

# “And show my story, in thy eternal book”: *Metempsychosis* and John Donne’s Sacramental Poetics\*

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## I. Sacrament, Transformation, and Accommodation

An Episcopal priest once told me about a five-year-old girl who had become curious about the theological mystery surrounding the sacrament.<sup>1</sup> Observing that all communicants affirm before the communion table by saying, with wafer on the palm, “May we become what we receive,” she wondered, “Why should I transform into bread?” At first, her naively literal interpretation of sacramental transformation seems simply amusing.

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\* The present discussion has been developed from a reading of John Donne in my doctoral dissertation, *“Transformed Oft, and Chaunged Diuerslie”: Shapeshifting and Bodily Change in Spenser, Milton, Donne, and Seventeenth-Century Drama*.

<sup>1</sup> Christian denominations employ the term “sacrament” in differing ways, all of which carry complex theological and doctrinal resonances. In this paper, I use the term in the Anglican sense as defined in *The Book of Common Prayer*. The Anglican theology of sacrament has remained faithful to the foundational Thirty-Nine Articles (1563, 1571).

Given more careful consideration, however, her question acquires a deeper resonance. Indeed, who would not wonder at the riddle of transformation inherent in sacrament? Who would not be intrigued by its theologically and philosophically complex relationship of form and matter, a mysterious imbrication of metaphoric and literal, represented and actual, word and material, which the Anglican catechism defines as “an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace”? (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 857).

Of course, Episcopalians no longer believe that the consecrated bread in the communion transforms into the real body of Christ as all Christians did before the Reformation, and as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches continued to do so afterward.<sup>2</sup> Nor does modern Protestant sacramental theology hold a belief that the pledge of conformity through sacrament transforms our own body into bread, as that five-year-old girl imagined. Nevertheless, transformation, in the sense of changing and reshaping the devotional self, remains essential to the understanding of sacrament, and carries complex psychological and material valences at least – or, especially – in the Church of England. Since the Reformation, orthodox Anglican doctrine emphasizes that sacrament is the source and enactment of conformity with Christ, a sacred ritual of transformation that

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<sup>2</sup> Transubstantiation was a solid foundation of the Christian sacramental theology before the Reformation (as it is to the modern Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches), and many stories were told in pre-Reformation England of the host literally transforming (e.g. the fifteenth-century Croxton’s *Play of the Sacrament* and Robert Mannyng’s early fourteenth-century *Handlyng Synne*). See Eamon Duffy’s chapter on the Mass, especially 102-07, for an analysis of the pre-Reformation Eucharist mysteries and their social and theological resonances. For a summary discussion of the early modern debate on the nature, use, efficacy of sacraments between the Roman and Reformed churches (and among Reformers), see Peter Marshall 51-57. On the real presence, the Council of Trent reaffirmed that Jesus was really and substantially contained under the appearance of the consecrated bread and wine. See Johann Peter Kirsch’s article, “Council of Trent,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

addresses the question of how to accommodate the soul in salvational form. Indeed, at the Lord's Supper, when he first institutionalizes sacrament, Jesus says, "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Christ's own words of institution underscore sacrament as a matter of accommodation (rather than of digestion). It is also revealing that the word "host," derived from Latin *hostia* (meaning victim or sacrifice), tantalizingly forms a potential etymological link with house, shelter, or refuge through its root word "hos."<sup>3</sup> Once traced back to this root word, the term stretches its range of meaning to incorporate hospitality and host (the person who receives guests). George Herbert, for example, puns on this set of resonances in "Love III," a poem that describes how the stained and dusty sinner is welcomed to the Eucharist, kindly accommodated by the charitable Host or Love divine, and finally united with the Host through the invitation to "taste my meat" (17).<sup>4</sup> "So I did sit and eat" (18), concludes Herbert, with a powerful simplicity that dares the reader to hear the literal valence of a guest consuming his host/Host. The point is that the question of accommodation is central to the Anglican understanding and practice of sacrament. The question of accommodation, needless to say, engages with the spiritual conformity of the human and the divine. Yet, in the Anglican practice of sacramental conformity, accommodation is also inseparable from the aesthetic practice of truthful sign-making or liturgical craftsmanship, for external form materially manifests the inward, invisible sacramental union of God and man.

