The Body is His Book: John Donne's Sacramental Poetics

by

Paul Merrimen

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the spiritual arc of John Donne's early lyric poetry through the lens of the Protestant Reformation. Drawing on the work of Max Weber, I situate Donne in a post-Reformed cultural environment with which his strenuous Catholic upbringing clashes, creating a rupture in consciousness from which a distinctive, though often paradoxical religious persona emerges. The decline of a particularly tactile sense of Catholic sacramentalism and the rise of a more transcendental Protestant mode of scriptural intercourse causes Donne to attempt a poetic synthesis of body and soul in order to reconcile the extremes of his own divided religious loyalties. Following a developmental trajectory from Donne's earliest *Elegies* and *Satires* through the *Songs and Sonnets* and ending with a treatment of the *Holy Sonnets*, it will be shown that Donne forged a poetic *via media* between his own Catholic past and the growing Anglican consensus in early modern England.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In a sermon given on Easter Day 1626 John Donne preached on the spiritual importance of the body to the human condition: "man is not a soul alone, but a body too; ... [he] is not placed in this world only for speculation; ... God did not breathe a soul towards him, but into him" (*Works Sermons* 372). Donne scholars have often noted his lifelong resistance to the severance of the body from spiritual matters, an impulse that implicitly contests the broader withdrawal of the divine from the material realm that marked his own reformed theology, so that some have detected a continuing Catholic "devotional temper" behind his later "theological position" (Gardner Poems 131). But even in Donne's early lyrics, this proneness to spiritual ambiguity in no way occasions a withdrawal from the pressing religious questions of the Reformation. Indeed, while his poetry was in many ways guarded, obscure, marked by an intermingling of contrary loyalties, it also remained paradoxically vehement, his spiritual fixations redoubled rather than halved by the era's violent oppositions. And yet Donne, by having refused the call to martyrdom to which so many of his family circle had submitted, bore the marks of a psychic bifurcation of not only Catholic and Protestant, and thus familial and national identities, but also one of blood and belief more broadly, a complex from which Donne's distinctive horror at the potential disunion of the sacramental body from God's grace seems to emerge. By exploring the arc of Donne's poetic development from his earliest *Satires* and *Elegies* through the *Songs and Sonnets* and ending with the *Holy Sonnets*, we can see that his incremental, and often reluctant embrace of Protestant theology, with its disjunctive turn away from the body towards a more transcendental view of religious experience, was invariably accompanied by a simultaneous intensification of bodily

obsession, one that continued to reflect a persistently Catholic sense of sacramental immanence. By pursuing a prolonged poetic synthesis of bodily and spiritual concerns, Donne can be seen to forge his own *via media* between divided theological allegiances in an attempt to reconcile the schismatic divisions of his own psyche.

A quick summation of Donne's spiritual biography provides some clarity. Having been born into what Dennis Flynn has called England's "ancient Catholic nobility" (9) to a stubbornly unreformed mother, raised in the company of Jesuits and educated by Catholic tutors late into his adolescence, Donne's religious arc resolves with his ordination in the Church of England and his deanship of St. Paul's Cathedral. Having thus in a sense encompassed the theological spectrum of the English Reformation in a single lifetime, Donne's views often seem marked by a pre- and post-reformed hybridity. But it is not merely the range but the personal depth of Donne's history that is remarkable. In the forward of his book *The Pseudo-Martyr,* Donne confesses that "I have been ever kept awake in a meditation of martyrdom, by being derived from such a stocke and race as, I believe, no family ... hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the teachers of Roman doctrine, than it hath done" (*Works* 190). Indeed, Donne's ruminations were well founded. A descendent on his mother's side of Sir Thomas More, perhaps the most famous of English Catholic martyrs, Donne was also in a significant sense a product of More's circle, an intellectual coterie renowned for their unyielding devotion to Rome. Included in this group was John Heywood, Donne's maternal grandfather, who after a period of imprisonment for his faith under Elizabeth I, fled to Europe in 1564 to avoid execution. John's brother Thomas was less prudent, eventually being executed for saying Mass when Donne was still a child. Both of Heywood's sons, Ellis and Jasper, Donne's uncles, became Jesuits, the latter becoming

the head of the Jesuit mission in England, and both were eventually forced into exile. Donne's mother, too, eventually chose exile on the continent to the continual threat of state oppression. Finally, Donne's younger brother Henry was arrested in 1593 for harbouring a priest in his quarters while both Donne boys were still students at Lincoln's Inn, thrown into the Newgate prison and died of the plague shortly afterwards. As John Carey has noted, not only was Donne "born into a terror," he was also significantly "formed by it" (18).

This inventory of loss is critical for two reasons: first, it establishes a Catholic pedigree from which Donne inherited a reflexive desire for bodily mediation in spiritual matters, sensual even if no longer institutional, an artefact of a late-medieval culture of extra-Biblical ritual and sacramental engagement which the reformers' refutation of material immanence had all but extinguished. Second, Donne's bodily desire is marked by an extreme sense of its own precariousness, an urgent attempt in the aftermath of loss to reincorporate the fragments of the old order into a sensible system, one defined, I will argue, by a pseudo-sacramental consecration of the body. And yet while the Anglican consensus so often reflected in Donne's sermons is evidence enough of the ultimate failure of his dalliance with spiritual self-fashioning, the tenor of his juvenilia shows Donne still in thrall to a not exactly Catholic, but distinctly post-apostatic fixation on the body as a means to its own resacralization. "The *body* makes the *minde*," Donne argues in the eleventh of his early *Problems and Paradoxes*, "and this *minde* may be confounded with *soul* without any violence or injustice to *Reason* or *Philosophy*: then the *soul* it seems is enabled by our *Body*, not this by it" (*Complete* 302). This proto-traducian allusion to the soul's bodily origin is redoubled in Paradox 8: "our *Complexions* and whole *Bodies* we inherit from *Parents*; our *inclinations* and minds

follow that: For our *mind* is heavy in our *bodies afflictions*, and rejoyceth in the *bodies pleasure*" (300). This manner of assertion is distinctive of the early Donne. Although he insinuates the propagative origin of the soul, denoting without overtly declaring the lineal, and thus discernibly Catholic premises from which his views emerge, we are left with a doctrine without sanction, a personal fixation left to transmute its own divinity, there being "no *criterium*, no canon, no rule" (*Works Letters* 331) to fall back on in a theological marketplace still marked by schismatic disorder.

In an early letter to Sir Henry Wotton in which he had included these *Paradoxes* (as well as the *Elegies* and *Satires* we will consider) Donne dismisses them as "nothings," written "rather to deceive time than her Daughter truth – although they have been written in an age when anything is strong enough to overthrow her" (*Works* 64-65). Though it is predictable that Donne would coyly disavow such unorthodox views, not only does his irritation with truth's indeterminacy carry weight, but his ambivalent expression of both deference and disdain for a feminized, and all-too-easily conquered characterization of truth is also essential to our reading. Izaak Walton, Donne's earliest biographer, attempted to divest Donne's story of its Catholic resonances, framing his early spiritual desire in rational, masculine terms, as though he were "coolly evaluating and choosing a religion," and thus already free of his mother's influence and "his schooling in a woman's religion" (Flynn 8). Donne shares this early modern association of "Catholicism with traditionally feminine attributes" (Dolan 8), but his response to "her" is hardly cool. As Achsah Guibbory notes: "the Reformation had reduced the sacraments from seven to two ... redefined them as "signs" rather than instruments of grace, abolished monasteries, got rid of saints, and forbade the worship of saints, relics, and images," and yet, "all of these appear in Donne's celebrations of love" ("Erotic"

144). And yet, for Donne, the Catholicized female body both alarms and attracts, alternately seeming a means of consecration or a desecrated spiritual obstacle. While Donne indeed represents the female body as a site of a displaced sacrality in the *Songs and Sonnets*, constantly equating his prospective lovers to devotional objects through which the tactility of Catholic modes of worship might be regained, he inevitably (and almost indiscernibly) veers away from sexual consummation. Sexual ecstasy thus becomes the animating – or *interinanimating* – spirit itself, a means by which the soul is incarnationally fused with the body, while simultaneously remaining an uncrossed threshold, a textual rather than bodily fantasy into which Donne withdraws.

In the *Holy Sonnets*, however, Donne's contradictions catch up to him. His vision of the sexual body as a displaced Catholic sacrament begins to strain and distort under the pressure of its own textuality, or, in other words, the medium – or *host* – of a distinctly Protestant sacrality. And yet strangely, if only briefly, the voice of Donne's early persona remains, still bearing the marks of his foregoing complex of Catholic desire even as it yields to its own failure. If, as Dolan notes, an "English national identity emerged in the early modern period" that was figured as "Protestant" and "masculine" (7), in the *Holy Sonnets* it is Donne himself who becomes the feminine other passively anticipating God's withdrawn carnality. While this perspectival reversal occasions a turn to psychological inwardness that is consistent with the Protestant believer's subjective isolation, Donne in no way lets his bodily fixation go. Though he eventually surrenders his bodily agency to a sense of Protestant estrangement from God in the worldly domain, Donne can also be seen to merely reverse sexual orientations, a radical reimagining of incarnational intercourse where he himself, rather than the archetypal female of his youth, awaits ravishment. Donne's early sensual compensations can thus be seen as the

refracted desire of a young poet coping with the bodily isolation of a still newly desacralized Protestant environment, but one who is drawn, often seemingly against his will, into a fervent re-consideration of the Catholic past, bearing witness to, and even fantasizing a re-entanglement with the fragments of an ultimately inaccessible sacramental culture.

