**Selfhood and technologies of textual production: the matter of John Donne’s poetics**

**Siobhán Collins**

Our philosophy system excludes techne from its mediations; Marshall McLuhan

The principal difficulty resides in not submitting our world made up of mathematical calculus, epistemic things and technological media to a supreme being, be it God, Meaning or Man – something the early modern age was incapable of doing; Friedrich A. Kittler

What the printing – presses bring to birth with inky travail, we take as it comes; but what is written out by hand is in greater reverence; John Donne

In the early 1970s, Marshall McLuhan pointed out that the philosophy of the Enlightenment ignored the technology of its own production. This remarkable observation is having an important impact on current theory. There is now an increasing recognition that text cannot be conceived outside of its relation to the realm of matter. The work of today’s most prominent media theorists, influenced also by the advent of digitized technology, concentrates on how the materiality of the text shapes our notions of selfhood. The relation between technology and textuality is debated in terms of agency and meaning. Friedrich Kittler argues that technology not only makes inscription possible, but also, and by a process that involves ‘a sort of structural violence’, constructs ‘cultural forms as well as our bodily experience of them’.4 That is to say, society and selfhood are subject to, and subjects of, technology. Kittler shares with Foucault a deterministic notion of human agency. However, he contrasts the author’s passivity with the power of writing technologies. Whilst denying agency to humanity, he suggests that autonomy resides in technology itself. His privileging of technology’s agency excludes the text and the author from analysis, producing a new and dehumanizing dichotomy that separates technology from textuality and authorship. Kittler forsakes the Enlightenment’s focus on the text as transcendent in favour of an historical analysis of the technologies of communication.

However, as James Brown’s topical article, ‘In Search of a Technological Criticism’, illustrates, the separation of textuality and technology is problematic; technology, as the etymology of the word, fusing techne and logos, implies, is both concrete and abstract, and in partaking of an object and a subject implies a mutually informative relation between consciousness and its physical form of expression.5 The interface between textuality and technology extends correlatively to the complex interrelation between soul, mind and body. When our understanding of one of these terms changes it correspondingly alters each of the other terms. For instance, Descartes’ mid-seventeenth-century reconfiguration of the mind as ‘the whole soul, which thinks’, also reconstitutes the body as a mechanical object.6 Whereas the classical tripartite soul has a variety of faculties, including growth, nutrition and locomotion as well as sensation, imagination and intellectation, the Cartesian soul is the principle of thought. Descartes’ argument that the soul and the mind are one made possible his assertion that ‘our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body’.7 Prior to this division from the soul, the body held ontological significance. The Cartesian notion of selfhood as the thinking ‘I’ that transcends matter is definitive of the historical phenomena whereby, as McLuhan puts it, ‘our philosophy system excludes techne from its mediations’. Although dualism extends back to Plato’s argument that the eternal soul is the essence of selfhood and superior to the perishable body, the body is not passive and mechanized as we find in Descartes’ writings; rather, it has the ability, albeit negative, to distract the embodied soul from its search for knowledge. Aristotle placed much more emphasis on the self as a composite of body and soul. It is through figurative language that he explains their interrelation, comparing the body to ‘wax’ and the soul to ‘the shape given to it by the stamp’.8 St. Aquinas’ scholastic concept of selfhood, which continued well into the seventeenth century, also guarantees the ontological significance of body in language that, like Aristotle’s, relies metaphorically on technologies of communication: ‘the blue-print of all we are…may be carried in soul, but it is realized in body’.9 The early modern pre-Cartesian self as body / soul composite underwrites Kittler’s observation that this period is incapable of dissociating technology from textuality, body from ‘God, Meaning, or Man’. However, while Kittler offers this comment as a critique of humanism, I believe that an analysis of how an early modern author negotiated the impact of competing technologies of writing (manuscript and print) on notions of selfhood is significant to our current, post-enlightened, search for a theory that would account for the text’s relation to writing technologies.

