Poetry and Natural Philosophy: The errant soul in John Davies, John Donne and Phineas Fletcher

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> Then what is our high-prais'd Philosophie,
> But bookes of Poesie, in Prose compil'd?
> Fulke Greville, *A Treatie of Humane Learning* (c. 1605 / 1633).[1]

In Plutarch's dialogue, 'Why The Prophetesse *Pythia* giveth no answers now from the Oracle in verse or meter', one of the speakers wonders why natural philosophy used to be couched in poetry, but is no more: 'Philosophers beforetime, pronounced their sentences, and published their doctrines in verse: as for example, *Orpheus, Hesiodus, Parmenides, Xenophanes, Empedocles, Thales,* and afterwards ceased and gave over to versifie'.[2] A variety of options are discussed to explain the decline in the status of poetry as a vehicle for complexity and it is noted that verse was rejected at the same time by priestess and philosopher, as they 'embrac[ed] perspicuity of stile, which was apt to teach and instruct, rather than that which by tropes and figures amused and amased mens braines.' This rejection of the poetic was, the speakers conjecture, a gradual and a not-wholly-welcome process, in which the 'vulgar' firstly over-rated and then rejected anything which was 'obscurely and covertly spoken'. Presuming that 'whatsoever was not ordinary nor common, but extravagant' must have 'some holinesse hidden underneath', the amorphous vulgar were at first 'astonied thereat and held it venerable'. If that was an excess, however, so was the shift by which 'they began to finde fault with Poesie ... as mingling the darknesse and shadow of obscurity' into what should be plain, 'saying, that metaphors aenigmaticall, and covert words, yea and the ambiguities which Poetry useth, were but shifts, retracts, and evasions to hide and cover all'.[3] And thus the Pythian priestess turned to gnomic utterances in prose, and natural philosophy surrendered its poetic medium.

Natural philosophy in the seventeenth century, as it happens, was given to the Pythian maxim, *nosce teipsum*, knowing thy microcosmic self being the desideratum and end of all one's study. The natural world was a theological resource, and to know the self was, in turn, to know the world. But its medium was prose. By the time Sir John Davies wrote his philosophical poem entitled *Nosce Teipsum* (1599), poetry was rarely considered a tool of philosophical thought. Such a claim might need qualification: in one sense, this is at best true of England only, and in another, it is not really true at all. Didactic and encyclopaedic verse had remained a staple genre, encompassing, to note but a few examples, Girolamo Fracastoro's *Syphilis* and the philosophical poems of Tommaso Campanella, as well as the ample Lucretian and

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[1] Fulke Greville, *A Treatie of Humane Learning,* in *Certaine learned and elegant workes* (London: Henry Seyle, 1633), stanza 29.

[2] Plutarch, 'Why The Prophetesse *Pythia* giveth no answers now from the Oracle in verse or meter' in *The Philosophie, commonly called the Morals*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603), 1197

[3] Plutarch, 'Oracle in verse or meter' 1199

anti-Lucretian traditions of sixteenth century Latin verse.[4] While it might thus plausibly be said that poetry as a medium of philosophical speculation never disappeared, nevertheless, seventeenth century English poetry attended anew and frequently to natural philosophy, in a mode quite alien to the continental didactic. Plainness, that most advantageous attribute that prose might boast of, was not what writers sought when they rendered their natural philosophy in verse. Rather, and this is the argument of this essay, poetry came to be valued precisely because of its discursive volatility, its kaleidoscopic capacity. Some things, the era (re)discovered, things beyond words, could only be approached via the protean qualities of metaphor. Early modern poetry was interested in elusive correspondence, how body and soul pulsed with the throb of the cosmic, how pattern mattered. There was little naivety and less literalism in supposing a relationship between the body and the cosmos, or the soul's knowledge and the knowledge-structures of the universe. These were hermeneutic strategies, not descriptive anatomies. But such strategies were important in the era's attempts to deploy the poetic to understand the scientific. Rarely was early-modern philosophical poetry conceived of as a 'replacement' for prose exposition, and neither of course was prose confined to the plain or devoid of any metaphorical and kaleidoscopic capacity.

In the following, I attend to poetry that deals with body and soul 'scientifically', as objects of knowledge, albeit always tainted with the crooked fallenness of postlapsarian being. I begin with the relative sobriety of Sir John Davies, moving on to Donne's *Second Anniversary*, in its mournful extravagance, turning finally to the strange phantasm of Phineas Fletcher's *Purple Island.* Each of these poems deals with the body-soul amalgam, which at the turn of the seventeenth century was a largely Aristotelian creature, composed of vegetative and nutritive forms, as well as intellect, consciousness and a glimmer of the divine. The early modern soul was wholly calibrated to the body; it shared and was in part responsible for all its mechanisms and its animation, even while it was an immortal, separable object, whose eternal fate was a theological matter. But the soul was physical before that; it was what made flesh live; it digested and shat; it pumped the passions that fired the body into life, and it constituted both the mind and the very essence of the human. The soul's remit was large—medical, psychological and spiritual. It was sufficiently material and essential to being as to fall within the realm of the physician, but of such 'tenuity, and diaphanity', as Robert Fludd put it, to be beyond any

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[4] Girolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus* (1530) in *Latin Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2013); Tommaso Campanella, *Selected Philosophical Poems of Tommaso Campanella*, ed. Sherry Roush (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Robert M. Schuler, 'English Scientific Poetry 1500-1700', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 69 (1975), 482-502; Schuler, 'Theory and Criticism of the Scientific Poem in Elizabethan England', *English Literary Renaissance*, 15 (1985), 3-41. Letizia Panizza, ed., 'Philosophical and Scientific Poetry in the Renaissance', special ed. of *Renaissance Studies*, 5.3 (1991); Anke Timmermann, 'Scientific and Encyclopaedic Verse' in Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, eds, *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2013), 199-211.

instruments of detection); it was the conduit to knowledge and it was damaged irrevocably.[5] Early modern philosophy had its own very particular and forensic toolkit of analysis for the soul, inherited from Aristotelian and scholastic legacies, and its medium was prose.[6] Its medium was also, properly considered, Latin, although increasingly there was a vernacular correlate. When in the seventeenth century, writers began to incorporate theological and philosophical debates on the soul into their poetry, this essay contends, they did so not to imitate so much as to escape their prose equivalents.

