The Enfranchisement of the “In-mate Soule”:
Self-Knowledge and Death in Donne’s Anniversaries

Poore soule in this thy flesh, what do’st thou know.
Thou know’st thy selve so little, as thou know’st not,
How thou did’st die, nor how thou wast begot.
---The Second Anniversarie, ll.254-256

Throughout John Donne’s work we find moments of intense skepticism about the soul’s capacity to know itself coupled with implicit invitations to acquire self-knowledge. The paradoxical nature of his treatment of self-knowledge is nowhere more apparent than in two of his most important long poems, which are known as the Anniversaries. These memorial poems (published in 1611 and 1612) were written in praise of Elizabeth Drury, the deceased fifteen-year-old daughter of Donne’s then future patron, Sir Robert Drury. Donne uses the occasions to inquire into the broader questions of what constitutes a praiseworthy life, and a proper cognitive and affective stance towards death.

Within this inquiry, Donne gives us two sharply conflicting accounts of self-knowledge: one in which the whole project is dismissed as being quite useless (because hopeless), and another in which it is promised as a virtue essential to “what thou shalt bee” in heaven (SA 1.322). The Second Anniversarie – the subtitle of which is Of the Progresse of the Soule. Wherein, by occasion of the Religious death of Mistris Elizabeth Drury, the incommodities of the Soule in this life, and her exaltation in the next, are contemplated -- posits a distinction between the attempt to acquire self-knowledge while still in this life (which is apparently in vain) and the prospective achievement of near instantaneous access to such knowledge in the next. Death marks the dividing line between a “Tombe” in which one is “oppress’d with ignorance”(ll.252-253) and an “expansion” in which one is liberated from the oppression of ignorance: “…thinke that
Death has now enfranchis’d thee, / Thou hast thy’expansion now and libertee” (ll.179-180). Yet even as the poem posits an ostensibly bright line between oppression before death and freedom after death, it also indicates that a provisional enfranchisement is available to the soul while it is still “in this thy flesh” (l.254) through the very process of thinking about death and life after it. The poem instructs the soul to think of itself delighting in the lasting joy of its heavenly home (ll. 487-490), and to think of the body it inhabits on earth as a “poore Inne” (l.175).

Not surprisingly, then, the poem has traditionally been read as charting the passage from earthly habitations that are as transitory as they are confining to the expansive freedom of the everlasting dwelling that is heaven. Accounts vary as to the significance of the figure of Elizabeth Drury in this context. For Barbara Lewalski, she represents the “regenerate soul,” and the speaker of the poem is understood to be centrally concerned with “the ‘world’ of the regenerate.” Elizabeth is “the manifestation of the height of perfection possible in the order of grace upon earth,” and her exemplary progress is a passage “from earthly encumbrances to perfection in the order of grace,” which leads, via death, “to heavenly glory.” Recent scholarship, however, has sought to complicate and, in one instance, to unsettle this narrative. For Ramie Targoff, The Second Anniversarie, “In striking contrast to a traditional Protestant narrative that celebrates the soul’s ‘liberation’ at the moment of death… describes an entirely unhappy parting between soul and body.” In reading the poem as “something other than a traditional celebration of the soul’s passage to heaven,” Targoff argues that the poem depicts death as the unnatural and “reluctant parting of two lovers.” According to Sarah Powrie, however, the poem “reconfigures ‘death’ as an ‘enfranchisement,’ arguing that
death liberates the soul from the body.”9 She contends that the poem “is framed as a narrative progress through the heavenly spheres to represent a journey through knowledge and self-understanding.”10

Is there some way in which we might accommodate each of these arguments? One might begin by observing that the generally accepted view that the poem contains Donne’s “hortatory…. admonition”11 to his own soul implies an acknowledgment that the soul, as depicted in the poem, stands in need of such an address.12 A soul already uninterested in worldly things, ardently desirous of their heavenly counterparts, and accepting of the view of death as a happy liberation (in accordance with the stance recommended by Donne’s church)13 would presumably not require the added impetus of hortatory admonition. *The Second Anniversarie* mingles the language of exhortation and congratulation, suggesting an understanding of the regenerate soul as still in need of exhortation to overcome its aversion to death, but capable of celebrating the benefits conferred by death as well (l. 448; ll. 65-66). Existing criticism has not fully taken note of the resistance to celebration within the poem, which is why Targoff’s insistence upon it is so valuable.14 While I do not think that her argument puts into question the view that the poem celebrates the progress of the soul from the “encumbrances” associated with inhabiting a body to “freedom from them after death”15 (even while making it clear that such freedom entails the reunion of the body and soul) it invites us to pay more attention to fact that hortatory admonition implies resistance in the addressee.

