Inanimating Matter: The Aesthetics of Putrefaction in Early Modern English Literature, 1580-1660

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or is being concurrently submitted, for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or is being concurrently submitted, for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the English Degree Committee.
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Abstract
This thesis examines representations of decaying organic matter in early modern English literature. The ubiquitous preoccupation with processes of organic dissolution and decay in the poetry, prose, and drama of the years 1580-1660 has often been understood to reflect this period’s pervasive anxieties about mortality and the mutability of the flesh. In this thesis, I argue, by contrast, that the slimy, dusty, vermiculated, and otherwise putrefactive remains of the organic body detailed so energetically in numerous early modern texts, from Shakespeare’s Hamlet to the natural histories of Francis Bacon to the sermons and poetry of John Donne, manifest instead a paradoxical awareness of matter’s inorganic animacy—an ontological and aesthetic generativity immanent in matter’s very formlessness. Drawing on recent scholarship emphasising the profoundly embodied nature of early modern interiority, I place the period’s fascination with processes of organic decay in the context of broader epistemological concerns about the relationship between outward form and interiority in this period; the body’s internal processes of dissolution, manifested especially vividly in the putrefaction of the corpse, suggest to early modern writers a conception of inner being as fluid, formless, and yet generative process—a process continually producing material forms in excess of the identities represented by the body’s static outer appearance. In my introduction, I explore the striking parallels between this conception of materiality and those of three twentieth-century materialist philosophers: Julia Kristeva, Georges Bataille, and, especially, Gilles Deleuze, whose theory of affect or intensity offers this thesis its central insight into the aesthetic and ontological generativity of material process. The central chapters of the thesis focus on three early modern writers: Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and Thomas Browne. Chapter One, ‘Spenser’s Slime: Indistinct Matter in The Faerie Queene’, studies that poem’s pervasive fascination with spontaneously generative muck, arguing that slime, mud, and mire offer the poem a powerful image of its own formless yet fertile materiality. In Chapter Two, “Perplex’d Discomposition”: The (In)animacy of Dissolution in the Writings of John Donne’, I suggest that Donne’s notorious obsession with the putrefaction, dissolution, and atomisation of the human corpse, evident in his poetry, sermons, and devotional writings alike, reflects not his anxieties about the annihilation of identity in death, as literary critics have frequently maintained, but his fascination with matter’s ‘posthume’—its posthumous and posthuman—aesthetic fertility. My final chapter, “Living Corruptions”: Thomas Browne’s Equivocal Materiality’, focusses on Browne’s late essay Hydriotaphia, whose unsettling meditation on the forms assumed by matter as it decays—incrassated gellies, saponified fats, equivocally generated serpents—evidences what I will term an aesthetic of the putrefactive sublime. Throughout the thesis, I will be concerned with the ways in which these literary texts might themselves embody the formless forms they describe, dissolving structure into indistinct process, organic totality into fertile putrescence.
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Abbreviations

OED: Oxford English Dictionary
ELR: English Literary Renaissance
SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900
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Introduction

Inanimating Matter: The Aesthetics of Decomposition in Early Modern Literature

I. An Insensible Sickness

*Duchess.* Dost thou perceive me sick?

*Bosola.* Yes, and the more dangerously since thy sickness is insensible. [...] 

*Duchess.* Who am I? 

*Bosola.* Thou art a box of wormseed—at best, but a salvatory of green mummy. What’s this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff-paste. Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earthworms.

John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 4.2.114-129

Critical readings of Bosola’s disturbing meditation on the corruptibility of the human body in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* have tended to characterise it as a conventional expression of disgust for corporeality, indebted to a long tradition of Christian moralising which stressed the superiority of the eternal soul to the mortal body and the need to transcend fleshly desires. To interpret Bosola’s comments wholly in terms of the *de contemptu mundi* tradition, however, risks missing the epistemological concerns that animate his reflections upon the mutability of the flesh. Bosola’s preoccupation with the ‘insensible’ corruption lurking within the human frame plays on his, and the play’s, wider concerns about the discrepancy between ‘this outward form of man’, as he once puts it, and inner being:

What thing is in this outward form of man
   To be beloved? [...] 
Though we are eaten up of lice and worms, 
   And though continually we bear about us 
A rotten and dead body, we delight 
   To hide it in rich tissue. (2.1.51-64)

It is easy to overlook Bosola’s complex probing of the nature of interiority in his exchange with the Duchess of Malfi because it is expressed in terms deeply alien to our post-Cartesian sensibilities. Early...


\[2\] Bosola’s contempt for the body is palpable’ in this scene, writes Gabriel A. Rieger (*Sex and Satiric Tragedy in Early Modern England: Penetrating Wit*, Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama [London: Routledge, 2009], p. 65); Bosola ‘uses his disgust for the female body to denigrate flesh in general, asserting its inferiority to the soul and the analogous inferiority of life to death’, comments Judith Haber (*The Duchess of Malfi: tragedy and gender* in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. by Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], pp. 236-248 [pp. 243]). For Irving Ribner, similarly, Bosola invokes the ‘commonplaces of *de contemptu mundi*’ philosophy carried on from the Middle Ages, a system of belief which stressed the insignificance of the human body in order to emphasize the eternity of the soul” (*Webster’s Italian Tragedies* in *The Tulane Drama Review*, 5 [1961], 106-118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1124666> [p. 114]).
modern culture, as numerous studies have shown in recent years, tended to conceive of interiority in much more profoundly materialistic terms than modernity; if since the Enlightenment terms such as inwardness and interiority have become largely metaphorical, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the inner was still intimately tied to the literal interior of the human body. If for Bosola the Duchess’s inner sickness is ‘insensible’ in the privative sense of the prefix ‘in’—that is, imperceptible, it is also insensible in the prepositional sense—sensible in the body. The conception of inwardness expressed in this passage differs from the modern one in another way as well. In modernity, inwardness has tended to be conceived as an individual essence transcending historical and material contingency. But for Bosola that ‘thing’ inside this outward form of man is, rather, material process itself (rottenness, corruption, disease); precisely that element of material existence which undermines individual being. This formulation of inwardness, I would argue, implies a particular conception of the epistemological relation between outer and inner. The discrepancy between sensible form and ‘insensible’ essence is referred not to a dichotomy between materiality and immateriality, but rather to an ontological relation between being and becoming: between the outward appearance of static, individual identity and inner material processes which are irreducible to such rational identities. ‘Who am I?’ asks the Duchess, and Bosola responds with a series of paradoxes: interiority is living flesh and rotting corpse; it is human and worm—‘wormseed’ refers not just to the seed of worms, but to an anthelmic herb used to purge intestinal worms from the human body—it decays, but is also generative; it is both unripe and rotten, both preserving and corrupting.

At the same time, I would argue, we cannot assume the simple equivalence of matter and mortality in this exchange. Bosola is fascinated by those forms—animate and inanimate—which the body produces through its dissolution: worms, mummy, curds of cheese, puff pastry; though the body’s inward corruption entails human mortality, it nonetheless also entails a kind of nonhuman animacy, an inward being which is always more than human, and which is continually producing alien new forms of existence. This is an inwardness constituted precisely by bodily decay—not a human interiority, but the inwardness of matter itself, in the very processes of dissolution which ultimately destroy psychological consciousness.

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Bosola’s ‘insensible sickness’, I would argue, closely resembles what the poststructuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze has called ‘affect’, or ‘intensity’. Writing at the other end of the history of Western idealism, Deleuze seeks to develop an anti-Cartesian metaphysics which conceives the inner as fully immanent within the outer, without, however, assuming any reductive equivalence between the two. For Deleuze, interiority is not any universal or identity which transcends the particularity of material existence, but immanent becoming, difference, and relationality; it is not, that is, a static being which remains the same despite material difference, but rather a pure potential or indeterminacy in things which produces material difference by relating the ‘inner’ to the ‘outer’, actual identities to that which they must exclude in order to become identifiable in the first place. What Deleuze calls ‘affect’ or ‘intensity’ is the continual interplay of this ‘virtual’ realm of difference with the ‘actual’ realm of constituted identities, as actual bodies are opened up to virtual difference, and virtual pure difference is itself determined and delimited by the actual.

