thomas Browne discerned; Leonardo's corporeal geography.[51] Donne's habit of making the body all world is really only the flip side of his recognition that the cosmic pathetic fallacy had failed. Earth and body no longer correspond; well, why not simply ignore the earth? Why not in fits of petulance or praise simply allow the

[49]Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.291, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 11.

[50]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 58.

[51]For a more detailed examination, see Barkan, pp. 32–46.

tiny human frame to—temporarily—obviate the universe? In the *First Anniversary* Donne refers to the earth as the "Microcosme" of Elizabeth Drury rather than she of it (236). In the *Devotions*, he states that man is more complex than the world, and if he was only extended, "man would be the giant, and the world the dwarf; the world but the map, and the man the world."[52] In "The Sun Rising," flushed with the bravado of post-coital insouciance, Donne banishes any world not enclosed in the lovers' arms.

And yet, of course, the pressure of the temporarily banished outside world returns, recalcitrant, stubbornly actual; the interrupting sun, a visitor from Porlock, breaks up irrecoverably the lovers' reverie. The pathetic fallacy was a plaything. Donne knew that—in point of fact—whether the individual suffers or sings, the universe remains equably indifferent. If his own body disregarded the wishes of his soul, would the world be more cooperative? In "The Canonization," Donne insists angrily to his unseen interlocutor that the tempest of his lovesick sighs will *not* wreck merchant ships; that the Petrarchan flood of his tears are incapable of causing widespread flooding; that his chills lack any cosmic grasp and will not delay Spring; and that his fevers, localized within his own body, will cause no general plague. In fact, it happens the other way around. The indifferent cosmos imprints the image of its ills upon the passive body of the poet.

Donne's reaction to the new astronomical discoveries was remarkably visceral.[53] Rehearsing the motion of the heavenly bodies in his own body, they afflicted him with—to borrow again Walton's happy phrase—"vertiginous giddiness."[54] A circling compass foot, the celebrated image in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," ends a poem fraught with anxiety over cosmic motion. While ostensibly celebrating the true line of faithful love, Donne's promised passage away from and back to his mistress is "obliquely run," a constant veering off-course. It corresponds

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[52]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 19.

[53]The other arresting, visceral reaction to the new astronomy was of course Pascal's, and auditory: it was the *silence* of the vast interstellar spaces that terrified him.

[54]We need not accept the ever-moral Walton's interpretation that Donne's mental sensation referred to his progression from unsteady prodigality to staid piety.

to the preceding evocations of natural perturbations, both corporeal (in the prohibited "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" [6]) and cosmic (in the "moving of th' earth" [9] and the unfelt shivering, "trepidation" [11], of the ninth sphere). By the *First Anniversary*, moreover, even the comforting conclusion of the circle which "makes me end, where I begun" is denied outright: "none ends where he begunne" (276). For elliptical orbits had turned the heavenly bodies into drunken cripples, ever veering queasily off course. And worse still were the visceral implications of the Copernican revolution: in the *Devotions* Donne feels the earth's unimaginably speedy circling of the sun as a growing nausea.[55]

In all these veering, wobbling, trembling, quaking circuits, in "The Valediction" as in the *Devotions*, Donne feels himself the satellite and not the planet, at the periphery and not at the center, the Copernican earth and not the Copernican sun. The abolition of the Ptolemaic universe had served only to heighten his sense of helplessness. He felt the de-centered "passive earth"[56] as a type of his own body, carried hither and thither without his permission. In a later sermon he would elaborate exactly this passivity in a passage comparing Copernicus's insight to the Final Resurrection: ". . . we wonder, and justly, that some late Philosophers have removed the whole earth from the Center, and carried it up, and placed it in one of the Spheres of heaven; that this clod of earth, this body of ours should be carried up to the highest heaven . . . *this* deserves the wonder."[57] The moves of Donne's imagination are by now familiar: he compares the body's motions to astronomical motions; and the body is the more interesting of the two. As always, it is a body characterized by passivity. The body will not propel itself upwards but "be carried up": in its destiny, as in its genesis, and its pilgrimage, the body is the moved and not the mover.

Christ's body is the unique antitype of the unwilled body in resurrection as it was in conception and in death; just as his was the only

[55]Despite his damning Copernicus to innermost hell in *Ignatius his Conclave* (1611), we probably hear Donne's voice in Ignatius's observation that the theory published in 1547 "may well be right."

[56]In "To the Countess of Bedford (To Have Written Then)," Donne compares the arrested sun to a dulled mind circled by the busy body (38).

[57]Donne, "Sermon preached on Easter Day, 1625," in *The Sermons of John Donne*, 6:265.

self-willed conception, so his is the only self-willed rising from the dead. As the first to reverse the primeval curse of universal entropy, his risen body provides the antidote to all the indigenous faultiness of mortal bodies. The risen Christ of the Scriptures was fully corporeal—he ate fish, could be touched by Thomas—but his body had been loosed from the limits of the mortal world, appearing mysteriously in different locations, apparently even able to pass through walls, conclusively impervious to death or decay. Donne saw in his ascension the rehabilitation of discountenanced hopes. Bad science might be good theology. In "Love's Alchemy," Donne complains that alchemy is "imposture" (6) and that "no chemic yet the elixir got" (7), yet in "Resurrection, Imperfect," he finds in Jesus's body the true "tincture" (14)—i. e., elixir—the substance of immortal life. And in the general Resurrection other human bodies will partake in the same function, will rise to the same life. Lady Markham, although currently putrefying in the grave, will also become the "elixir of all" ("Elegy on the Lady Markham," 27).

In these moments, Donne reaches towards the exhilarating hope that Augustine expresses for the resurrected body, "*omni molestiae sensu, omni corruptibilitate et tarditate detracta*" (free from all feeling of distress, of all decay, and sluggishness).[58] Such heavenly hopes remained, however, at the periphery of Donne's work. The body he returned to constantly was the time-bound body, fallen, suffering, leaky, mortal. It was this body that forged in its sensitive memories the associations—tactual, visual, aural—which issued in the ingenious associative flow of his imagery; it was this organism whose unwilled effluences—blood, excrement, sweat, tears, phlegm, sperm, pus—he recorded unflinchingly, revenging his ignominy with laughter; it was this fragile conjunction of mind and material, this temporarily bivalved mollusk of spirit and flesh, whose mortal unhinging he imaginatively rehearsed, anticipating beforetime the inevitable break-up of death; it was this anomaly, more complex of composition than his intellectual forefathers had dreamt, in deaf dissonance from the circling spheres, sometimes torn apart in the judicial torture of religious strife, and doomed in any case to dusty disintegration, whose imprint he assiduously recorded.

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[58]Augustine, *The City of God*, 13.20, 4:212.

This side of the Resurrection, the only "re-membering" available to Donne was textual. His compositions record his decomposition, his verse inscribed his falling apart, and at his death he left an incorruptible corpus. In the act of writing there was a symbolic gesture, a token exercise of the will, volition, and decision on paper which he could not exercise over his flesh. Transposing his visceral body into a textual body allowed Donne to grasp back control, albeit temporarily. The social and the natural world were indifferent or hostile but in the little room of a sonnet he could, at least for a while, create an alternative cosmos. The "subtle knot" ("The Ecstasy," 64) that tied body and soul was ineluctably unraveling—but Donne could, meanwhile, as Johnson observed, yoke together the most heterogeneous ideas.

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