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The subject matter of Sir John Davies's forensic account of the soul, *Nosce teipsum* (1599) is the soul's knowledge, slow and painful in the acquisition, cumbersome to enquire into, and all the time pulsing with the memory of how easy prelapsarian life was and how vast prelapsarian knowledge had been. Even if a careful steward, aiming to make good the reckless squandering of a fortune, might take steps towards its recovery; nevertheless, this careful husbandry would only always remind him of what he had lost:

> So might the heire, whose father hath in play,
> Wasted a thousand pounds of ancient rent,
> By painfull earning of one grote a day,
> Hope to restore the patrimonie spent. (69-72)[7]

The contemplation of the self in early modernity was wholly bound up with the lacerating knowledge of the degraded state of one's infected human soul. While the injunction to know oneself might be a Christian as well as a classical and philosophical duty, such a knowledge could produce only loathing. Io, turned into a cow in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, could not bear to see herself bovine, reflected in the water, and 'loathes the watrie glasse wherein she gaz'd /and shunnes it still, though

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[5] Robert Fludd, *Mosaicall Philosophy Grounded upon the Essentiall Truth* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1659), 191.

[6] Katherine Park, 'The Organic Soul', in Charles Schmitt and Quentin Skinner, eds, *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 464-84; Kessler, Eckhard, 'The Intellective soul', in ibid., 485-534. On poetry's enmity towards philosophy, see Raymond Barfield, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), Plato, 697b.

[7] Sir John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum* (London: John Standish, 1599), citing line numbers in text. Since the 1970s, there has been relatively little critical attention paid to Davies, but see Antony Ossa-Richardson, 'Known Unknowns: Sir John Davies's *Nosce Teipsum* in Conversation', *ELR* 52 (forthcoming, 2021); Elizabeth L. Swann, 'Nosce Teipsum: The Senses of Self-Knowledge in Early Modern England', in Subha Mukherji and Tim Stuart-Buttle, eds, *Literature, Belief and Knowledge in Early Modern England: Knowing Faith* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 195-214.

she for thirst do die' (119-20). Thus it was for the bovine human thinking on their degraded soul.

Everything we learn is undone by the constant and horrific reminders of what might have been. Being human generates an intractable pain, a chronic reminder not only of what was lost, the estate of paradise, but how far we bore and continued to bear the blame:

> … for merchants broke
> View their estate with discontent, and paine;
> And *Seas* are troubled when they do revoke,
> Their flowing waves, into themselues againe. (133-6)

The latter is an exquisite torture, in which the ocean, longing to escape itself, almost makes it, before that liberty is revoked, reminding the speaker of the soul, which might briefly seem free, but whose tainted nature inevitably reasserts its depravity. The salty waters pour back into the self, with recrimination and awareness of its former entitlement. What was lost at the fall could hardly be summed up, it so infected every facet of the world—illness, enmity, grinding poverty, decayed earth, and looming death—but at issue for Davies was the soul's decayed knowledge, which it could still dimly discern, even while it could not remedy the immensity of its ignorance.

Nosce teipsum is in fact two poems, or a poem of two parts, the first its lament, *Of Human Knowledge*, on the sheer enormity of what we do not know, the simultaneous futility and necessity of the long, slow slog of learning, taught always through affliction and grief, and returning to the brute fact of humanity: 'to conclude, I know my self a Man, /which is a proud and yet a wretched thing'. But if this seems not wholly to come down in favour of the labour of learning, the second poem, *Of the Soul of Man and the Immortalitie Thereof*, immerses itself in the task of contemplating the self in its full painful range. This is a poem that seems, at times, a late scholastic lecture on the soul, pedantic and thorough, attending in detail to the senses and how they scout for and serve the soul's needs.

Philosophy knew itself crass when it presumed to account for what the soul is, given that it was a fundamentally unknowable entity. The soul was a dark mystery, as well as the only source and hope of clarity. Early modern thought had inherited, however, a weighty apparatus of definition, lumbering and ungainly perhaps, but undoubtedly thorough. At some points in his investigation into the nature of soul, Davies is similarly definitive, enumerating its qualities in didactic fashion:

> *She is a substance,* and a reall thing,
> 1 Which hath it selfe an actuall working might,
> 2 Which neither from the *Senses* power doth spring,
> 3 Nor from the Bodies humors tempred right. (273-6)

Even while this describes its fine distinctions, that the soul is its own palpable and active substance, distinct from and not subservient to the senses or humours, it nevertheless might be thought culled from a scholastic primer, prosy, dull and listy. However, the lines that follow, without denying the philosophical claim, soften its assertions by entangling it among metaphorical foliage, capturing the soul's paradoxical and enigmatic co-belonging in a body unsupported but consubstantial:

> She is a *Vine,* which doth no propping need,
> To make her spread her selfe, or spring vpright;
> She is a *Starre,* whose beames do not proceed
> From any *Sunne,* but from a *natiue* light. (277-80)

Davies, at times the geographer of the plain soul, here finds himself having to account for it as a mysterious entity, haunting its own material self without quite being it. It is concurrent and omni-diffuse in the body it occupies, which sustains and harbours it, but nevertheless it is distinct and not dependent on brute matter. It demands and resists definition and suffers an epistemological offence in being explained:

> *But* how shall we this *vnion* well expresse?
> Nought tyes the *Soule,* her subtiltie is such;
> She moues the body, which she doth possesse,
> Yet no part toucheth, but by *vertues* touch. (893-6)

Nosce Teipsum is a long poem which is varied in its generic approach to how the soul accrues its knowledge and how it uses the body as its medium. Firstly, it approaches its matter as allegory, describing the courtly management of feckless servant-senses, who scurry to collect the sense-impressions that are then coordinated by the sovereign queenly soul (317-88). Subsequently, however, it changes its mode of engagement to more philosophical quandaries, picking its fight with unnamed materialists, whose gambit is that the soul is no more than an aggregate of the senses (389-580). A poem that opens by stressing the omni-unknowability of things then proceeds to detail, minutely, the whys and wherefores of the origin of the soul, treating in some depth those theories it does not countenance—of preexistence, transmigration, and traduction of the child's soul from the souls of its parents, which explanation had an Augustinian heritage as a mechanism for understanding how original sin was passed on (581-712). Adamic sin rumbles through all this, before a second half to the elegy (the genre it gives itself) deals with the immortality of the soul (1271-900). Each of these topics has a venerable philosophical and theological lineage, which might be attended to, but I want primarily to note Davies's recurrent poetics of uncertainty.