Chapter 2: From Disenchantment to Via Media

"Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear," Donne pleads at the beginning of "Holy Sonnet 18," asking whether it is "she, which on the other shore / Goes richly painted? or which robbed and tore / Laments and mourns in Germany and here?" (1-4). Donne here reiterates the basic denominational question that lies at the heart of so much of his early poetry: *to which Church do I belong*? But so too does Donne's exhaustion and near contempt for the problem show through, as he likens the Catholic Church of his youth to a "richly painted" woman, a prostitute who is "open to most men" (14), while depicting her Protestant alternative as a wailing malcontent. And yet, based on Donne's almost pathological concern with the issue, it seems clear that rather than attempting to distance himself from either, his disgust betrays an irresolvable and thus warped desire for both. T.S. Eliot's sense of a "dissociation of sensibility" in seventeenth century English poetry draws much the same distinction in literary terms. For Eliot, in a post-reformed literary culture where thought began to overshadow feeling as a poetic concern, Donne's poetry is one of the final expressions of a declining aesthetic of the senses, one where thought was capable of being felt "as immediately as the odour of a rose" (287). In Donne, according to Eliot, "thought" itself becomes an "experience," one that serves to "[modify] his sensibility" (287). I would argue, however, that Donne's poetry offers a generational link rather than an abrupt dissociation of sensual and intellectual, or what I would suggest are implicitly Catholic and Protestant orientations. Donne's reluctance to devote himself entirely to either denominational trope – whether the feminine sensuality attributed to the Catholic faith or the "holy desperation" (Coles 913) of the Protestant convert – places him at their intersection, one

fading into the past and the other still unfolding, but both pulling against Donne's desire for synthesis. In Donne's early lyrics, the greater his longing to act, to reach out and touch, to mingle his own body with the body of the divine other, the more surely he seems divested of that very agency, and thus, in the words of Calvinist thinker William Perkins, "out of all hope euer to attaine saluation by any strength ... of his own" (913).

And yet to suggest that for Donne the Reformation occasioned a perceived withdrawal of God's presence from the world is to situate him within a paradigm of disenchantment first popularized by German sociologist Max Weber. In Weber's classic formulation, the Reformation initiated an iconoclastic desacralization of early modern Europe – ending pilgrimages, closing monasteries, destroying shrines and devotional objects – a backlash that sought to abolish the idolatry and superstition of late-medieval Catholicism. For Weber the social ramifications of Protestant theology inclined towards an "extreme inhumanity" (60) by divesting the laity of its active role in what had been, in his view, a more humane "Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement [and] release" (71). Such doctrines as the high-Calvinist view of predestination and the Lutheran justification by faith alone – both of which withdrew even moral action from God's soterial balance sheet – left "not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatever" (61). This new sense of distance between the sacred and the secular, Weber suggests, established the "absolute transcendentality of God" (61), who was now remote, inscrutable, as though engaged in a cosmic drama in which the human body played an entirely passive part. This loss of spiritual agency saw a deepening sense of the "corruption of everything pertaining to the flesh," accounting for "the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism to all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and religion" (61-62), and thus left the early modern

believer with a "feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness" (60), struggling within the bodily isolation implied by God's withdrawal. Weber came to see these trends as part of a systematic "disenchantment of the world" (*Vocation* 13), one that swerved away from late-medieval expressions of sacramental engagement towards a less tangible "rationalization and intellectualization"(30) of belief.

But while Weber, like Eliot, theorizes an abrupt dissociation of pre- and post-reformed, or sensual and intellectual emphases, Donne's own example belies both views, his mixed allegiances serving to remind us of the transitional generation of believers on whom it fell to reconcile the entrenched sacrality of a declining Catholic tradition with the Protestant future. In this regard, scholars have begun to contest the suddenly and comprehensively demystified post-Reformation world that Weber imagines. Indeed, according to Alexandra Walsham, there has been a "bold revisionist backlash" in recent years "against the confident teleologies and polarities embedded" (500) in the disenchantment model, a reaction that emphasizes a gradual rather than abrupt transition from pre- to post-reformed viewpoints. Even a quick look at the attitudes held by Protestant reformers concerning the body seems to vindicate this revisionist trend. Martin Luther, despite famously contesting the efficacy of works as a means to salvation, argued that the body's "external gestures" might still "commend themselves" to God as long as it is "the Spirit who impels them" (135). Ulrich Zwingli too suggested a continuing significance for the body, counselling that "bodily exercise," such as "running, jumping, throwing, fighting and wrestling" (Zwingli 116) was a vital part of a youth's education and a manner of resisting worldly corruption. Even John Calvin, whose influence is one of Weber's primary targets, noted in his *Institutes* that "we are consecrated in soul and body to be a holy temple to the Lord" (4.18.16), and thus "there

[is] no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks [do] not glow" (1.15.3). As Jennifer Waldron has suggested, it was not the distinction between the corporeal and celestial that troubled Protestant reformers so much as that between "living humans," who were "consecrated by God himself," and "dead objects" which were seen as "(falsely) consecrated by humans" (27), such as the transubstantiated eucharist.

While Donne would have been familiar with these continental theological disputes, this latter distinction between idolatry and the incarnational sanctity of God's creation is moderated by the Church of England, whose *via media* between Roman Catholic institutionalism and Puritan calls for wholesale Reformation might be thought to have alleviated the severity and suddenness of Donne's denominational alienation. Waldron notes, for example, that that the Elizabethan homily on the right use of the church draws a quite permeable line between God's grace and the body, suggesting that while the "incomprehensible majestie of God" is not an indwelling part of the objective presence of churches themselves, the "cheefe and speciall temples of God, wherein he hath greatest pleasure, and most delyghteth to dwell and continue in, are the bodyes and myndes of true Christians" (2). In his *Acts and Monuments,* English martyrologist John Foxe too condemns the Catholic dependence on idolatrous objects like "money, candles, ... Reliques [and] Images" (Waldron 5), and instead posits the martyred Protestant body itself as a "local habitation" for the sacred that "supplants the veneration of statues or the real presence of Christ in the consecrated Host" (16). Finally, Waldron goes so far as to quote Donne's late *Devotions* to make her case, where he notes that God has "consecrated our living bodies, to [his] owne Spirit, & made us Temples of the holy Ghost" (25), demonstrating, according to Waldron, that "for Donne, as for most English Protestants, the disenchantment of Catholic objects of devotion did not correspond to a

disenchantment of the entire material world" (25).

But while it is clear that Protestant attitudes towards the body were more nuanced than the disenchantment model may suggest, Waldron's suggestion that Donne serves as an unambiguous example of a continuing Protestant awareness of the body's divinity is a characteristic overcompensation among revisionists. Though it is important to establish the overlapping nature of pre- and post-reformed views of the body, we should not exaggerate their continuity. Donne was anything but a representative Anglican thinker on the subject, and instead should be seen to reflect the lived experience of an *actual body* within a reformed theological framework, his sense of sacramental alienation being a collateral effect rather than overt expression of Protestant theology. The human body, even if it remains enchanted, is a fish out of water in a disenchanted world. It is difficult to quantify what the precise psychological costs of the English national apostasy against centuries of accumulated spiritual practice had on the collective psyche, but the idea that the withdrawn intermediation of that very body of practice would foster an increased sense of intimacy with the divine is not evident. Donne adjusted, as indeed the English nation was forced to adjust, to re-conceptualize God's presence by other means or else suffer what were still potentially fatal consequences. And yet not only from the Catholic perspective itself, but also from a broadly sociological one, the iconoclastic dismantling of a culture's inherited forms of belief can be seen as traumatic by definition, even if the desire to move away from them was common enough. While the disenchantment view may be overdetermined in its broader historiographical context, we might still see the spiritual distress of Donne's early lyrics, his attempt to privately reconnect with a sense of sacramental touch from which he was forced to publicly isolate himself, as a not uncommon reaction to post-schismatic uncertainty, particularly among Catholic

recusants – i.e., to outwardly conform and inwardly agonize over the remainder.

