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Madison Forbes

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Poetry of Body and Soul: Personhood in John Donne

Madison Forbes

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Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University  
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Dr. James Crowley, Thesis Director  
Dr. Michael McClintock, Committee Member  
Dr. Kevin Kalish, Committee Member

## **The Poetry of Body and Soul: Personhood in John Donne**

The seventeenth-century poet and preacher, John Donne, made a public, confessional move from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism early in his life—but a public oath of allegiance does not a faithful adherent make. For a man of Donne’s sweeping intellect, to accept fully the faith he publicly endorsed, he had to accept the theologies and philosophies attached to Anglicanism. One theory that differs between Catholicism and Anglicanism is the concept of the person (i.e., what the roles of the body and soul are). In Donne’s writings we witness an intellectual shift from a Catholic (Thomistic) understanding of the person to an Anglican<sup>1</sup> (Augustinian) concept of the person. By separating Donne’s life into three periods: early (until 1607), middle (1608-1620), and late (1620-death), we see Donne at three distinct intellectual phases in his understanding of the person. The early period reveals Donne’s use of a Thomistic concept of the person; the middle period shows Donne struggling to reconcile the incompatible Thomistic and Augustinian concepts of the person; and in the late period, Donne endorses the Augustinian concept of the person. The intellectual shift in Donne’s understanding of the person is indicative of his confessional move from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism.

### **Biographical Information:**

Born into a legendary Roman Catholic family in 1572 during the reign of anti-Catholic legislation under Queen Elizabeth, Donne was surrounded by the pressures of his family’s legacy to remain faithful to the family’s faith and avoid persecution by the Crown. The pressure to remain Catholic stemmed from being a descendent of the martyr, Sir Thomas More, Chancellor of

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<sup>1</sup> I am using “Anglican” to refer to the Church of England; at this time in English Church history “Anglican” was not yet associated with the Church, but for brevity’s sake I will use “Anglican/Anglicanism” to mean the the Church of England/the Church of England’s beliefs throughout.

England to King Henry VIII, a nephew to two Jesuit priests who were under constant persecution, and the older brother to Henry Donne, who died of bubonic plague only a week after being sent to Newgate prison to which he was sent for harboring a Catholic priest. The young John Donne lived in an atmosphere where remaining and practicing your Catholic faith was your duty and your purpose in life. The tension Donne felt between the pull of his family against the push of his own desire to ascend the ranks at Court weighed on Donne's soul heavily.

Being only eleven when his mother, then widowed and remarried to a Catholic doctor, who was—like Donne's biological father—an ardent and cautionary Catholic, sent him and his brother Henry to Oxford. The young Donne boys needed to receive an education prior to their sixteenth birthday because at sixteen, if a student wished to receive a degree, were obligated to take the Oath of Supremacy, vowing loyalty to the Anglican Church and the Crown. If refused the result could be imprisonment and execution. For the Donne boys taking the Oath would mean betrayal of their family's faith and the very real possibility of the rejection of Heaven, but if they did not take the Oath, the possibility of them being found as papists would result in persecution, so the pressure to convert and remain was constant.

The Donne boys remained at Oxford for three years before attending Cambridge for three more years—receiving a degree from neither Oxford nor Cambridge. Thereafter, the boys choose different paths: John went on to be admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1593, while Henry began secretly fighting for his Catholic faith by helping the work of the Jesuit missionary priests. At Lincoln's Inn Donne studied law and how to carry himself with a metropolitan polish. While at Lincoln's Inn, Donne was assigned a spiritual advisor, the Anglican, Anthony Rudd, whose job was to convert Donne to Anglicanism. The push for Donne's conversion become intensely strong, as his aspirations for a political career were increasing. Meanwhile, Henry had been caught harboring a

Catholic priest. The priest was disemboweled and executed, and Henry was sent to Newgate prison—practically a death sentence—because he died of bubonic plague only a week after being there. John Donne was now facing the grim reality of being Catholic in an extremely anti-Catholic country and recognizing the benefits of Anglicanism that conversion would bring him.

Donne's time at Lincoln's Inn provided him with the time to explore his family's religion and what it means for a religion to be the True religion. Donne does eventually make the confessional move from Catholicism to Anglicanism. It is unclear when this was publicly broadcasted; it is assumed his conversion, however, was between his time at Lincoln's Inn and fighting for England against the Spanish in Cadiz and the Azores in 1596 and 1597, respectively. This time-frame is assumed because upon Donne's return to England, he was offered the position as secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton. Donne was in a position that he believed would elevate him to a political career at Court.

Donne lived with Egerton and his family, which included Egerton's niece Anne More, the daughter of a well-known courtier and politician, George More. Donne and Anne had fallen in love, between hallway encounters and across the table at dinner—the two souls became one (“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” 20). Their love was vehemently disapproved of by both Anne's father and uncle—but John and Anne defied their disapproval and married secretly just before Christmas in 1601. The marriage's secrecy obligated John and Anne to separate after the ceremony and live apart from one another for a few months. Donne could only take being apart from his wife for that long and the fear of her father finding out second hand terrified Donne. He then wrote to Sir George More, in February of 1602, telling him of the secret nuptials.