Soul in the poem oscillates between a thing explicable and beyond words. The enigmatic soul, it seems, is poorly served by philosophy's thorough plod, by the systematic, indeed by prose. And this failure of philosophical language can only be relieved by a poetic manoeuvre:

> Then dwels she not [in the body] as in a tent,
> Nor as a Pilot in his Ship doth sit;
> Nor as a Spider in her Web is pent;
> Nor as the Waxe retaines the print in it;
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> Nor as a Vessell water doth containe;
> Nor as one Liquor in another shed;
> Nor as the heate doth in the fire remaine,
> Nor as a voyce throughout the aire is spred. (897-908)

This series of dissimiles produces its account of things that the soul is almost but not quite like. All of the comparisons might under other circumstances serve to describe how the soul shimmers in the body, but as with negative theology, with its endless insufficiency of metaphor, here too each comparison turns out only to be of temporary. We need to shuttle on to the next metaphor, such that a glimpse of understanding is all we get. Natural philosophy needed the poetic because there was no other way in which it might address the intangible, paradoxical and frustrating resistance to definition. No metaphor was right, and this is why they work, or why they work when piled one on top of another. The adept use of metaphor and analogy was, of course, not restricted to verse. Philosophy and natural philosophy had long deployed the resources of analogy in their prose with panache.[8]

Nevertheless, it matters that the medium is poetry, in an argument that so turns on the unfathomability of the soul's access to knowledge. Metaphor is briefly true, partly true, but always also insufficient, with its excess of connotation, its failure of accurate representation, such that one must scramble for the next best likeness. The quick-fire movement between models of how the soul inheres in the body, akin to the apophatic concession that it can never know very far, is the key dynamic of the poem. Certainly, *Nosce Teipsum* has something of the textbook about it, and something of the didactic, with its low-key metrical thrum, its steady form of reiterated quatrains. But Davies could run with a metaphor quite effectively and as his models of the soul proliferate, so too does the sense of its sheer unknowable substance. The more closely we encounter it, the more ungraspable it becomes. The soul is present in the body like light in air, we find; as air is a substance which could be divided, blown and tossed with daylight diffused within it undisturbed, so the soul in the body is 'Indiuisible, vncorruptible still, /Not forc't, encountred, troubled, or confus'd.' (919-20). Or, switching metaphors once more, he details how the soul perceives. While it discerns in a manner quite distinct from the senses, its wide remit includes the orchestrating of all the senses, each discussed in turn. The soul, it is said, tunes the body's instrument (1145); it marshals the intricate design of the body, with its sleek divine purposes. Sound that might shock and jolt the brain is washed in the mazy channels of the ear's 'plaits and folds' so as to allow it to arrive more gently, to have

[8] Judith H. Anderson, *Light and Death: Figuration in Spenser, Kepler, Donne, Milton* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 77-112.

it eddy at the edges:

> As Streames, which with their winding banks do play,
> Stopt by their Creeks, run softly through the plaine;
> So in the Eares labrinth the voyce doth stray,
> And doth with easie motion touch the braine. (1113-16)

It matters, no doubt, that the metaphors' vehicle is very frequently a facet of the natural world, our poor knowledge of which is the very problem. This is the epistemological impasse of fallenness.

Such forays into the poetic were not undaring. Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) is sometimes treated as if it won the day for poetry, righting the wrong of Plato's summary banishment, and renovating the reputation of poetry as a medium for serious thought.[9] A suspicion remained, however, that poets lugging half-worn philosophical baggage were somewhat embarrassing. When Fulke Greville comments, in the epigraph to this essay, 'Then what is our high-prais'd Philosophie, /But bookes of Poesie, in Prose compil'd?', he does not intend it as a compliment.[10] Philosophy here is all glittering wit, not substance, in an essay that excoriates human arts as trivial patchwork, 'A *Science* never scientificall, /A *Rhapsody* of questions controverted' (stanza 49). John Stephens, in his 1615 essay 'Of Poetry', concedes the proximity of poetry and a prophetic access to truth, in theory at least, but nevertheless argues that verse tended to be ill-fitting for anything substantial:

> The deepest poets have neglected verse: I meane the polished forme of verse: but I would sooner love such workes in prose; and heartily intreate such writers, even for their own dispatch-sake, and the readers also, to abandon poetry, except they can avoyd that crabbed stile and forme, which weakens any readers appetite and apprehension.[11]

'Polished' verse, by which Stephens seems to mean over-polished and stylised verse, attenuates its topic. To be worth its salt, poetry needed to work some alchemy upon the subject, making it into something it might not otherwise be, and this was very often equated with the prophetic.[12] Francis Bacon's *De dignitate & augmentis scientiarum* (1623), which provides 'An universall Partition of Humane Learning', is equivocal about the value of 'poesy', but attributes to it the ability to plumb areas beyond the ordinary, 'the shadow of things, where the substance cannot be had'—although it might be added that this is a power it has over history rather than philosophy. In its more allusive and enigmatic powers, whereby it 'trafiques divine