Admittedly, to argue that Donne's expression of the body's sacredness in his *Devotions* is a surreptitious expression of curbed sacramental longing is tricky, as though the disenchantment claim were strengthened by evidence that seems to overtly contradict it. And yet the idea that Donne would stoop to equivocation, or that his avowed belief might run counter to his genuine conviction, is not merely to obfuscate the evidence. As Katherine Maus points out, "the question of whether conscientious dissidents ought to conceal their true allegiances from hostile authorities" (18) was a constant matter of debate during the Reformation. Maus delineates these tensions by emphasizing the inner and outer parameters of early modern disputes between Protestants and Catholics. For Maus, questions of "whether priests ought to wear vestments, whether communicants should kneel when they receive communion, whether infant baptism is acceptable, whether prescribed prayers have merit" formed a struggle between orientations that led Protestants to "typically describe themselves as cultivating internal truths, while accusing Catholics of attending only to outward "shows"" (15). This Protestant conflation of aesthetic austerity with virtue, one which posits a kind of pristine continuity between inner and outer selves, would seem to make what Maus calls the "inwardness topos" a distinctly Protestant characteristic. And yet, as Maus goes on to note, "the awareness of a secret interior space of unexpressed thoughts and feelings" does not necessarily "require commitment to a particular theology," and, indeed, "it is an almost inevitable result of religious oppression" (16). In this regard, Maus continues:

> Tudor and Jacobean religious dissidents face self-definitional challenges similar to what Eve Sedgwick describes as the challenges of modern homosexual identity – the expediency, even at times the apparent necessity, of concealment; the

> physical perils and psychic relief attendant upon open declaration; the uncertainty about who and what might betray half-secret allegiances; the context-dependent fluidity of what counts as a heretical orientation. (18)

What Donne would later describe as an "immensity cloistered" in a "little room" (*Works* 171) might thus be seen as the institutionally enforced interiority of his own obstinately Catholic instincts, an inherited desire for extreme sacramental ostentation locked within the prison of the inwardly oriented body. In view of this potential for a Jesuitical misalignment of one's inner and outer nature, Calvin had explicitly stated that "two men in one, God loveth not. If the inward man know the truth, why doth the outward man confess a falsehood? ... If the tongue speak otherwise than the heart thinketh, both be abominable before God" (Maus 18). While we might see the growing alertness to the inwardness of early modern consciousness as the rise of a particularly Protestant sense of selfhood, for a declining generation of Catholics such inwardness becomes a kind of devotional graveyard under which sacramental desire is only ever partially repressed. For Donne, the sensuality of a bygone culture of Catholic sacramentalism continues to throb like a phantom limb long after he has assented to its forfeiture. So while Maus is not wrong to note that "it is impossible to estimate accurately the severity of the crises of conscience that accompanied official changes of faith" (18), it can be reasonably assumed that the absence of supposed idolatry by which Protestants might rest assured in their allotment of grace must have struck Catholics as a painful divestment of spiritual agency. Donne's personal experience of a particularly Catholic need to disappear in order to endure can thus be seen as a kind of recusant poetics whose sensible artefacts were necessarily decentered, disguised, fragmented, comprising a complex of avoidant desire whose inward restlessness not only belies, but

is exacerbated by its outward accommodation. For a figure like Donne, whose eventual conversion confirms a final willingness to compromise, it is difficult to know how much of this was calculated. While Donne the convert often seems to confirm the lower station of the body, for Donne the poet the body's divine significance inheres, suggesting an almost obsessional desire for the salvation of its materiality. What Donne would later call his "ruinous anatomy" (*Works* 104) is thus the outcome of a kind of schismatic violence, a sense of physical dismemberment that mirrors the destruction of late-medieval Catholic culture itself, so that his desire to "recompact [his] scattered body" (*Works* 104) is also a desire for sacramental cohesion.

And yet strangely, despite Donne's obsessive attempt to recentralize the body in his early poems, he just as persistently invokes the text, or "the Book," as a means by which the body becomes permanently inscribed, bodies themselves becoming "manuscripts" which "no schismatic will dare to wound" (*Works* 107). This conflation of body and book is not only central to Donne's sacramental poetics, but serves as a defense mechanism against the precarious station of the body itself, and particularly his own body in a still perilous post-Reformation milieu. Robert Scribner has argued that rather than being disenchanted, "the Reformation was a world of highly charged sacrality" in so far as "it can be said that the Word of God became ... the overwhelming sacramental experience, the sole means through which created humanity could come to knowledge of the divine" (483). Michael O'Connell too notes this incarnational oneness of body and text in the writing of Erasmus, who once suggested that the gospels "bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing dying, rising Christ himself, and thus they render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes" (36). Erasmus here reflects a theological transition towards logocentrism

during and after the Reformation that Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's has termed "Christ as Text" (O'Connell 37), where the iconoclastic turn away from Catholic idolatry, joined with the rise of vernacular translations of the Bible, the printing press as a means of dissemination, and the rise in literacy that proceeded from both, saw the textual experience of Christ "eclipse his real presence in the visible, tactile Eucharist" (37). Donne's own "incarnational aesthetic" (O'Connell 89) does not treat sensual and textual sacramentalisms as mutually compatible so much as it strains to hold the still relatively close proximity of two perspectives divided from the same source but now moving inextricably apart. Donne falls (or soars, depending on one's taste) into paradox, the body being read like a text and the text itself becoming a fetishized body. Unwilling to concede or dilute either figuration, Donne takes the incarnational object of both pre- and post-reformed views and conflates them, no matter how incongruent their coupling.

While there does finally appear to be a clear incommensurability between Catholic and Protestant views of the spiritual body, Donne himself, occupying the tenuous generational middle ground between a pure expression of either, is nevertheless determined to establish a synthesis of orientations, his own poetic *via media* through which to recuperate the sacramental culture of his youth and incorporate it into the Anglican consensus. And yet, as Anglican priest Thomas Wright suggested in 1596, "he which once is thoroughly grounded in the Catholique religion... may varie his affection, but his judgement [and] his conceit ... hardly wil he change or never" (Hester 382). Indeed, Donne himself, in a 1609 letter to Goodyere in which he discussed the ongoing religious disputes of the era, noted that "You shall seldom see a coin upon which the stamp were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint, and so for the most part do minds which have received divers impressions" (*Works* 43). Donne here

identifies his own distorted mixture of similarity and difference, continuity and interruption, an internally contained but forever skewed irresolution between pre- and post-reformed views. Donne's anguished desire for synthesis thus proceeds from not only his attempt to reconcile the Catholic and Protestant theological polarities of the Reformation, but from the fact that he himself – body and soul – comprises the very site of their contradiction. While by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Donne's experience of having been raised within what little remained of a radical Catholic culture was already somewhat anachronistic, both the external pressure under which he came to convert as well as the internal pressure under which his sacramental longing labours makes him a distinctly transitional voice, his poetry being the record of one man's search for spiritual permanence in the flux between traditions.

Chapter 3: From True Religion to Mystic Book

In Donne's *Satires* and *Elegies* one sees the destabilizing effect England's post-reformed culture had on the development of his poetry. Carey, for one, has suggested that "we should not take either set of poems at face value. Both were, to a degree, compensatory fantasies" whose "erotic conquests and lordly postures reversed [a] social reality" where the "gullibility and boastfulness" of Inns of Court students "made them a joke with ordinary citizens" (Works xxi). And yet beyond any pangs of status anxiety, Donne's early vainglory not only serves as a coping mechanism for the loss of his Catholic faith, but is the expression of a persona that predates his apostasy, and thus, in a sense, constitutes a form of surreptitious continuity. Our earliest visual impression of Donne is a portrait miniature from 1591, commissioned after what Flynn suggests was a period of travel in the Catholic strongholds of Italy and Spain (170), showing a dandyish nineteen year old wearing a cross that "only a Catholic who fancied himself a swordsmen would wear" (Flynn 4) and holding the hilt of his sword up to the viewer, a gesture of Catholic pride and virility that accords with the Spanish motto etched in the top right corner – *Antes muerto que mudado* – or, "sooner dead than changed." If Donne's early posture is dashing, unconcerned with personal safety, even doom-eager in its apparent thirst for martyrdom, his post-apostatic stance is comparatively sheepish, comprising a series of impudent winks and nudges designed to delight his fellow students. But if the death of his brother marked an abrupt end to Donne's flirtation with the romance of Catholic martyrdom, the burden of constancy flaunted in his youthful motto continues to be borne by his poetic persona, whose recusant tenor proves tenacious. Neither Catholic nor Protestant, but thrashing in the terminological webs of

both, the *Elegies* and *Satires* see structures of belief undermined, the possibility of faith, whether to a Church or a woman, ridiculed, and yet Donne's quasi-courtly facade remains a surface impression that his elided, but still latent religious longings never cease to undermine.