In a work that has greatly influenced the recent turn to technology in Renaissance literary studies, Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday demonstrate that, much as print and digital technologies overlap today, manuscript and the new medium of print not only coexisted as writing technologies in the Renaissance but interacted and competed with one another, each contributing to differing concepts of self.10 Concern with and manipulation of the relation between materiality and textuality, body and meaning, is evident not only in Donne’s poetics, which can be gleaned from both his poetry and prose, but also in his deliberation between the two competing forms of textual production available to him. Donne’s preference was for manuscript circulation of his work. Relatively little of his poetry or prose was published in print in his lifetime. The nine prose works he did print: Pseudo Martyr (1610), Ignatius his Conclave (1611), Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (1624), and six sermons (1622-1627), constitute a small percentage of Donne’s body of prose, which includes: Paradoxes and Problems, Biathanatos, Essays in Divinity, an impressively large body of letters and more than 150 sermons. Of his poetic canon, aside from the three brief commendatory poems and the elegy on the death of Prince Henry that appeared in print ‘in the books of others’, only the two Anniversaries on the death of Elizabeth Drury, with their accompanying ‘Funerall Elegie’, were printed with Donne’s authorization in 1611 and 1612.11 This paper will consider the motivation behind Donne’s decision to print a select few works and to transmit the vast majority of his poetry and prose in manuscript form, an understanding of which is critical to any attempt to reconstruct how the author may have intended his writings to be read. On a methodological level this will serve to illustrate the importance of how the text’s content and the material form of its production, dissemination and reception interact with one another to produce meaning. The weight of meaning Donne imparts to materiality, and its ability to communicate, will be discussed in relation to his pervasive use of the body / book metaphor throughout his canon. Focusing primarily but not exclusively on Donne’s poetry, I will argue that his choice of textual production is a correlation of his ambivalent attitude to his poems as both bodily and spiritual, concrete and abstract, and reveals the psychological, epistemological, ontological and political depths behind the questions of language, authorship, and textual production in the early modern period.

As a result of choosing to circulate the bulk of his poems in manuscript form, Donne’s poetry was susceptible to variant and erroneous transcription. Virtually none of Donne’s poetic holographs survive, motivating negative critical consideration of his authorial attitude towards poetry.12 Izaac Walton, Donne’s earliest biographer, describes Donne’s poems as ‘facetiously composed’ and ‘carelessly scattered’, based on the poet’s decision not to print the greater part of his verse. Speed Hill states: ‘we must admit the possibility that [Donne] …did not value his poetry as we’.13 An image of a careless, yet essentially self-aggrandizing Donne, with little thought for the endurance or worth of his verse, who wrote as a ‘coterie’ poet (rather than as ‘a professional’ like Jonson) for the aim of ‘social prestige and preferment that successful exploitation of the patronage system would win’, has been constructed.14 Underlying this portrait of Donne, I believe, is a modern predisposition toward print, which assumes that an author in this period would, if he or she valued his/her art, choose to immortalize it in type.

Donne and Jonson record in their verse how poetry would circulate widely in a scribal community, bringing fame to its author. In ‘The Triple Fool’ Donne recounts his double folly: one, he falls in love with a woman, and two, he writes about it in ‘whining poetry’ (line 3).15 Yet, his rhetorical question, ‘where’s the wiseman, that would not be I, / If she would not deny?’ confidently asserts, advertises, and intertwines his specifically masculine textual and sexual talents (lines 4-5). The poet attempts catharsis through art; he ‘tames’ and ‘fetters’ emotion within his verse, yet ironically that verse, ‘by delighting many, frees again / Grief, which verse did restrain’ (lines 11-16). The poet’s lack of control over his readership determines that ‘two fools, do so grow three’ (line 21).

In contrast, Jonson desires renown through the wide circulation of his poetry. Such fame is the subject matter of his verse addressed to Sir Kenelm Digby, in which Jonson glories in the thought of how his lines may be read ‘at the Treasurers bord’, and dreams of ‘what copies shall be had, What transcripts begg’d’ (lines. 3-6).16 Jonson, later in his life, sent his poetry to press thereby increasing his audience while advertising himself as an established author of his collected Works. Donne feared not for the survival of his poems, but that a much wider audience than he could control would read his poetry. While print publication, as I will show, was pertinent to his concerns on occasion, Donne never did publish a volume of his poetry due to his apprehension of ‘some incongruities in the resolution’: ‘I know what I shall suffer from many interpretations’.17 Donne recognises that to change his main mode of textual production from manuscript to print would transform also his audience, and thus the reception of his poems.