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[9] See Catherine Bates, *On Not Defending Poetry: Defence and Indefensibility in Sidney's Defence of Poesy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[10] Greville, *A Treatie of Humane Learning*, stanza 29.
[11] John Stephens, *Essayes and Characters, Ironicall, and Instructiue* (London: Phillip Knight, 1615), sigs K7v-8r.
[12] Philip Sidney, *Apologie for Poetrie* (London: Henry Olney, 1595), sig. B4r-v

commodities with men', poetry remains for Bacon a frustrating tool, more or less along the lines we encountered with Plutarch: 'And it is of ambiguous use, and applied to contrary ends. For it serves for *Obscuration*; and it serveth also for *Illustration*'.[13] There were some reasonably substantial attempts to argue for poetry's particular access to knowledge otherwise inaccessible, such as Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus,* in one of his *Poeticall Essayes* (1599), but it is also the case that early modern poetry of natural philosophy was more adept at making the case for cosmic brokenness.[14]

An Elegy for Natural Philosophy in Donne's *Second Anniversarie*

Donne's two *Anniversaries* epitomise, indeed exaggerate, the problematic incursions of poetry into natural philosophy and vice-versa. Long seen as poems that inhabit the scientific within the early seventeenth century stew of the philosophical and the theological, the *Anniversaries* also lend themselves to a suspicion that the poet merely wants to plunder the science, to ransack its rich stock of ideas and its cosmological cargo. Donne's long first anniversary elegy to the dead Elizabeth Drury, a poem presented to the girl's parents, revels in its edgy bad taste, detailing the gruesome ripping to pieces, in a slow anatomy, of a carcass. That the rotting corpse, disjointed, bloated and ill-proportioned, picked over though the poem, turns out to be the world left after her death, hardly mitigates the poem's excess, its hyperbolic grief. The (ultimately unfair) suspicion that attends the poem consists also in its rent-a-woe character, lamenting for a girl whom Donne had never met, in what has been seen an overwrought patronage application.[15] If some readers have discerned bad faith in this, no less is Donne's 'science' liable to the same suspicion that he simply doesn't care. It is grist to his all-consuming mill, and self-consuming hyperbole. Nevertheless, this is a poem that deploys the tropes of natural philosophy, and explores the relationship between body and world, as memorably as any early modern writing.

Continuing a year later, Donne's *Second Anniversarie*, *Of the Progress of the Soule*, is less evidently a product of natural philosophy, but details the philosophically and anatomically intricate habitation of the soul in its mortal shell. Body and soul, exist in a precarious and bitter co-dependency. The opening depicts the sundering of the soul from the body, and the manner in which the two refuse to let go of each other. As though the earlier poem was not sufficiently gruesome for the grieving parents to whom it was presented, Donne makes up for it by showing in slow motion the twisted difficulty by which soul and body are plucked apart. This is no liberation,

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[13] Francis Bacon, *Of the advancement and proficience of learning; or, The partitions of sciences, Nine books*, trans. Gilbert Watts (Oxford: Robert Young and Edward Forrest, 1640), sigs O1v-2r; see Robert M. Schuler, 'Francis Bacon and Scientific Poetry', in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 82 (1992), 1-62.

[14] Samuel Daniel, *Musophilus* in *Poeticall Essayes* (London: Simon Waterson, 1599)

[15] Edward W. Tayler, *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in the 'Anniversaries'* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), 5-7; Robin Robbins, ed., *The Complete Poems of John Donne* (London: Longman, 2010), 879. Subsequent citations of the *Anniversaries* are to Robbins's edition.

but rather an inertia and a zombie-like reluctance to release and be released. By reference to the casual and quotidian fact of a man beheaded, with the twin gushing streams of blood, Donne notes the body's after-twitches, which might just be its gestures of love:

> as sometimes in a beheaded man
> Though at those two Red seas, which freely ran,
> One from the Trunke, another from the Head,
> His soule be sailed, to her eternall bed,
> His eies will twinckle, and his tongue will roll,
> As though he beckned and cal'd backe his Soul,
> He graspes his hands and he puls up his feet,
> And seems to reach, and to step forth to meet
> His soule. (9-17)

In apparent twinkly-eyed amusement at its own sudden soullessness, the body produces a dead seizure that just about resembles desire, in its convulsive clutching at its former companion.

Things heave on: the body and the world have their momentum and seem alive even as they break up. A lute will produce its sound even without anyone there, its gut-strings humming as the wood expands:

> … when all these motions which we saw,
> Are but as Ice, which crackles at a thaw:
> Or as a Lute, which in moist weather, rings
> Her knell alone, by cracking at her strings. (17-20)

Not until a long series of such comparisons has exemplified this juddering life-in-death do we find that the thing that is still jerking on as it rots is, in fact, the world, not her: 'So strugles this dead world, now shee is gone; /For there is motion in corruption' (21-2). This is a deviant micro-macrocosm with its heart removed; the world seems to lurch on, even while it is a mere charade of life.

The hobbled soul in its progress is, we find out, Donne's as much as Drury's. While she is catapulted through the spheres, in comet-like flight though the universal, those who remain must merely suffer the waterlogged soul 'whiles with the lugage of this clay /It clogged is', as the prefatory poem penned by Joseph Hall, *The Harbinger to the Progress,* has it (21-2). Donne's 'progress' is to study the stew of the earth: 'This must, my soule, thy long-short Progress bee' (219). The most that those who remain on this deflated and decaying earth can do is to slow its putrefaction. The poem, unable to revive Drury or the world, will attempt only to 'embalm, and spice / The World, which else would putrify with vice' (39-40). And yet putrify it will: from the husk of rotting body-earth we crawl, dependent still upon it: 'The World is but a Carkas; thou are fed / By it, but as a worme, that carcas bred' (55-6). The poem's

flighty ambition is not great—one can merely look up as Drury's inflated soul shoots away though the cosmos, while we remain vermicular upon the soil.

