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The Mutuality of Body and Soul

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Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. xiv + 213 pp.

A topic that is everywhere in the works of John Donne, that is of necessity frequent in critical reading and understanding of him and his works, and that has actually been inadequately treated as a basic theme is here given its due in clear and polished writing. The subject is "body and soul"—their individual significances, their combinational import, and their supposed precedence of one over the other. There are four major points that I felt immediately in reading the Introduction and observing the Table of Contents. First, this is a study that recognizes and employs not only one genre in Donne's oeuvre, but rather amazingly (yet oh, so correctly) the personal letters and the sermons alongside the poetry and the other prose. Second, there is important stress on philosophic, linguistic, metaphysical backgrounds. Third, the subject has dictated an examination that involves these genres, not in any separated fashion, but as it leads to an analysis of Donne's thinking and concerns on the issue or on some specific aspect of it. It is the topic that is pursued, moving back and forth in genre and in times of probable composition. And fourth, while there is "literary criticism" presented, the emphasis is not upon another reading of a specific work. This last point may disconcert some readers expecting an involvement of a kind of *explication des textes*, for the reader may be bothered that the many literary levels and techniques, multiple meanings and connotations of a poem are unfortunately ignored. A poem by Donne does not have *a* meaning.

A case in point could be "The good morrow." This poem is employed (on p. 51) to illustrate "the subtle shift . . . from the idea that the couple's

two loves were one to the idea that they were similar"—and that's about all that it says. The dramatic situation, the ironies of the images and language, the psychological interpretation afforded the speaker are not even hinted at. But such poetic analysis is not what is being pursued: what does emerge is the recognition that the two lovers' parting is inevitable, and that the speaker's response to this "is not to accept it, but to fight it as best he can." The speaker here (and elsewhere) is very often identified with Donne himself, a dangerous reading I think, but Targoff means to show such questions, answers, and incertitudes as defining Donne in general, in his concerns and philosophy, not as the character of the poem. One need only look at the discussions of "The Extasie" (pp. 53–57), or of "A Valediction: of my name, in the window" (pp. 67–59), for fuller "literary" (and importantly solid) analysis of an individual poem.

In reference to point one above, most unusually but definitely most tellingly, Targoff has read the personal letters from and to Donne for pertinent ideas and attitudes relating to the body and the soul and their mutuality. Most Donnean criticism has ignored the letters completely—and one can say, to the detriment of such criticsm, for they are extremely informative and the employment of them here is not only apt but instructive of the way in which metaphysical questions about body/soul (as well as other matters) emerge in Donne's life over and over again, not only in creative poetry. Chapter One, after a long and elucidative Introduction, is on the letters—first the prose, personal letters, and then some of the verse letters (most of which have been untouched in our studies of Donne the creative artist). A few of the later verse letters, which have been discussed elsewhere, are cogently examined for their place within this theme, but also two of the earlier ones to Rowland Woodward. I would hope that such examination would evoke further work on those verse letters to men (which for the most part only George Klawitter and Ben Saunders have really paid attention to), particularly as they exemplify Targoff's dissection of the subgenre. A letter, detached from writer and from receiver, performs an intimate exchange and is a strong conveyer of love or friendship. Indeed, nourishing "bodies of friendship," it provides "presence" in "absence" (pp. 25–31). "The act of writing separates the soul from the body. . . . [T]he act of writing performs the 'mindefulness' so crucial to the 'office' or duty of friendship" (p. 31).

Chapter Two looks at the Songs and Sonnets, and frequently there are agreements and also disagreements with former scholarship: the melted gold and compass of "Valediction: forbidding mourning," for example, are related to Tertullian ("Donne's favorite church father") and to Giovanni Guarino, though three salient differences with the latter provide a potential reversal of "parting" (der Abschied, which is so importantly discussed in the first chapter as a constant anxiety Donne faced). It posits a return "home," and thus rejects John Freccero's and Arthur Marotti's reading of the last stanza as pointing to God and a resurrection. The upshot of many readings is an emphasis on dualism in which love must involve both body and soul, but as in "Aire and Angels," Targoff asserts, love descends into flesh. In distinction from hylomorphism (a compound of matter, not easily divided), generally accepted by critics, "We turn to our bodies, Donne suggests, because we cannot love without them" (p. 57). Accordingly there is also much discussion of Neoplatonism and its spiritual transcending of the body. While it does arise in the poetry, it is not central and parts of its theory are rejected, Targoff cogently argues. The matter of parting (as in the valedictions) is of great concern for Donne: he hopes for the meaning and actuality of "until we meet again," but fears that it is "final."

Perhaps the most meaningful statement of Donne's attitude as he himself so frequently approached death lies in his epitaph to Anne (1617) and a wedding sermon of 1627 (neither of which generally appears in conjunction with exposition of the poetry) as Targoff points out: marriage in heaven is a mingling of the loved ones' ashes, a possibility of "our *knowing*, or *our loving* of *one another* upon former knowledge in this world, in the next" (p. 78).