With the concept of sacrament-as-accommodation, I here offer a reading

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<sup>3</sup> I am inspired by a brief discussion of the etymological links surrounding host, hospitality, and hospital in Elaine Scarry 45. The etymological links are debated because the roots of some of these words remain uncertain. But some sources support the potential relations among host, hospice, hostel, hotel, and hospitality: see e.g. *Merriam-Webster New Book of Word History* (227).

<sup>4</sup> Quotations hereafter are from *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* edited by John Tobin.

that concerns the sacramental topoi in John Donne's *Metempsychosis*, an unfinished poem about various changing forms into which the soul of the paradisiacal apple creeps after the Fall. Traditionally, the poem has been discussed by and large in relation to the playful Ovidian *corpora transit*. What has remained understated is how such an idea of transformation may carry personal and religious resonances, and more importantly, suggest Donne's wrestle to accommodate his beleaguered self in time of transition, contingency, and transiency. As I will shortly discuss, *Metempsychosis*, written at what might have been perceived by the poet as a beginning of tumult and apparent transition, reveals much of the satirical Donne and yet also a different, potentially questioning Donne. As critics have long noted, the poem is clearly Pythagorean in approach and satirical in both form and tone. In content, however, the poem, subtitled *The Progress of the Soul*, depicts a Christian, spiritual search for home. Moreover, *Metempsychosis* is a spiritual progress not only of a nameless soul but also of the poet's, a progress in which, as Donne himself confesses, "through many straights, and lands I roam,/ I launch at Paradise and sail toward home" (56-57).<sup>5</sup>

The objective of the present discussion is, thus, two-fold: to call a renewed critical attention to *Metempsychosis* by recuperating the textual and editorial properties that have largely been ignored in readings of the poem; to discuss the complexity of the poem's preoccupation with transformation as Donne's playful and yet serious inquiry into a sacramental union of the soul and the body, a spiritual search for the right(eous) host. Specifically, I consider the poem's interest in material form in terms of the poet's explorative, if not strictly disciplinary, spiritual and stylistic accommodation; then, I suggest *Metempsychosis's* potential links with his

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<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Donne's poetic works are taken from *Complete Poems* edited by Robin Robbins, and accordingly, spellings are modernized. Donne's prose and other early modern texts, however, retain original spellings.

more explicitly devotional and liturgical poems, such as *La Corona* and *Holy Sonnets*.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, I argue that *Metempsychosis*, a poem preoccupied with varying and unsettled transformations, provides us with a richer context in which we can examine Donne's growing desire for sacramental conformity through an experimental self-inscribed poetic form.

## II. Critical Responses: The Problem in Accommodating *Metempsychosis*

Donne's *Metempsychosis* or *The Progress of the Soul*, dated by the poet himself 16 August 1601, is a poem describing the odyssey of the itinerant soul: the soul is released into the world from its original home, the apple hung safely in the Tree of Knowledge, when Eve succumbs to temptation; thereafter, the soul finds habitation successively in a mandrake, a sparrow, several forms of fish, a whale, a mouse, a wolf, a wolf-dog, an ape, and eventually Eve's unborn daughter, Themech, destined to be "sister and wife to Cain" (491-510).