Here, I argue that the poem may be read as both a portrait of resistance to the parting of body and soul in death, as well as an account of the soul’s enfranchisement and growth in self-knowledge through the same event. The progress of the regenerate soul
towards heaven is represented as being at once reluctant and willing, and thus “long” as well as “short,” or, as Donne would have it, “long-short” (SA 1.219). I pursue my claim through a discussion of his two-fold account of self-knowledge: that which consists of knowledge of oneself in one’s this-worldly incarnation, and that which entails knowledge of the self at the moment of death as well as of “thy self, beyond thy self… what thou shalt be in the next world.”16 I suggest that Donne does not reject the project of acquiring self-knowledge in “this rotten world” (SA 1.49) altogether, but rather fashions a model of transitional self-knowledge between the ignorance suffered by the “oppress’d” (l. 253) denizen of earth and the knowledge afforded the enfranchised citizen of heaven.17

Donne’s use of the topos of the transient “In-mate soule” (FA 1.6) is of central importance in this context. His use of this topos (which varies sharply between the two poems) pertains to the longstanding theological debate concerning the tension between what Calvin called “our natural aversion to leaving this life”18 and the normative Christian desire for heaven.19

First, I introduce the notion of self-knowledge beyond the self, before turning to a very short comparative discussion of Donne and Joseph Hall. I then briefly discuss the depiction of the “In-mate soule” in The First Anniversarie before proceeding to a longer account of The Second Anniversarie.

‘Thyself Beyond Thyself’

On April 26, 1625, shortly after the death of King James, Donne preached a sermon at Denmark House before the king’s body was removed for burial. He instructs the auditory to forego the attempt to know themselves through a consideration of honors,
offices, pedigree, posterity, and alliances: “Get beyond thine own circle; consider thy selfe at thine end, thy own death, and then Egredare, Goe further than that, Go forth and see what thou shalt be after thy death.” Seeing the self as it exists only in the context of the world, Donne suggests, is not really self-knowledge at all. It is only by looking at ourselves as we will be in heaven that we can know ourselves: “Still that which we are to look upon, is especially our selves, but it is our selves, enlarg’d and extended into the next world; for till we see, what we shall be then, we are but short-sighted.” He does not propose the abandonment of the project of acquiring self-knowledge, but rather, proposes a more expansive understanding of its object.

A sermon by Joseph Hall from Good Friday, April 14, 1609, offers an instructive point of comparison with and contrast to Donne’s approach. Hall observes that “It is a shame to tell: many of vs Christians dote vpon life, and tremble at death…” Citing a phrase from John 19:30 (“He gaue up the ghost”), Hall notes that “Wee must doe as he did… This inmate that we haue in our bosome, is sent to lodge here for a time… we haue a living ghost to informe vs, which yet is not ours, (and alas, what is ours if our soules be not?).” Both Donne and Hall draws from the Pauline understanding of residence in the body as a matter of inhabiting a temporary lodging (see II Corinthians 5:1-9). Both take as their object the Augustinian figure of the soul that is decidedly less than cheerful about the prospect of death and needs to be shamed by an appeal to the example of others not similarly afflicted with a want of cheerfulness, tempted with descriptions of how easeful death will be, or otherwise persuaded to convert its tendency to tremble at the thought of leaving its short-term lodging into a cheerful anticipation of entering into its heavenly home. Hall implies that the tendency of some Christians to tremble at death suggests
unclear thinking as well as cowardice.\textsuperscript{25}

For Donne, the tendency of the regenerate soul to tremble with fear at the thought of death (and what comes with it) is more ambiguous; such fear may be filial fear that is fueled by love or servile fear that flies from judgment. In his account, the latter, while inferior to the former, is not necessarily shameful.\textsuperscript{26} To Donne’s mind, God is served by both fears and, as he puts it in a sermon from 1621, even the “feare of hell gets us heaven.”\textsuperscript{27} Since Donne views one sort of fear (the fear of the Lord) as being “the most noble, the most courageous, the most magnanimous, not affection but vertue in the world” (as he puts it in a sermon from 1624) he cannot recommend the wholesale substitution of a sense of security (which has its own dangers) for fear.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, to consider oneself properly at the moment of death and beyond is to encounter fear, for as Donne puts it in the same sermon, “fear respects the future.”\textsuperscript{29} At least notionally, the admission of the fear of the Lord into natural fear prompts a shift of attention away from “the afflictions of this life” towards “the joys of heaven.”\textsuperscript{30}

In *The First Anniversarie*, the world has fallen into such an unnatural state, that it does not even know that it is “rotten at its hart” (*FA* l. 242). Ignorance of sickness prevents access to even servile fear (which in this instance, would be salutary). Here, then, Donne’s task is to impart to readers such limited knowledge of their sickness as they are capable of bearing, and to point out that the picture of the decaying world painted therein “should more affright, than pleasure thee” (*FA* l. 372). The fear that “should” be felt by readers participating in the project of praising Elizabeth Drury’s virtuous soul (and attempting to act in a manner befitting it) is consistent with their own status as regenerate “weedless Paradises… /Which of themselves produce no venomous
sinne, / Except some forraine Serpent bring it in” (ll. 82-84). These Adamic “new creatures” of a “new world” (l.76) face danger in the form of excessive confidence, for “strength it selfe by confidence grows weak” (l. 86). They must be told of the fearsome “dangers and diseases of the old” (l. 88) in order to further their knowledge of the “true worth” (l. 90) of things. Readers are to fear forsaking their status as new creatures, but also, it would seem, the danger of becoming part of and like to the infected world from which they emerged (ll. 245-6). The old world is necessarily to be known, but only in order that it might be rightly feared.