In this thesis, I will suggest that English literature of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries evinces a conception of materiality strikingly similar to Deleuze’s postmodern, professedly anti-Cartesian one. I study in particular this period’s fascination with the materiality of organic decay, a fascination evident in many of the best-known texts of this era, ranging from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to the natural histories of Francis Bacon to the pamphlets of Thomas Nashe to the poetry and sermons of John Donne. I suggest that the vivid descriptions of bodily decay that figure so prominently in literature of the early modern period are motivated not, as has often been argued, by individual or cultural anxieties about death and mutability, but by a fascination with the non-human, pre-individual, but fully material animacy Deleuze calls ‘affect’: a power, immanent within matter itself, to be and to produce being in excess of any outwardly symbolisable meaning. While Deleuze’s differential metaphysics might seem deeply alien to a culture still steeped in theological conceptions of material order, I suggest that it in fact resonates powerfully both with this period’s deeply materialistic habits of mind and with the particular epistemological crises with which early modern writers were continually grappling; the ‘affective’ conception of materiality I outline stems, I will argue, from a culture deeply engaged with the problem of the relationship between inward truth and outward appearance, but one which imagined that discrepancy not in terms of the Cartesian duality of the material and immaterial, but of an ontological discrepancy between being and becoming, between form and a material indeterminacy that produces form even while exceeding it. Indeed, these texts intimate a conception of matter which, like Deleuze’s own, profoundly challenges some of the guiding assumptions informing Western philosophy and science following the Enlightenment: one that privileges difference over identity; that conceives of matter in terms of animacy rather than passivity and causal determination; that conceives of mind as fully immanent within matter, within, that is, the physical experience of being, in all its mutability and contingency—and also its metamorphic novelty.
In this introduction, I seek to draw out the sometimes unexpected parallels between the early modern conceptions of matter I outline in this thesis and the ontological and epistemological insights of Deleuze, as well as those of two other twentieth-century French materialists, the psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva and the philosopher Georges Bataille, whose thinking has guided my own in this thesis in various ways. In drawing these various materials together, my aim is not to reduce early modern thinking about materiality and the body to modern theoretical systems, nor, indeed, to reduce the complex thought of any one of the modern philosophers I have mentioned to those of the others. Instead, I seek to highlight certain similarities in these various ways of thinking about matter, affect, and interiority that persist despite undeniable differences in historical and philosophical outlook—a method I find modelled in Deleuze’s own substantial work in the history of philosophy. Throughout this introduction, then—and throughout the thesis—I will weave between historical and theoretical material, allowing them to resonate with and illuminate one another in turn.

II. ‘A Kinde of Quicknesse, and Life of Spirit’: Inwardness and Putrefaction in the English Renaissance

Our garments (which are cases and couers for our bodies) we compact of Pearle and golde, our bodies themselues are nought but clay and putrifaction. [...] Though our span-long youthly prime blossomes forth eye-banquetting flowers, though our delicious gleaming features make vs seeme the Sonnes and Daughters of the Graces, though we lister it neuer so in our worme-spunne robes and golde-florisht garments, yet in the graue shall we rotte: from our redolentest refined compositions, ayre pestilenzing stincks and breath-choking poysnous vapours shall issue.\(^4\)

Thomas Nashe, *Christs Teares over Jerusalem* (1593)

That the intense preoccupation with the materiality of dissolution and decay in early modern culture should, as I suggested above, express an epistemological problem—a concern about the nature of the relationship between the exterior and interiority as such—might seem strange to modern readers, for whom questions of outer and inner have long been severed from the spatial dimensions of the physical body. This was not, however, yet the case in the early modern period, when the abstractions of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought still lay some years in the future. In early modern culture, as numerous recent studies have shown, mind, selfhood, and inner being were still considered intimately connected to the body and its functions; whether using the terminology of Galenic humoralism or referring more generally to inner phenomena in terms of the body’s organs, structures, and processes, writing of this period repeatedly suggests that the interiority of inwardness in this period was not yet the mere metaphor it has become for modern ears.\(^5\) When in his 1593 pamphlet *Christs Teares over Jerusalem*, then, Thomas Nashe, like Bosola, characterises the somatic interior as a place


\(^5\) See footnote 3 above.
of putrefaction and corruption—a place in which the distinction between the living and dead body seems strangely irrelevant—we would do well to consider the implications of such imagery for a conception of interiority as such. Conversely, when, in the famous closet scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, we find Hamlet referring to Gertrude’s inner life in terms of a ‘rank corruption’, which, ‘mining all within,/ Infects unseen’, we should not immediately assume this formulation of inwardness to be purely metaphorical—or simply separable from his, and his contemporaries’, broader fascination with the physicality of organic decay:

Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks;
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
While rank corruption, mining all within,
Infests unseen. (*Hamlet*, 3.4.146-150)

*Hamlet*, indeed, repeatedly refers to the inner in these terms:

This is th’impostume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies. (4.4.27-9)

The association between inwardness and various forms of dissolution and decay persists well into the seventeenth century. In one of several discussions of various means of preventing putrefaction in material bodies in her 1666 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Margaret Cavendish too characterises the discrepancy between interior and exterior as one between the outer form of the body and putrefactive inner formlessness:

there may be an art to preserve the exterior shapes of some animal bodies, but not their interior forms; for although their exterior shapes, even after the dissolution of the animal figure, may be somewhat like the shapes and figures of their bodies, when they had the life of an animal, yet they being transformed into some other creatures by the alteration of their interior figurative motions, can no ways keep the same interior figure which they had when they were living animals.

In these texts, the fluidity and flux characterising the bodily interior are imagined as physically undermining the illusions of self-sameness, stasis, and autonomy provided by the body’s outward appearance; they present inwardness as inseparable from this capacity of the inner body to exceed and undermine the ostensible boundaries of its own interior, producing, in doing so, less determinate forms of existence: odours, infections, imposthumes.

Modernity has tended to conceive of inner and outer in dialectical opposition to one another—of the self to its material and social contexts, of the subject to its objects, of mind to matter. As psychoanalysis has suggested, however, the abstract conception of interiority implied by those

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oppositions is founded upon the illusion of the body as a discrete, autonomous entity, physically separated from a broader material world. For psychoanalysis, the primal experience of the body is one of relative non-differentiation between interior and exterior: in very early infancy, the child experiences the external world not as a differentiated realm of discrete objects separable from inner emotional life, but as fundamentally continuous with her own body, a projection of her own psychobiological drives.\(^8\)

Julia Kristeva in particular has traced the emergence of the ego—and the various distinctions which arise from the ego, between subject and object, self and other, and so on—to the moment when the infant ‘abjects’ its mother, who at this point constitutes the primary feature of the infant’s world, from its body, a rejection of the felt continuity with the world which is the first step toward the emergence of a sense of autonomous, unified selfhood and identity. In time, the nascent ego, Kristeva argues, will come to repress the memory of its primal, non-differentiated experience of the world, and in doing so accede to symbolic language. But this expulsion of the external world is neither a secure nor a complete one; the desire for somatic autonomy is paradoxically paired with a longing for somatic non-differentiation and immersion that continues to haunt the mature ego, and, therefore, the patriarchal symbolic order itself. Kristeva argues that the powerful fascination elicited by bodily filth—excrement, menstrual blood, and, especially, putrefactive matter—stems from its power to evoke this barely repressed fear of and desire for presymbolic formlessness, a desire whose achievement would spell the annihilation of the ego and the collapse of one’s symbolic structures of signification. According to Kristeva, the putrefying corpse is the paradigmatic instance of the threat the abject poses to individual being:

> The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death [...] A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. [...] No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver.\(^9\)