It is because Donne was so self-consciously an author, so hopeful of communication yet so discriminating about his readers, so concerned with the aesthetics and ethics of verse, that he engaged so deeply with how materiality signifies, choosing in the main to transmit his verse in manuscript. The concept of individual authorship, associated with the printed book and its illusion of linearity and closure, is a relative one in the early modern period. Although Foucault points to the seventeenth century as the time when ‘[t]he coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ constituted the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas’, within the still vibrant manuscript culture the circumstances under which copies were produced, the personal bodily sweat and expense involved in physically transcribing (and altering, consciously or unconsciously) a text, not only result in ‘some confusion’ between the role of the author and that of the reader, but link bodies together in a shared act of textual interplay that questions boundaries between the individual and the social body, between flesh and the page.18 The evidence of ‘part-shared language’ that marks the style of manuscript texts testifies to the communal and open nature of their production.19 The early modern manuscript system was far less author-centered, or interested in fixity, than print culture.20 It involved ‘different material conditions of writing and reading’, different attitudes towards ownership and materiality, which did not allow for an absolute distinction between writer and audience.21 The very physical and intimate nature of transmission in a manuscript culture, for Donne, not only acknowledges the bodily and contingent nature of language, but also connects the author and reader in an act of physical performance that transports to the spiritual, which the technology of print miscarries: ‘What the printing-presses bring to birth with inky travail, we take as it comes; but what is written out by hand is in greater reverence’.22 Print’s ability to ‘produce almost flawless replicas of a given text over and over again’ not only threatens the book’s symbolic value as a revered object, but also the intimacy between body and book, which, as we will see, is so important to Donne’s poetics.23

Donne plays ingeniously with the analogy between body and book throughout his work.24 His notion of the body as a book differs in essence to the postmodern idea of the body inscribed with and constructed by social discourses. For Donne, the body as text not only illustrates by resemblance the whole of nature, but is also inscribed with God’s sacred text. He describes man as a ‘plentifull Library’, and the heart as a book of instruction presented by God.25 The open heart is a symbol for religious purity, and figures prominently in Renaissance poetics as a metaphor for interior writing, suggesting transparency and equating textuality with both corporeality and an interior subjectivity.26 The line between body and book is blurred; they are imagined as both metaphorically and literally linked in this period. The image of the heart features prominently in Sidney’s sonnet sequence, Astrophil and Stella, as symbol of both his bodily desire and the transparent purity of his textual voice: ‘know that I, in pure simplicity, / Breathe out the flames which burn within my heart, / Love only reading unto me this art’.27 However, for Donne, man’s subjectivity is conflicted: torn between contingent earthly desires on the one hand, and a priori ‘testimonies of the conscience’, which are ‘imprinted’ in the memory (contained in the heart) on the other.28 The philosophical significance Donne awards to memory is, paradoxically, both orthodox and radical. While Plato and St. Augustine placed a great deal of importance on memory as a rational faculty of the soul that transcends our material being, Donne emphasises how memory is also dependent on the body. For Donne, memory is both ‘the art of salvation’ in that it can return the reader to a consideration of their creation in the image of God, and at the same time it is a repository for remembrance of our lustful sins, which feed bodily desire.29 Donne views the body as a book wherein can be read the epic narrative of Christian history: from the Creation, through the Fall, to the Redemption and, finally, the Resurrection. The body is the Alpha and Omega of God, for ‘his first, and last work is the body of man’.30 Donne’s view of the heart as ‘imprinted’ with God’s image and text is underpinned by his notion of man as microcosm. Donne insists on theologically minded correspondences despite his awareness of, and concern with, the new sciences’ increasing separation of the physical body from the soul. The title of Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) suggests that at this historic moment there is not yet the sharp division between the mental and the physical, the body and the text, the psychological and the physiological that characterized the duality of Enlightenment ontology.31 At the same time, however, the divisions and subdivisions within Burton’s vast text provide ‘a textual example of [the] delight in particularization’ that characterized this period’s ‘culture of dissection’.32 This tension between unity and division, as we will see, characterizes also Donne’s work.

Consideration of the textual materiality of Donne’s poetry necessitates a focus on both the body and the page, for ‘[l]oves mysteries in soules doe grow, [b]ut yet the body is his booke’ (‘The Extasie’, lines 71-2). In his verse, Donne offers a reading of his microcosmic body / world, where ‘streams, like veins, runs through the earth’s every part’ (‘The Bracelet’, line 38). As Elaine Scarry observes, Donne ‘lifts the interior of the body directly onto the surface of the page’, and ‘repositions the page back into the human body’.33 Language takes on attributes of the body in Donne’s work; muscles, sinews and veins are made to signify. Descartes’ later claim that ‘our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body’ is anticipated and contested by Donne’s remarkable description of the soul as fully partaking in all that is corporeal: ‘all that the soule does it does in, and with, and by the body’.34 The material body / book, for Donne, is capable of encapsulating and expressing what would otherwise be an abstract spirituality. In ‘A Valediction: of the Book’, Donne states: ‘though minde be the heaven, where love doth sit, / Beauty’a convenient type may be to figure it’ (lines 35-6). Flesh (or parchment) serves as the material out of which spirituality is made known, and through which souls communicate with one another. The body is the conduit or mediating agent connecting and commingling profane and sacred realms. However, as a microcosm, wherein can be read the book of nature and God’s word, the body exists as a site of tension: on the one hand, as in the Platonic tradition, it is the prison-house of the soul, the locus of worldly appetite, desire and decay; on the other, it is the image of God and the instrument of redemption in the person of Christ.