The kindness of Anne's cousin Francis Wooley allowed Donne and Anne to live at Wooley's small property in Surrey for a few years, which is the setting for “The Good Morrow”

as well as “The Sun Rising.” Donne became restless though in this small property because he was not in the metropolitan world of London; so, the couple, along with their growing family, moved to a small house at Mitcham, London in 1605, where the couple continued to expand their family.

Still unable to secure a career at Court after being deterred by James I, Donne worked as a lawyer and wrote anti-Catholic pamphlets part time to support his ever-expanding family. Donne still continued to write poetry and prose at this time with the support of his patron Sir Robert Drury, who even had Donne’s family move into a portion of his home on Drury Lane. At this time Donne began writing religious poetry and works rather than the secular love poetry of his youth. He was able to explore and express his Anglican faith now in his own words. Donne, however, was still restless due to his desire to achieve a position at Court—but, again, James I advised Donne against this and told him to consider taking Holy Orders instead.

Anne was delivering a child approximately every year; the pressure for Donne to secure a career with a sufficient income for his enormous family was increasing. Donne was ordained into the Anglican Church in 1615. Upon his ordination, Donne received an honorary doctorate of divinity from Cambridge University, where he previously had to defer the degree for fear of persecution. Donne was appointed minister to his previous educational institution, Lincoln’s Inn, at which he served from 1616-1622. The security that came from sufficient pay was a burden lifted off of Donne, but only to be met with the tremendous grief of Anne dying in 1617 a week after delivering their 12<sup>th</sup> child, a stillborn. Donne’s grief was so great that he vowed to never remarry for the respect he had for Anne as well as the sensitivity to their love.

Shortly after Anne’s death, Donne was appointed Chaplain to Viscount Doncaster, and to travel with him around the continent for two years. Shortly after Donne returned from the continent, he received a position he had been hoping for since he was a young man: he was

appointed Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the second highest position in the Anglican Church, only second to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Donne preached regularly at the cathedral, becoming known as one of the most passionate and eloquent preachers of this time. His preaching was interrupted two years into his term by a relapsing fever (*fretum febris*), from which he believed he was going to die. In the wake of this fever Donne wrote *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, a text that paradoxically celebrates life while meditating on death. Donne, however, did not die but lived eight more years, remaining the Dean of St. Paul's and preaching personally to Charles I.

### **Scholarship:**

Scholarship has been, and is still, divided on what Donne's concept of the person is. Recently, readers have argued that Donne is inconsistent in his concept of the person. Both John Carey's and Ramie Targoff's criticisms reveal Donne's shift in philosophies concerning the person throughout his lifetime. Carey argues that Donne's apostasy affects how he poeticizes love, farewells, and faith more than past criticism has let on, revealing a stronger attachment between Donne and his former Catholic faith (Carey 37). What is at the center of Donne's poetizing is the person; in the relationships of love, saying goodbye, and living a faith-filled life, the person is at the center of the experience and is also the basis of the experience. Within Donne's own evolution as a person, areas of his concepts are affected by his maturation and confessional move to Anglicanism. Donne's imagination on what the person is must shift alongside his confessional move from Catholicism to Anglicanism. Donne must reimagine what that person's nature is for the experience to be true, good, and beautiful in his specific Christian religion.

Ramie Targoff notes specifically the inconsistencies and differing philosophies concerning the nature of the human person in Donne's oeuvre. Targoff classifies the different philosophies concerning the body and soul in Donne's sweeping imagination with keen specificity; she neglects, however, to connect these differences on a linear timeline. She, rather, focuses on grouping Donne's work by genre to show differences in Donne's thoughts. Although Targoff's work is valuable, the possibility of understanding Donne and his work as scattered is too great in her work, and arguably diminishes Donne's own intellect as haphazard and arbitrary rather than composed and purposeful. Targoff's argument needs to be amended.

Both Carey and Targoff's observations highlight the connection between Donne's concepts of the person to his own personal life, but the connection between his confessional move to Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism and his concept of the person has yet to be examined. There is a distinct progression in Donne's concept of the person as he matures in his writing from a Catholic concept of the person to an Anglican concept of the person; he moves from a Thomistic concept to an Augustinian concept of the person. These two traditions are specified as the Catholic and Protestant because when Donne was alive the Thomistic tradition was widely considered the Catholic position, while the Augustinian tradition was paraded as the Protestant one.

### **Concepts and Historicity:**

During Donne's life, the Thomistic and Augustinian concepts of the person were broadly considered the Catholic and Anglican positions on the person, respectively. In Donne's confessional move from Catholicism to Anglicanism, his concept of the person reflects an intellectual transition from the Thomistic concept of the person to the Augustinian concept. The Thomistic and Augustinian concepts of the person, albeit similar, are incompatible with one



another. The Thomist and Augustinian both agree that the person is the composition of body and soul; neither is the soul the person nor just the body alone, but the combination of the two that constitutes the person. The difference between the Thomist and Augustinian is the emphasis that is placed on the roles of the body and soul. The Thomist emphasizes heavily the union of the body and soul more so than the Augustinian who will emphasize the soul's superiority over its mortal body.