Donne's beautiful, horrible *Anniversaries* are a polyphonic outrage of cruelty, hyperbole, and despair. The *Progress of the Soul* turns out to have as its drumbeat not just the 'Incommodities of the Soul in the body', as the margin terms one section (157-80), but the problem that we do not want to remember that it is a problem at all, refusing that terrible knowledge that ought to be our every thought. 'Think … think … think' the poem's refrain goes, some thirty times. The body after all 'was made but in a sinke' ('a cesspool; a receptacle for filth or ordure' as the OED puts it), and its growth, in terrible intertwinedness with the lower parts of the soul, is reckoned as something of a cannibalistic feast: 'That those two soules, which then thou foundst in mee / Thou fedst upon, and drewst into thee, both / My second soule of sence, and first of growth' (160-2). This is Aristotelian and Thomist soul-theory after a fashion, with a tripartite soul, but figuring the soul-body relation as endlessly corrupting:[16]

> Thinke but how poore thou wast, how obnoxious,
> Whom a small lump of flesh could poison thus.
> This curded milke, this poor unlittered whelpe
> My body, could, beyond escape, or helpe,
> infect thee with originall sinne (163-7)

This account of being is Jobean—'Hast thou not poured me out as milk, and curdled me like cheese?' (Job 10.10)—in its despair at the coagulated, rancid state of humanity. Where Donne can say of Elizabeth, who served as microcosm to the world, that death 'hath now enfranchis'd thee' and released her soul ('thou hast thy expansion now and libertee'), the sorry microcosm of the humans left behind is a slighter thing: 'a province pack'd up in two yards of skinne' (179-80, 176), itself a not-un-Jobean observation ('Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me with bones and sinews' [Job 10.11]). Her death is the mere cracking of the egg-shell body to release the soul: 'Thinke thy sheell broke, think thy Soule hatch'd but now' (183-4), while we remain imprisoned merely in 'our living tomb' (252).

Critical responses to the poem have addressed, if sometimes warily, Donne's efforts to manufacture his own transcendence from the glimpse of Elizabeth's flight. This has been understood in relation to Protestant meditative traditions, or loosely Neoplatonic idealism; or as micro-macro correspondence, body and cosmos strung together. Donne's 'progress' is to follow the circuit of Elizabeth's solar soul, in a more or less hobbled fashion.[17] Whether the poem admits of or rejects a tranquil

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[16] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 2.2-3; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), 1a.76.3.

[17] Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Sarah Powrie, 'Speculative Tensions: The Blurring of Augustinian Interiority in *The Second Anniversarie*', *Connotations* 24 (2015-16), 1-18; Sarah Powrie, 'The Celestial Progress of a Deathless Soul: Donne's *Second Anniuersarie'*, *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007), 73-101. See too Anderson, *Light and Death*, 167-84.

conclusion may well depend upon the weight we attach to the epistemological debasement that precedes it, whether this is wholesale and philosophical *contemptus mundi*, not rising to the *contemplatio dei* it ostensibly aims at.[18] In a structural sense, the poem clearly does move to this celestially-focused end—its last two hundred lines turn away from worldly learning as mere superfluity and instead inveigle the soul to follow her ('up, up, my drowsie soul'), variants upon which are repeated, framing Elizabeth as the 'pattern' of the world rightly considered. Ramie Targoff's account of the *Second Anniversarie* offers an impressive account of its theological warp, in which the soul—Donne's soul, that is, as the subject of the poem—remains 'hydroptique', waterlogged rather than airy, but more importantly, reluctant to leave the body, its sewery home. Elizabeth as model proves 'insufficiently compelling to lure' the errant soul from its earthy ignominy.[19]

This is very frequently a dynamic in Donne—with something in common, for example, with the spiritual abasement of the *Holy Sonnets*—in which the poet so twists, warps and bullies on the way to spiritual resolution, with abusive paradoxes, or dark sexual undertows, as to undermine the ostensible direction of the poetry. We may arrive in a pure place, but have got filthy on the way there. Similarly in the *Anniversaries*, our intractable humanity, the thoroughly rancid soul-body, will just not scrub up. This may teeter on theological quandary, the deep stain of original sin, more than natural philosophy, but Donne's poem goes to some lengths to entwine the body's corruption with corrupt *knowledge* of the body.[20] At the centre of the poem, a long and epistemological excursion deviates from the drumbeat injunction 'think … think' to produce instead the insistent reminder, 'Know … Know', as though the body or the world might provide some knowledge worth having:

> Knowst thou but how the stone doth enter in
> The bladders Cave and never breake the skin;
> Knowst thou how blood, which to the hart doth flow
> Doth from one ventricle to th'other go? (269-72)

These questions ('Why grasse is greene, or why our blood is red'), engrossed in their epistemological quandaries, have been linked to Montaigne, but they are questions of a very particular Jobean slant.[21] They are not merely acataleptic, sceptical of our capacity to know; they lambast the presumption by which we might suppose we could look into the reasons of things. Job, having been ground in the mill of pain, disgraced and lashed by the disdain of his friends, appeals to God who, in the longest of biblical theophanies, assaults Job further, over four chapters, detailing the breadth of his ignorance: 'Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the

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[18] Tayler, *Donne's Idea*, 100.
[19] Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 85-105.
[20] Donne's sermons return to this motif regularly. See Robbins's edition, pp. 884-6, for several examples.
[21] Targoff, *Donne*, 101.

search of the depth? … Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? … Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven[?]' (38:16-33). This puncturing of audacity and pride carried, in early modern natural philosophy, a noted charge. God's reproving of Job's ignorance might signal the lancing of hubristic, over-daring curiosity, but this was also seen as the most philosophically charged piece of scripture, whose hard lesson was the fundamental unknowability of anything far beyond the banal.

This series of fruitless philosophical questions is more akin to the Donne of the *First Anniversarie*, disgusted at the shambles of the world's carcase, even as he butchers it into pieces, asking how it can teach anything worth knowing. The two poems similarly share a lament for our fractured knowledge, a lament that looks briefly as though it is a complaint about new-fangledness and needless intellectual innovation, but which in fact speaks to our postlapsarian condition. Where in the earlier poem, 'new Philosophy cals all in doubt' (205), in the *Progress* a similar disdain for newly concocted philosophy is voiced: 'Haue not all soules thought /For many ages that our body is wrought /Of Ayre, Fire, and other Elements? /And now they think of new ingredients' (263-6). In both cases, the disjointedness is a product of our fallen condition, an intellectual faithlessness and restlessness inherent in being human, rather than a nostalgia for an older, safer episteme, whether that means pre-Copernicanism or Hellenistic element theory.