In the same letter to Sir Henry Wotton in which Donne earlier disparaged his *Paradoxes*, he also takes aim at these early lyrics. "To my Satires there belongs some fear and to some Elegies, and these perhaps, shame," so that, he pleads, "I am desirous to hide them without any over-reckoning of them or their maker" (Works 65). If the explicit ribaldry of the *Elegies* is the presumable origin of Donne's shame, we might encounter the cause of his fear in Satire III, a poem in which Donne, according to James S. Baumlin, "flaunts [his] recusancy" without remaining "actively or explicitly recusant" (69), his invective cutting defiantly against the entire breadth of the Reformation's various religious divisions. "Kind pity chokes my spleen," the poem opens, so that a "brave scorn forbids / Those tears to issue which swell my eyelids" (1-2). Michael Schoenfeldt notes that Donne establishes a "powerful blend of psychological states and bodily fluid," where the "emotion of pity wars with the spleen, the organ thought to cause anger" (24), thus mingling an imaginative and corporeal unity of terms. But Donne's combined anger and pathos quickly progresses into a series of questions:

> Is not our mistress fair religion,
> As worthy of all our soul's devotion,
> As virtue was to the first blinded age?
> Are not heaven's joys as valiant to assuage
> Lust, as earth's honour was to them? (5-9)

Much is signified here. First, Donne interrogates institutional religion's ability to

confer virtue and wisdom, openly comparing it to a bare secular means, in this case the heathen philosophy of pre-Christian antiquity. Secondly, however, and more importantly, with his framing of religion as "our mistress" and her ability (or inability) to "assuage/ Lust" (a penile slackening which might be read as either anaphrodisiac or post-coital) we are no longer sure if she is Christ's bride or mankind's whore. Here, we enter not only into what will become Donne's primary method of compensation for religious discord – the motif of lover's bodies in sexual union, and particularly the female body itself as a site of sacramental synthesis – but also his strained relationship to the idea of woman as a figure of alarming erotic variability that mirrors his own spiritual fragmentation.

Any biographical reading of Donne's attitude towards women is necessarily fraught with difficulty. And yet having grown up under the persecuting, as well as displaced Marian shadow of the Virgin Queen of English Protestantism, while also under the unreformed (and thus potentially fatal) influence of his mother, Donne manifests a defensive mistrust at the reliability of women as agents of truth. Beyond Donne's experience, however, the early modern conflation of the body's appetites and passions with the inconstancy and wantonness of women is rooted in a gendered dichotomy as old as Eve's seduction in the Garden and the Fall of Man. In his "First Anniversary" Donne himself writes: "For that first marriage was our funeral: / One woman at one blow, then killed us all, / And singly, one by one, they kill us now" (105-107). Significantly, however, according to Dolan, the promotion of a particularly "white, Protestant, and masculine" (7) national identity in England saw an equivalence drawn between Catholicism itself and the "destructive potential of strangeness, disorder, and variety" (6) associated with women. And yet this masculine anxiety over the Catholic sensuality of

women, exampled in "icons of the Virgin Mary" where "the female figure is literally larger than the male" (8), coexist strangely with the mythic dimension of Elizabeth's own body in the sixteenth century English imagination. This dichotomy between Catholicism as the Whore of Babylon, "larger than life, monstrous, foreign, grotesquely feminine yet not human," and the mythic scale of the Church of England's own virgin Queen mirrors Donne's own bizarrely inverted maternal archetypes, becoming a site of pathological conflation where women as objects of desire are invested with the lost sacrality of devotional objects. Yet, as Guibbory notes, and we will shortly see, despite Donne's erotic fixation on the female body, he also often treats women as "objects of revulsion and nausea and, for all the Ovidian emphasis on the naturalness of sex," his lyrics often confess "a distaste for the activity" (*Returning* 75). Donne's sense of the female body can thus be seen to both terrorize and fascinate him, alternately promising a soft, submissive means of spiritual entrance and a sadistic, impenetrable spectre of inhibition and obstruction.

It is thus that in Satire III, when Donne's speaker wonders where to "Seek true religion," her previous classification as "our mistress" seems whorish rather than wholesome. Indeed, the Reformation's denominational splintering is framed as not only a hierarchy whose original unity has broken into fragments of diminished value, but as a monstrous woman whose schismatic variability offers men the ability to pick and choose among her disparate manifestations, making them contextually little more than patrons at a metaphysical brothel. Following this pattern, Mirreus, her first ostensible client, "Seeks her at Rome" (45), whose claim to legitimacy is based more in longevity than truth, her "rags" (47) attesting to the fact that "she was there a thousand years ago" (46); Crants, on the other hand, seeks her in Calvinist "Geneva," where she is seen as "plain, simple,

sullen" and "young" (50-51); Graius, finally, seeks her "at home," where the Anglican clergy ("vile, ambitious bawds") pimp her out in the form of "laws / Still new like fashions" (55-58). This declining scale, Donne's speaker implies, finds a laity in thrall to "man's laws" as a basis of affiliation whose doctrinal origins can be traced back to "a Phillip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin" (96-97), (Philip II of Spain, Pope Gregory XIV, Henry VIII and Martin Luther), rather than to a Peter or a Paul, let alone to Christ himself. And yet ironically, embracing the *reductio ad absurdum* of the very downward spiral he abhors, Donne's speaker revels in the atomization of subjective belief, the post-schismatic individual becoming a Protestant denomination unto himself. "On a huge hill," his speaker tells us, "Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about must go; / And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so" (79-82). While this masculine sense of "courage" and "valour" in the face of religious "fear" (16) can be seen as the bluster of an aspirant courtier, it is also a model of seduction by which Donne's speaker seeks to overcome the resistance of a female representation of religious truth ("unmoved thou / Of force must one, and forced but one allow" (69-70)), and thus recover the sacramental intercourse her inconstancy has stolen from him.

Ilona Bell notes that while Donne has frequently been termed "a misogynist who loathed women's bodies and scorned their minds" (201), his "attitudes towards women shift so quickly, sometimes within a single poem or line, that it is difficult to say exactly what Donne himself thought" (201). Indeed, there is only a thin conceptual line (if any at all) between the espoused belief in a manly independence at the end of Satire III and the passive withdrawal of "Careless Phrygius" earlier in the poem who abhors all manifestations of religion because "Knowing some women whores" he "dares marry none" (62-64). This often ugly comingling of courtly love tropes with a callow

libertinism forms the deeply unnerved proto-secularity of the persona who speaks through the *Elegies*. "He is irresistible to women," Carey tells us, "insulting and seducing them in the same breath," but "though lewd, blasphemous, and cruel, he is also (he makes clear) dazzlingly intelligent and sophisticated, and culturally on a higher plane than those he deceives" (Works xxi). While his *Elegies* were written at least as much for "a smirking male coterie" (Bell 214) of readers at Lincoln's Inn than as an expression of his actual views towards women, they do speak, however much he displaces and distorts his emphases, to an ongoing conflation of the female body with the failed promise of a worldly sacrality.

But at this stage in his development Donne seems more interested in playing with the potentialities of his misogynistic conceits than systematizing them. In Elegy IV, "The Anagram," for example, Donne makes a sportive argument in favour of a woman's ugliness, insisting that

> though her eyes be small, her mouth is great,
> Though they be ivory, yet her teeth are jet,
> Though they be dim, yet she is light enough,
> And though her harsh hair fall, her skin is rough. (3-6)

This drawing together of imperfect features in order to form the "anagram" of a beautiful face is warranted, we are told, since "love built on beauty, soon as beauty, dies" (27), making naturally beautiful women "like angels; the fair be / Like those which fell to worse" (29-30). The speaker's own fusion of disparate "things," on the other hand, draws together "beauty's elements, where these / Meet one, that one must, perfect, please" (9-10). Though the grin behind this particular synthesis of female features lowers the stakes of what will later become a far more ambitious synthesizing pattern, Donne's

basic method of forging composite meanings out of objectified female bodies is nevertheless established. In Elegy XIV, or "The Comparison," Donne's speaker indulges in a similar conceit, but one that makes not only the abjection, but the spiritual significance of the female body more explicit. The speaker ostensibly sets out to compare the features of a lover who arouses him to one who emphatically does not, and yet the poem, in fact, seems a mere exercise, a pretext to catalogue his disgust with the female body. He describes the "sweat drops" of the unfavoured woman's body as the "spermatic issue of ripe menstruous boils" (8); her breasts are like "worm eaten trunks, clothed in seal's skin" (25); her body itself is like a "grave that's dirt without and stink within" (26). And yet, though this divestment of spiritual (and indeed, human) significance leaves us with a body reduced to a repugnant materiality, near the end of the poem, when Donne imagines the "touch" (52) of his preferred lover, it is as "devoutly nice" as "are priests in handling reverent sacrifice" (49-50). Though still ambivalently contextualized, the carnal and the sacramental, for Donne, can even at this early point be seen to emerge from the same complex of thought.