The Thomistic concept of the person is based on Aristotelian philosophy and is greatly reliant on a physicalist's conception of the person (i.e., the body is all that exists). Aquinas, although reliant on a physicalist's conception, argues strongly for the existence of the soul, and thus for the necessity of the body and soul's union. How Aquinas understands the unification of the body and soul can be analogized to Aristotle's definition of matter and form. The soul for Aquinas is the substantial form of the body, which itself is matter: "the soul is evidently the substantial form of any being possessing a soul because a living being is constituted in genus and species by its soul" (Aquinas 89) and "man must be endowed with senses as a prerequisite for understanding" (77) which shows that Aquinas argues for the importance of both the soul and the body in a person's life. The readily employed metaphor of the statue to explain what Aquinas means by the soul being the substantial form of the body will suffice: the statue of David is made of both matter and form. The matter is the marble from which Michelangelo used and the form is the shape that Michelangelo carved. We do not say that the marble is the statue of David, nor just the shape without the marble is the statue of David. When we refer to the statue of David we refer to the union of both the marble and the shape, the matter and form. Similarly for Aquinas, the human person is the composition of the body, which is likened to matter and the soul, which is likened to form.

Aquinas argues that the unification of the body and soul is necessary in the life of a person: “Elements which by nature destined for union, naturally desire to be united to each other; for any being seeks what is suited to it by nature. Since, therefore, the natural condition of the human soul is to be united to the body...it has a natural desire for union with the body” (169). It would be unnatural for a soul not to desire to be united to its body—the soul needs its body. Moreover, the soul and body are particular to one person; the soul can only ever be united with one body, and vice versa. Therefore, the unification of a body and a soul is individualized and unique to a particular person—and the lack of importance on the unification affects how a person would thrive in life.

The Augustinian concept of the person is a neo-Platonic theory, and therefore has dualistic characteristics. Augustine, however, is not a dualist (at least once he had become a Christian); Augustine, in fact, rejects the dualistic concept of the person vehemently to distance himself from his former religion of Manichaeism. Augustine maintains, similar to Aquinas that, “every spirit and every body is naturally good” (Augustine 48). What differentiates Aquinas and Augustine, then, is that Augustine argues strongly and repeatedly that the “body is always less than the soul itself” and the soul is less than itself when it is in union with the body (46). The soul, for Augustine, is the reflection of God whereas the body is subject to the temptations of the flesh: “Unchangeable spirit is God, changeable spirit, having been made, is nature, but is better than the body...body is not spirit” (48-9). The body is still good for Augustine because it was made by God but it remains less pure and virtuous than the soul.

The most noticeable difference between the Thomistic concept of the person and the Augustinian concept of the person is the emphasis placed on the relationship between the body and soul. The Thomist argues for a more co-dependent relationship between the body and soul,

while the Augustinian emphasizes the importance of the soul's role in the sanctification of the person. Donne transitions in his works from an understanding in which the body and soul are, or at least nearly, equal in experiencing love and the Divine to an understanding in which the soul is emphasized in the person to experience love and the Divine.

### **Writings of the Early Period (to 1607):**

The early period of Donne's writings reflects essentially the Thomistic concept of the person; Donne readily employs the Thomistic emphasis on the union of the body and soul throughout his early, secular love poetry. "The Good Morrow" is an early poem that suggests that the unification of the physical and spiritual natures of the speaker and his lover are central to their ability to show one another love. Throughout the poem, the speaker alternates freely between physical and spiritual references to show his lover how powerful and all-encompassing their love is.

The opening line of the second stanza begins with an undeniable spiritual reference: "And now good morrow to our waking souls" (8). From their physical unification with one another the night before, the couple's souls have now awakened; the bodies have the ability to awaken and bring to life their souls. Following immediately in the next line, the speaker notes that they are able to watch the other with love—not fear. The act of watching another person involves the sense of sight. From this, the speaker shows that the physical action of seeing another person is connected to encouraging and supporting the couple's love. Donne returns to the sense of sight to convey that the soul does "in the faces rest" (16), which emphasizes further the importance of the role that the physical and spiritual aspects of the person have in conveying love to another person. The importance of the physical and spiritual union in the couple reflects how the individual's

composition must be; if the individual person was not a union between body and soul, in which both the body and soul are recognized as equally important, then unity between the two lovers would be impossible within this Thomistic framework.

The closing of the poem echoes the speaker's concerns for the importance of the body's role in the relationship. To do this, Donne uses a theory from Galenic physiology. Galen, among other ancient thinkers, argued that an object or being survived primarily by being complimentary to other objects or beings—a strictly physical account of survival. The speaker argues with the notion of Galenic physiology that “whatever dies was not mixed equally; / If our two loves be one, or, thou and I / Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die” (19-21). This purely physical theory is used by Donne to argue that the physical attributes of the person have the ability to sustain the lovers and even grant them immortality. This reflects the importance of the integration of body and soul in the person that is argued for by the Thomist.

Similarly, other poems that are representative of Donne's use of the Thomistic concept of the person include: “The Flea,” “Air and Angels,” the elegy “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” and “Woman's Constancy.” The Thomistic concept of the person in these poems is used as a foundation for Donne to argue the theses of these poems, whether that be persuading a woman to become physically intimate or regarding the fleeting nature of love. The importance of both the body and soul as equal components of the person, then, is a necessary premise for Donne to convince the person(s) being addressed in the poems of his argument.