As the German sociologist Norbert Elias argued fifty years ago, however, the conception of selfhood whose origins psychoanalytic theorists like Kristeva have sought to trace—one which insists upon a firm distinction between inner and outer—is by no means a transhistorical or universal one, but is one which has roots, rather, in specific socioeconomic and cultural transformations occurring in Western Europe in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. It was only with the rise of courtly society in Western Europe during this period, and the increasing emphasis on social decorum and emotional self-discipline that accompanied the shift, Elias argued, that people began to conceive of inwardness as

\(^8\) Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror stage has offered the most influential theoretical formulation of the transition from non-differentiation to a unified sense of selfhood in early infancy; see ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), pp. 1-8.

somehow physically contained within the body—of selfhood, as Elias put it, as ‘something locked away “inside” them, severed from all other people and things “outside”’, a phenomenon Elias dubbed ‘homo clausus’. The affective distance required by the newly diverse social settings of urban society, that is, manifested itself as a physical barrier between inner and outer worlds, an actual wall between the self and the ‘outside’ world. The crystallisation of this somatic boundary between the interior and the exterior, Elias suggested, both accompanied the emergence of, and helped to bring about, the more abstract divisions that delineate the ‘inner’ in modern thought: the divisions between mind and materiality, between subject and objects, between the autonomous self and the social and historical contexts in which it operates. Building on Elias’s work, recent scholarship has extensively detailed an early modern paradigm of selfhood profoundly different from our own modern one, one which insisted on the imbrication of mind within body and of the self within its material and social environments.¹¹

The eagerness of such studies to emphasise historical difference has, however, sometimes come at the expense of a sense of the instability of the relation between inner and outer in this era of profound and rapid cultural change. Where Elias’s argument importantly historicises the psychoanalytic account of the origin of selfhood, Kristeva’s poststructuralist revision of the Freudian narrative can help us perceive the instability that always accompanies the division between inner and outer—and would especially have done so in an era when that distinction was just beginning to emerge historically.¹² The persistent association between the interior of the body and states of dissolution and decay in early modern texts can be understood as expressing a fascination with the non-differentiation of the somatic interior, with the irreducibility of somatic inwardness to the body’s physical forms; in Hamlet, for example, corruption is repeatedly imagined as a process by which the inner materiality of things undermines, outgrows, or otherwise exceeds structures of containment, and, therefore, psychological consciousness: ‘mining all within’, ‘infect[ing] unseen’, ‘inward break[ing]’, ‘o’erleaven[ing]’/ The form of plausible manners’ (1.4.29-30), ‘breaking down the pales and forts of reason’ ‘by the[...] o’ergrowth of some complexion’ (1.4.27), that is, internal humoral constitution. The epistemological problem implied by Hamlet’s formulations of inwardness is expressed especially clearly in one of John Donne’s early

sermons on the resurrection of the body; Donne’s sensational description of the putrefaction of the body closely echoes Kristeva’s emphasis on the corpse’s resistance to signification:

thy skin shall come to that absolute corruption, as that, though a hundred years after thou art buryed, one may find thy bones, and say, this was a tall man, this was a strong man, yet we shall soon be past saying, upon any relique of thy skinne, This was a fair man; Corruption seises the skinne, all outward beauty quickly, and so it does the body, the whole frame and constitution[...]. Painters have presented to us with some horrour, the skeleton, the frame of the bones of a mans body; but the state of a body, in the dissolution of the grave, no pencil can present to us. Between that excrementall jelly that thy body is made of at first, and that jelly which thy body dissolves to at last; there is not so noysome, so putrid a thing in nature.¹³

Like many writers studied in this thesis, Donne posits a profound continuity between the living and dead bodies; the posthumous putrefaction of the corpse marks only the eruption into the bodily exterior of processes which constitute the human body from its conception—or, indeed, prior to its conception.¹⁴ For Donne, the living ‘frame’ and ‘constitution’ of the body, its outer form and inner structures, is an illusion concealing the more unsettling reality of continual, irreducible bodily transformation, an ‘excrementall’ non-distinctness which defies the distinction between inside and outside fundamental to symbolic representation. In this sense, somatic inwards cannot be defined as properly ‘inward’ at all, or even human: beneath the outer signifiers of inner identity is simply process and formlessness, a materiality which is continually transforming into some other, indeterminate stuff.

Donne’s reference to momento mori iconography suggests another relevant context for his meditation on the unrepresentability of putrefaction. For this iconography was, of course, central to representations of the body in the emergent discipline of empirical anatomy, a discipline which more than any other in this period sought to subject the bodily interior to external knowledge and representation. The close association between somatic inwardsness and processes of dissolution and decay in numerous texts of this period has, in fact, frequently been attributed to the discoveries made by the anatomists about the body’s processes of morbidity in this period, and to the broader Christianising didactic programme into which the anatomists assimilated these processes, one which emphasised the mortality of the flesh and the need to transcend fleshly desires.¹⁵ The magnificent illustrations of

¹⁴ The processes of disease afflicting the living body were not, indeed, well distinguished in the medical and physiological discourses of this period from those processes of putrefaction which finally consume the corpse. Disease itself was frequently understood to be caused by the putrefaction or corruption of humours and tissues in the body, or, frequently, in the surrounding environment; Levinus Lemnius, for example, calls ‘opillation [obstruction] and putrefaction’ of the humours ‘the verye breeders and procurers of Agewes and al other diseases’ (Levinus Lemnius, The touchstone of complexions [London, 1576], fol. G6v). On the perceived continuity between the living and dead bodies in the anatomy and physiology of the late medieval and early modern periods, see Katharine Park, ‘Birth and Death’, in A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Middle Ages, ed. by Linda Kalof, 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), II, pp. 17-38. See Sawday, The Body Embazoned, pp. 112-129, and Michael Neill, Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 103-140.
Vesalius’s *De Fabrica*, for instance, explicitly drew on *momento mori* iconography, portraying cadavers kneeling at the side of a grave or meditating upon skulls, their skin and flesh having been progressively stripped away over the course of the volume to reveal the body’s inner structures. We should, however, hesitate before assuming that early modern texts adopt the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions of anatomical discourse, even when they describe the interior of the body using ostensibly similar language and imagery. For the anatomists precisely sought to turn the bodily interior into a thing, a visible form, amenable to empirical description and analysis: ‘through observation, dissection, and detailed pictorial representation,’ Jean Starobinski has written, early modern science ‘refine[d] and reinforce[d] the knowing of the human body as a natural object. The progress made in anatomy [...] transformed the body into a spectacle [...] in the form of a nameless cadaver exposed to the observers who fill up the bleachers of an “anatomical theater.”’ From the subject of a first-person experience, the body was transformed into an ‘object of an external knowing capable of being confirmed’, subject to universalising taxonomies that distanced the individual from the particularities of the lived experience of the body. If, as Sawday and Neill argue, the new science helped to produce this period’s new awareness of somatic and psychological interiority, in another sense they emptied the body of its interiority—depriving it of its status as the locus of self-awareness and experience, which would soon become the preserve of an abstract, disembodied subjectivity.