Direct correspondence between body and word, or body and soul, sign and signified, is damaged by the Fall. Such a loss of correspondence is lamented in Donne’s Anniversaries, which mourn the death of Elizabeth Drury. Donne’s decision to print the Anniversaries, a decision he regretted and later described in a letter to George Gerrard as a kind of personal sin ‘beyond pardon’, is generally assumed to be at the application of Elizabeth’s father, Sir Robert Drury, the poet’s patron.35 Patronage was crucial to Donne’s welfare at this time; the necessity of keeping body and soul together would certainly validate his decision to publish these poems at Drury’s request.

If we look briefly at the main theme of the poems, another reason to publish them in a form that represents, for Donne, an additional remove from the ideal of correspondence between body and word, emerges. Donne never met Elizabeth Drury. In his poems, she symbolizes an almost perfect unity between the physical and the spiritual, but her death metaphorically enacts a second fall into a ‘new Philosophy’ and an increasingly mechanistic society, which ‘cals all in doubt’, resulting in the further breakdown of correspondence between body and language, self and world (The First Anniversary, line 205). Following the death of Elizabeth Drury, the world has become a carcass divided from its soul, the body a mere empty shell that has lost its colour and no longer signifies. Arguably, considering Donne’s description of the new technology of print as ‘without reverence’, the form of textual production he chose for his Anniversaries reflects these poems’ thematic view that an ever more mechanistic world advanced the separation of soul and language from the body, thus denying ‘all cohærence’ and ‘all Relation’ (lines 213-4).

Donne attempts to counter the immateriality of language and its denial of analogy and metaphor by focusing on the materials of his art in terms of the four elements, which correspond to the four humors of the medieval Galenic body:

My fire of Passion, sighes of ayre,

Water of teares, and earthly sad despaire,

Which my materialls bee

 (‘The Dissolution’, lines 9-11).

His description of himself in his holy sonnet as ‘a little world made cunningly / Of elements and an Angelike spright’ (lines 1-2) can also be mapped onto his verse, which, as has been widely noted, intermingles the material and the spiritual, or in our contemporary terms, the technological and the textual. Like St. Paul’s description of the Church and all its members as one body, discourse on the medieval humoral body focuses on the union of its parts. This unity of parts, though always fragile, is threatened by the new climate of scientific scrutiny; for instance, the body under the pressure of anatomical dissection becomes fragmented and divided, an object to its self. In ‘Loves Exchange’, Donne writes: ‘If th’unborne / Must learne, by my being cut up, and torne: / Kill, and dissect me’ (lines 38-40). Donne’s rhetoric is charged with anatomical references: ‘the sharp outline of … bones, the liquid trickle of dissolution, or the compact viscous masses of brain and liver’ ‘bulk’ out of his ‘flat page’.36 He consciously explores the bodily nature of language in a deliberate attempt to put material substance back into words. It is within the context of seventeenth-century duality and division that Donne’s hyperbolic claim for Elizabeth Drury – ’her bodie thought’ – discloses his sense of loss, his nostalgic desire for absolute unity between body and soul, signifier and signified (The Second Anniversary, line 246). Ironically, having ‘descended to print’ his Anniversaries, they nevertheless evoke his longing for correspondence that influenced also his decision to publish the bulk of his poems in manuscript form. Manuscript form, for the poet, approximates more closely to the speaking body than print, and thus serves to reduce the breach between word and thing, body and soul, author and reader, thereby also helping to reduce the risk of misinterpretation, which he so feared and to which I will return.