The early poem, “The Flea,” uses the Thomistic concept of the person as the foundation on which Donne will try to persuade a woman to become physically intimate. Through the sophisticated conceit of the flea, Donne transforms the flea “to a temple and a cloister” (Carey

147), a physical space for the speaker and woman to join together. The flea's body becomes a host for the physical and spiritual unification of the pair:

This Flea is you and I, and this  
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is  
 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
 And cloistered in these living walls of Jet. (12-15)

Donne relies on (1) the physical union of their bloods that already “mingled be” as well as (2) the religious and spiritual imagery of being “cloistered” and it being sacrilegious if they do not yield to one another with their bodies to persuade the woman to join with him in union. Donne wants clearly to seduce the woman (Perrine 1) so that he may enjoy physical union which reveals the emphasis on the bodies' role in the union; the spiritual aspect, however, is more difficult to recognize. Donne does make the religious references, but in jest, and only to try to convince the woman she should be intimate with him. Even though Donne uses the religious references in jest, he still needs to use them to try and convince the woman. This fact shows that although Donne may be favoring the body over the soul, the spiritual aspect of physical intimacy is still necessary. Donne's intellectual disposition in this poem is inclined more so to the Thomistic concept of the person than the Augustinian concept.

The use of a Thomistic foundation to persuade a woman of the necessity of the body in a relationship is also seen in “Air and Angels.” A poem which has barely any commentary on either air or angels (only a passing reference is given), this poem reveals not only an argument for the importance of the body in the union of the body and soul, but also provides a counterargument for why the body must be involved in a relationship. The speaker begins with fanciful and beautifully written verses about love, to only then chide the previous lines as producing “some glorious

nothing” (6) when love only involves the body alone or the soul alone. The first few lines of the poem invite the reader to contemplate love, only then to be chastised by Donne, who reveals that the previous lines do not mean anything. Donne begins then to argue that, “since [his] soul, whose child love is, / Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do, / More subtle than the parent is / Love must not be, but take a body too” (7-10). The closing adverb of these lines, “too,” indicates that neither just the body alone nor the soul alone will convey love—but *both* the body and soul are needed. This is because the person is the combination of both soul and “limbs of flesh”; if the body is missing from the union then love cannot be experienced or felt.

The focus of the second stanza shifts slightly to elucidate the implications of the unified body and soul in the individual person when in relationship with another unified body and soul. For love to be complete both the speaker and woman must turn to physical union with one another so that, “[her] love may be [his] love’s sphere” (25). That is Donne’s attempt at arguing for the need of bodily union. The passing reference to Aquinas’ theory that Angels assume bodies of air to show love, is the argument for the physical and spiritual integration of the couple. Similar to the religious references—except not in jest—in “The Flea,” Donne uses Aquinas’ theory of Angels to show that the body does have a place in a spiritual relationship. Love is both a physical and spiritual experience, so the body and soul are both needed to be integral parts of the person to experience the fullness of love itself.

In similar style, Donne, in the persuasive elegy “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” enforces the Thomistic concept of the person, even though this poem appears to suggest Donne using a dualistic concept of the person. Donne deviates from both the Thomistic and Augustinian understandings that the person is union of body and soul (regardless of emphasis on the individual roles of the body and soul in that union); Donne, rather, explains that, “As souls unbodied, bodies

unclothed must be, / To taste whole joys” (34-5). Souls without bodies, according to Thomistic philosophy, cannot experience whole joys on earth because the union of body and soul is necessary. Donne, therefore, is disagreeing with the Thomistic theory of the person; he can’t, however, take seriously the rejection of the union of body and soul because he is arguing ultimately for the physical, bodily experience of intercourse, promising the girl that when they do have sex, it will be in “love’s hallowed temple” (18) and be as pleasurable as “a heaven like Mahomet’s paradise” (21), itself a place of sexual, carnal pleasure. So, although Donne purports a dualistic view of the body in this line, he cannot mean it entirely because of the body’s centrality to his intentions with the woman.

In a different tone, Donne conveys the centrality of the body by arguing that when the body is removed from a relationship, so too is the love between a couple. This is seen “Woman’s Constancy.” Here, Donne takes an ironic tone towards the title of his poem: women are not constant in remaining with their partners, but mutability is inevitable on the woman’s part. In an opening similar to the “Good Morrow,” the speaker begins with a question to his beloved: “Now thou hast loved me one whole day, / Tomorrow when thou leav’st, what wilt thou say? / With thou then antedate some new made vow?” (1-3). Donne maintains this inquisitive tone throughout the poem, which is indicative of his own uncertainty regarding the nature of what happens when the two will separate from one another. The concern of whether the woman will remember what happened between her and the speaker is brought into doubt, but represents the primary concern of Donne, which is what happens when the body is removed from a relationship, since the union of both body and soul is needed to experience complete love.

There is an urgency in Donne’s tone that acknowledges that the physical presence of his lover ensured that she would remain in union with him; when she leaves, however, the risk—at

least for Donne—is too high that she will no longer remain committed to him like she was when she was present. The relationship will become “untied” and no longer binding when the two are absent from one another. Donne’s lack of assurance in the lover’s ability to remain constant in her love shows readers Donne’s own argument that the physicality of the relationship is necessary for the couple to be bound together. The body, and the body’s own presence, is therefore central to sustaining the relationship (this idea was also seen in “The Good Morrow,” regarding the Galenic theory of complementarity of objects). Donne’s reliance on the presence of the lover for the love to persist is starkly contrasted in the middle period poem, “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” in which love is able to persist, regardless of the couple not being physically present with each other. But for now, “Woman’s Constancy” reflects Donne’s Thomistic concerns in the early period, understanding that the role of the body in the union of body and soul is a fundamental and essential role.