Donne assails his own soul in terms that might seem to scold its laborious efforts to learn things object by object, seeking out 'a hundred controversies of an Ant', but this is merely, intractably human. Knowledge, greedily accumulated, weighs down and sinks humans, or at least those unlike Elizabeth: 'for as much knowledge, as would over-fraite /another, did but ballast her' (303-4, 316-17), ballast serving to steady a ship. Hers is now a flight through the cosmos in which mere fact, astronomical trivia and worldly speculation, has become an irrelevance, and this is the paradoxical end of all knowledge: the ultimate aim of learning is to render it, in its mere earthly focus, immaterial and insignificant. That the space-girl in flight convinces the speaker of this may, of course, remain in doubt.[22] Like the *First Anniversarie*, that chides the world for its worthless learning but remains consumed by it, the *Progress of the Soul* can consider Elizabeth ('She who all Libraries had throughly red /at home, in her owne thoughts') as free of the burden of the arduous, which liberation the speaker has not himself attained. However, his contemplation of her innocence is not a short-cut to knowledge. He, in his earthly stew, remains boggy and clogged. And no descant on her soul in flight is sufficient to do more than remind

[22] Ryan Netzley, 'Learning from Anniversaries: Progress, Particularity, and Radical Empiricism in John Donne's *The Second Anniversarie*', *Connotations* 24 (2015-16), 19-44 (pp. 26-7); Mary Thomas Crane, 'John Donne and the New Science', in Howard Marchitello and Evelyn Tribble, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Early Modern Literature and Science* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 95-114 (pp. 107-9); Richard Sugg, *John Donne: Critical Issues* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 123-53.

him of this fact.

Natural philosophy as a prose genre was shot through with theology, to quite the same extent as its poetic equivalent; its terms of reference, its objects of enquiry, its every fibre was imbued with the Fall as its key fact. But prose expositions of the science of the soul tended not to despair and grieve in quite the way that Donne does. Donne brings natural philosophy to elegy (in something like the modern sense of a lament), or he brings elegy to natural philosophy; this is his kaleidoscopic work in the poem, and neither sits easily with the other. The brokenness of human knowledge, the inhospitable home of the soul in its reeky body, the partialness of the senses—these were the stuff of natural philosophy in prose (and in Davies, who in this respect is prosy), but Donne transposes this lament for humanity down to the human, to the still more visceral grief for an ordinary girl. That there may be something fake in this is not something extrinsic to the poem, or a question of his 'sincerity'; it is the very quality of fallenness that the poem describes. The proximity of elegy, despair and the scientific is jarring and is meant to be; they disrupt each other, but they need each other. Knowledge needs to know how paltry a thing it is. The difference between prose and poetry as the medium for natural philosophy was not between plain and florid language. Claire Preston, exploring the poetics of early modern, largely prose, scientific writing, notes both how rich and highly self-conscience it was in its literary capacities, how such writings 'cannot be disengaged from their rhetorical, literary vehicles'.[23] The cognate work of poets who deal in natural philosophy is not merely a low-calorie equivalent of serious writing, heavier on the metaphor and lighter on the natural philosophy. It was, rather, a mode of writing that borrowed and skewed the materials of natural philosophy, and revelled in the disruption. Nowhere, perhaps, do we find such generic disruption more deliberately and elaborately than in Phineas Fletcher and his wonderful, terrible gargoyle of an epic.

Kaleidoscopic Anatomy: Phineas Fletcher's *Purple Island*

Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island* is an epic of the sprawled body, depicting a corpse subject to vehement, fast-paced metamorphoses, a body whose meaning hurtles from one to the next instantiation. It can properly be described as a philosophical-scientific poem, with its depiction of a thriving body ready for dissection, but the corporeal terms of reference lie beyond this, and are elaborated into a series of allegorical states. It becomes a topographical body, on which is played out both a creation myth and a political city-system, with busy commerce and rivalry between the organs, capitalist spleen made literal; it is a distinctly Protestant body, proud in its nationalist-theological isolationism, rolling itself aside from the diabolic Catholic continent, all narrated by a wandering Spenserian shepherd, in verse of

[23] Claire Preston, *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4

middling quality. There is nothing else like it. The critical reception of *The Purple Island* is littered with carefully denigrating comment, disinfecting the way, lest anyone should think the critic misinterprets the poem as quite good. Fletcher is a poet 'who writes almost exclusively in truisms', says Leonard Barkan, while Marjorie Nicolson comments candidly that: 'A little of *The Purple Island* goes a very long way, and I do not pretend to have mastered all the intricacies of its twelve cantos … nor—life being short—have I any intention of ever doing so'.[24] More recent writings have been kinder, indeed impressed with its strangeness.[25] Peter Mitchell, in his 700-page monograph on four of its twelve cantos, brings to it multiple anatomical and theological contexts, describing its dense 'metaphoricity'.[26] If any poem could be said to embody the kind of discursive volatility that, I suggest, characterises the poetry of natural philosophy, this is it. *The Purple Island* is in a poem constant bilious flux.

The bones of Fletcher's poem (so to speak) are its margins, in which an anatomy, a fully worked out humoral account of the body, forms a dense column in counterpoint to which the poem proper describes its complex body-land. The visual layout of this is careful and elaborate—an eighteenth-century edition, presenting marginal notes as footnotes, misses the aesthetic entirely, and a recent edition does the same.[27] This is a poem that visualises equivalence. The poem's putative scientific status, across cantos 2-5, lies in the margins rather than the main 'body' of the poem and the interaction between margin and poem is therefore an essential constituent of any reading of *The Purple Island*. They are not footnotes so much as the poem's less-mad twin, though the two are in constant correspondence, demanding that the reader shuffle left and right. This is not a poem with a narrative; it relies almost entirely for its logic on the structures of the body, described in intricate if polymorphic detail. At one moment we have a quasi-geological landscape churning into existence, the next a castle-architecture reminiscent of Spenser's House of Alma (or indeed Davies's court, overseen by a sovereign soul, in *Nosce Teipsum*) and then again, we are presented with a complex capitalist economy, its cities the bodily organs, each with its function within the overall infrastructure.