Donne’s complex use of the body metaphor displays a remarkable openness to psychological uncertainty, and his own historical moment in which man’s identification with a metaphysically ordained sphere is threatened by the new empirical sciences, religious factions and the increasing mechanization of writing technologies, in short, by the growing disjunction between body and soul. In a sermon, he writes:

How empty a thing is Rhetorique? (and yet rhetorique will make absent and remote things present to your understanding). How weak a thing is poetry? (and yet poetry is a counterfeit Creation and makes things that are not, as though they were).37

Donne’s syntax highlights the divisions that language exhibits in the early modern period. His contrasting clauses juxtapose an abstract view of language as ‘empty’, as a ‘thing’ in itself that operates according to its own self-contained laws, with a view of language’s powerful ability to create, and its inherently symbolic nature. In the first view, rhetoric is abstract and empty: there is no direct link between the sign and its referent; the word cannot embody, or fathom, being. ‘[A]nd yet’, Donne argues, rhetoric has the power to activate understanding as it strives towards regenerating things ‘absent and remote’. Understanding, Donne claims, is the conduit through which language can mediate between things ‘absent and remote’ and things present. Without understanding, which involves an active effort to digest the words of another, rhetoric is empty, meaningless, and indeed unnecessary. For Donne, the significance of language is dependent on a rhetorical understanding between author and audience, and this underwrites his imperative in his prose Epistle to his poem, Metempsychosis, that he ‘would have no such readers as [he] can teach’ (line 21).

Ideally, Donne’s coterie encircles and extends him, unifying author and reader as one body, through similar cognitive and affective orientation. In ‘A Valediction: of my Name in the Window’, a poem that, as Scarry shows, emphasises the material processes of writing and reading, the persona claims that by scratching his name on a windowpane his physical self is contained in the inscription: ‘My name engraved herein, / Doth contribute my firmness to this glass’ (lines 1-2). Donne’s ‘name’ at once both celebrates the living sexual body, and at the same time bemoans its absence; the engraving suggests both the hope that ‘all times shall find me the same’, and the fear that time may alter the reader’s ability to recognize the embodiment of Donne’s self as it is contained in the inscription:

Or if too hard and deepe

This learning be, for a scratch’d name to teach,

It, as a given deaths head keepe,

Lovers mortalitie to preach,

Or thinke this ragged bony name to bee

My ruinous Anatomie

(lines 19-24).

Donne’s awareness of the importance of the reader in the re-embodiment of his word is evident in his appeal to a particular reader, a particular contemporary audience, that is less likely than an uneducated reader or audience to misinterpret his language: ‘You this entireness better may fulfil, / Who have the pattern with you still’ (lines 17-18). Donne privileges the spoken word above what he describes as the ‘dead carcasses’ of the written.38 The association between writing and death is expressed in the Poet’s punning on the verb ‘engraved’ in this poem. For Donne, manuscript production offers an intimate textual encounter between author and reader within the context of bodily decay: he appeals to his reader to, in his absence, ‘repaire / and recompact’ his ‘scattered body’ (lines 31-32). In a verse letter ‘To Sir Henry Wotton’, Donne suggests that absent friends can share their souls in letters more fully than through physical touch, words being a manifestation of what is written in the breast. Donne’s privileging of the written above the spoken word in this letter is dependent on the fact that it is addressed to a close friend, whose intimacy with the poet ensures that Donne’s written word, despite his absence, renders his self, body and soul, and will not be misinterpreted.

It is such heartfelt engagement with the body / word that underlies Donne’s confidence in the power of rhetoric to regenerate and give presence to things ‘absent and remote’. The awareness Donne exhibits with regard to language’s inability to stand for things as they really are does not cancel out his desire to comprehend being through words and to use rhetoric as a means of communicating truth. I refer once again to a passage from his sermons, quoted earlier: ‘How weak a thing is poetry? (and yet poetry is a counterfait creation and makes things that are not, as though they were)’. The first clause, ‘How weak a thing is poetry?’ is undermined not only by the extraordinary creative power allotted to poetry in the second contrasting clause, but also by the difference in length between the two conflicting statements, and the question mark which signals doubt at the end of the first clause. The ‘and yet’ which connects the two clauses acknowledges the arbitrary nature of language but nevertheless marvels that within language, and particularly poetry, there exist such creative and communicative possibilities. However, for Donne, the potential for communication, where an understanding takes place between author and reader, is more fully realizable in manuscript forms of textual production.