### **Writings of the Middle Period (1607-1620):**

The Middle period of Donne’s work is compelling for the dichotomy in Donne’s approach to the person both in his prose and his poetry. Donne is in conflict—“contraries meet in one” (Holy Sonnet XIX)—as he tries to reconcile the Thomistic and Augustinian concepts of the person with each other. Unfortunately for Donne, he is unable to reconcile the incompatible theories: the Thomist’s emphasis on the body and Augustine’s emphasis on the soul in the union are too distinct to be complementary to one another. There is not a seismic shift in Donne’s thought, but subtleties in how he will argue for a particular thesis (whether that thesis is concerned with love or the Divine). Donne struggles to reconcile both the Thomistic and Augustinian concepts, but towards



the end of this period shows favoritism towards the Augustinian concept. This favoritism will not only be shown in his secular love poetry, but also in his religious poetry.

John Carey comments that at this time Donne is still “at a profound level, attached” (Carey 51) to the Catholicism he earlier renounced. Moreover, Annabel Patterson in her book, *Reading Between the Lines*, shows that Donne also went through a shift in his political thinking at this time. This period for Donne was a “translational period . . . when he was clearly engaged in an intellectual agon with his environment” (Patterson 165). So, not only was Donne, according to Patterson, shifting in his political thought, but, as suggested here, he too was shifting in his religious philosophies as well. This period, then, is truly a transitional period for Donne.

The secular love poetry of the middle period echoes the conflicts Donne is having in his religious poetry. “The Ecstasy” is a paradigm of this. Some readers, such as Helen Gardner and Ramie Targoff, have noted that “The Ecstasy” is a beautiful failure. Similar to “The Good Morrow,” Donne tries to establish unity between two lovers, but here he cannot. Donne attempts to marry a neo-Platonic idea of *ekstasis* (in which the soul is out of the body) to a Thomistic concept of the person. Fundamentally, Donne is not able to unite the experience of *ekstasis* with a Thomistic concept of the person because for the Thomist the soul leaving the body while on earth is contradictory to the well-being of the person. *Ekstasis*, as Donne uses the theory, is an experience in which the couple’s souls in the poem leave their bodies to ascend to the Divine, and are Divinely revealed to the perfect nature of love. Once they now know what perfect love is, the couple returns to their bodies to try and perfect their love.

The poem begins with the speaker and his beloved in a place of ignorance, and Donne intends to make the shift from the couple’s position of ignorance to a place of knowledge and then physical and spiritual unification. The couple, prior to their ecstatic ascent, were trying desperately

to establish unity through physical and spiritual means by “[intergrafting] our hands” (9); the couple holding hands for them “was all the means to make [them] one” (10). The couple was ignorant of the fact that physical and spiritual unification does not come merely from holding hands, but once their “souls (which to advance their state/Were gone out) hung ‘twixt her and [he]” (15-6) where only a language understood by the soul could interpret the idea of perfect love. What has been revealed to the souls in their ecstatic experience is that hand holding is not the means to make them one, but rather having intercourse will.

Upon the return of the souls to their bodies, the couple is no longer confused; “This ecstasy doth unperplex” (29) so now love can “interanimate two souls” (42) corresponding to the perfect nature of love (i.e., physical intimacy). Now, the couple is able to maintain control over the “defects of loneliness” (44) that the inter-grafting of hands previously yielded. Donne longs desperately for the bodies to be brought into the souls’ communion in the Divine revelation of love, trying to insist that the bodies are still necessary to not only know, but experience perfect love:

And if some lover, such as we,  
 Have heard this dialogue of one,  
 Let him still mark us, he shall see  
 Small change, when we’re to bodies gone. (72-75)

Donne here argues that there is little difference between the souls’ union and the bodies’ union, so little a difference that a lover (the singular form is used, but what is implied is that two people who are in love are one, so rather than the plural, “lovers,” the singular is used to emphasize union) wouldn’t be able to recognize whether the couple is actually physically or spiritually unified.

There is, however, a fundamental incongruity. Donne cannot establish unity between the couple by arguing that the couple now just needs to be physically intimate (since they are already unified spiritually) because he previously placed the soul in a superior position to the body, both literally in the ascension of the souls, and the ability for souls to be Divinely revealed to in the absence of their bodies. The bodies of the lovers can only ever be as significant as “sepulchral statues;” the souls’ communion will always be more significant than the bodies’. This poem reveals, then, the fundamental incongruities between advocating for a Thomistic concept of the person within a theory that favors the souls’ superiority over the body.

There are secular love poems in this middle period that elevate the spiritual over the physical unapologetically and do achieve unification; the unification, however, is not based on a physical and spiritual union, but on a spiritual union. “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” is one of the most spiritual love poems within Donne’s canon, and represents Donne relying on spiritual unification as the only means necessary to establish unification between a couple. In an attempt to restrain himself and his lover from mourning over their temporary separation, the speaker must emphasize the souls’ significance rather than physical intimacy; it is the souls, according to Donne, which can sustain the love between the two rather than the bodies. This is contrasted to the earlier poem, “Woman’s Constancy,” in which Donne argued that the lovers could never be separated because love is unsustainable when there is no physical presence. But here, in “The Valediction” Donne chastises those relationships founded on physical love: “Dull sublunary lovers’ love / (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit / Absence, because it doth remove / Those things which elemented it” (13-16). Those lovers who are affected by the lunar cycle only love the person because they are together; their love would not be able to survive the absence of

one of the lovers because their relationship is predicated on the physical intimacy between the two. When the couple is no longer able to be physically intimate, the relationship will deteriorate.