Donne’s sermon insists, however, upon the irreducibility of the bodily interior to mere empirical object; indeed, if, as one scholar has written, anatomy sought to ‘remak[e] [...] the interior as exterior’—that is, to transform the interior of the body into the reified object of a wholly external knowledge—dissolution, for Donne, accomplishes the reverse, transforming the legible forms of the body into a pure process which eludes empirical description and analysis.¹¹ Nor, I would argue, does this period’s fascination with the body’s processes of corruption necessarily entail an association between matter and mortality, however obvious the connection between putrefaction and death might seem to modern readers—including Kristeva, who, as we have seen, argues that, for the developed ego, the formlessness of the somatic interior is inseparable from the prospect of individual mortality. Indeed, rather than seeing it as evidence of this period’s conception of materiality in general, one could argue that the association between matter and mortality in anatomy texts originated in part as an attempt to justify morally the discipline’s objectifying epistemological practices—its transformation of the body’s living interiority, as Starobinski suggests, into a mere corpse, seeming lifeless matter to be probed and submitted to rational knowledge. This was not, however, the only way to understand the body’s inner processes of dissolution and decay—even among empiricists. When in his survey of the discipline of anatomy in his 1605 *Advancement of Learning* Francis Bacon enumerates the various forms of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 276.
¹⁸ Hillman, *Shakespeare’s Entrails*, p. 32.
corruption afflicting the interior of the body—processes, Bacon complained, to which anatomy had not yet devoted adequate attention—one gets the sense not of matter’s inanimacy but rather of its irrepressible vitality, its wild productivity:

And as for the footstools of diseases, & their devastations of the inward parts, impostumations, exulcerations, discontinuations, putrefactions, consumptions, contractions, extensions, convulsions, dislocations, obstructions, repletions, together with all preternatural substances, as stones, carnosities, excrescences, worms, and the like: they ought to have been exactly observed by multitude of Anatomies [...] whereas now upon opening of bodies, they are passed over slieghly and in silence.”

Bacon’s taxonomy of bodily afflictions of course reflects the drive toward reification that has been described as central to the new empirical sciences. Yet that very desire for objectification seems to stem from a prior sense of the uncontainable excessiveness of the somatic interior, a corruptive fertility science had yet to subordinate to rational form. Like Hamlet, Bacon is fascinated by those materialities which seem somehow to outgrow their forms: excrescences, extensions, carnosities (defined by the OED as a ‘morbid fleshy growth’), exulcerations, repletions (“The fact or condition of being filled to the limit or of being excessively full; [...] (in early use) esp. an excess of humours, blood, etc.”), never mind the ubiquitous worms. For Bacon, this animacy, intrinsic to matter’s power to exceed discrete form, could take quite a literal form. In a simile elsewhere in The Advancement of Learning comparing the interminable metaphysical debates of scholastic Aristotelianism to vermiculated putrefaction, Bacon ponders the paradox that dissolution itself could—as was thought in this period—produce new forms of life:

Surely, like as many substances in nature which are solide, do putrifie and corrupt into wormes: So it is the properie of good and sound knowledge, to putrifie and dissolve into a number of subtile, idle, vnholesome, and (as I may tearme them) vermiculate questions; which haue indeede a kinde of quicknesse, and life of spirite, but no soundnesse of matter, or goodnesse of quality.

Putrefactive matter evinces a kind of life which traverses the boundary between inner and outer, a kind of spirit which is independent of the ‘sound’ and ‘wholesome’ body. Formlessness, here, is conceived not as a mere privation of form, but rather a problematic excess of form irreducible to discrete individual being.

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19 Francis Bacon, The Two Bookes of Francis Bacon: Of the profficience and aduancement of Learning, divine and humane (London, 1605), 2L2r.
22 Bacon was fascinated by processes of putrefaction, dedicating one of only two of his published natural histories to the study of processes of ageing and decay in bodies animate and inanimate, the Historia vitae et moritūs, as well as substantial portions of Sylva Sylvarum. Bacon’s death has traditionally been attributed to a chill he caught while conducting an experiment to determine whether snow would prevent putrefaction in chicken flesh. See Markku Peltonen, ‘Bacon, Francis, Viscount St Alban’, in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/990>.
23 Of the profficience and aduancement of Learning., fol. E4v.
Early modern writers were fascinated by the numerous strange forms, both living and nonliving, assumed by matter as it decayed: in addition to Bacon’s ‘excrecences’ and ‘preternatural substances’, we will find, in the texts this thesis studies, ‘excrementall jellies’, ‘moist relentments’, ‘transplendent juices’, saponified fats, dust, ashes, atoms, seed pearls, and, of course, the numerous more obviously animate forms of life understood to be generated spontaneously by decaying matter. Characterised broadly by their lack of distinct form and autonomous being, these phenomena suggest the ontological generativity of formlessness, matter’s capacity to generate being in excess of the discrete physical forms of bodies and the conceptual identities attached to physical forms and structures. Nashe’s satirical attack on courtly attire in *Christes Teares Over Ierusalem*, quoted in the epigraph to this section, luridly enumerates the forms produced by the decaying human corpse:

> As many iagges, blysters, and scarres, shall Toades, Cankers, and Serpents, make on your pure skinnes in the graue, as nowe you haue cuts, iagges, or rysings, vpon your garments. In the marrow of your bones snakes shal breede. Your mornelike christall countenaunces shall be netted ouer and (Masker-like) cowle-visvard with crawling venomous wormes. Your orient teeth Toades shall steal into their heads for pearle; Of the ielly of your decayed eyes shall they engender them [sic] young. In theyr hollowe Caues (their transplendent iuyce so pollutionately employed,) shelly Snayles shall keepe house.

The transformation of exterior into interior here becomes quite literal: the cuts and slashes which once adorned the body’s outer garments now penetrate the bodily depths; masks and vizards are metamorphosed into a swarm of worms; the pearls once adorning the bodily exterior are recreated in the pearly teeth ingested by the toads making their home in the body’s corruptive flesh. This is not the annihilation of inwardness, but rather *its production*—its production from exteriority itself. The corruptive bodily interior is made a place where the outer form of the body is transformed into new forms of existence, forms simultaneously alien to and yet curiously resembling their earlier instantiations. Nashe’s image of snails and toad eggs sheltering in hollow eye sockets offers a powerful vision of an interiority which is quite literally nothing in itself, its entire being consisting of the internalisation and transformation of the exterior. The specifically human inwardness of the bodily interior gives way, in death, to the nonhuman, strangely polymorphous interiority of exteriority itself.

Nashe’s attack on courtly attire vividly expresses what I take to be central to the representations of putrefactive materiality I study in this thesis. For early modern writers, somatic interiority is not simply characterised by processes of dissolution and decay; it is constituted, produced, by them. Interiority in this sense is not conceived in simple dialectical opposition to the exterior, even while the body’s outward form fails to signify its formless interior; it is rather constituted through the continual transformation of the exterior into something else, something which, as Donne said, ‘no pencil can

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24 ‘Excremental jelly’ is, as we have seen, Donne’s phrase; ‘transplendent juices’ is Nashe’s; ‘moist relentment’ is Thomas Browne’s in his essay *Hydriotaphia* (Thomas Browne, ed. by Kevin Killeen, 21st-century Oxford Authors [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], pp. 507-547 [p. 115]).

25 Nashe, *Christes Teares Over Ierusalem*, p. 139.
present to us’. It is this conception of interiority—as a material process simultaneously produced by and producing the exterior—that I would like to compare to Deleuze’s affect.

III. Deleuze: Indistinct Materiality

If the early modern conception of materiality I outline in this thesis evokes, as I will argue, a Deleuzean ontology, this is perhaps because Deleuze himself was profoundly influenced by early modern philosophy, and in particular by the seventeenth-century materialist philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose magnum opus, the Ethics, was written and published during the final few decades I study in this thesis. Spinoza is perhaps best known for his theory of the affects, but what interests Deleuze about Spinoza’s metaphysics is the way in which Spinoza integrates affect into his broader epistemology and ontology, offering a materialist metaphysics which sees interiority as fully immanent within the physical experience of being. In doing so, Deleuze argues, Spinoza offers a radical alternative to the Cartesian idealist tradition almost unparalleled in post-Kantian philosophy. Yet that radical alternative should also be seen as profoundly tied to its early modern moment; Spinoza’s complex conception of the relation between inner and outer is in part a product of the complex grappling with that relationship in early modern culture more broadly, as I detailed above. In what follows, I will summarise Spinoza’s affective ontology as it is understood by Deleuze, before describing how Deleuze puts it to use in his own metaphysics.