Since its first publication, *Metempsychosis* has been best described, to

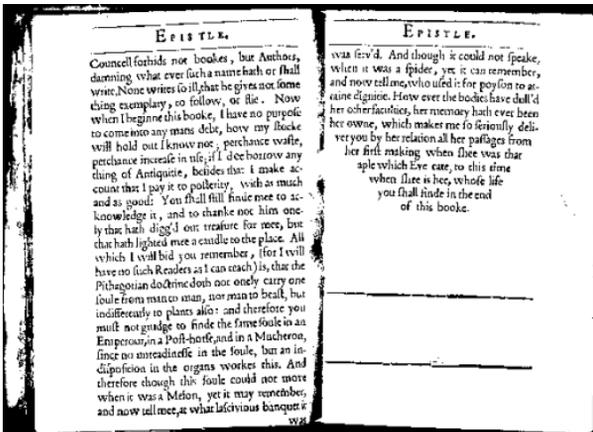
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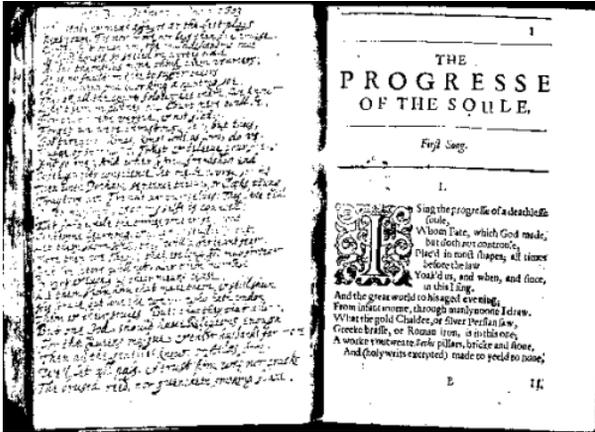
<sup>6</sup> It is a critical commonplace that *Holy Sonnets* and *La Corona* have strong liturgical resonances rhetorically, thematically, and formally. Critics, however, differ in opinions about if the liturgical traits are Catholic, Calvinist, Anglican or mixed. The best treatments of this subject are Theresa DiPasqual, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne*, Robert Whalen, *The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert*, Kirsten Stiring, "Liturgical Poetry," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* edited by Jeanne Shami, Denis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester, 233-241, and Roman Dubinski, "Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Seven Penitential Psalms," in *Renaissance and Reformation* 10 (1986), 201-216. Donne's formal interest in both *Holy Sonnets* and *La Corona* has long been noted, and critics have placed Donne's poetic craftsmanship along the spiritual axis, interpreting the sequential sonnets as manifestations of disciplinary devotional act. See R. V. Young, "The Religious Sonnet," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, 218-232; Catherine Bates, "Desire, Discontent, Parody: The Love Sonnet in Early Modern England," in *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* edited by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, 105-124; also Helen Wilcox, "Sacred Desire, Forms of Belief: The Religious Sonnet in Early Modern Britain," in *Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, 145-165.

appropriate Donne's near contemporary Andrew Marvell, as a "witty fable" but one that "had hitherto puzzled all its Readers" (61, 57). In our time, the poem has received only occasional comments because, as one relatively recent critic puts, the poem's "abrupt shifts of tone and flaccid narration" continues to "dismay even the best natured and most learned critics" (Ronald J Corthell 97). Even those interested in the poem have found themselves in disagreement about its genre, style, purposes, value, and significance. Janel M. Muleller argues that the poem is an Ovidian epic elaboration on heretical theories of the soul, a presentation of "the world of oppositions and conflicts which effect transformation" (117). George Williamson labels *Metempsychosis* an "epic satire" that traces "the evolution of original sin from the apple" by which "corruption enters at the angelic level and descends the scale of being to all parts of the world" (251). In a similar vein, Anne Lake Prescott categorizes *Metempsychosis* as Menippean satire, a "salty, jumbled, cynical" mode of writing that Donne utilizes, with a Spenserian twist, for topical commentary (159). W. A. Murray argues that the poem allegorizes the problem of moral choice, because the soul of the apple repeatedly demonstrates "crucial error followed by death from natural causes" (149). Arthur Marotti contends that the poem relates to Donne's skepticism of court politics, particularly his discomfort with Robert Cecil (129).