For the speaker of the poem, however, he and his beloved are able to admit physical absence because they share “a love so much [more] refined, / That our selves know not what it is, / Inter-assured of the mind, / Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss” (17-20). The couple’s love, because it is not based on physical intimacy will “endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion” (22-23) of their love. The couple’s souls “are one” (21); this union contrasts to Donne’s earlier poems in which he argued that for a couple to be one, the souls and bodies had to be in union. This is distinctly an inclination towards the Augustinian concept of the person, in which the soul has a superior role to the body in the person’s life, rather than the Thomistic concept of the person, in which the body and soul are needed equally. Donne, therefore, in both “The Ecstasy” and “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” shows that his understanding of the person is shifting to an Augustinian concept of the person in his secular love poetry of this period.

The *Holy Sonnets*, which are evidently spiritual meditations, are attentive to answering Donne’s question in Holy Sonnet XIII: “Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?” (1). Donne, throughout the Holy Sonnets, relies on physical imagery and the role of the body, but the tone is different. Donne focuses here on the decay and degeneration of the body. Moreover, the soul’s virtuous nature is attended to in more detail than the body’s. Donne will now distinguish (similar to his chastisement of physical intimacy in “The Valediction”) between the corruptible “prodigal elements” of the body in Holy Sonnet XII and the unchangeable “angelic sprite” in Holy Sonnet V. The primary concern of the *Holy Sonnets* remains concentrated on the soul, but, with great care, Donne will involve the body in spiritual matters. This suggests Donne’s hesitation on fully accepting the Augustinian concept of the person.

Holy Sonnet VI is a meditation on the moment of death when the body and soul separate; the soul ascends to heaven and the body remains with the earth. Throughout the poem, Donne is trying to wrestle the body into a spiritual experience. Donne's meditation is on the soul's ascension to Heaven, which should be understood as such a rapturous moment, that you are only concerned with God and yourself (i.e., you are your soul in this moment). But Donne can't dismiss his body even when he is contemplating when his "ever-waking part shall see that face," (7) Donne immediately returns to the physical imagery of experience shaking his "every joint" (8). Moreover, when Donne attempts again to turn the meditation to the physical: "Then, as my soul to heaven her first seat takes flight," (9), Donne is still preoccupied with his "earth-born body [which] in the earth shall dwell" (10).

The tension between abandoning the body and allowing the soul to ascend to heaven is an excruciating separation for the Thomist; Donne shares in this pain with the Thomist here throughout the poem, however, he concludes in a conciliatory valediction: "For thus I leave, the world, the flesh, the devil" (14). The succinctness of this last line indicates a confidence in Donne's ability to leave the world behind, and allow the soul to ascend to Heaven. So, in this poem, Donne struggles with the separation of the body and soul—just as a Thomist does—but concludes with a brief farewell to the body—just as an Augustinian does. In Holy Sonnet VI, then, Donne is predominately preoccupied with the body and spiritual experience, but concedes to the soul's superiority over the body in the closing line; he shifts from a Thomistic concept of the person to an Augustinian concept of the person in this poem alone.

The uneasiness and lack of willingness to allow the soul to ascend throughout Holy Sonnet VI is starkly contrasted to Holy Sonnet X's defiance towards death through embracing the experience of death itself. Donne does not lament the separation of body and soul; the bones, rather

are at rest, while the soul is delivered to its Maker. Death, here, is not “gluttonous” (VI.5), but is even more gracious and peaceful than sleep is; when death passes, he will live eternally with God. Death, paradoxically, is not the enemy then for disjoining the natural union of body and soul, but the means for eternal joy. The tone throughout Holy Sonnet X is far more confident and accepting of death than is present in Holy Sonnet VI. The embracement of death then reveals Donne’s shift towards the Augustinian concept of the person, because Donne is no longer preoccupied with his body to the extent seen in Holy Sonnet VI.

The incompatibility of the Thomistic and Augustinian theories of the person is of great disappointment for Donne. He is unable to reconcile the theories with one another, similar to his inability to reconcile the Catholic faith with the Anglican faith. As a result, Donne is forced into choosing a single theory, or else continue living with a dichotomous and incompatible theory of the person. Moving into the later period we see Donne accepting one theory of the person: the Augustinian one, the broadly Anglican one. This acceptance and endorsement is seen in both his prose *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* as well as his sermons.

### **Writings of the Late Period (1621-to death):**

The later period of Donne’s life is absent of the secular love poetry, and almost of poetry entirely, as he shifts into writing sermons and prose texts. At this time, Donne is given the position as Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London by King James, and delivers countless sermons there. Also during this period, Donne wrote *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in the wake of a serious relapsing fever (*fretum febris*) from which he believed he would die. He did not die from this fever, he lived eight more years, but from this sickness, Donne produced a text that paradoxically celebrates life while contemplating death. Throughout the twenty-three meditations

Donne relies upon physical imagery and language to explain spiritual events. The physical language, however, is imbued with an outspoken Protestant theology on the relationship between body and soul seen in *The Second Anniversarie*: the body is a prison for the soul. So, Donne will use a physicalist's vocabulary, like in his early and middle writings, but the emphasis is clearly on the soul, like in the Augustinian concept of the person.