Samuel Johnson once remarked that in Donne and the so-called metaphysical poets "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (16), but in this last flourish there is the suggestion of a potential alchemy between the sacred and the profane, a kind of Madonna-whore dichotomy that seeks a reconciliation by means of that violence. But while these alternating gestures of consecration and desecration will come to denote a more overt analogy between the female body and a lost sacrality, his *Elegies* remain marked by an unresolved emotional alienation. In Elegy IX, for example, Donne's speaker complains about the wasted labours of his devotion to a false and withdrawn beloved, as he is desperate to no longer "serve" (1) as just another among

many of her "idolatrous flatterers," noting that though his "soul" has been "in her own body sheathed" (11), the "purgatory" of his subsequent banishment and her "faithless" (13) nature are one and the same thing. And yet ironically, while the inconstancy of the speaker's mistress is conflated with Catholic signifiers, she is also a force of uncontrolled nature, a river that "rusheth violently" (29), devouring her male victims, and thus echoing, according to Guibbory, the "martyrdom that was a trope for love-suffering but also a reality for ... persecuted Catholics" ("Erotic" 139). This suggestive inversion of Catholic allusions continues more explicitly in the final lines of the poem:

> Though hope bred faith and love; thus taught, I shall
> As nations do from Rome, from thy love fall.
> My hate shall outgrow thine, and utterly
> I will renounce thy dalliance: and when I
> Am the recusant, in that resolute state,
> What hurts it me to excommunicate? (41-46)

Donne's early lyrics abound with these unusual attempts to shoehorn Catholic motifs into verses whose ostensible interest lies in the experience of human love but whose idiomatic attire seems to confess an either incompletely repressed or perfunctorily deflected religious concern. In Elegy IX, though an analogy is drawn between "Rome" and his unchaste lover, the persistence of its application combines with the bitterness of his address to make it seem as though he were chastising the analog itself more so than its target. Donne thus averts any accusation of desire for the Catholic faith by seeming to recapitulate his apostasy, but now as though from an unfit lover, mocking her prior dominance, re-asserting his autonomy by exulting in his excommunication. And yet Donne's conceit belies its own reformed posture. His speaker's desire is ambivalent,

likening his lover's carnality to "curled whirlpools" that "suck, smack and embrace" (16) him as though she were about to engulf a "careless flower" (15), but all the while he confesses that he would gladly remain her "favourite" (10) if she would only accept him as he is. In this manner Donne transfers the guilt associated with his own religious betrayal to the feminine inconstancy of the Church itself while still leaving his longing exposed, however semantically embedded. While it is difficult to separate Donne's actual trauma from the self-fashioning of the youthful faux-courtier, seen in developmental rather than contextual terms, this eccentric form of textual love-making with religious composites can be seen as the rhetorical excess out of which Donne will later come to distil the displaced sacramentalism of his later poetics.

Though so far we have been chiefly concerned with Donne's often disturbed relationship to the female body, as Felicia Wright McDuffie suggests, "a few delightful exceptions do exist" (6). In Elegy II, "To His Mistress Going to Bed," McDuffie sees a "reversal of conventional valuations" that not only invert the Petrarchan conceit of denied consummation and Platonic notions of the spiritual transcendence of the body, but more importantly, the Protestant mode of desire for a now disembodied sense of sacrality. Here, however, Donne does not merely play with the bawdy implications of such reversals, but begins to conflate the conceits undermined with the conceit that undermines them, so that negation begins to resemble fusion. This merging of signifiers can be seen as the poem opens with the speaker amorously cajoling his lover to remove her clothes: "Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistering, / But a far fairer world encompassing" (5-6); "Off with those shoes: and then safely tread / In this love's hallowed temple, this soft bed" (18-19). Here, heaven's manifestations are dismissed like "gay coverings" (39) under which the greater beauty of the beloved's body is hidden, the

speaker's bed rather than the Church becoming the true "temple" of love. This reorientation of spiritual and courtly ideals towards sexual consummation, however, is not framed as a devaluation or moral lapse, but serves, for Donne, as a corrective. The conceit is flipped, in other words, but its original signification inheres. While we have met with this mingling of sexual and spiritual vocabularies before, the violation of the latter is now accompanied by a grin (a little) less callow than before. "In such white robes," he suggests, "heaven's angels used to be / Received by men; thou angel bring'st with thee / A heaven like Mahomet's paradise" (19-21), a shift from Christian to Islamic orientations to the afterlife marked by erotic rather than transcendental bliss. And yet the speaker affirms his angel's spiritual nature by virtue of rather than in spite of this exotic carnality. While he admits that "Ill spirits" too "walk in white," he distinguishes his angel "from an evil sprite" in that "They set our hairs" while she his "flesh upright" (19-23). It is thus the fact that she is able to stir the speaker to erection that serves as proof of her sanctity, the ability of her nakedness to arouse him accounting for her portion of heavenly purity.

Strangely, however, while Donne relentlessly signals to the reader that some erotic profanation of spiritual and courtly ideals is taking place, his speaker's desire is in fact never consummated. "The foe oft-times, having the foe in sight," we are told as the poem opens, "Is tired with standing though they never fight" (2-3). While Donne reiterates his earlier sense of the religious mistress as the desired enemy, as well as emphasizing his supposed tiredness with their estrangement, the two lovers never touch. Moreover, as Carey notes, Donne does not "mention any part of the girl's body except her hair – not so much as a lip or toenail, let alone breast or thigh" (Mind 107). Despite Donne's stated preoccupation with the girl's body, his "abstracted and rarefied" language

ironically comes to seem a kind of "eulogy of nakedness" according to Carey, where the speaker "hardly seems to see the girl, though his appraising eye dwells on the clothes she takes off" (107). The clothing itself thus takes on a kind of idolatrous relationship to the concealed body, as though it were the regalia of a defunct religious symbolism that Donne wishes to see stripped away but which he cannot cease examining. The speaker claims that "all joys are due" to "full nakedness" (33), but his gaze resembles the "fool's eye" that he mocks, which "lighteth on a gem" and thus covets what is "theirs" but "not them" (37-38). That Donne maintains even while ridiculing his estrangement from the sensual divine creates two distinct impressions. First, Donne suggests that "As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be, / To taste whole joys" (34-35). We here see a kind of incarnational equivalence drawn between the unbodied souls of the afterlife and the erotic nudity of lovers' bodies, and thus a *potentially* sacramental fusion of the two in the sexual act. Secondly, however, Donne goes on to frame female bodies themselves as "mystic books, which only we / Whom their imputed grace will dignify / Must see revealed" (41-43). This gesture towards the sacrality of the Protestant text even while he seeks (and almost imperceptibly fails) to resacralize the physical body in sexual congress will come to form a sacramental poetics of far greater potential than his to this point blithe manner would suggest he had originally intended.

Chapter 4: From Canonization to Ecstasy

Robert Whalen has noted that this "bringing together of disparate elements" mirrors the "incarnational features of sacramental thought" itself, where "body and bread, blood and wine, the Word become flesh" not only resemble Donne's own synthesizing conceits, but lie at the "conceptual heart of Christianity" (23). In the *Songs and Sonnets* we find Donne developing this conflation in greater earnest. While some of the *Songs and Sonnets* continue to exhibit a deep ambivalence towards the female body, the sacramental significance of romantic love begins to manifest in a much larger variety of ways. The language of the sacraments, however, remains constant, becoming a means of consecration through which displaced Catholic signifiers and the erotic signified are brought to "interinanimate" – a neologism of Donne's own coinage that "conveys a sense of motion, a forward thrusting of soul into body" (Targoff 55). While Guibbory is right to suggest, given their uncertain chronology, that we should not read the *Songs and Sonnets* as though "the libertine, cynical poems are early, and the poems about mutual love later, as if Donne matured into sincerity and stability" (138), it is worth noting that John Carey's proposed composition from 1602 onward (*Works* 88) aligns provocatively with the first year of Donne's marriage to Anne More, and thus forms a probable impetus for the increased gravity of his tenor. And yet Donne's elopement – described by Walton as "the remarkable error of his life" (*Devotions* 199) – also saw him dismissed from his position as secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, imprisoned in the Fleet, and left with virtually no future avenues to secular employment. While this episode can thus be seen as initiating the prolonged chastening that leads to Donne's final conversion to the Church of England, his poetic persona remains active. Such instability does not quench

Donne's taste for a radical poetics, but only intensifies it.

"For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," Donne's speaker declares in the opening lines of "The Canonization," wondering "who's injured" by it, "what merchant ships have my sighs drowned? / Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?" (1, 10-12). Donne's defensive posture is clear: he refuses to allow his "ruined fortune" (3) to overpower his appetite for Eros, instead setting out to establish the doctrinal parameters of a new compensatory sacramentalism. He frames the two lovers as martyrs, "tapers," or votive candles who "at our own cost die" (21); he suggests that the "phoenix riddle hath more wit / By us, we two being one, are it. / So, to one neutral thing two sexes fit" (23-25); he then indicates that the lovers are destined for resurrection, to both "die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love" (27-28). This sense of mystery which forges the two lovers into one essence that transcends gender, place and time, commandeers, as Guibbory suggests, the language of "divine revelation" itself, becoming an incarnational stand-in for Christian rites, and "specifically the Eucharist" ("Erotic" 143). Guibbory goes on to note that

> In contrast to his Ovidian poems, where sex is a matter of the body and women interchangeable, poems celebrating the sacredness of erotic love depict lovers who are committed to each other in an exclusive relation that doesn't need the church. They are the true clergy of the world, taking the place of ordained priests. (143)

In addition to Donne's overt use of Catholic images, Guibbory's observation indicates a modified gesture towards Luther's priesthood of all believers, where the lovers themselves become intermediaries on behalf of the lovers of the world. In this vein, also, within the poem itself, we see that if the union of lovers is the body and blood

of Donne's reformulated Catholic sacrament, the poem itself, or the text, is their host. As such, even if they are given no quarter within the worldly realm to "live by love," they will "build in sonnets pretty rooms," and thus, in Donne's own quasi-scriptural "verse," they become "canonized for love" (28-36). We will return to this mingling of the Catholic body and the Protestant text later as Donne faces the mutability of bodily ecstasy as a means to sacramental fulfillment. For now, however, the speaker foresees an eternal significance in the oneness of lovers who have become each other's "hermitage," suggesting that after they die those lovers who follow in their wake will invoke them in prayer like saints, seeking intercession, begging for the "pattern of your love!" (45).