Whether *Metempsychosis* was intended to be an epic, satire, or allegory is a matter of speculation. Indeed, *Metempsychosis* contains properties of all these genres. The poem begins in a typical epic voice, "I sing," which immediately evokes the spirits of Homer, Virgil, and Spenser; its stanzaic form, with its nine pentameters and a final hexameter, likewise echoes Spenser's signature form. The poem, appears to comment allusively on contemporary political notables, such as the Earl of Essex, Robert Cecil, Thomas Egerton, and Queen Elizabeth, and its self-classification as "Pôema Satyricon" establishes a generic connection with satire. Yet the multiple

(and destabilizing) preliminaries that precede the actual body of the poem introduced with the title *The Progress of the Soul*--a dedication to infinity (Infinitati Sacrum), a dated inscription (of writing or dedication), a title (*Metempsychosis*), a subtitle (Pœma Satyricon), and Donne's self-introducing epistle--package the poem paratextually as a hybrid, metamorphic entity that defies easy categorization (see figures 1-3).





Figures 1-3: The first pages of *Metempsychosis* that open the 1633 edition.

Such *disconcordia* is, at least in part, why most modern critics and editors of Donne’s poems have found *Metempsychosis* troubling to place generically. Yet, I suggest that this problem of accommodation is the very point of the poem. Like the itinerant soul it describes, searching restlessly for accommodation in various bodies, *Metempsychosis* itself searches for its right and proper form, metamorphosing from Spenserian epic through allegory and satire eventually to personal prayer, which I will shortly demonstrate. Put another way, in *Metempsychosis* or *The Progress of the Soul*, Donne lets his poetic imagination as well as his very soul float, roam, and wander as he experimentally engages with conventionalized literary forms.

### III. Critical Responses: Areas of Neglect

Extant criticism of *Metempsychosis* has paid little or no attention to its recurring imagery of housing. Donne repeatedly uses the words “inn” (181), “house” (187, 244, 333, 392, 401, 490), “room(s)” (392, 398),

"bedchamber" (393), and "castle" (374) to describe the multiple, temporary, and perishable bodies in which the deathless soul finds itself as a "tenant" (175). The soul's serial transmigration results in a series of unproductive unions with bodies that are either politically lustful or sexually lascivious. The bodies in which the itinerant soul dwells are all associated, directly or indirectly, with lust: most notably, the mandrake, sparrows, wolf, and ape are conventional symbols of lechery in both the pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, the bodies appear explicitly self-interested and engaged in a merciless sexual exploitation that drains the soul away. The wolf and ape episodes, for example, are accompanied with graphic images of greed, rape, and murder (401-30, 451-90). The violating and violated bodies, which are eventually put to death, crush the soul's hope to regain the restful security of its initial abode at Paradise. In other cases, Donne uses such terms as "prison" (241, 371), "tomb" (399), "confined and enjailed" (177), and "cloistered" (375), all of which emphasize the soul's suffering, invoking the senses of isolation, emptiness, and suffocation. With these descriptions of the soul and the mortal body yoked in nonreciprocal and volatile unions, Donne implies that the soul's transmigratory progress is a search for right accommodation and a righteous host. The question at stake is, thus, how to find the properly charitable body or form to anchor the restless soul.

More importantly for my immediate discussion, Donne's substantial attention to the problem of accommodation carries personal resonances. The soul's weary itinerancy after the Fall is framed by the poet's personal and prayerful "I" narrative in the opening stanzas, which is an interesting element of the text seldom discussed in detail by critics:

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the symbolism of the bodies, see Karl P. Wentersdorf's "Symbol and Meaning in Donne's *Metempsychosis* or *The Progresse of the Soule*" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 69-90.