Meditation XVIII is representative of Donne's Augustinian understanding. Donne is extremely direct in the rejection of the Aristotelian/Thomistic concept of the person. While Donne meditates on the nature of the soul's going out of the body at death, he becomes increasingly dismissive to the "poor" and "wretched" body that was only a mere passive house for the soul until the soul's glorious ascension, which is the focus of the meditation. Donne is not shy in his brief dismissal of these theories which is seen in the following passage:

If I were to ask mere philosophers what the soul is, I shall find amongst them that will tell me, it is nothing but the temperament and harmony, and just and equal composition of the elements in the body, which produces all those faculties which we ascribe to the soul; and so in itself is nothing, no separable substance that overlies the body...But if my soul were no more than the soul of a beast, I could not think so; that soul that can reflect upon itself, consider itself, is more than so" (*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* 108).

With this passage Donne is accepting that the Thomistic concept of the person he employed readily in his earlier poetry falls short—the soul is more than he previously believed it was. That is the Augustinian thought, that the soul is more than its body. Moreover, in the lines following Donne directly mentions St Augustine: "St. Augustine studied the nature of the soul, as much as anything, but the salvation of the soul... [and] he satisfies himself with this: 'Let the departure of my soul to salvation be evident to my faith, and I care the less how dark the entrance of my soul into my body

be to my reason.’ It is the going out, more so than the coming in, that concerns us” (345). Donne in his meditations in *Devotions* is concerned with the “going out” of the soul in the Meditations, a concern held by Augustinians.

Donne, in the *Devotions*, embraces concepts such as unity in Meditation XVII, a concept Augustine, among other ancient and medieval thinkers wrote on. Donne there argues that “all making is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated” (344). Augustine argues that unity is an essential to life—here Donne endorses a further Augustinian idea, revealing the shift in his intellect.

In one of Donne’s last poems, he creates a hymn to God in his sickness, in which Donne’s tone is apathetic and passive towards the body. This tone is taken because he is now hopeful for joining God in heaven and the resurrection thereafter, not concerned with the state of the body posthumously. Donne provides the image of physicians examining his body in his sickness, while he “lie/Flat on this bed” (7-8). Donne’s passivity towards the body comes in the following stanza, in which he finds joy in that the “*fretum febris*” (10) he will get to “see his west” (11) a symbolic reference to the sunset of his life. The fever, as Donne understands, will deliver him to God, so “What shall [his] west hurt [him]?” (13). Donne embraces his inevitable death because he recognizes that his soul will be united with God. He is no longer concerned about the body, but only in ascending to the Kingdom of God—a distinctly different tone from both the early and middle periods.

In the *Devotions* and the religious poems, Donne welcomes the Augustinian concept of the person now, and in so doing has accepted a Protestant theology over a Catholic one. This acceptance of the Augustinian concept of the person is seen elsewhere as well, in his sermons



especially; Donne is distinct and clear in his categorizing of the body and soul's roles in his sermons.

Unlike in Holy Sonnet VI, when Donne discusses the separation of soul from body, he is not emphatic in his contemplation on the body and soul's separateness; rather, he becomes contemplative on the soul's glorious ascension and brief in his reference to the body's return to ashes. Donne is rarely grieving the body's return to dust, while the soul is consumed beautifully in the Divine. In his sermon preached on Easter Day 1627, Donne preaches that "when [the soul] departs the body" we know little "whether [the soul] must pass locally, through moon, and sun, and firmament, or whether that soul find new light in the same room, and be not carried into any other, but that the glory of heaven be diffused over all" (379). Donne emphasizes the soul's own role in the person's death, only mentioning the body briefly to introduce the moment he is thinking of. This reveals a shift in Donne's own thinking from his earlier writings, where the body and soul were central to all experiences; now, the soul is the center to all experiences.

In the same sermon Donne explains how a person will have a "better resurrection" than others. A martyr, for Donne, can have many degrees, and even the smallest act of martyrdom, such as a "war maintained by us, against our own desires, is a martyrdom" and this is "to suffer for his glory, [bringing] us to a *Better resurrection*" (379). Moreover, to suffer cheerfully and even thankfully, will bring us to a "Better resurrection" still. The martyrdoms that Donne argues will bring us to a better resurrection, are the denials and death of the physical body, be it of the amorous, ambitious, covetous, or voluptuous kind, we are brought to a better resurrection because of the body's denial for the soul's sanctification. Donne parallels Augustine here by distinguishing the body's inferiority to the soul's superior nature.

Donne's interest with the soul more than the body is consistent in his later period. We see Donne in his sermon preached before King Charles I in April of 1629, preaching about all of creation and referencing specifically the way creation of the soul is different from the creation of all else, including the creation of the body. The soul is made of nothing, *ex nihilo*, while the other creatures "are made of that pre-existent matter, which God had made before, so were our bodies too; But our souls of nothing" (392). The soul being made out of nothing is to have no other parent beside God "no other element but the breath of God, no other instrument but the purpose of God" (Donne 392). The soul is the image of God, and that image is born when the soul is made of nothing.