This language of Catholic sainthood continues in "The Relique," in which the speaker imagines his own "grave" (1) being exhumed for re-use, a motif that Donne mocks in terms of "woman-head" (3), or woman's nature, an inconstancy by which "more than one" body is admitted to "a bed"(4). And yet, despite this misogynistic quip, the grave digger discovers a "bracelet of bright hair" around the speaker's "bone" (6), a token of his lover in life with which he was buried. Though it is thus implied that the lovers are not laid together, the speaker imagines that the bracelet might be taken as a sign that here "a loving couple lies" (8) who by this "device" (9) sought to bring their "souls" together with their bodily remains on that "last busy day" (10). While this gesture towards a hoped for union of body and soul at the time of the resurrection aligns with Donne's broader desire for synthesis of the material and spiritual domains, remarkable also is the continued use of gendered language as a way of marking the Catholic significance of his conceit. In the second stanza the speaker sees the future in which the poem is set as one

Where mis-devotion doth command,

Then, he that digs us up, will bring
Us, to the Bishop, and the King,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby. (13-18)

Here, the speaker draws equivalences between the lovers' remains and the relics of saints, his beloved and Mary Magdalen, as well as between himself and an unnamed "something else" (18), thus insinuating himself into the role of Christ, a veiled blasphemy intensified by the love affair traditionally rumoured between Jesus and Mary.

We might take this as Donne merely chiding the role of the female lover, comparing her to a saint who was also thought to have once been a whore, her Catholic sainthood again positioning Catholicism as the Whore of Babylon. "All women shall adore us, and some men," the next line reads, seemingly reinforcing this connotation, as though women's innate gullibility in matters of both love and religion were being invoked and the speaker's own masculine acumen established. But while Donne's speaker tries in one sense to distance himself from the supposed credulity of women, the poem itself implicitly places him in the feminine role. Dolan has noted the widely held belief that "Catholicism lured women with its ritual paraphernalia, offering them trinkets and toys rather than a Bible they could not read," so that they were seen as particularly susceptible to a Catholic "religion that coddled their incapacities" (27). And yet, in addition to the invocation of saints' relics which Protestants had dismissed as idolatrous, and though the bracelet of hair itself is a metonymous stand-in for the speaker's beloved, it is the speaker himself who wears it, thus reversing the "assumption that women are vain and fashion conscious, drawn to ornaments and objects rather than the Word" (28).

At the same time Donne's speaker ends the second stanza by hedging against his own androgynous implication, placing himself in an equivocal balance between gendered emphases, suggesting that "since at such time" as the poem imagines "miracles" will be "sought / I would have that age by this paper taught / What miracles we harmless lovers wrought" (20-22). Donne's own text thus becomes the sacramental Word by which his masculinity is reasserted in a Protestant context, purveying a love adorned in the regalia of the old faith forward into the reformed world, sanctifying the memory of their love's miracle.

Having thus posited a masculine mentality superior to the Catholic femininity which he seeks to penetrate, Donne's speaker might seem to have merely revisited Donne's own anxiety about the culturally inscribed androgyny of his contradictory religious sensibilities. And yet in the third stanza of "The Relique" the speaker's tenor is transformed. He no longer seems to lampoon the lover's position, instead fusing the Protestant, or textual abstraction of his masculine persona to the feminine, or Catholic sensuality of the lover:

> First we loved well and faithfully,
> Yet knew not what we loved, or why,
> Difference of sex we no more knew,
> Than our guardian angels do (23-25).

The previously insinuated advantage of the male lover's position disappears, as do the speaker's mocking manner and blasphemous equivalences. Instead, he imagines he and his lover "Coming and going" (27) like angels, a fusion that transcends gender through spiritual intercourse, so that they are finally set "free" (30) of "All measure" and, more significantly, "all language" (32), leaving only the "miracle she was" (33). We will

return to this conceit of a genderless union between lover and beloved shortly, but for now we can see that Donne, while still expressing a residual and reflexive anxiety over the power of his fixation on the Catholic feminine, dissolves his masculine persona, submitting to the incarnational androgyny of sexual synthesis as a means of resacralizing the post-reformed body.

As Carey notes, however, "the emotions of holiness" in the *Songs and Sonnets* "are never simply holy. They always meet subversive elements – ridicule, wit, human love – which challenge or displace them," so that "we seem to encounter an attempt to dispel religion and to retain its sanctities at the same rime" (*Works* xxiv). Indeed, Donne's use of a Catholic devotional vocabulary comprises a distinctly post-apostatic means to holiness rather than a return to the Catholic fold, a fact that he seems determined to establish. While we have seen Donne's tenor become more idealistic, his sense of union more reciprocal, "The Flea" builds on his earlier emphasis on the experience of his lovers as "comically inferior to the sacred discourse evoked" (Whalen 22). Instead of simply naming the Catholic signifier in relation to the lovers' discourse in the manner we have just seen, Donne in this case infuses a distinctly Catholic sacramentalism into the pointedly trivial body of an insect. As the poem begins, the speaker attempts to coax his beloved into bed by way of a humorous disputation formed around a flea whose body acts as an immaculate womb (Hester 379) in which their "two bloods mingled be" (4). The speaker goes on to suggest that the prospective sexual act is a trifling thing compared to the (mock) significance of the flea who "sucked me first, and now sucks thee" (3), and thus "pampered," now "swells with one blood made of two" (8-9). Hester has suggested an erotic framework in which Reformation and Counter-Reformation arguments come to form a "*dialogue d'amour* between a 'Catholic' exegete

and his 'Protesting' lady about the significances of the last supper and death of a metonymical flea" (377), so that the flea itself becomes a kind of pseudo-eucharistic host, the sanctity of which dwarfs the few moments of intercourse for which the speaker pleads. The flea itself, which has become "three lives in one" (10), its own as well as "you and I" (12), becomes an embodied sacramental unity in which the blood is *real* rather than symbolic, a transubstantiated body which to kill would not only "kill me," but would be a form of "self-murder" as well, and thus a "sacrilege, three sins in killing three" (16-18).

But where Hester sees Donne's speaker as a camouflage under which he seeks to voice his latent Catholicism, I would argue that Donne's manner speaks more to an attempt to undermine rather than affirm his devotion. He plucks the mystery of transubstantiation out of the Eucharist itself and refashions it to his own romantic purpose, so that while the belief in a distinctly Catholic sacramentalism inheres, it is one whose doctrine is malleable, subject as much – if not more – to the poet's imagination as to the doctrines of the Church. The argument of the poem thus reaches its threshold of plausibility as a manner of Catholic apologetics in the third and final stanza, as "Cruel and sudden," his Protestant beloved crushes the flea, and thus "Purpled" her "nail" with the "blood of innocence" (19-20). In a final reversal, the speaker suggests that if "thou / Find'st not thyself, nor me the weaker" (24) after the flea's mock crucifixion – potentially undermining not only the flea's, but the Eucharist's merely symbolic character – then she need only notice "how false fears be" that premarital sex will damn her, as "Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me, / Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee" (25-27). But while the ostensibly high stakes of religious debate dissolve into yet another manner in which the speaker argues for his lover's sexual

consent, we do see the pattern of Donne's love recapitulated. He begins with an equivalence drawn between Catholic sacraments and the lovers' embrace, and yet only to buttress the higher importance of the sexual act itself, as though he is perfectly willing to shed the analogical function as extraneous if the embrace can be achieved – which in this case, as in so many others, it is not. In a post-reformed world, the sacramental body remains withdrawn, but always grudgingly, always marked by a desire that can no longer be requited.