The Inmate and the Active Soul

In the beginning of The First Anniversarie, the speaker posits the existence of two different sorts of souls: an active soul, which sees, judges, follows and praises “worthinesse” by deeds, on the one hand, and, on the other, an “In-mate soul” (l.6) which does none of these things:

When that rich soule which to her Heauen is gone,  
Whom they all celebrate, who know they haue one,  
(For who is sure he hath a soule, vnlesse  
It see, and Iudge, and follow worthinesse,  
And by Deedes praise it? He who doth not this,  
May lodge an In-mate soule, but tis not his.) [ll.1-6]

In suggesting that Elizabeth’s departed soul can only be celebrated by “all who know they haue [a soul]” ( ll. 1-2), the poem does not refer to all who simply have a soul, but to all those who know that they have a soul by the fact that it sees, judges, and follows worthiness through praising it “by Deedes.” Those who do not may contain an other, lesser sort of soul, but to serve as a lodging for a soul is not the same as to possess one.
The notion of an “In-mate soul” is related to, but not identical with the Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonic notion of the soul as the prisoner of the body. It is Donne’s version of the related Roman, Rabbinic, and Christian notion of the soul as itinerant lodger, guest, and traveler. In Donne’s time, an “inmate” was a tenant or temporary lodger in a residence that belonged to someone else, or a stranger. An inmate has no title to (and hence, no lasting claim upon) the structure in which he resides. Yet Elizabeth’s life on this earth is itself to be understood as “progresse time” (l.7) preceding her arrival in the “standing house” of heaven, suggesting an image of a royal journey (which connotes residence in a world that is one’s “own” realm by virtue of one’s rule over it), but also the biblical notion of Christian life as a matter of living in a world in which one can never be truly at home (see I Peter 2:11). In a limited sense, one might say that the soul in the temporary lodging of body is roughly homologous with the inmate Christian in the world, in which he or she may be understood as both active, self-possessed sovereign and “visiting stranger.”

While the speaker notes the gap between the inmate soul and the active soul, he suggests that the likelihood of that that gap being closed is very slight. Only those who actively pursue goodness through action have imaginative access to the “sight” of Elizabeth’s soul: “now no other way there is / But goodness, to see her, whom all would see, / All must endeauor to be as good as shee” (ll.16-18). In one sense, the world may be thought to gain by her death rather than to lose from it, because her death has made action aimed at the good an imperative for “all.” But this action-oriented account of the soul that praises worthiness by “Deedes,” and confirms its own existence through the exercise of
its faculties would seem to comport ill with a world in which the conditions of the active pursuit of goodness have been generally imperiled. The world as a whole has been deprived of accurate self-knowledge: “So thou, sicke worlde, mistak’st thy selfe to bee / Well, when thou’rt in a Letargee” (ll.23-24).

One of the lessons that the reader is to learn from the poem’s anatomy of the world’s corpse is as follows:

That here there is nothing to enamor thee
And that, not only faults in inward parts,
Corruptions in our braines, and in our harts,
Poysoning the fountains, where our actions spring
Endanger vs: but that if euery thing
Be not done fitly’nd in proportion.
To satisfie wise, and good, lookers on,
(Since most men be as such as most thinke they bee)
They’re lothsome too, by this Deformitee.
For good and well must in our actions meete:
Wicked is not much worse than indiscreete. [ll.328-338]

Being “good” in a transpolitical sense is not the same as being “well” (i.e., well-regarded and honored) in the eyes of “lookers on” and the minds of “most.” Donne offers two formulations of the notion that the regard of others (or the anticipation of such regard) is partially determinative of the moral status of actions: in the first formulation, that which is not done to the satisfaction of “wise and good lookers on” is “lothsome.” The second, parenthetical formulation is much more radical because it suggests that most men are as good as “most” others (not just wise and good others) take them to be. If this were the case, the public face of virtue would amount to virtue itself, and acquiring self-knowledge would entail learning how to act within the context of custom (which Donne elsewhere describes as “second nature”35) and public opinion, rather than attempting to discover what one would be like apart from it.
In *The First Anniversarie*, Donne considers the issue of the soul’s self-knowledge primarily (although not exclusively) from the perspective of a world that has been “embarr’d” from commerce with heaven (l.400). At stake, then, in the poem’s exploration of the faculties of the soul as they have been corrupted in the wake of Elizabeth’s death, are not only defects in the inward springs of action, but the nature of the communities within which souls judge and praise worthiness by deeds. In the end, the poem does not identify the project of acquiring self-knowledge as a means of allowing the inmate soul even preliminary access to the privileges of self-ownership and self-knowledge in this life. The illness of the natural world notwithstanding, however, there is still nourishment to be had through the consumption of “that supernaturall food, Religion” (l. 188). But the only prospect of complete enfranchisement for the inmate soul is death: “For though the soule of man / Be got when man is made, ‘tis born but than / When man doth die. Our body’s as the wombe, / And as a mid-wife death directs it home” (ll.451-454).