For Spinoza, Deleuze argues, a body is to be defined in two ways: extensively, and intensively. On the one hand, a body is not a form or a substance, but a ratio of movement and rest between particles, which are themselves ratios of movement and rest between particles, and so on all the way down, until we reach infinitely small formless parts. (Since for Spinoza mind and body are not two different substances but two different attributes of the same substance, furthermore, an extended body can be either mental or physical.) Spinoza’s God or Nature—Deleuze’s ‘plane of immanence’—is merely the largest of these ratios, the relation of all extensive relations, a totality without unity or teleological direction. At the same time, however, every extensive ratio also corresponds to a non-extensive intensity, or affectus: a ‘capacity to affect and to be affected by’ other bodies, as Deleuze defines it. An intensity or capacity to be affected is essence defined in purely relational or differential terms, as a degree of power or force of existence which varies continually according to a body’s encounters with other bodies, and, at the same time, according to the intensive variations of the bodies that constitute Nature as a whole.

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In defining a body as an *affectus*, Deleuze argues, Spinoza renders the corporeal, affective experience of existence integral to his ontology and epistemology. When, sitting on a park bench after lunch, I am warmed by the sun, for example, my encounter with the sun’s rays produces what Spinoza calls an *affectio*, which is, simultaneously, a physical effect and an idea, a modification of my body and a modification of my mind in the form of a sensation or perception. This *affectio* in turn has an effect upon my *affectus*, my intensity, in the form of an increase or a decrease, a waxing or waning felt as a joy or a sadness—a Becoming, as Deleuze calls it. Essence, then, is no longer conceived as separable from the contingency of corporeal relations and the way they are experienced by individual bodies. At the same time, however, neither is it reducible to them. Even while rendering the idea of a thing immanent within its physical substance, Spinoza at the same time severs the *epistemological* relation between objects and ideas into two parallel but autonomous causal chains: objects refer to objects as their causes, and ideas to other ideas. A thing’s being, that is, is not reducible to the way it empirically appears to me. My affective experience of a body is determined not by the body’s conscious significance for me—the *signification* of a perception or sensation—but by the intensity with which it resonates among, or repeats and varies, the ideas or affections of all my other prior encounters, which together constitute the ‘spiritual automaton’ of my mind. Affect is the resonance between an individual’s physical encounters and the ‘spiritual automaton’, experienced as a continual, varying flow of being. An affect, meanwhile, is a slice in that becoming understood as a relation between an affected body and one or more affecting bodies.

Phenomenal appearances, then, are no longer seen as instantiating prior universals or abstractions, but rather as effects of the ceaseless play of intensities, of capacities to affect and to be affected, in the ever-varying plane of Nature. Affect *generates* phenomena, even while, being the pure, indeterminate resonance of autonomous traces, it necessarily exceeds any single phenomenal manifestation. In this view, the representations of psychological consciousness are merely second-order ideas which extract from the dimension of mind/body resonance the illusion of final causation, as well as various religious and moral imperatives. They interpret affective traces not as indications of the state of a body in its encounter with another body, but of a stable ‘objective’ reality, and thereby delimit, order, and contain the experiential richness and polyvalence of affect.

The affective metaphysics Deleuze develops in his other early works is sometimes described as ‘Spinozism minus substance’: Spinoza’s affect is integrated into a broader metaphysics and epistemology which posits absolute divergence as the condition of being. In *The Logic of Sense*, for example, Spinoza’s epistemological parallelism is mapped onto the Stoic conception of the incorporeal ‘event’. Far from any physical state of affairs, the ‘pure event’ is a ‘becoming’ without direction or identity, taking the form not of a predicate but of an infinitive verb: the event ‘expressed’ by a scalpel slicing into

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flesh, for example, is a ‘to be cut’, a pure indeterminacy which a physical state of affairs can actualise in any number of ways. What Deleuze calls the ‘virtual’ is the universe conceived as a pure emission of series of all events, a pure relationality without any determinacy, identity, or temporal direction. Any individual, or ‘individuation’, must in part be conceived as an indeterminate relation between (or ‘problematic structure’ of) virtual events, defined not by its predicates but by the turning points or ‘singularities’ which will propel its movement through life. This virtual reality, however, is paired with and inseparable from the realm of actual bodies and identities. An individual moving through life actualises the virtual condition of its existence by bringing them into relation with constituted individuals and identities. Affect, or intensity, is precisely the continuously varying relation between actual and virtual realms, as the actual relations and differences between individuals are opened onto the pure difference that is the condition of their existence, and as the virtual relations between all series of events, in turn, are modulated by the actualisation of relations.

For Deleuze, then, matter is no longer inanimate stuff passively determined by conceptual form. Deleuze’s theory of affect sets material difference and particularity free from prior identities and essences, and in doing so renders difference generative. Affect can be described not as the general, *a priori* conditions of existence which individual beings instantiate despite their differences, but rather as an incorporeal indeterminacy which continually introduces new forms of existence into the real. Sensation is the experience of that indeterminacy as it collides with and generates actual existence.

IV. **Forms of the Inform**

So after Nilus inundation,

Infinite shapes of creatures men do fynd,

Informed in the mud, on which the Sunne hath shynd.

Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 3.6.7

From a Deleuzean perspective, then, the fascination with the animacy of formlessness evident in Nashe’s attack on courtly attire, or, more ambivalently, in Bacon’s simile in the *Advancement of Learning*, can be understood to reflect a conception of the inner as immanent within the very flux of matter itself—as immanent within (though not identifiable with) bodies’ material contexts and relations, as immanent within the material processes which transpire within bodies and in which they participate. As Deleuze suggests, an insistence on the immanence of interiority within the material particular involves accepting a seeming epistemological paradox. If we are to see being as immanent in material

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*a ‘Virtual’ is the word Deleuze uses in *Difference and Repetition*, his best-known work, and has become the term most widely used in Deleuze studies (*Difference and Repetition* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014]; in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze instead calls it ‘the pure Event’ or the ‘Event of sense’ (*The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas [London: Athlone Press, 1990]).

particulars, we must accept the epistemological reality of sensible appearances. On the other hand, if we are to insist upon the absolute particularity of particulars, we must posit an epistemological reality which is irreducible to the actual forms of the sensible—which can always be identified according to a priori concepts—even while it does not precisely transcend them. Deleuze describes this paradox in the important central chapter in *Difference and Repetition*, where, beginning to lay out his theory of intensity, he contrasts what he calls the ‘object of recognition’ with the intensive ‘object of an encounter’. Where the former is an identifiable object of experience which causes agreement among the faculties—that is, it can be simultaneously sensed, imagined, remembered, conceived, and so on—the latter, Deleuze argues, can only be sensed:

The object of an encounter [...] is not a sensible being but the being of the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given. It is therefore in a certain sense the imperceptible [insensible].”

The object of an encounter is ‘insensible’ insofar as it does not present itself in any outwardly recognisable form which can be attached to an a priori concept or identity. At the same time, it can only be sensed because material difference can be known only through those faculties which are proper to us as physical beings, caught up in and inseparable from the flux of material existence. The object of an encounter, then, is the ‘being of the sensible’ insofar as that being must be understood as intensive difference—as an absolute singularity which cannot directly be sensed in things but nonetheless cannot be thought in advance of experience. This is the final epistemological implication of Deleuze’s conception of affect: to be affected by a thing is also, however unconsciously, to know it, though such knowledge cannot be identified with rational certainty.

Deleuze’s concept of intensity thus solders together two disciplines which have, since Kant, been seen as separate fields of enquiry: aesthetics, the study of sense experience, and epistemology, the study of what can be known. I would argue, however, that Deleuze’s concept of intensity is equally relevant in this respect to early modernity, an era when the modern distinction between things-in-themselves and sensible experience was, as we have already seen, not yet taken for granted. I have already suggested how early modern writers were canny about the metaphysical implications of empirical epistemologies which sought simply to reduce material being to externally sensible forms. I would now like to recall the paradox with which I began this introduction, Bosola’s ‘insensible sickness’, whose resemblance to Deleuze’s discussion of the paradox of intensity in *Difference and Repetition* we can now perceive. If, as I suggested there, we can understand the prefix ‘in’ to be functioning prepositionally as well as privatively, we can understand the word ‘insensible’ to refer to an understanding of interiority as both sensible and insensible in Deleuze’s sense of those terms—imperceptible, and yet nonetheless immanent within the sensed experience of being. The ‘sickness’ of matter is also matter as it is experienced sensibly from within, as a flux of forms which exceeds any rational identity.

* Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 184.
I would like, then, to distinguish my own emphasis on the nonhuman animacy of putrefactive matter from the various forms of vitalism which have proved influential in Renaissance studies in recent years, in particular that of Lucretian atomism, Paracelsianism and alchemy more generally, and, more recently, Jane Bennett’s vital materialism. These vitalist theories have tended to conceive of the animacy or agency of matter as a property of physical extension, and thereby in some way amenable to empirical standards of proof. Deleuze’s concept of intensity, by contrast, refers to an animacy in things which cannot be made empirically provable in this way—which is precisely the principle of their escape from any empirical category, even predication itself. The animacy of matter as I understand it in this study, then, refers to the immanence of being within material difference itself—a difference that cannot be reduced to any recognisable material thing, even the invisible atom, without losing its very differential status. Similarly, the generativity of matter refers to a specifically aesthetic or phenomenal generativity, the idea that matter itself produces outward form, rather than those forms merely instantiating prior concepts; I am not interested in physical or physiological processes of generation and decay themselves.

The paradox of a being simultaneously sensible and insensible, forming and formless, also evokes Georges Bataille’s notion of l’Informe. Bataille—whose influence on French philosophy during the time Deleuze was writing was profound—is perhaps best known for what he called ‘base materialism’, whose basic principles he first articulated in the 1923 Critical Dictionary he co-authored with other former members of the surrealist group. Despite its ostensible commitment to the eradication of spirit from metaphysics and epistemology, Bataille argued in the Dictionary, classical materialism—including, in particular, scientific positivism—was not much better than idealism in disguise. With its continuing attachment to conceptual system and hierarchy, modern materialism, he suggested, had allowed idealism’s commitment to transcendence to slip in through the back door. Taking its cue from Freud rather than science, by contrast, Bataille’s ‘base materialism’ would be centred on the analysis of raw phenomena, and in particular ‘base’ phenomena—excrement, decomposition, and so on—in which, Bataille believed, conceptual system revealed the material excess or ‘heterogeneity’ which

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As far as I have been able to determine, Deleuze refers to Bataille’s work only once, briefly, in A Thousand Plateaus. Yet Bataille’s influence on the French literary and philosophical scene in the mid- to late-twentieth century was pervasive, and Deleuze would undoubtedly have been deeply familiar with his writings. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 447.
made it possible. In this vein, Bataille included in the *Critical Dictionary* an entry entitled ‘Informe’, usually translated into English as ‘Formless’:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in [a] world [that generally requires that] each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.\(^{33}\)

The word Bataille uses for ‘bring things down’ is the French word *déclasser*, a word which, Tom McCarthy notes, ‘carries the dual sense of lowering in class, or demoting, and of releasing from all classificatory or taxonomic constraints’.\(^{34}\) *Informe*, then, does not simply describe a discrete class of phenomena, but rather an operation performed on classification itself, the overturning of abstract systems of difference, of rational, discrete thinghood—a sort of conceptual decomposition, one might say. Himself a medievalist, Bataille would have been well aware of the dual signification of the prefix ‘in-’. *Informe* is *form-less* in at least two senses: if we understand form as ‘sensible form’, matter must be understood as irreducible to bodies’ appearance of discontinuity and autonomy; if we understand form in the Platonic sense, it must also be understood as always in excess of any conceptual system or hierarchy. Like Deleuze’s intensity, however, *déclasser* suggests a kind of formative principle immanent in matter, one which is inseparable from a de-forming, the undoing of hierarchies and binaries, including the binary of form and formlessness. For Bataille, too, material difference is aesthetically productive; formlessness is also polymorphousness.

In what follows, I would like to focus on four of the most commonly appearing iterations of decaying matter in early modern texts—worms, dust, jellies, and odours—in order to place them in relation to several prominent motifs in Deleuze’s work. Like Bataille’s *Informe*, these four forms of dissolution are *formless* in the sense that—as these texts emphasise repeatedly—they elude and disrupt the symbolic systems of representation that permit the recognition of bodies as individuals. At the same time, that very power to disrupt is inseparable from a kind of spirit immanent in matter’s very indeterminacy. Equally, then, what follows should not be understood as itself a taxonomy of decaying forms; indeed, they frequently bleed into one another, worms sucking humours from the corpse, decomposing slime mingling indiscriminately with dust, repulsive odours emanating from the body’s excremental jellies. Worms, dust, jellies, and odours are exempla, chosen more or less at random from the array of (in)f/orms offered by early modern texts, and not paradigms.

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1. A Diet of Worms

_Claudius._ Now Hamlet, where’s Polonius?

_Hamlet._ Not where he eats, but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet; we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table; that’s the end.

_Claudius._ Alas, alas.

_Hamlet._ A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

_Claudius._ What dost thou mean by this?

_Hamlet._ Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

Shakespeare, _Hamlet,_ 4.3.16-29

A squishy, earth-coloured thing barely distinguishable from the mud and decomposition it inhabits, the earthworm, as Bataille suggests, is perhaps the paradigmatic instance—if paradigms can be sought in that which precisely lacks essence—of a material phenomenon that is not quite formed and not quite formless. It also offers a potent image of the animacy of formless, muddy, earthy matter. Earthworms, of course, play a central role in the process of decomposition, digesting bodies into undifferentiated materiality to be upcycled through the food chain; in this respect, they physically embody the operation of declassification, mixing matter from discrete bodies to produce new forms of existence. Donne’s last sermon, _Deaths Duell,_ details this process of declassification with relish:

> But for vs that dye now and sleepe in the state of the dead, we must al passe this _posthume_ death, this _death after death_ [...] when these bodies that haue bene the _children of royall parents_ & the _parents of royall children,_ must say with _Job, Corruption thou art my father,_ and _to the Worome thou art my mother & my sister._ _Miserable riddle,_ when the _same worme_ must _bee my mother, and my sister, and my selfe._ _Miserable incest,_ when _I must bee maried to my mother and sister,_ _beget & beare that worme_ which is all that _miserable penury; when my mouth_ shall be _filled with dust,_ and the _worne shall feed,_ and _feed sweetely vpon me_ [...][3]

Because worms, as well as snakes and maggots, were also understood to be spontaneously generated from rotting bodies—and even from putrefied excrements in the human intestines—they also suggest the nonhumanness of the innermost depths of the human interior: snakes, as we shall see in my chapter on Thomas Browne, were thought to be generated from the medulla of the human spine. Worms embody

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somatic inwardness as a vital, repulsively fertile material process which actively subverts and transforms conscious self-awareness and identity.

2. ‘Who Knows the Revolutions of Dust?’: Difference and Repetition

Hamlet. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bunghole?

Horatio. 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

Hamlet. No faith, not a jot, but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it, as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Shakespeare, Hamlet, 5.1.171-179

[...] who knows the revolutions of dust?