Though Donne remains playful in "The Flea," we encounter a darker representation of his sacramental/sexual frustration in "Twickenham Garden." In this case, the sacramental language Donne employs is more explicit as well as more severe. His speaker imagines a mock-Edenic state where he is his own "self-traitor" (5), thus positioning himself to bear the weight of original sin rather than deflecting it onto the suddenly now chaste (and seemingly married) Eve for whom he pines. Donne refashions the proverbial garden of the world's first lovers as though he were lurking in the grounds of his lady's estate, roaming in order to "seek the spring, / And at mine eyes, and at mine ears, / Receive such balms, as else cure everything" (2-4). Whalen suggests that Donne here plays on the Catholic "sacrament of Extreme Unction," the speaker's "Eyes" and "ears" exploiting "the semantic duality of 'unction' as both religious rite and flattering speech, thus anticipating ... the plaint which follows" (27). The speaker's complaint itself, however, is far less oblique, for though his exasperation is apparent, he declares his own sacramental prowess, inverting the power of consecration through love in a manner which dims the paradisial purity of the setting. He brings, the speaker declares

> The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
>
> And can convert manna to gall,

And that this place may thoroughly be thought

True paradise, I have the serpent brought. (5-9)

Donne's speaker, now a strangely modified Petrarchan prototype who rather than being ennobled by his lack of consummation turns Eucharistic nourishment to a bitter secretion as an acrimonious compensation, seems to suffer from his own ability to infuse matter with sacramental significance. The phallic instrument of his consecrating capacity is now figured as a merely solipsistic impotence, a mocking reminder of his own inability to tempt the woman he desires. Thus left to agonize in "tumescent suspension" (Whalen 28), Donne's speaker desires to dissolve into the sacramental object itself rather than remain its ineffectual agent, so that rather than "leave loving" he asks: "Love, let me / Some senseless piece of this place be; / Make me a mandrake, so I may groan here, / Or a stone fountain weeping out my year" (15-18). In this way the speaker likens his own suffering with that of Christ, so that "lovers" might "come, / And take my tears, which are lover's wine" (19-20). Here, Donne's speaker becomes self-incarnational, his tears becoming the sacramental wine by which lovers might imbibe the Eucharistic elements that have failed him. He can also be seen to extend his conceit to the transubstantiation of the broader material domain of the garden, confessing an implicit desire for the re-enchantment of the world. While the speaker ends in frustration – "O perverse sex, where none is true but she, / Who's therefore true, because her truth kills me" (26-27) – we have encountered the speaker's sense of his own consecrating power, not merely associating Catholic sacraments and lover's union analogically, but figuring himself as the agent of transformation.

But if Donne imagines his speaker – or even himself – capable of poetically rendering the whole substance of bodies into a manifest spiritual reality, we have yet to

encounter a fully fleshed argument in favour of such a view. So far Donne has recovered the discarded late-medieval culture of Catholic sacramentalism and repurposed it, consecrating the union of lovers, associating the one with the other on the page as though their proximal textual relation were enough to establish their affinity. In "The Canonization" and particularly in "The Relique" we have also seen him move towards a negotiated synthesis between not only gender itself, but gendered conceits between the masculine Protestant text and the feminine Catholic sacrament. But in "The Extasie" we see Donne's suggestions of likeness move towards synthesis, his conflations finally transcending their religious signifiers, allowing the soul to descend into the body only to kick away the Catholic propositions by which the resulting fusion is achieved. Though Donne later came to look on the phenomenon of ecstasy with some suspicion, in a letter to Goodyere in 1607 Donne suggests a private willingness to indulge, calling letter writing itself "a kind of ecstasy and a departure and secession and suspension of the soul, which doth then communicate itself to two bodies" (Selected Letters 27). In "The Extasie," this mingling of Protestant and Catholic, or textual and bodily sacraments reaches a kind of apogee, no longer reflecting a gamesome dressing of disenchanted bodies in once enchanted ornaments, but synthesizing the bodies themselves with the divinity of the soul.

The poem imagines two lovers lying together on a bed, their "eye-beams" twisting and threading upon "one double string" (7-8), their hands "firmly cemented" (5) as though "intergraft[ed]" as a "means to make us one" (9-10). But while Donne at first seems determined to finally push the language of bodily synthesis beyond its merely figurative significance and into the sexual act, the speaker stops in the midst of this spiritual foreplay, such pawing preludes remaining "all our propogation" (12). In a

similar vein as “To his Mistress Going to Bed,” Donne imagines the lovers as two “souls” (15) who resemble “two equal armies’ facing one another, their “Fate” suspended in “uncertain victory” (13-14). But as before the lovers remain paralyzed in the balance, lying “like sepulchral statues” who maintain their postures “all the day” (20), leaving it to their souls to “advance their state (15). Targoff suggests that “the humor of these lines is their failure to mention the obvious physical means to “make us one” – sexual intercourse,” but instead finds them maintaining “their postures like funerary ornaments” (54). But if there is humour in this it does not seem deliberate on Donne’s part. In the poem “Air and Angels” too he figures the beloved’s body like an angel’s, a kind of “glorious nothing” (6) that nevertheless constitutes an imperceptible presence, so that it is not self-evident how tactile Donne imagines the congress of souls to be. However difficult to discern they are, without taking these “limbs of flesh,” according to Donne, the “soul” could “nothing do” (7-8). And yet what exactly, it must be fair to ask, is the body’s role? Donne insists on the central importance of bodies, constantly insinuating that making love is the essential agency behind spiritual synthesis, and yet he seems unable to find them something to do. In “The Extasie,” Donne’s speaker negotiates what comes to seem a purely spiritual oneness, suggesting that, were it possible, one might indeed wish to understand the “soul’s language” through a love “grown all mind” (23), a refinement from which the two lovers would “part far purer than before” (28). The “ecstasy” of such a love might indeed “unperplex” the incompatibility between souls, so that it is “not sex” (31), whether of gendered difference or intercourse, that defines them, but the mixture of souls that make “both one, each this and that” (36) For Donne, when “love” thus “Interinanimates two souls” (41-42), an unbreakable bond is forged, forming a single soul which “no change can invade” (48).

And yet, as the poem turns towards its conclusion, Donne returns belatedly to the significance of the body in his vision, as though interjecting it into a spiritual hypothesis to which it does not self-evidently belong.

> But O alas, so long, so far
> Our bodies why do we forbear?
> They are ours, though they are not we, we are
> The intelligences, they the sphere. (49-52)

This sense of guiding spirits that animate the body, that having at some point "yielded their forces, sense, to us" (55) now rely on the body as much as the body relies on them, challenges the top-down, unmediated orientation of Protestant spiritual hierarchies, reasserting the crucial significance of the soul's devolution to the incarnational nature of not only (or even necessarily) Christ, but to the lovers themselves. Indeed, Donne suggests that not even "heaven's influence" works to effect the lovers' synthesis, for just as it "first imprints the air" before reaching the earth, so for "soul into soul" to "flow," they must through the sacramental "body first repair" (57-60). In this reckoning, the transcendental, comparatively disembodied love imagined by Protestants and Neoplatonists is insufficient, the body itself becoming the vessel of the soul's activity. But why, then, does Donne's argument remain abstract? Why are the lovers never brought to the bodily intercourse whose latency would seem to animate much of the poem? It is possible that the sexual act between insubstantial souls is as hermetically sealed as the blood and body of Christ is within the corporeal, but outwardly inactive Eucharistic host, so that the act itself cannot be seen. And yet some integrating act does seem insinuated, a "sense" that might "reach and apprehend" and without which "a great prince in prison lies" (67-68). Instead, however, Donne returns to a pattern we've seen

repeatedly already, where the threshold of the sexual act turns away from intercourse at the last minute – or nearing the end of a poem – towards a strangely non-sequitur invocation of the text:

> To our bodies turn we then, that so
>
> Weak men on love revealed may look;
>
> Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
>
> But yet the body is his book. (69-72)

As much as Donne reiterates his desire for body/soul synthesis in sexual terms, as though lovemaking were the one passion to which one might confidently devote one's faith in a post-reformed world, he veers instead towards a fusion of Catholic and Protestant sacramentalisms, as though to bring the Eucharistic body into the Word. And yet sacrament as text, as indeed the text of the poem itself, is a self-limiting body, one that contains its own margins, and it is on these conceptual thresholds Donne seems determined to remain. He insists that if another lover were to happen upon this "dialogue of one" (75) between souls, that lover would see that it is only a "Small change, when we'are to our bodies gone" (76). But there the poem ends, in suspense, the promise of bodily synthesis standing in for its consummation.

Chapter 5: From Ravishment to Chastity

Helen Gardner suggests that in the "The Ecstasy," when the speaker implies that the unified body and soul of these lovers is such that "no change can invade" them, Donne becomes "sophistical," there being "no good ground for asserting" (Note 324) this everlastingness. It would seem that despite Donne's poetic magnifications and the radical notion that bodies achieve a state of permanent sacramental grace in the act of love-making would depend, paradoxically, on the host body never being consumed. Donne's ideal is an expression of avoidance, but less of sexual consummation than its slackening aftermath, its dying impermanence. Unlike Erich Auerbach's sense of a late-medieval, figural, and non-sequential view of time, where ritual and textual emphases mark a singular, transcendent instance, a kind of incarnational palimpsest which progresses only insofar as it recapitulates God's design (74), Donne's sacramental body is human, linear, temporal, its portion of grace destined to expire. Donne's longing continues to reflect the timelessness posited by the old sacramental order, but unmoored from the institutional structure on which this sacramental sense of eternality was based, the sexual experience as sacrament necessarily drives towards its own termination. In this vein, Christopher Ricks has suggested that "Donne's poems, whether or not they are personal memories, record a dislike of having come" (33). In a poem like "Farewell to Love," for example, though again the sexual act itself is not recorded, we do encounter the "postcoital sadness" (33) which seems to be the change, or death, against which "The Ecstasy" argues. Here, Donne confesses that

> I thought there was some deity in love
>
> So did I reverence, and gave

Worship; as atheists at their dying hour

Call, what they cannot name, an unknown power

As ignorantly did I crave. (2-6).