**The Soul on Earth and in Heaven**

From the very beginning of *The First Anniversarie*, the question of praise is bound up with the questions of what sort of soul one has, what one knows of it, and especially, what one *does* with it. Although both poet and reader are operating in a world reduced to “pieces” (l.213), their deeds are ultimately calculable within the same (battered and impoverished) moral, theological, and metaphysical economy.

Upon turning to *The Second Anniversarie*, we find that this minimally functional economy is no longer functioning at all: “a new Deluge, and of Lethe flood, / Hath drown’d vs all, All haue forgot all good… (ll.27-28). Since the memory (the faculty of
the soul which could retain the image of “all good”) has been permanently ruined or temporarily washed out, the soul has been deprived of the goal for the sake of which future actions might be performed and the standard by which its attempts to be good could be measured. The water-logged soul lacks not only knowledge of its own powers and purpose, but also knowledge of where it should direct its gaze, and where it stands.

Here, there is no place to stand as such. Due to the “Deluge / grosse and generall” (l.30), the world is not just weak and ailing but dead, having suffered a flood akin to that of Genesis 6-8. A devastating judgment has already been rendered and survived. Donne, as scholars have pointed out, is in the position of a “new Noah,” but as a post-diluvian man, he must develop a new, more expansive knowledge of his soul’s capacities in the wake of the figurative flood from which it has emerged “striv[ing] for life” (SA l. 31).

Because the dead world is an unstable, watery expanse, there is no question of being still or at rest in it. Yet there is also no means of acting in the same manner in which one could in the world before the deluge.

The speaker initially resists announcing that the world is dead (which, in this account, would mean that it was something like a world of bodies in motion without souls) but he then proceeds to suggest the likeness of the world’s struggle in its present condition to two entities (a ship with its sail down and a beheaded body) that are still moving despite the absence of any indwelling force within them that would account for that movement, or render it intelligible. In presenting an image of the beheaded body attempting to call back – and then to “step forth to meet” its departed soul, the speaker tentatively attempts to assign human intention and desire to this post-mortem convulsion by saying that it was “as though he beckon’d, and cal’d backe his Soule” (l.14), and that
the headless corpse “seemes to reach and, and to step forth to meet / His Soule” (ll.16-17). Ultimately, however, the speaker concludes that these motions are not part of a dramatic sequence, “but as Ice, which crackles at a thaw: / Or as a Lute, which in moist weather, rings / Her knell alone, by cracking of her strings” (ll.17-20). The crackling of ice in a thaw and the cracking of strings in the damp are not simulacrae of action, but rather, figures of the failure of material substances to offer such resistance to the elements as might have sufficed to maintain their forms. Finally, the speaker is forced to acknowledge that what “we saw” (l.17) was merely “motion in corruption” (l.21).

The poem encourages the striving, “insatiate” soul to long for something other than mere life, and to look “vpward, that’s toward her” (ll.65). After glancing up, the soul’s gaze is directed back down to the world, which now appears as “fragmentary rubbidge… not worth a thought” (ll.82-83). The soul is now invited to begin thinking about death. Indeed, it has no other option: the soul can think about death or think about something (the world) that is less than nothing. The flurry of initial directives to the soul (“Thirst” [l.45]; “serue thy thirst” [l.46]; “Bee thirsty still, and drinke still” [l.47]; “Forget this rotten world; And vnto thee/ Let thine owne times as an old story be. / Be not concern’d; study not… / Do not” [ll.49-52], “Forget this world and scarce thinke of it…” [l.61]; and “Look vpward” [l.65]) given in the introductory section of the poem include only one instruction about thinking: a directive not to think about the world. These propaedeutical directives are meant to remove obstacles to the work of thinking that is the main engine of the poem.