Donne is separating the nature of the body and soul even further in this passage than in his Easter sermon in 1627. He emphasizes strongly the superiority of the soul over its material body, a distinction and tone which Augustine uses readily. Donne provides an explication of what his body will be after death, emphasizing the distinct inferior nature of the body prior to discussing a "Better Resurrection":

When I consider what I was in my parents' loins (a substance unworthy of a word, unworthy of a thought) when I consider what I am now, (a volume of diseases bound up together, a dry cinder, if I look for natural, for radical moisture, and yet a sponge, a bottle of overflowing rheums, if I consider accidental; an aged child, a grey headed infant, and but the ghost of mine own youth) When I consider what I shall be at last, at the hand of death, in my own grave . . . [I] shall be all insipid, tasteless, savories dust; for a while, all worms, and after a while, not so much worms, sordid, senseless, nameless dust." (379)

Donne explains succinctly the general timeline of bodily life: loins of the parents to man to post-death. The language used by Donne conveys a negative and degrading tone towards the state of

the body in the “past, present, and future” (379). Donne explains, he is able to do this with the body, but what he is not able to do is expand upon the glory that God will give to the body, which, for Donne, he is “not able to express, not able to conceive” (379), but only be mystified.

This echoes Augustine when he himself writes of the Resurrection of the body. Augustine, using a similar tone to Donne, emphasizes the body’s natural state: “[the man’s] own flesh . . . which he lost by famine, shall be restored to him by Him who can recover even what was evaporated” (Augustine 190). Augustine then, like Donne, explains that only God knows how the resurrection of the body will come about: “And though [the body] had been absolutely annihilated, so that no part of its substance remained in any secret spot of nature, the Almighty could restore it by such means as He saw fit” (Augustine 191). Donne follows Augustine in both the degradation of the body in its past, present, and future as well as explaining the inexplicable nature of how God will restore the body in the Resurrection.

Further in this sermon, Donne shifts his focus to the present state of the body. Donne argues that every deprivation of the body “maintained by us, against our own desires, is a martyrdom” (380). Moreover, being a martyr to our own flesh is understood by Donne as a glorifying act. Donne maintains that denying the flesh through depriving the body, will strengthen the soul’s will. This is the similar tone present in his *Devotions* and other poems, like Holy Sonnet X.

Even though Donne still relies heavily on physicalist vocabulary and imagery to explain spiritual experiences and matters, the subject matter and emphasis remains focused on the soul rather than the union of body and soul in these sermons. In the sermon preached before King Charles I on 12 February, 1629, Donne employs the physicalist vocabulary of heart along with different verbs to explain the spiritual molding and melting of the soul by the fiery power of God’s Spirit. I have italicized the words which are the physicalist’s vocabulary:

...there is a *liquefaction*, a *melting*, a *pouring* out of the heart...And when upon the consideration of God's miraculous judgements and mercies, I come to such a *melting* and *pouring out* of my heart, that there be no spirit, that is, none of mine own spirit left in me; when I have so exhausted, so *evacuated* myself, that is, all confidence in myself, that I come into the hands of my God, as *plibly*, as *ductilely*...this is a blessed nullification of the heart, a glorious *annihilation of the heart.*"(399)

Donne argues that there must be an emptying, which implies a physical experience and/or nature, but what must be remembered is that in the above passage Donne is strictly referring to his spirit, as indicated by Donne himself. Therefore, Donne is emphasizing the soul more so than the body, which is parallel with the Augustinian theory. Donne accepts the Augustinian theory of the person, and elaborates and explains the theory electrically and insightfully.

### **Conclusion:**

Donne was a highly intellectual man who transferred his allegiance to Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism. The decision to convert was not easy; the decision, rather, involved Donne's emotions, spiritual life, and intellectual alliances. With the move came new philosophies and theologies he would have to accept, including who and what he thought the person was. In his writings we are able to see Donne shift his allegiance on an intellectual level concerning the nature of the person. Donne shifts from focusing on the importance of the union of the body and the soul, to emphasizing the soul's superiority and the deprivation of the body. The Thomistic concept of the person emphasizes the union of the body and soul; the body is as important to the person as the soul is. The Augustinian concept of the person, in a different tone, emphasizes that the soul is

more important in the union of the body and soul for the person. Donne shifts from the Thomistic to the Augustinian concept of the person.

The writings of the early period are predominately secular love poems, in which Donne relies consistently on the Thomistic concept of the person to argue for the significance of the body in relationships with women. The writings of the middle period reveal a subtle shift in Donne's thoughts concerning the person. Donne wrote not only secular love poetry, but also religious poetry during this period, and in both he wavers between the Thomistic and Augustinian concept of the person. The writings of the later period, however, reveal that Donne ultimately aligns his views regarding the person with the Augustinian concept, which is also the concept of his Anglican religion. Thus, Donne shifts from a Catholic and an Anglican concept of the person.

Recognizing this shift allows for readers to understand Donne not as two separate people with drastically different beliefs, but a single person who evolves in his own understandings in life. Moreover, Donne was not haphazard in his thoughts concerning the person, but intentional and thoughtful. Donne, therefore, is intentional in his development of the concept of the person and this is representative of conversion from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism.

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