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[24] Leonard Barkan, *Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 3; Marjorie Nicholson, *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effects of the New Science upon Seventeenth Century Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 29

[25] Thomas Healy, 'Sound Physic: Phineas Fletcher's The Purple Island and the Poetry of Purgation', *Renaissance Studies* 5 (1991), 341-52; Lana Cable, 'Such Nothing is Terrestriall: Philosophy of Mind on Phineas Fletcher's Purple Island', *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 19 (1983), 136-52; Yvette Koepke, 'Allegory as Historical and Theoretical Model of Scientific Medicine: Sex and the Making of the Modern Body in Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island*', *Literature and Medicine* 27 (2008), 175-203.

[26] Peter Mitchell, *The Purple Island and Anatomy in Early Seventeenth Century Literature, Philosophy and Theology* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 250-1.

[27] Phineas Fletcher, *The Purple Island* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1633/London: J. Buckland et al., 1783); Fletcher, *The Purple Island, Or: The Isle of Man*, ed. Jonathan H. Pope (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

The poem is also, if unintentionally, quite funny. The history of queasy responses to it emerges at least in part from its somewhat flustered and somewhat indefatigable representation of the body excreting and having sex. Both fearless and coy, the poem makes its way around the body, and the body's functions. Here is Fletcher pissing:

[a]Down in a vale, where these two parted walls
Differ from each with wide distending space,
Into a lake the Urine-river falls,
Which at the *Nephros* hill beginnes his race:
Crooking his banks he often runs astray,
Lest his ill streams might backward finde a way:
Thereto, some say, was built a curious framed bay.

[b]The Urine-lake drinking his colour'd brook,
By little swells, and fills his stretching sides:
But when the stream the brink 'gins over-look,
A sturdy groom empties the swelling tides;
Sphincter some call; who if he loosed be,
Or stiffe with cold, out flows the senselesse sea,
And rushing unawares covers the drowned lea.

[a]The passages carrying the urine from the kidneys to the bladder. Some affirm that in the passage stands a curious lid, or cover.

[b]The bladder endeth in a neck of flesh, and is girded with a muscle which is called Sphincter: which holds in the urine lest it flow away without our permission. If this be loosened, or cold, the urine goes away from us of it self without any feeling.

Purple Island, 2.25-6

The sturdy groom of the bladder is a little harassed, if stoic, in his task of emptying the piss-lake. But the task is made harder by the surprising incontinence of the cold body, pissing itself unawares. One might suspect that this would be how it sounded if Bart Simpson had written microcosmic poetry. Jonathan Sawday's borrowing of Joyce's *Ulysses* as a cognate somatic epic, both consisting of multiple overlain, incongruous schema, is particularly helpful, if generous to Fletcher, in imagining how a poem might kaleidoscopically contain a febrile city, frantic with trade, providentially agitated, at once hierarchical and superbly communal, and at the same time, a body unembarrassed, graphic and a little gawky.[28]

While it is true to say there is little narrative in the poem, it does however feature the heaving movements of slow time and creation history. The body is, on the one hand, static and laid out, corpse-like, for anatomical or medical probing. But it also has an animate history of fallenness and redemption written into it; the body-land is described in its painful postlapsarian birth, which is figured as a quasi-geological separation from the rankly Catholic mainland of Europe from which it is wrenched into existence: 'Now was this Isle pull'd from that horrid main' (Canto 2.2). After this politico-geophysical pre-birth, however, there is more shaping to be suffered, as the

[28] Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned, Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 170-82.

bubbling proto-Blakean universe congeals into bones which ‘grounded lies upon a sure foundation, /Compact, and hard; whose matter (cold and drie) / To marble turns in strongest congelation /Fram’d of fat earth, which fires together tie’ (Canto 2.5-6). The chaos churns into being, but for each such account of the hard-wrought earth, there is an analogical model that might be culled from Vesalius or one of the many richly illustrated anatomical works that so fascinated renaissance culture. The scaffold or skeleton of underground bones are linked by gristle made of the same ‘portion of seed’:

> [a]Whose looser ends are glu'd with brother earth,
> Of nature like, and of a neare relation;
> Of self-same parents both, at self-same birth;
> [b]That oft it self stands for a good foundation:
> [c]Both these a third doth soulder fast, and binde;
> Softer then both, yet of the self-same kinde;
> All instruments of motion, in one league combin'd.
>
> *Purple Island*, 2.6

[a] A cartilage, or grisle, is of a middle nature betwixt bones, and ligaments or sinews made of the same matter, and in the same manner as bones, for variety and safetie in motion.
[b] Some of these (even as bones) sustain and uphold some parts
[c] Both these are knit with ligaments: A ligament or sinew is of nature between grisles, and nerves, framed of a rough and clammy portion of the seed, for knitting & holding the bones together, & fitting them for motion.

The effect of this occasionally overflowing pairing—anatomy and geology; or anatomy and political structure—is that the reader must shuttle back and forth. If at times the poem itself seems to have a degree of autonomy and the description of the land proceeds within its own internal logic, it is also relentlessly indebted to what the anatomy reveals. This is both rigid microcosm and free-form association between bodily detail and its various correlates.