The first instruction to the soul in Line 85 to “Thinke” about death inaugurates a series of (highly conventional) cognitive adjustments concerning the soul’s conceptions
of death: death is a bridegroom (l.85); death is not difficult (a mere “vnbinding of a packe” [l.94]); it allows the soul the opportunity to become innocent again (l.114); it delivers one from a body that is bound to rot (l.115) and the sleep it entails is quickly over (l.120). The poem interrupts the meditation upon death by calling Elizabeth to mind:

...[she] hath taught vs that though a good man hath
Title to heauen, and plead it by his Faith,
And though he may pretend a conquest, since
Heauen was content to suffer violence,
Yea though he plead a long possession too,
(For they'are in Heauen on Earth, who Heauens workes do.)
Though he had right, and power, and Place before,
Yet Death must vsher and vnlock the doore. [ll.148-156]

Donne’s use of forensic terms pertaining to disseizin and inheritance (title, “long possession,” right, power and Place”) invites questions about the nature of the “title to heaven” held by “a good man” who pleads “long possession” in this respect. In land law, “long possession” is claimed by those who lack clear title to a piece of property that they have occupied and used for a long time (as squatters or tenants) and who seek to convert their *de facto* possession into *de jure* possession. The passage begins by offering a standard Protestant account of a “title to heaven”: it can be pled solely by virtue of faith in Jesus Christ, rather than on the basis of obedience to law or meritorious works, and exercised only because of the covenant of grace. The grounds for the plea to entitlement then become a bit muddier, as the poem suggests that the “good man” may plead “long possession” as an additional basis of his title to heaven (on the basis of works that he has already figuratively done “in Heauen”) even though he has “right and power and Place” on the grounds of faith and pretended conquest. The possession of a title to heaven does not translate into the actual enjoyment of heaven absent the intervention of death.

Thus, despite his legitimate claim to possession of heaven, the good man’s soul is,
with respect to his exercise of his “right, power and Place” as permanent resident of heaven, in a position akin to that of “In-mate soul” with respect to its dwelling on earth. The latter, however, can only plead “long possession,” while the former has a range of other bases for his claim. Nonetheless, he still has to claim “long possession.” Here, then we find some suggestion of a situational overlap between the soul of the “good man” and the inmate soul. Yet this suggestion does not wholly prepare us for the section following the passage from which I have just quoted:

   Thinke further on thy selfe, my soule, and thinke
   How thou at first was made but in a sinke…
   …
   Thinke but how poore thou wast, how obnoxious,
   Whom a small lump of flesh could poison thus.
   This curded milke, this poore vnlittered whelpe
   My body, could, beyond escape or helpe,
   Infect thee with originall sinne, and thou
   Couldst neither then refuse, nor leaue it now
   Thinke that no stubborne sullen Anchorit,
   Which fixt to a Pillar, or a Graue doth sit
   Bedded and Bath’d in all his ordures, dwels
   So fowly as our soules, in their first built Cels.
   Thinke in how poore a prison thou didst lie
   After, enabled but to sucke, and crie.  [ll.157-74]

In thinking on “thy selfe,” the soule is told to think of itself as having been conceived in “a sinke” (l.158), an occupant of a poor prison (l.173), and then having matured into a dweller in a “poore Inne” (l.175). The speaker emphasizes the utter susceptibility of the soul to infection by the body, and, once infected, its inability to escape from the source of its taint. The soul that is told that it is just a lodger in a “a poore Inne / A Prouince Pack’d vp in two yards of skinne” (ll.175-176). The soul has no lasting title to the “poore Inne” or “Prouince” in which it dwells; it is only an occupant in a structure it does not own.

Here, then, Donne conflates the respective plights of the inmate and the active
soul that he took pains to separate in the earlier poem. The inertia of the former and the activity of the latter become two ontological moments within the trajectory of one soul (which extends through life and death), rather than two different sorts of soul belonging to different persons (as they were in The First Anniversarie). There, Donne distinguished two sorts of souls on the basis of their respective self-knowledge. Here, there are only inmate souls (i.e., those with no lasting title to the bodies they inhabit) who have titles to heaven which they cannot yet exercise. Donne adds another layer of complexity to his use of the topos of the soul as temporary lodger by merging it with that of the soul as prisoner.

There would initially appear to be no prospect of acting -- or thinking -- one’s way out of the imprisoned soul’s predicament, since it is pointedly posited as a constitutional condition, rather than a potentially corrigible defect in thinking, judging, or acting. Donne pointedly abstracts from questions of the soul’s choice, desire, and will to inhabit the body by emphasizing the involuntary nature of its residence; the soul could not refuse the body in the beginning, and it can’t “leaue it now.” But the very fact that the soul is being instructed to “think” implies that it has the capacity to reflect upon its own condition, and thus, to gain self-knowledge about its worldly predicament from within that predicament. Even “slow pace’d snails, who crawle vpon / Our prisons prison earth” (ll.248-249) are capable of acquiring insight into their own condition of imprisonment within imprisonment that characterizes this-worldly existence, but towards what end? Within the logic of the poem, knowledge of one’s own bondage does not amount to enfranchisement or promise unfettered access to essential joy while still on this earth.