Great Destiny the commissary of God,  
 That hast marked out a path and period  
 For every thing; who, where we offspring took,  
 Our ways and ends seest at one instant; thou  
 Knot of all causes, thou whose changeless brow  
 Ne'er smiles nor frowns, O vouch thou safe to look  
 And show my story, in thy eternal book;  
 That (if my prayer be fit) I may understand  
 So much myself, as to know with what hand,  
       How scant, or liberal this my life's race is spanned. (31-40)

With its Spenserian stanzaic form and somewhat Miltonic invocation to “make my dark heavy poem light, light” (55), Donne creates expectations of a Christian epic about “the progress of a deathless soul” (1). The soul’s story, however, is deferred until stanza 12, and in the first eleven stanzas Donne repeatedly shifts his focus from the ancient time when the soul’s journey begins to his own “life’s race”; from the Creation to the Fall, from the original sin to the Crucifixion; from changeless Destiny’s “eternal book” (37) to his own fickle, transient “six lusters” (or thirty years) (41) of unedifying “story” or “legend” prone to “steep ambition, sleepy poverty, / Spirit-quenching sickness, dull capacity, / Distracting business” and “beauty’s nets” (43-46).

In sum, Donne’s story of “the progress of a deathless soul” is simultaneously an inward journey through which he attempts to “understand / So much myself, as to know with what hand, / How scant, or liberal this my life’s race is spanned” (38-40). The conventions of epic form, accordingly, serve to frame his personal prayer: “O vouch thou safe to look / And show my story, in thy eternal book / That (*if my prayer be fit*) I may understand / So much myself” (36-39, emphasis added). History and myth, the universal and the particular, high and low, full-scale epic and microcosmic, consciously self-inscribed prayer, all seemingly

dissonant, freely and fleetingly converge and diverge. And it is this complex literary terrain that Donne sets out to traverse in his own simultaneously spiritual and poetic journey: "through many straights, and lands I roam," he confesses, "I launch at paradise, and sail toward home" (56-57). Imagining himself as an itinerant, Donne directs his focus to the Tree of Knowledge where the deathless soul, the heroine of his poem, originally dwelt. At this point, the deathless soul and the poet's are paralleled--or, more precisely, overlap. And the first thing the soul meditates on is the oneness of the Tree of Knowledge and the Cross to which Christ, the Redeemer, was nailed. This moment encapsulates the soul's much desired recuperation of the restful security of its initial and eventual abodes:

That Cross, our joy, and grief, where nails did tie  
 That all, which always was all, everywhere,  
 Which could not die, yet could not choose but die;  
 Stood in the self same room in Calvary,  
 Where first grew the forbidden learned tree,  
 For on that tree hung in security  
 This soul, made by the Maker's will from pulling free. (71-80)

Interestingly, 16 August--the date with which Donne inscribes the poem--falls on Saint Roch's day in the Catholic calendar. Traditionally, Saint Roch was associated with a cross, the symbol of charitable sacrifice, because he was believed to have been born with a red cross on his breast.<sup>8</sup> As Prescott asks, "Is St. Roch here because he is a mischievous parallel to Spenser's Redcrosse Knight--a Redcrosse Saint?" (162). While Prescott suggests a satirical edge to the Spenserian echo, I propose that the potential

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<sup>8</sup> "St. Roch," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* by Gregory Cleary; see also "The Tree of St. Roche," in *Jacobus De Voragine V, 3-7* translated by William Caxton. While the majority of biographies of St. Roch report that the saint was born with a red cross on his breast, in Caxton's translation, the cross is colorless and on the shoulder.

link with Spenser's Redcrosse Knight suggests Donne's playful imposition of spiritual discipline via the disciplinary rigors of the Spenserian stanza--a stanza Donne furthermore *overgoes* by adding an extra line (ten to Spenser's nine), just as Spenser himself attempted to "overgo" his epic-romance predecessors. Donne's attempt to accommodate his spiritual navigation in a form similar to that Spenser uses for his "Legend of Holiness" may in fact deserve more careful critical attention. Above all, the Legend of Holiness charts the progress of a Christian soul or what might be called the Christian bildungsroman, in which an uncouth and untried knight errant transforms into St. George. After all, *Metempsychosis*, however defined generically, is also *The Progress of the [Christian] Soul*.