Donne’s metaphor, cited in the epigraph, for print as a painful and bloody labour which births a child unworthy of attention, draws textual production and the sexual body into direct relation within the context of spirituality. Donne’s preference for manuscript not only reduces the risk of censorship and misinterpretation, but also correlates with his metaphorical use of the body as a means of communicating his beliefs and desire to a particular audience. The intimate nature of manuscript circulation limits Donne’s audience to circles of friends that, most likely, share similar interpretative strategies with the poet. Donne digests the body of rhetoric and the notion of proper interpretation that reached its apex in Sidney’s Defence of Poetry as metaphor.39 Sidney’s Defence would be difficult to conceive without the prior influence of Aristotle’s theory of art as mimesis, and Augustine’s rhetorical model, which argues that ‘anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative’ for ‘when something is interpreted … literally, it is understood in a carnal way’.40 According to Sidney, imitation is the essence of poetry. However, the imitation a poet figures forth is not that of the actual in nature, which has been distorted by fortune and circumstances, but of the ideal behind nature. Poetry is to speak metaphorically in order to provide a grasp of the universal design and order, which governs the material realm. Sidney’s Defence articulates the development of a theory of art as nature transformed by the ‘erected wit’ of the artist through metaphor and conceit.41

To speak metaphorically is for Donne, as it was for Sidney, the way to a higher truth. In ‘A Litanie’, Donne acknowledges his poetic debt to the metaphors of ‘heavenly poets’, which ‘excuse’ his own rhetorical ‘excess’ in ‘seeking secrets, or Poeticnesse’ (lines 68-72). However, metaphor, for Donne, is more than a rhetorical device, it is how the cosmic ‘all’ is written and should be read. For Donne, nature is created by a ‘literall God [and] … a figurative, a metaphoricall God too’.42 This aesthetic, which aligns the literal with the metaphorical, serves as an affirmation of a metaphysical poetic: ‘The world was a poem made up of conceits, … a “metaphysical” poem and God a “metaphysical” poet’.43 Donne’s God, whose words ‘wouldest bee understood literally’ but also contain ‘such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors’, justifies his own bold use of metaphor and conceit to redress the fall and restore the relationship between body and soul – a union that extends to word and thing, textuality and technology.44 God’s language is not abstract but enfolds within itself the material body, his words containing, as Donne enthuses, and imitates in his own writing, ‘such sinewes even in thy milke, and such things in thy words’.45 Donne’s preoccupation with the metaphysical conceit and chirography challenges the increasing polarity between subject and object, word and body, in the typographical turn of the seventeenth century. Paradoxically, the sexual act, which Donne associates with the fall into knowledge, is also the symbolic means by which the poet reunites subject and object. He contracts ‘the whole worlds soule’ (‘The Canonization’, line 40) into his microcosm in a self-conscious attempt to negate the otherness of the world by taking possession of it: ‘She is all states, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is’ (‘The Sunne Rising’, lines 21-2). Possession of the world translates to sexual consummation of the female other. Lovers are supreme and sovereign, negating space and time whilst encompassing all and nothing within their embrace, justifying all excess, and becoming the true paradox that unites all ‘contraries into one’. This transcendent one, however, figures forth an original state of primeval wholeness that, paradoxically, involves an enactment of death itself. In ‘The Canonization’ he writes: ‘we can die by it, if not live by love’ (line 28). The union of lovers, the Renaissance pun on the word ‘die’ for orgasm, and the poet’s assurance that he will ‘rise the same’ (line 26), is a remarkably corporeal interpretation and performance of Sidney’s metaphoric ‘erected wit’. The metaphorical movement, from the lovers’ ‘hermitage’ in each other’s mortal bodies to their eternal life as ‘Canoniz’d’ saints, relies rhetorically on the involvement of a reader who will with delight solve the ‘ridle’ and perceive the dialectical relationship between physical and spiritual love (lines 37; 35; 23).

Donne insists on an educated reader, one that knows how to read figurative language for its spiritual intent, and at the same time winks knowingly to the reader at the literal carnality of his verse, which, ‘[r]idlingly’ doth ‘catch men’ (‘Satyre II’, line 8). Although the physical consummation of earthly lovers serves as an example, or pattern, for the contemplation of divine love, Donne brings to the vehicle of the metaphor a degree of excess that complicates the reading strategies put forward by Augustine, and ‘new pleasures prove’ (‘The Bait’, line 2). The metaphoric transfer between body and knowledge, sex and religion, emerges from a cultural matrix, which privileges theological interpretation. Donne’s insistence on the bodily nature of the word is informed by, and yet in turn distinctively informs, this rhetorical tradition. Donne’s recognition of the ‘strangling snare’ of corporeal and sexual metaphors underwrites his insistence on a coterie readership for his verse; nevertheless, he concedes his own complicity: ‘That fish that is not catched thereby / Alas is wiser far than I’ (‘The Bait’, lines 27-28). Donne manipulates textual play, thereby fostering pleasure and critical independence, his readers’ and his own; however, he limits interpretative license by choosing a form of textual production that restricts his circle of readers to a known, like-minded audience.