Ironically, the project of liberating the inmate soul from its prison depends upon
making the condition of imprisonment into a congenital predicament, rather than a potentially corrigible defect. Donne puts the inmate soul in a poor prison (which it cannot leave [l.168]) in order to set it free. He turns the condition of being a temporary occupant of the prison/inn of the body and a permanent resident of heaven (where the soul “euer joyes and euer staiies” [l.490]) into two stages in a single process. The selfsame soul that is told that it dwells in “a poore Inne” (l.175) and a “prisons prison” (l.249) is also told what it “shalt bee” in heaven, and given a means of preparing to exercise its title to heaven in anticipation of its permanent residence there after death. What is so striking here is that he combines one account of the soul in which questions about the soul’s will or desire have no bearing on its predicament (since it is a prisoner of the body) with another account of the soul in which questions about will and desire are of central importance (since the speaker’s attempt to persuade the soul of the benefits of heaven aims to direct the will and cultivate the soul’s desire for heaven). Having created a trajectory that spans from imprisonment on earth to enfranchisement in heaven, Donne is then faced with the challenge of showing how the imprisoned soul might be prodded into overcoming its resistance to the knowledge of “thy self beyond thy self,” a task which he approaches by attempting to convince the soul that heavenly self-knowledge entails a fulfillment of its earthly equivalent, rather than an abandonment of it.

The speaker’s radical disparagement of embodied existence on earth, and the sort of knowledge of the soul that can be obtained strictly within the confines of such an existence is directed at the goal of deflating excessive confidence, as well as expanding the scope of self-knowledge to include the soul at the moment of its death and beyond. The vehicle for this deflation and expansion is thinking. This first instruction to the soul
to “thinke” (found in Line 85) is followed by thirty-three more instructions to do the same. Not coincidentally, this series of injunctions ceases in Line 185, in the midst of the stunning passage in which the formerly slow-paced soul makes its precipitate flight to heaven:

...thinke that Death has now enfranchis’d thee,
Theou hast thy’expansion now and libertee;
Thinke that a Rusty peece, discharg’d is flowen,
In peeces, and the bullet is his owne,
And freely flies: This to thy soule allow,
Thinke thy sheel broke, thinke thy Soule hatch’d but now.
And thinke this slow-pac’d soule, which late did cleaue,
To’a body and went but by the bodies leaue,
Twenty, perchance, or thirty mile a day,
Dispatches in a minute all the way,
Twixt Heauen and Earth... [ll.179-189]

There are several different modes of liberation here, all of them figuratively arrived at through the vehicle of thought. The first is described rather than imaged; death confers enfranchisement in the sense of allowing for a greater range of movement across an “expansion” (suggestive, in this instance, of the expanse of heaven) and “libertee” in the negative sense of liberty from the constriction (and, it would seem, indignity and vulnerability) attendant upon the condition of being “Pack’d vp in two yards of skinne / And that usurped, or threatened with the rage / Of sicknesses, or their true mother Age” (ll.175-76). The conversion of negative liberty into positive liberty begins in the next three lines, which represent the soul as a bullet being shot out of a rusty gun (the body).

At first, the focus is on the gun being discharged and “flowen, / In peeces” (ll.181-82). Surprisingly, the flight of the bullet/soul is not depicted as being propelled by the force of the discharge; rather, it is somehow self-determined: “the bullet is his owne / And freely flies” (ll.182-183). But while it has been mysteriously endowed with the
power of self-propulsion and the capacity for free flight, the soul is not yet possessed of positive liberty in the sense of the liberty to achieve some particular desired end. Now, the notion of enfranchisement and liberty is represented in terms of a chick being hatched from an egg shell, which has a very different connotation than the image of the soul as self-propelled bullet. A chick, unlike a bullet, does not shoot forth from its shell with force and speed; rather it emerges from its long, slow struggle to be born in a state of exhaustion and complete vulnerability. Here, the tension between two notions of death as liberation (death as near instantaneous empowerment, and death as slow birth) is presented but not resolved. This tension informs what I have already described as the overall suggestion of the poem that the movement of the soul towards death is at once reluctant and willing, and slow and fast. This multivalent movement is in keeping with the fact that the soul’s claim upon its destination is itself a matter of long possession, title, and conquest by violence alike by an inmate that is both an heir possessed of right, power and Place, and a mere tenant. Its flight to heaven is both halting and precipitate: it is “a long-short Progresse” [l.219]).

This progress is aimed at building up connective tissue between heaven and earth:

So by the soule doth death string Heauen and Earth,
For when our soule enjoyes this her third birth,
(Creation gave her one, a second, grace,)
Heauen is as neare, and present to her face,
As colours are, and objects, in a roome,
Where darknesse was before, when Tapers come. [ll.214-219]

This third birth has not one but two midwives: death and thinking. Heaven is brought near through thinking, a process which is at once self-propelled and outwardly compelled (and guided) by the cumulative pressure of the repeated commands to “think.” The
poem invokes the memory of Elizabeth in order to “aduance these thoughts” (l.220) about the work that death is doing to promote commerce between heaven and earth.