The poet's awareness of the cross in his allusion to the Tree of Knowledge does not yet reach forward to the possibility of sacramental union, the moment Donne later elaborates in his "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness," where he writes, "We think that Paradise and Calvary, / Christ's Cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place; / Look Lord, and find both Adams met in me" (21-24). Donne's discovery of "both Adams met in me," a recurring trope of personal conformity with Christ in his later devotional works, is missing from *Metempsychosis*. Here Donne lingers over the cross, the moment of original sin, and the soul's restless itinerancy. Nevertheless, *Metempsychosis* signals Donne's growing interest in accommodation, that is, the union of the soul and the charitable body, the salvific union of the fallen soul and the redeeming body.

#### IV. Donne, Transformation, and Self-transformation:

##### *Metempsychosis as Palinode?*

It is generally accepted that, at the turn of the seventeenth-century, Donne underwent multiple personal and professional mishaps and

uncertainties.<sup>9</sup> To briefly summarize, the young man who left the study of law at Lincoln's Inn joined the Earl of Essex's expeditions to Cadiz and the Azores, probably in the hopes of social and professional advancement. These hopes appeared to have been fulfilled at first when Donne succeeded in getting the post of secretary to the Lord Keeper, Thomas Egerton, but were soon thwarted by his romantic (but father-in-law-enraging) elopement and marriage in 1601. Donne thereafter experienced a series of setbacks, including unemployment, imprisonment, and financial difficulties that lasted until his ordination as a clergyman in the Church of England in 1615.<sup>10</sup> During this tumultuous period, Donne seemed preoccupied with the idea of transformation, more specifically, with the idea of transformation already begun and yet incomplete, and thus open-ended. In his letter to Sir Henry Goodyer probably written in 1607 or 1608, for example, Donne writes, "You shall seldom see a Coyne, upon which the stampe were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint" (*Letters*, 87). The "deformed coin" to which Donne alludes in his discussion of changing religious affiliation carries personal resonances; it implies change as a

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<sup>9</sup> Critics--John Carey, Marotti, Richard Strider, to name a few--have paid attention to the first decade of the seventeenth-century as the pivotal moment of Donne's literary, spiritual, and socio-political change. They disagree, however, on the sources and implications of this change. See Carey 1-116, especially 15-31; Marotti 129; Strider 677-705.

<sup>10</sup> For up-to-date discussions of the complex biographical and historical contexts for Donne's career, see *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne* edited by Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester. Many of the articles help revise older interpretations of Donne's thwarted ambitions. Paul E. J. Hammer, for example, notes that Donne's service as a gentleman volunteer in Essex's expeditions was not necessarily rewarding in socio-economic sense although provided him with the prospect of adventure, new social contacts through military comradeship, and first-hand knowledge of war (435-46). Donne's military career seemed to have helped him employed by Egerton, but the nature of his service as Egerton's secretary, which remains unspecified, calls renewed attentions to Donne's relationships, ambition, career, and marriage (Steven W. May 337-59; Andrew Gordon 460-70; Dennis Flynn 471-82).

reentry or reinstatement by which stability may be acquired, but it carries, too, a sense of the tremendous pressure that may follow any forced change.

In "Resurrection, imperfect," a poem generally believed to have been written in 1609, Donne expresses in a similar manner his mixed response to transformation, his fascination with the process of change shadowed by his anxieties over deferred or incomplete change. Playing with the age-old Christian trope of resurrection and redemption, Donne draws the alchemical image of the Son transformed from "all gold when he lay down" to "All tincture," that is, to an essence of gold with the "power to make even sinful flesh like his" (13-16). To paraphrase, the Son, himself undergoing transformation, is also the (sole) source of power to transform the base material of fallen man's sinful, corrosive body into a gold as eternally bright and sustainable as the Son's. Basically, Donne reverberates the orthodox reading of Christ, whose resurrection ensures the transformation of sinful into imperishable flesh. Significantly, however, the poem, as its title indicates, remains incomplete, with its sense of imperfection re-invoked in the end, "*Desunt caetera* [i.e. the rest is lacking]." At one level, the presence of these framing comments suggests simply that this particular poem on the Resurrection is literally incomplete. Yet, these recurring reminders of "imperfection" or "lacking" may also connote that Donne's personal resurrection, for which he so longs, likewise remains incomplete, cannot yet come full circle.