The poem’s ‘ingenuity’—to use a word that has often attended this bafflingly-contrived work—is that, in its anatomy, it strenuously avoids the body as a visceral dead entity and, by and large, as a site of illness—which is figured always as potential, not actualised, civil unrest. The body, though undergoing a dissection, is wholly alive; it is continually reconfigured into land and trade arrangements, translating each nerve, bone and organ into geography or a political structure. The ‘anatomy’ section of *The Purple Island*, the ‘corpse’ under dissection, is presented as a smoothly operational commercial zone, whose anatomical functions are predicated on economic ideas of proper exchange. Written, it is assumed, around 1610-11, though not published till 1633, the poem’s economic logic does not quite yield a Jacobean allegory of free trade, but it certainly insists on the analogical potential of the body to supply a model for commodity exchange, and indeed, one of its commendatory poems, by Lodowick Roberts, discovers an equivalence between Fletcher’s anatomical project and Roberts’s own ‘merchants progresse’ around the

earth 'to seek out undiscover'd ground'.[29] The praise of trade, however, sits alongside Fletcher's frequent stress on the vanity of travel (a praise of stasis perhaps inadvertently apt in a poem about a corpse). The mapping of the body, its chorography of strange internal and external lands, is Fletcher's 'Autologie', the knowledge of the self—*Nosce te ipsum*—which underlies the poem, as the only spiritual balm for fallen man. Because man is a microcosm, the trope goes, knowledge of the self is sufficient, without the need for vacuous travel. And yet the island itself (which is both nation and individual) seems unable to obey the praise of stillness. It floats and bobs in rough political waves, at times a lost boat as much as a settled island. If it is difficult to see the unity between the anatomical first half of the poem and its latter parts, six cantos of *psychomachia* (a sub-Virgilian battle of the virtues and vices), the euphoric climax of *The Purple Island* returns to the body adrift, with the plea of a sea-worn traveller in a boat made of flesh for anchorage in the blood-streaming, wounded side of Christ: 'Anchor my life in thy calm streams of bloud … /Harbour my fleshly bark in thy wounded side' (12.52). Probing Christ's side is generally to be associated with Doubting Thomas and there is, perhaps, a corresponding uncertainty in the earlier section of the poem, at odds with the empirical and apparently assured account of the body in the margins.[30]

Phineas Fletcher was no John Donne, and we do not find in the poem the searing emotional descant or the raw poetic brilliance of the *Anniversaries*. But *The Purple Island* remains a quite remarkable and wonderfully unhinged poem, typifying what early modern writers believed philosophical poetry could achieve, beyond the capacity of prose. The early modern body was required to *mean* beyond itself, to demonstrate pattern or analogical resemblance, and this remains true throughout the seventeenth century.[31] This was a deeply ingrained habit of thought. Poetry allowed for, indeed insisted upon, the ceaseless reformulation of the meaning of this most polysemous of objects: the body in its relationship to the soul or to the world. Prose could not be expected to sideways-leap in this alogical fashion, in such discursive hopscotch, and it was this kaleidoscopic quality of poetry that proved so attractive to writers of 'scientific' poetry in turn-of-the-century England.

The poetry of natural philosophy retained its allure throughout the century, a testament to the era's cacophony of disciplines, but also its sense that the poetic, 'metaphors aenigmaticall, and covert words' as Plutarch phrased it, allowed for a perspective on the always dark natural world that prose could not manage. The reader positively needed to be perplexed. Margaret Cavendish, whose early scientific poetry (published in *Poems and Fancies* [1653]) pursued a detailed atomism, wrote some decades later in her prefatory remarks to *Natures Picture Drawn by Fancies Pencil* of having dealt with her many subjects, but not having 'painted them all alike, some

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[29] Fletcher, *Purple Island* (1633), sig. ¶¶2v; see Mark Beyer, 'The Distribution of Political Agency in Phineas Fletcher's Purple Island,' *Criticism* 44 (2002), 249–270.

[30] Healy, 'Sound Physic', 348-9.

[31] See Sawday, *Body Emblazoned,* passim.

being done with Oily-colours of Poetry, others with Water-colours of Prose'.[32] Neither was more 'right' than the other, but poetic encounters with natural philosophy were particularly rich. They could also be, of course, absurd. Henry More, one of her scientific contemporaries, produced the most lavish, if not grotesque poetic accounts of the soul in full Spenserian-Platonic dress, in a poem attractive in the way that Phineas Fletcher is attractive: a marvel of incongruity.[33] Grouping these poems together as what Robert M. Schuler called 'Scientific Poetry' is no doubt fraught with difficulties. They are fantastically unscientific in most respects, and describing them as 'natural philosophy' does not entirely circumvent the problem. But it is the case, this essay has argued, that poetry at the cusp on the seventeenth century was a medium that made natural philosophy say things it could not say in prose.

[32] Margaret Cavendish, *Natures Picture Drawn by Fancies Pencil* (London: A. Maxwell, 1671), sig. b1r.

[33] Henry More, *Philosophical Poems* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1647); More, *Psychodia platonica, or, A Platonicall Song of the Soul Consisting of Foure Severall Poems* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel, 1642).

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Further Reading

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Abstract

Poetry and Natural Philosophy: The errant soul in John Davies, John Donne and Phineas Fletcher

This essay addresses the sudden surge in natural philosophy as a subject or subtext of English poetry from the turn of the seventeenth century. This interest in incorporating

the scientific was quite distinct from didactic traditions that laid claim to a classical heritage in Hesiod, Nicander and Lucretius. In its wrenching together of the anatomical and the cosmic or the fraught relationship between body and soul as a framework within which to consider the precarious nature and limits of human knowledge, this was a poetry of both epistemological ambition and despair. The question that will animate the essay is why poetry was, of a sudden, considered a proper medium for such philosophical speculation, and how it might accomplish ideas beyond those of prose exposition. The claim will be developed that early modern poetics came to be valued precisely because of its discursive volatility, its kaleidoscopic capacity. Some things, the era (re)discovered, things beyond words, could only be approached via the concoctions of metaphors. The essay will focus on poetry that deals with body and soul, 'scientifically', as objects of knowledge, beginning with the relative sobriety of Sir John Davies' *Nosce Teipsum*, moving on to Donne's *Second Anniversary* and Phineas Fletcher's *Purple Island*, poems of increasingly outlandish design and purpose.