Donne’s poetry is richly illustrated with metaphors, riddles and puns, directing the reader into a complex realm, where proliferating meanings are compressed and the sacred is inscribed in the secular. The riddling quality of Donne’s poetry deliberately challenges the reader.46 At the same time the riddle allows the reader a central position of sharing in the communication process. Riddling, associated with the rhetorical attempt to overcome the limits of knowledge, is linked to desire, with its promise of fulfilment.47 The promise contained in the riddle allows it to present itself as a gift. Donne offers his verse as a gift to a coterie at a time when the rise of print and money as a medium of exchange challenged and conflicted with gift-giving practices, and in the process reconfigured social relations. Quoting Christopher Gregory, Barbera Sebek distinguishes between the principles of gift exchange, which involves a ‘reciprocal dependence’ between the giver and the receiver and creates ‘personal relations between people’ on the one hand, and on the other, the principles of commodity exchange, which encourages the people involved to maintain a state of ‘reciprocal independence’ and creates ‘objective relations between things’.48 Gift exchange, unlike commodity exchange, which is associated with print, is not so much motivated by a desire for profit or self interest but rather a desire to position oneself honourably within a social network tied together through an interdependent and unfinished cycle of giving, receiving, and requiting gifts. For Donne, the self is one of process, unfinished and incomplete, a pre-Cartesian composite of mortal body and immortal soul, ‘man is a future creature’.49 There are similarities between the concept of self in postmodern thought, which is multiple, ever-changing and fragmented, rather than unified, whole and rational, and Donne’s pre-modern notion of identity as process. The early modern and the postmodern period bracket the printed book’s pretensions of linearity and fixity. Donne’s decision to circulate the vast majority of his poems by the open, communal and contingent form of manuscript most closely reflects the poet’s cultural identity, his mediation of social relationships, and accords with his poetics of selfhood.

However, as discussed earlier in relation to his Anniversaries, Donne also used the new technology of print on occasion. I will now consider his incentive to print a number of his prose works, the discussion of which will be brief due to the precincts of this paper. Donne’s Pseudo-Martyr and Ignatius his Conclave, published in print in 1610 and 1611 respectively, are polemic and display the author’s preoccupation with the conflicts between the Catholic church and the English state, particularly within the context of the controversy over the Oath of Allegiance. Their main interest is in religious and political conciliation. The author’s decision to print Pseudo-Martyr, particularly in view of its pragmatic defense of King James’ Oath of Allegiance, is generally understood as an attempt by Donne to gain public employment through royal favor. Even if so, it is important not to underestimate or devalue the sincere urgency of Donne’s search for employment prior to his taking of holy orders in 1615 and, in particular, its significance for his sense of selfhood. For Donne, finding useful employment is equivalent to being part of the body of the world; otherwise, he claims, one is but a nonentity, fragmented and isolated, ‘no link in Gods chaine’, no ‘limbe of the body of this world’.50 This belief, as John Carey notes, suggests less the desire for ‘independent self-advancement’ than a longing for ‘integration into a greater whole’, a longing for union with the other that, as we have seen, also finds expression both in his love poems and in his preference for manuscript circulation of his work.51 His decision to publish in what he describes as the ‘mere blood of print’, a medium that is counter to his ideal of selfhood and spirituality, suggests more complex motivations than an ambitiously single-minded striving after individual preferment. Neither would the desire for worldly self-advancement explain the printing of his spiritual autobiography, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, composed during and published immediately following the author’s recovery from a near-fatal bout with typhus in late 1623. Although an influential critic such as T.S. Eliot may argue that Donne published this work in print ‘for the purpose either of self-indulgent introspection or to astonish his fashionable audience’ this does not accord with Donne’s fear of misinterpretation, and his allied desire to limit and control his audience.52 While the publication of his Devotions again counters his general disdain for print, Donne explains his rationale in an epistle to a sermon that he also published in 1624.