What does the poem and letter tell us about? They indicate how transformation becomes for Donne not simply a literary theme or *topos* but a felt experience on many fundamental levels during this period of personal, professional, and devotional change in the years before 1615, the year of his ordination that Donne himself names his "second birth" (*Devotions*, 2). In these writings, we have a glimpse of Donne's preoccupation with transformation and accommodation, his serious inquiry into the complex dynamic between desires of change and of stability--the

inquiry already started to form in *Metempsychosis*, a poem written at the beginning of notable transition and uncertainty. *Metempsychosis* and other writings by Donne over the next decade reveal that for Donne the trope of metamorphosis--or, more precisely, the incomplete search for the right(eous) form--has particular personal valences; that the search relates to Donne's intense efforts to accommodate his dislodged professional and spiritual self in the midst of changing circumstances and relationships.

## V. Implications and Suggestions

Commenting on *Metempsychosis*, Ben Jonson remarked on two things: "The conceit of Donne's Transformation or Metamorphosis" and its unfinished and unfinishable state. "Of this [i.e. the soul's incarnations in all heretic bodies]," Jonson continued, "he never wrote but one sheet, & now since he was made Doctor repenteth highlie and seeketh to destroy all his poems" (1.136). Jonson implies that the poem's incompleteness marks Donne's departure from the playful and even sacrilegious to the prayerful realm. Brief as it is, Jonson's account registers the poem as a hallmark of Donne's multivalent changes of vocation, poetic imagination, and psychology: his transformation from Jack Donne, lyricist, satirist, and rakish young man about town, to Dr. Donne, the eminently respectable Dean of St. Paul's and devotional priest-poet; and his inward turn from the sardonic self to the penitent self as the term "repenteth" implies.<sup>11</sup> Was *Metempsychosis* meant to be a palinode of the secular as Jonson insinuate?

While *Metempsychosis* has rarely been considered as belonging to Donne's personal and devotional poems, all early editions of Donne's *Poems*

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<sup>11</sup> To repent, etymologically linked to Latin *re-paeniare*, Anglo-Norman *repenter*, and Old and Middle French *repentir*, signifies both behavioral and emotional turning, to renounce or cease to do something, and to feel contrition. The earliest English usage goes back to the fourteenth-century (*OED*).

in fact group it with *La Corona* and *Holy Sonnets*. In the first edition of Donne's *Poems* in 1633, *Metempsychosis* opens the volume, followed (without section division) by *La Corona* and *Holy Sonnets*. Beginning with the 1635 edition, *Metempsychosis*, *La Corona*, and *Holy Sonnets* were moved collectively to follow the secular poems and letters, but the group was kept together. In seventeenth-century editions from 1635 onward, the last three stanzas of *Metempsychosis* share the running head "divine poems" with the opening sonnet of *La Corona*, with the conclusion of the soul's journey in *Metempsychosis* leading directly to the more obviously devout exploration of the soul's journey that begins on the same page (see figure 4). Interesting, too, is that the poem's body, now separate from its original preliminary epistle that the 1635 edition kept at the very beginning of the book as the 1633 edition did, was printed directly under the title *The Progress of the Soul* (see figure 5). By this (re-)arrangement, the poem's satirical quality for which modern critics have long argued was remarkably reduced, if not entirely effaced, and the poem's spiritual valences notably increased. As a result, the thematic arc linking *Metempsychosis*, *La Corona*, and *Holy Sonnets* was made more visible, creating a seamless narrative of Donne's progress of the soul into liturgical devotion. The printing history reflects the (admittedly complex and incomplete) manuscript tradition: five of the most textually significant extant manuscripts of *Metempsychosis* (of the eight in total) all place the poem directly before *La Corona*, in two cases sharing the recto and verso of the same leaf.<sup>12</sup> The potential implication is that Donne, at least at some point in the manuscript circulation of his texts, saw the group as linked, even if modern editions tend to keep them separate. At the least, Donne's early editors (which included his son) clearly perceived *Metempsychosis* as a prelude to Donne's devotional songs of sacramental

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<sup>12</sup> See Peter Beal, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, Vol. 1: 1450-1625, Part 1, DnJ1659-67 and DnJ757-74; and John Donne, *The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters* edited by W. Milgate 171-172.