Standing in the way of this advancement is the obstacle of the soul’s defective self-knowledge. If the soul is to move on its own and move freely, it cannot rely upon external pressure to push it forward; it must have internal knowledge about its own path, including potential obstacles it might encounter along the way. So pressing is the problem of defective self-knowledge that the poem suggests that if the soul is going to be as ignorant in heaven as it is on earth it wouldn’t make much difference even if it did, in dying, change its “roome” from the “living Tombe” of earth to the more capacious chamber of heaven: “But t’were little to haue chang’d our roome, / If, as we were in this our liuing Tombe / Oppress’d with ignorance…” (ll.251-253).

The poem directs our attention to the soul’s lack of knowledge about “how thou at first camest in” (l.257) to the body and became poisoned with sin (l.258) and by “what way thou art made immortall” (l.260). The speaker tells the soul that it lacks a standard by which to adjudicate between the opinions of others concerning the composition of the body and its parts. He shifts from “thou” to “we” in asking “What hope haue we to know our selues, when wee / Know not the least things, which for our vse bee?” (l.280). Collective attempts to acquire knowledge about the world are no more promising than individual attempts to acquire knowledge about the self. An opinion belonging to “one soule” (l.267) is not corrected by another soul; either soul could be right (or neither).

The poem suggests that if there is no readily available means by which correct judgment pertaining to the thoughts of others concerning “the least things which for our vse bee” (l.280) then there is even less hope that we can be brought “to know our selues”
The celebration of the comprehensive sort of knowledge that is available to the soul in heaven does not begin until the soul has moved beyond the sphere of “sense, and Fantasy” (l.292) into the “watch-towre” (l.294) from which vantage point not only the self, but “all things” can be seen “despoyld of fallacies” (l.295). There, as in heaven, to see (l.295) is simply to know: “In Heauen thou straight know’st all” (l.299).

Although the poem’s movement is directed towards the resurrection of “earthly bodies more celestiall” (l.493) in heaven, it insists upon death as the necessary cognitive, theological, and ontological prelude to that reunion. Through death, the thinking subject is to be restored as an embodied subject and made capable of conversation with others. In heaven, thinkers have ready access to all the thoughts in “all Libraries” in their own thoughts, but they still have cause to look outside of themselves. Knowledge of oneself, however complete, does not cancel out the desire to receive knowledge from others; heavenly souls rejoice at the arrival of other souls and that “Ioy of a soules arriuall neere decaies; / For that soule euer ioyes, and euere staies” (ll.489-490). The process of thinking oneself into heaven, as it were, is not aimed at attaining either the isolate splendor of absolute self-sufficiency or dissolution into thought thinking itself. Even in anticipation, the soul must think of itself beyond itself – through others, and in conversation with them – if it would seek to know itself at all.

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5 Lewalski, *Donne’s Anniversaries*, p. 301.


8 Targoff, *John Donne*, p. 80, 83.


10 Powrie, “Celestial Progress,” p. 82. On her disagreement with Lewalski, see p. 74, n.4; on Targoff, see p. 90, n. 45.


12 The convention of hortatory address to the soul to direct its attention towards heaven is commonplace. For example, in Joseph Hall’s *Art of Divine Meditation* (1603), in Frank Livingstone Huntley, *Bishop Joseph Hall and Protestant Meditation in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study with the Texts of The Art of Divine Mediation and Occasional Meditations* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1981), we find the following exhortation: “Up then, my soul, and mind those things that are above…” (p. 86).

all men suffer, but not all men with one mind, neither all men in one manner… absolutely
we cannot discommend, we cannot absolutely approve, either willingness to live or
forwardness to die.”