Recognizing after the fact of consummation that "Being had, enjoying it decays" (16), the lover is left with "A kind of sorrowing dullness to the mind" (20), so that he determines thereafter to refuse this eternal love that "no man else can find" (32), ending as it does in decline, flaccidity, disappointment. And yet, rather than eschew the centrality of the body and embrace the Protestant hierarchy of spirit which he has been so busy contesting, "The Ecstasy" posits a synthesis of souls forged not by the sexual act that its argument seems to imply, but by maintaining a liminal rigidity before intercourse. This very lack of closure is the point, though one that Donne cannot bear to make explicit. He confesses a manner of erotic fusion based on the intoxications of proximity, his body drawn agonizingly taut by the presence of the sacramental object – in this case the female body – only to be suspended in a threshold state that finally, when redirected into his poetry, becomes an alternate mode of climax, one that remains comparatively permanent. Despite Donne's insistence on the body, this suspension of consummation in the text leaves Donne isolated within the very Protestant complex which he seems to have fought so hard to avoid. It is thus, as Catherine Gimelli Martin tells us, that "Donne's simultaneous longing for and rejection of the sacramental body creates an internal trauma very like what psychoanalysts refer to as a psychological double-bind," whose "chief symptom is the inability to directly pursue a desired object – either a person or a path to salvation" (202). Donne can thus be seen to circuitously embrace Protestantism's doctrinally imposed estrangement, first from the Catholic Church itself, but also from sacramental mediation. And yet, even Donne's conversion to

the Church of England failed to resolve his desire for bodily synthesis with the divine. In a letter to Sir Henry Goodyere in 1608, and thus around the period in which he is thought to have converted, Donne describes his longing:

> I would not have [God] merely seize me, and only declare me to be dead, but win me, and overcome me. When I must shipwreck, I would do it in a Sea, where mine impotency might have some excuse; not in a sullen weedy lake ... Therefore I would fain do something; but that I cannot tell what, is no wonder. For to choose, is to do: but to be no part of any body, is to be nothing. (*Letters* 321)

Even after his fantasy of divine sexual union between lovers has seemingly passed, and though the roles are reversed – he himself awaiting ravishment rather than the prototypical female model of his youth – Donne has not let go of his prior preoccupation, but has merely refigured it. Whether Donne's conversion was an authentic spiritual reversal, a practical necessity, or both, his acceptance of God as a distant and comparatively arbitrary dispenser of grace does not find Donne either willing or able to passively submit to the torments of isolation he would seem to have no further doctrinal means – whether Catholic or poetic – to challenge. The persona Donne has fashioned through the course of his early love lyrics not only refuses its contextual dormancy, but imagines a fusion with God that remains sexual, his speaker becoming the feminine sacrament of his prior Catholic formulation, awaiting God's grace not only in abstract, spiritualized terms, but also in terms of physical longing, so that he seems to confess an almost homoerotic desire to be penetrated by it.

Nowhere is Donne's reversal of bodily emphasis more apparent, nor his desire to be erotically overpowered more overt, than in "Holy Sonnet 10." The poem opens: "Batter my heart three-personed God, for, you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine and

seek to mend; / That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new" (1-4). Here, we see Donne's appetites invert once again, though while his original turn towards spiritual eroticism was itself an inversion of latent Catholic urges, this inversion of an inversion produces a bizarrely lurid, even sacrilegious projection of faith where, as Schoenfeldt puts it, "devotional desire transgresses terrestrial customs," Donne seemingly placing "at risk the very conventions of sexual conduct his culture used religion to promulgate" (222). The violently erotic grace that Donne incites God to bestow runs deep with ambivalence, as though his final acceptance of penetration by the fundamentally "masculine God," of Protestantism were not only the "assumption of a feminine persona" (222), but the final submission of his Catholicism to the sadomasochistic violation of both Church and State. The speaker, who describes himself as a "usurped town," still beholden – or "to another due" (5) – to the faith of his youth, claims to "labour to admit" God into his body, but "to no end" (6), so that although "dearly'I love you" he remains "betrothed unto your enemy" (7-8). Guibbory observes the audacious perversity of Donne's plea, in which "the speaker says he is like a woman who loves one man (God) but is betrothed to another (Satan), and wants to be rescued, even by force," thus exhibiting not only the "unsettling implications that emerge when the biblical notion that Christ is the bridegroom (and the soul the bride)," but the "contrary impulses" that motivate Donne, "curiously similar" as they are "to those in his love poetry" (*Returning* 83). Guibbory, however, assumes much by framing God, in this figuration the dominant sexual male, in unambiguous contrast to Satan. The combined alienation of Donne the Protestant from a distant God and Donne the Catholic from an absent sacramentalism of His body is a paradox which can only be unified in post-schismatic rapture, where "battery [becomes] love and rape the avenue to

chastity" (Schoenfeldt 222). The sonnet concludes as such, with yet another overcharged request to be enveloped in God's embrace: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I / except you enthral me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (12-14).

And yet, despite this overt desire for spiritual, as well erotic submission, there is a sharp, even commanding tenor to Donne's ostensible supplication. Guibbory notes how Donne "both attempts to control God (thus preserving his individual separateness and autonomy) and seeks an intimate union with God that would erase his separate identity" (83). These characteristically paradoxical desires see Donne straining to shed his egotism, only to reaffirm it; gesturing as though he were finally willing to leave the longings of the body behind, then demanding that God requite them. We see that Donne, despite his attempt to escape himself, to become something new, to align himself with the Protestant faith at the expense of his lifelong, if often ambivalent Catholic reflexes, cannot, in the end, let go of the sacramental, and indeed, pointedly eucharistic resonance of the spirit made flesh. In "Holy Sonnet 15," we again see these fixations play out, as the speaker represents himself as "a little world" made of both "elements" and an "angelic sprite," except that "black sin hath betrayed to endless night / My world's both parts," and thus "both parts must die" (1-4). As Targoff observes, these lines, with their "emphasis on the dualism" of body and soul, deploy "what may well be the single most consistent principle in [Donne's] metaphysics: that no aspect of our devotional experience belongs exclusively" to either, leading to the "heretical suggestion that the soul as well as the body shall perish at the moment of death" (115). While this implication mirrors Donne's pattern of defining God's will before he submits to it, his submission, when it comes, is almost abject, desiring to be harmed into purity. "But oh it must be burnt," the speaker declares, "alas the fire / Of lust and envy have burnt it

heretofore" (10-11), so that he asks that God to "let their flames retire / And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal / Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal" (12-14). We end with the return of God as the host consumed, the body of Christ inside Donne's own, so that though these still theologically contradictory poems inaugurate his passage into the Anglican sphere, we never cease hearing Donne's Catholicism straining to touch and be touched.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Despite the developmental trajectory we have followed here, and though he became more and more militantly Anglican as time went on, Donne continued to reflect a deeply ingrained Catholic sacramentalism, and thus a constant preoccupation with the incarnational body. Even in his final Sermon, "Death's Duel," Donne expresses an existential anxiety about the nature and fate of the physical body, until, in a final characteristic flourish, he encourages his flock to "hang upon him who hangs on the cross," and to there "suck at his wounds" (177). This, however, as with so many of the examples mentioned, is not a precisely wholesome projection of faith. Though Donne's early lyrics could be bracingly high-minded, and their eroticism quite beautiful, the psychic trauma of his upbringing resulted in a deep, though never quite successful repression of the Catholic sacramental order, and while these motifs puncture the surface on an almost compulsive basis in Donne's poems, they appear alternately inspired or degraded, but never quite at home. And yet Donne, with curious flair, occupies the double-bind between faiths without being cowed by the resulting paradox. Unable to choose one without losing the other, Donne chose both, always simultaneously, always with a daring sense that he could not only bridge, but reconcile their incompatibility. It might thus be argued that Donne prized both faiths, one in public and one in private, thus remaining loyal to his country and his family respectively, despising only the extremes that tore them apart. Donne's drive towards integration, and the erotic, libidinal, or broadly reproductive medium in which he sought to effect it, was fundamentally a response to the religious schisms of the Reformation that so tortured his youth, forcing him to forge a hybrid nature. The child of divorced Churches, Donne demanded a

spiritual synthesis, however distorted, without which he could not endure and therefore never ceased to make, even before God.

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