John Donne, sermon preached on Job 19:26 at Lincoln’s Inn, Easter term 1620⁶

In the Western tradition, dust and ashes are the very emblem of human mortality, the final formless stuff to which all human individuals must finally be reduced: ‘Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return’ (Genesis 3:19), the Book of Genesis intones. Yet in many texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the dust which the human body becomes in death embodies not formless homogeneity but rather endless novelty and aesthetic polymorphousness; the numerous metamorphoses undergone by the dust of the body as it scatters to the winds and mingles with other materialities are a frequent subject of comment in early modern representations of decay, as in the churchyard scene of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, or in Donne’s striking 1627 marriage sermon:

One humour of our dead body produces worms, and those worms suck and exhaust all other humour, and then all dies, and all dries, and molders into dust, and that dust is blown into the River, and that puddled water tumbled into the sea, and that ebs and flows in infinite revolutions, and still, still God knows in what Cabinet every seed-Pearle lies, in what part of the world every graine of every mans dust lies.⁷

What seems to capture the attention of these writers is not the homogeneity of dust, but rather the variety of instantiations even so apparently formless a matter can assume in the course of its ‘infinite revolutions’, as Donne puts it: earth, loam, the plug of a beer barrel, even the body of Alexander; humours, a muddy puddle, an eddy in a wide ocean, and, finally, a tiny seed pearl in the mouth of an oyster.

This fascination with the polymorphousness of formlessness evokes the paired concepts of difference and repetition which serve as Deleuze’s point of entry in his major 1968 work Différence and

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⁶ Potter and Simpson, III, pp. 105-6.
Repetition. In the preface to this work, Deleuze announces his intention to devise, on the one hand, a concept of ‘difference without negation’—that is, an idea of difference as irreducible to logical opposition—and, on the other, ‘a concept of repetition in which physical, mechanical, or bare repetitions (repetition of the Same) would find their raison d’être in the more profound structures of a hidden repetition in which a “differential” is disguised and displaced.’ While common sense would tend to conceive of repetition and difference as opposed to one another—the very concept of repetition seems to imply an identity between repeating and repeated elements—Deleuze seeks to offer an account of repetition which sees these two concepts as inextricable: of repetition as produced not by a prior identity, but by difference; of difference as actualised by ever-varying series of repetitions. To do so, Deleuze offers the concept of the simulacrum: a copy which, rather than being identical to a model or a paradigm, introduces intensive difference into a series of repetitions, thereby transforming the significance of the entire series: ‘The simulacrum is not just a copy, but that which overturns all copies by also overturning the models: every thought becomes an aggression.’ “The task of life’, Deleuze comments, ‘is to make all these repetitions coexist in a space in which difference is distributed’—to create or produce difference and singularity from seeming homogeneity and reiteration, not by breaking from repetition, which, for Deleuze, would be impossible, but by repeating in a new way.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet suggests that dust’s heterogeneous homogeneity is analogous to one particular form of literary language:

*Hamlet* [...] Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quilletts, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? [...] Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? (5.1.83-91)

Paronomasia, or punning, too, is a kind of repetition with difference—a rhetorical trope which generates meaning from, so to speak, the dirty, decaying matter of words.

3. **Excremental Jellies: The Zone of Indifferentiation**

Some finde sepulchral vessels containing liquors, which time hath incrassated into gellies. For besides these lachrymatories, notable lamps, with vessels of oyles and aromaticall liquors attended noble ossuaries. And some yet retaining a vinosity and spirit in them, which if any have tasted they have farre exceeded the palats of antiquity.  

**Thomas Browne, Hydriotaphia, or, Urne-Buriall** (1658)

Putrefaction in this period is often imagined, quite literally, as a process of dissolution, that is, as a process through which the body assumes a more or less liquid state; one common iteration of that more fluid form of being is the jelly. In this period, ‘jelly’ usually referred to the gelatine made from

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38 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. xvi.
39 Ibid., p. xvii.
40 Ibid., p. xvi.
animal tissues and bones that are boiled and then cooled; it was thus the product of the transformation of something solid and identifiable into something liquid and then into something more ambiguous—neither solid nor liquid, no longer animal but not yet another concrete thing. Donne’s 1628 marriage sermon uses the image of the ‘excrementall jelly’ to describe human life—from its prehumanoid origins in male sperm to its ultimate dissolution—as a subhuman process of continual metamorphosis; in a fashion extremely reminiscent of Bataille, the very excrementality of the jelly is thus rendered inseparable from its pre- or proto-human seminality. For Nashe, too, the ‘pollutionate’ jelly of decaying eyes is quasi-generative, serving as the breeding ground for toad sperm.

In his late writings, Deleuze sometimes refers to affect as a ‘zone of indifferentiation’ where one identifiable material thing ‘becomes’ or ‘enters into a becoming with’ another:

To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.”

Where Cartesian rationalism posited clarity and distinctness as the conditions of true cognition, Deleuze privileges the ‘indiscernibility’ of the event of becoming, through which previously identifiable terms are transformed, through their material relation, into something not yet distinguishable. In the opening essay of Essays Critical and Clinical, Deleuze further suggests that writing is itself a form of becoming:

To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. Literature rather moves in the direction of the ill-formed or the incomplete [...] Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived.”

For Deleuze, in contrast with Kant, aesthetic experience is not a separate category of experience; art simply reveals, in a particularly clear way, the differential, intensive conditions which produce and sub tend all experience, even when those conditions are cloaked by the appearance of identity or self-sameness. To write, or more generally to produce art, then, is neither to represent lived experience nor to shape sense experience in a domain autonomous from the lived, but rather to participate in the continual undoing and transformation of forms which constitutes life itself. One of the questions this thesis will pose, as I will discuss further below, is whether literary form, too, can be inform: conceived, that is, as indistinct process rather than as a unified organic whole, as a material self-generation rather than as totality imposed upon formless matter.

4. Ayre Pestilenzing Stincks and Breath-choking Poysnous Vapours: Odour

Hamlet. Dost thou think Alexander looked o’ this fashion i’th’earth?


43 Ibid., p. 1.
Horatio: E’en so.

Hamlet: And smelt so? Pah!

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.167-169

The sense of smell has not fared well in Western philosophy. Since Plato, philosophers have numbered smell among the three so-called bodily senses, senses which require physical contact or proximity for perception and are therefore more closely associated with the body and its pleasures than with cognitive functioning. Among these three ‘lower’ senses, smell has in particular been the object of complaint for three reasons: first, because it lacks the discrimination of the other senses, particularly that of sight, but also taste; second, because smells, being notoriously difficult to describe, tend to be intersubjectively unverifiable; and third, because smell is often perceived as participating in or in some way dependent upon the physical deterioration of bodies. Plato, for example, calls smells a ‘half-formed class’ because the nose cannot perceive the elements themselves, but only elemental mixtures; smells, then, only arise ‘from substances which are in the process of being moistened or putrefied or melted or vaporized’—or something: it is as if Plato cannot quite put to words the enigmatic transformations of matter which give rise to formless odours. Aristotle, for whom sight was the most important cognitive sense because of its capacity to perceive the greatest number of differences between things, complains that smells seem to resist categorical description entirely: ‘odours’, he writes, ‘are not very distinct’, unlike flavours, and depend on the latter for their descriptive categories. Modern philosophy has shown remarkable continuity with its ancient predecessors in this regard. Kant argued that smells cannot be beautiful, only agreeable (or disagreeable), because smells do not perceive form and therefore depend upon subjective bodily pleasure; in *Anthropology from a Practical Perspective*, he objects to the invasiveness of smell, which must physically enter the very depths of the body in order to

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be perceived. Perhaps most intriguingly, Hegel’s Lectures on Fine Arts excluded the sense of smell from the work of art because, as he wrote, ‘we can smell only what is in the process of wasting away’; smell, that is, evokes ephemerality, temporality, in contrast with the eternality and purity Hegel saw as central to the work of art.

In much of the Western philosophical tradition, then, the sense of smell seems to be intimately connected with the transience and non-distinctness of bodies; it is as if what we smelled were always the decay and formlessness of bodies, not least our own body. The odour of the putrefying body is thus, in a sense, paradigmatic of the sense of smell, being the smell of material process itself. The stench of corruption and decay makes numerous appearances across early modern literature, from the churchyard scene of Hamlet, to Bacon’s natural histories, to Nashe’s Chrys Teares over Jerusalem, to Donne’s sermon at Lincoln’s Inn:

If the whole body were an eye, or an ear, where were the body, says Saint Paul; but, when of the whole body there is neither eye nor ear, nor any member left, where is the body? And what should an eye do there, where there is nothing to be seen but loathsomenesse; or a nose there, where there is nothing to be smelt, but putrefaction [...]?