"And show my story, in thy eternal book"

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conformity that, to appropriate another Christian poet of his time, "pleased him long choosing and beginning late" (*Paradise Lost* 9.26).

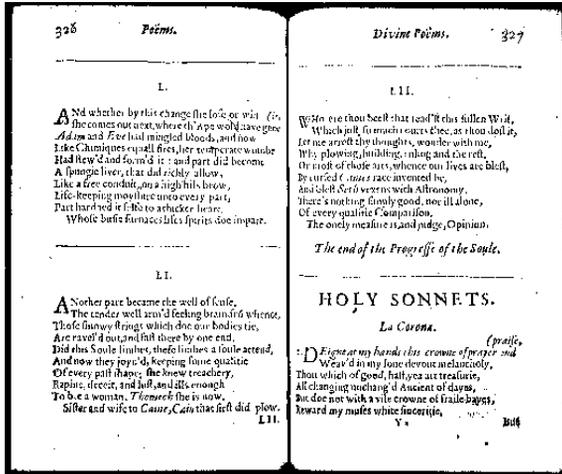


Figure 4: The last page of *Metempsychosis* or *The Progress of the Soul* and beginning of *La Corona* in the 1635 edition

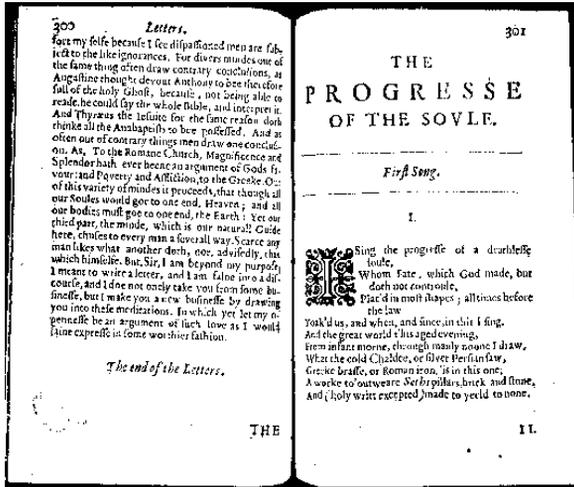


Figure 5: The first page of *Metempsychosis* or *The Progress of the Soul* (separated from its preliminary epistle)

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ABSTRACT

**“And show my story, in thy eternal book”: *Metempsychosis* and John Donne’s Sacramental Poetics**

Youngjin Chung

This study offers a revisionist reading of John Donne’s *Metempsychosis*, or *the Progress of the Soul* (1601), a poem that has received only sporadic critical attention. The poem’s abrupt shifts of tone, narrative mode, and uses of generic conventions create a problem in accommodating it within the corpus of Donne’s poetry. Modern critics almost invariably categorizes the poem as a satire, paying disproportionate attention to the poem’s possible socio-political resonances. What is overlooked is Donne’s play with literary form and his spiritual inquiry into how to accommodate the itinerant soul with the charitable body. A combined attention to the poem’s search for the right form and righteous host helps us recuperate Donne’s interest in sacramental transformation, an interest hitherto obscured. Furthermore, the printing history of the poem, which has long been neglected by modern editors and critics, alerts us to its connection with Donne’s divine poems, namely, *La Corona* and *Holy Sonnets*. Along with Donne’s more apparently devotional and liturgical artifacts, *Metempsychosis* forms a meaningful sequence that suggests Donne’s personal progress of the soul and his serious undertaking of poetry-writing as sacramental devotion.

**Key Words** | *Metempsychosis*, Donne, sacrament, accommodation, the progress of the soul.