14 Not all criticism has failed to note this resistance; in Fulfilling the Circle, Terry
Sherwood, for example, observes that “the poem, which forces the soul out of the body in
an imagined ecstasy, begins and ends on earth, and consistently dwells on the body” (p.
88) and suggests that the poem accommodates “both the movement of spiritual progress
upward… and a gravitational counterforce that keeps the earthly body at the poem’s focal
center” (p. 90). See also p. 93, where he mentions “the glorified soul’s longing for its
body” and the “downward” gravitational pull in the poem. On the manner in which
Donne “acts out the duality of his aversion and desire” with reference to the relationship
between body and soul, see James Andrew Clark, “The Plot of Donne’s Anniversaries,”
Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 30.1 (Winter, 1990), pp. 63-77, esp. p. 70.
15 Lewalski, Donne’s Anniversaries, p. 300. On the poem’s affirmation of the heavenly
“harmony of body and soul,” see Dennis Quinn, “Donne’s Anniversaries as Celebration,”
Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 9:1 (Winter, 1969), pp. 97-105. For a brief but
insightful comment on Donne’s concern with body and soul as part of his broader
“preoccupation with ‘the relatedness of things,’” see Robert Bozanich, “Donne and
16 Donne, Sermons, Vol. 6, p. 286.
17 For the phrase “transitional self-knowledge,” I am indebted to an anonymous reader of
this paper.
18 John Calvin, The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles
to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, in David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (eds),
19 Differing views concerning the proper affective and cognitive understanding of death
are internal to the Christian Bible. Jesus himself is depicted as being gripped by the fear
of death in the Gethsemane accounts (Matthew 26:30-35; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-
46), but elsewhere the fear of death (as distinguished from death itself) is represented as a
state of bondage by evil from which Christians are to be delivered by Christ (see
Hebrews 2:15). Questions concerning the fear of death and its relationship to the virtue of
courage run throughout Christian theology; see, for example, John Chrysostom, In Praise
Eusebius, The Proof of the Gospel in W.J. Ferrar (ed. and trans.) (1920; rpt. Eugene,
OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), p. 201. To Augustine, fear of death is natural, and
the parting of the body from the soul, unnatural. On the body as “dear friend” and
“spouse” of the soul, see the references in Stephen J. Duffy, “Anthropology,” in Allan D.
Fitzgerald (ed.), Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids, Mich.:
on the difficulties associated with the Reformed attempt to combat the fear of death, see
Andrew Spicer, “‘Rest of Their Bones’: Fear of Death and Reformed Burial Practices,” in
William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (eds), Fear in Early Modern Society (Manchester
20Donne, Sermons, Vol. 6, p. 285. On this sermon, see Lewalski, Donne’s Anniversaries,
p.212.
25 Hall contrasts the (to his mind, shameful) timidity of his trembling contemporaries with the laudable courage of Christ and the “zealous contempt for death” shown by early Christian martyrs (p. 74, and p. 80).
26 I am indebted to an anonymous reader of this paper for the suggestion that I introduce the distinction between filial and servile fear into this discussion. A more sustained and nuanced treatment of the role of filial and servile fear in the soul’s attempt to acquire self-knowledge might explore the different ways in which both sorts of fear contribute to the acquisition of wisdom (for Donne’s discussion of servile fear as “some beginning of wisdom,” see *Sermons*, Vol. 1, pp. 233-34).
30 Donne, *Sermons*, Vol. 6, p. 106. We see an attempt at such cognitive and affective redirection in *The Second Anniversarie*, where Donne exhorts his soul to conjure up a fearful image of his ague-ridden body, “parch’d with feuers violence” (l. 96). The sickbed becomes a deathbed, as the soul is told to think that it is being summoned to the heavenly “Triumphant Church,” (l. 101). At the same time, the soul is to envision “Satans Sergeants” (l. 102) stand clustered around his bed, waiting to arrest his soul. The call to heaven is coupled with an image suggestive of the threat of hell, but that threat is raised only to be rapidly defused. The soul is instructed to “trust th’immaculate blood to wash thy score” (l.106), thus sparing it from having to pay the debt it has incurred through sin. Here, Donne’s soul has to be instructed to envision the parceling out of his sins to the representatives of hell; for an account of a process by which sins are to return to their place of origin by falling rather than being distributed, see Donne’s *Holy Sonnet VI*, “This is my playes last scene…” There, the speaker does not have to be told to think of a series of encounters, separations, and departures. Fear directs his attention to his soul’s future flight to heaven – a movement which is, at the same time, a flight from the thought that gave rise to the fear.
This *topos* should be distinguished from the Orphic and Platonic notion of the soul as prisoner. Wesley Milgate, in *John Donne: The Epithalalamions, Anniversaries, and Epicedes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) inaccurately suggests that the *topos* of the soul as prisoner may be found in Psalm 142 (p. 161). נפשי does not connote “my soul” in the sense of “my immaterial and immortal soul”; it means simply “me” or “my life.” ממעור has no association with the body. In Ps. 142:8 (numbered in the KJV as 142:7), the psalmist is imagining himself in a literal prison that is also a figurative underworld. See Mitchell Dahood (ed. and trans.) *Psalms III*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), which points to the importance of the suggestion of an underworld in this context.

33 On the body as tent, see, again, II Corinthians 5:1-9.
35 Donne, Sermons, Vol. 6, p.106.
38 The suggestion that this passage should be read with reference to the action of disseizin comes from Frank Manley (ed.) *John Donne: The Anniversaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1963), p. 182.
39 Here, Donne refers to the common conception of the womb as an unclean place like to a sink, drain, or sewer. See Helen King, *Midwifery, Obstetrics and the Rise of Gynaecology: The Uses of a Sixteenth-Century Compendium* (New York: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2007), p. 55. On the willingness of Jesus to be born in a soul that “acknowledgeth it self to have been a sink of uncleanness” see Donne, *Sermons*, Vol. 6, p. 339.