Such reexaminations and epitomes of Donne's attitudes, beliefs, and personal angst demand our attention and should alter some "standard" readings of these and other poems. Readers of this book, I feel sure, will feel initial disagreement with some conclusions, but they are well examined and deserve attentive and *unbiased* consideration. Two methodological decisions, however, often seem to appear: avoidance of biographical circumstances of writing (dating of the poems) and their having been produced within a coterie competition. For example, of "A Valediction: of the booke" (p. 66)—given an excellent reading—Targoff writes, "There is no hope in this poem of reunion, nor is there any real consolation given to his beloved." I agree, but the realistic fact (which

could have been briefly stated) underscores why: The poem was written as Donne prepared to go abroad with Sir Robert Drury in July 1611; his wife had given birth to their daughter Mary a year or so before and was now again pregnant with their eighth child which was stillborn in January 1612 (he did not return to England until September 1612). And most pessimistically religious wars in Germany loomed and an alliance between England and Germany had recently been enacted (the Thirty Years' War broke out finally in 1618). In addition, frictions caused with the Dutch concerning the spice trade arose in 1611, making sea travel dangerous. Or, "The Apparition" (and citing Christopher Ricks's view about such lyrics, p. 50) which she assigns to poems that "share a profound distaste for separation" and that's it. The implication is that the poem is deeply biographical in origin and its outrageously coterie connection is ignored. The poem exhibits much more than an abhorrence of separation. Perhaps these matters, since they do not impinge on the theme of body and soul as presented, need not be mentioned, but Donneans, I suspect, are not going to be happy with what seems narrowness of scholarship, a kind of incompleteness of matters that poems discussed raise, and dependence on certain critics only for agreement or disagreement.

The *Anniversaries* (Chapter Three) entail the separation of soul and body at death, the idea of which opposes standard, religious precepts: the soul is less for such separation, nor does it benefit by death as studies of the *Second Anniversarie* allege. Although the body may be a prison for the soul, the soul is not happy in its separation: "Donne denies the soul's desire to be in heaven if such an 'elevation' means leaving the body behind" (p. 83). Furthermore, the ending of the *Second Anniversarie* proposes that the Drurys' real consolation can come only through a future reunion of Elizabeth's body and soul, not through the soul's separation and ascent to heaven: the marriage of body and soul "ultimately transcends the limits of the grave" (pp. 104–105). These oppositional readings and resolutions from usual interpretations will bring antagonism and surely force re-thinking and re-evaluation of prior theses, including the emphasis on Elizabeth's death being the *cause of* the "death of the world."

Similarly, and with further ideational movement, the Holy Sonnets (Chapter Four) and the *Devotions* (Chapter Five) are seen to fear death, yet hope for salvation, and thus to pay more attention to the state of the

soul, and then to exhibit anxiety over the state of health of the body and then over the fate of the soul. There is a progression about these matters as Targoff presents her arguments. The sonnets depict struggle over the elemental (Donne's own sinfulness) and the spiritual (his inconstant faith)—a dualism that has appeared in other works. Donne's dire illness in 1623, on the other hand, brings concern over his recovery from both bodily and soulful illness, creating a staging and resolution, as it were, of a cycle of illness, death, salvation, and rebirth. "It means, however temporarily, to take the place of God" (p. 147). Through both the early sonnets and the midlife *Devotions* there is an implication that Donne considers himself one of the elect. The *Essays in Divinity* connect his abilities as a poetic maker and salvation (p. 129), but in the *Devotions*, despite the yearning for union and fear of parting, a rejection of concepts about body and soul that have been examined before emerges. "It is the *union* of the *body* and *soul*" which causes our illness: "Putting body and soul together creates the disease from which only death can free us" (p. 151).

The final chapter deals with the last sermon *Death's Duell*, in which is manifested "an intensity of focus on the posthumous body that has no parallels in early modern Protesant literature" (p. 154). The sermon becomes a staging in the pulpit of Donne's own death, a valediction to the world. Contemporary personal letters in which his impending death is dominant and then his posing for his monument in his "winding sheet" exemplify the defeat of death through resurrection and its visualization as simultaneously being dead and alive. Herein is a résumé of the questions concerning the separation of body and soul, of death and resurrection, that repeatedly recur in both his secular and religious writings (p. 156). A review of Donne's life as a divine, as a preacher, incisively explores Donne's approach to a sermon, his understanding of and toleration for his varied audiences, his performance as a "speaking action," at the same time as he employs classical rhetorical techniques. His repeated aim, it is clear, is to convince his audience that "however decayed and scattered the posthumous body may be, it will return intact on the last day" (p. 161). The last section of the sermon, built on the last day of Christ's life, is intended to elicit each individual member of the congregation to reflect upon him/herself and experience the joy and anticipation of that transmigration (p. 181).

The thesis of this book evolves around metaphysical questions which

raise the uncertainty of "the nature of the soul and its relation to the body" (p. 5). There is a mutuality, a mutual necessity, between the body and the soul for Donne, and their parting (Donne's obsessive concern) thus provokes an uncommon concept of resurrection (the "hardest Article of the Creed"). The works that Targoff anatomizes evidence Donne's hope (argument) that the resurrected flesh (body) will be identical with its earthly counterpart. Not only will a spiritual salvation (soul) exist after death, a "body" as well will remain, thus allowing for a reuniting, not a final farewell as one is separated through any reason from one's love. The monument of Donne in St. Paul's Cathedral, showing "dormant corpse and resurrected body" as one, represents "the moment between the reassembly of his scattered body and its reunion with his soul" (p. 183). Clearly this is a book of basic significance for a study of Donne, for readings different from so many other delineations of Donne's philosophic world and the lemmata upon which it is fashioned. It deserves an unbiased reading: there is much to learn from it.

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