In this epistle, Donne implies that the only basis to publish a work, outside of it being by royal command, is if it is of ‘publique use’ (iv, 362-3). The term ‘use’ appears frequently in Donne’s poetic canon; its importance for Donne as a concept is complex and deserving of greater study. Donne’s idea of usefulness links to his desire to be incorporated into the body of the world, and to his notion of social interdependency as expressed in his Devotions: ‘no Man is an Iland, intire of it selfe’.53 As Frost states, the six sermons Donne printed in his lifetime all meet with his criteria of ‘publique use’.54 So too do his three printed books have contemporary value. Pseudo-Martyr attempts to prove to English Catholics that they could both continue in their faith, thus remaining loyal to the spiritual authority of Rome, and still take the Oath of Allegiance to their King. At a moment of extreme political tension, Donne’s Pseudo-Martyr argues for compromise and denies the need for martyrdom. Ignatius his Conclave is a satirical work that, like Pseudo-Martyr, exposes what Donne sees as Rome’s betrayal of the Catholic faith, which, I believe, underpins his own eventual commitment to the reformed church as the universal church, a personal commitment that, in the climate of suspicion and treachery that produced so many martyrs (including his own brother, Henry) justified public expression. The printed epistle to the 1624 sermon further suggests that Donne’s intention in publishing both the Devotions and this sermon is publicly to counter the Roman church’s accusation that the Church of England ‘cast off all distinctions of places, and of dayes, and all outward meanes of assisting the devotion of the Congregation’.55 As Richard Strier also argues, Donne is concerned to defend the Church of England against the allegation of being entirely spiritualistic.56 The Devotions, as well as this sermon, are hurried to print in order publicly to defend material manifestations of the sacraments against a form of Puritanism. The spiritual physician, for Donne, is in the sacraments of the church, the bodily sign of inner grace: ‘I may associate thy word with thy sacrament, thy seal with thy patent; and in that sacrament associate the sign with the thing signified, the bread with the body of thy Son’.57 The Devotions ‘are a sustained paean to religious non-immediacy, to the importance of means, helps, assistances, and ordinances’.58 Within the context of political pressure and religious reform, their publication in print does not so much contradict but is testament to Donne’s understanding of and adherence to the importance of materiality, of bodily form, to his notion of self and spirituality.

To conclude: Donne, like Kittler, recognizes that language is material, subject to change, and that its contingency, its propensity to manipulation and alteration via writing technologies, effects an instability in both the self and society. However, for the early modern author, writing technologies have an interactive relation to philosophy - power, love, religion, art, money – and notions of selfhood. In contrast to Kittler’s deterministic view of authorship, Donne manipulates technology in order to give expression and meaning to his theory of language and selfhood. The tension and rhetorical complexity throughout Donne’s extant works enact his attempt to reconcile the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, whilst being aware of their growing divide. His preference for the corporeal and contingent nature of manuscript production mirrors his epistemological, ontological, and psychological outlook, and also reflects his recognition that the text’s reception contributes significantly to its meaning. As an author Donne is preoccupied with issues of control and communication. His ambivalent attitude towards the new technology’s ‘inky travail’ expresses his concern with this medium’s seemingly limitless and unrelenting outpouring of books - making it increasingly difficult to conceive of the self within the older body / book analogy as containing, like the ideal microcosmic Elizabeth Drury, ‘all Libraries’ within one’s own heart and memory (The Second Anniversary, line 303). He is also ambivalent about print’s potential to reach the widest possible audience. On the one hand, he fears that such an audience would not necessarily share his interpretative strategies nor understand his textual play. On the other, his appropriation of the technology of print for a relatively few works displays his willingness to become publically involved - in a way that is not possible within the limits of manuscript circulation - in the political and religious debates that deeply mattered not only to Donne but to his society at large.

Siobhán Collins is a part-time lecturer at University College Cork, where she co-directs the Making Books, Shaping Readers project (http://www.ucc.ie/en/mbsr/). Her PhD thesis, ‘John Donne’s “russet pawe”: Body and Word in Metempsychosis’, awarded by UCC in 2007, explores Metempsychosis within the context of Donne’s extant writings, and the philosophical and political worlds he inhabited. She has published articles on Donne, and co-authored an article with Louise Denmead on Sir Thomas Browne. She has annotated King Lear and Hamlet for Forum Publications; contributes to Routledge’s online Annotated Bibliography of English Studies; and is presently working on an Electronic Donne Initiative which aims to make the material transmission of Donne’s corpus available as a searchable digital archive.

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