For Donne the smell of putrefaction bespeaks the comprehensiveness of material transformation, an almost magical power in matter to transform solid substance into something almost ethereal, if repulsively so: a thing which is both something and nothing, a material thing without a body.

Renaissance writers were significantly more open to the potential pleasures of the odour of transience than their modern successors. In section 835 of his posthumously published natural history Sylva Sylvarum, Francis Bacon ponders the question why ‘most Putrefactions are of an Odious Smell: For they smell either Fetide, or Mouldy.’ Bacon argues, in a Kantian fashion, that the senses are attracted to ‘equality’ and ‘order’ in sensible bodies; putrefaction, ‘being a Dissolution of the first Forme, is a meere Confusion, and Unformed Mixture of the Part,’ cannot fail to smell ‘Ingrate’.

Nonetheless, he notes with some surprise,

it is strange, and seemeth to Crosse the former Observation, that some Putrefactions and Excrements doe yeeld Excellent Odours, As Civet, and Muske; And as some thinke Amber-Greece [...] The Reason may be [...] that the Senses lone not to be Ouerpleased; But to haue a Commixture of somewhat that is in it selfe Ingrate. Certainly, we see how Discords in Mucicke, falling vpon Concordes, make the Sweetest Straines: And we see againe, what Strange Tastes delight the Taste; As Red-Herrings, Cauceary, Parmizan, &c. And it may be, the same holdeth in Smells. For those kinde of Smells, that we have mentioned, are all Strong, and doe Pull and Vellicate the Sense."

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67 Immanuel Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, trans. by Robert B. Louden, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §20-23. Kant, in fact, dubs smell the ‘most ungrateful’ and ‘most dispensable’ sense, since ‘there are more disgusting objects than pleasant ones’ (pp. 50-51).


69 Potter and Simpson, III, p. 105.

70 Francis Bacon, Sylva Sylvarum: or A Naturall Historic in Ten Centuries (London, 1626), fol. 2F1r.
Civet and musk were common additives to Renaissance perfumes which were produced from the glandular secretions of the civet cat and musk deer respectively; musk was thought to be the product of putrefied blood, and was distilled by allowing the glandular liquid to congeal in the sun for several days prior to collection. Bacon’s use of the word ‘ingrate’ in this context provides an interesting alternative to the dismissal of the aesthetic value of smell in modern philosophy. Like his ancient and modern counterparts, Bacon ties the sense of smell closely to the body: in an earlier century, he argues that, unlike vision and hearing, smell depends upon the ‘Emission of some Corporeal Substance’; here ‘pull’ and ‘vellicate’—a Latinate synonym for ‘tickling’—imagine odour’s effect on the senses in extraordinarily physical terms. Bacon thus invokes a form of sensory pleasure which is understood as profoundly linked to the interior of the body—a body whose pleasures seem to diverge sharply from those of the more cognitive senses of vision and hearing, seeming to pertain more to the dissolution and modification of bodies than to their formal unity and autonomy. The pleasures of odour are, indeed, ingrate: ‘Not pleasing or acceptable to the mind or the senses; disagreeable, unpleasant, unwelcome’, from the Latin in- and gratus, ‘pleasing’, but also pleasing within the body.

Along with the sense of smell itself, the paradox of sweet-smelling excrement disappears in modern aesthetic philosophy, to be replaced by the more grandiose paradox of sublimity, an aesthetic feeling which, as Kant famously argued, both evokes the mortality and corporeality of the subject and, ultimately, affirms subjective transcendence. One could argue that the discomfort with the sense of smell in modern aesthetics arises from the troubling idea Bacon explores in the Sylva—that the very decay of bodies, that formlessness without transcendence, might be pleasurable. This pre-subjective, fully corporeal pleasure in material process itself, I will argue in the following section, forms the basis of a distinctively early modern aesthetic.

V. An Early Modern Proto-Aesthetic

And when ye have skimmed the vomit of your riots,
Y’are fat in no felicity but folly;
Then your last sleeps seize on ’ee. Then the troops
Of worms crawl round and feast; good cheer, rich fare,
Dainty, delicious.[14]

John Ford, The Lover’s Melancholy (1628), 2.2.96-100

‘Dainty, delicious’: Ford’s description of worms feasting on rotting flesh also, however strangely to modern eyes, describes an aesthetic experience. This aesthetic differs in a number of obvious ways.

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[22] Ibid., fol. 2E4v.


from the aesthetic as we usually understand it. Since its emergence as a field of philosophical enquiry, the category of the aesthetic has tended to be associated primarily with the beautiful, an aesthetic which received its most extensive explication in Immanuel Kant’s 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. Struck by the fact that statements about beauty lay claim to a universal validity that, he suggested, had no basis in cognitive content, Kant proposed that the sensation of pleasure we associate with the beautiful lay in a given presentation’s ‘purposiveness without purpose’: the appearance of unity and coherence in an object which cannot be explained by a prior concept. Kant argued that such presentations caused the subjective faculties of imagination and understanding to enter into ‘free play’, a harmony which was not governed by empirical or practical concepts. For Kant, then, judgements of taste would pertain solely to the formal—that is to say, spatial and temporal—unity of the aesthetic object, not to the material aspects of a presentation (e.g. colour, tonality, and so on). They would also be autonomous, having no cognitive or ethical purport; purely subjective, having no relation to the empirical being of the object; and, finally, disinterested, that is, divorced from desire and bodily pleasure.

The judgment of taste, so to speak, described by Ford, however, is a significantly more literal one than Kant’s, which excluded the bodily senses of taste and smell from judgements about the beautiful; for Kant, taste and smell engaged the pleasures (and displeasures) of the body too intimately to qualify for the distantiated, purely formal judgement Kant associated with the judgement of taste proper. The aesthetic sensation described, furthermore, is attributed not to a human, but a worm—a form of life which can barely be called sentient, never mind reflective. Third, the pleasure described borders on the significantly more ambivalent emotion of disgust—an affect Kant excluded from the experience of the beautiful work of art, not because it was unequivocally repulsive, but because it appeared to present the object as *desirable*: ‘For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination,’ Kant noted, ‘the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting’, thereby collapsing the distinction in sensation between the represented and the real object. Finally, the putrefactive body as aesthetic object violates Kantian formalism. For Kant and most aesthetic theorists following him, the aesthetic object was associated with a transcendence of the ephemeral; the putrefying body, however, is perhaps the most transient of all materialities.

This thesis details the early modern history of an aesthetic which I would like to call a Deleuzean ‘proto-aesthetic’. By the prefix ‘proto-’, I do not only intend to describe an aesthetic prior in a temporal sense to Kant’s aesthetics. Where for most aesthetic philosophers, as we saw in my brief discussion of odour above, the aesthetic has been understood as antithetical to ephemerality and contingency, Deleuze’s Spinozist theory of sensation centres on somatic variation as the source of


57 I would like to thank my supervisor, David Hillman, for suggesting this phrase to me.
aesthetic pleasure: it is the continual production of new actual and virtual relations, as mediated by the body of the perceiver, rather than spatiotemporal unity or formal play that causes the amplification of being Deleuze calls ‘affect’. Deleuze’s aesthetics, furthermore, both radically amplifies and undermines Kant’s insistence upon the autonomy of the aesthetic. For Deleuze, too, aesthetic affect is autonomous from a priori cognitive categories. But affect’s independence from the received forms of experience depends not on the autonomy of the subject, but instead on the autonomy of matter—it is matter’s ontologically and aesthetically creative power, not the subjective forms of space and time, that produce sensation. Deleuze thus decentres aesthetics from the subject, even while rendering Kant’s account of the autonomy of aesthetic sensation foundational to his entire metaphysical system. As we have seen, this is not to say that Deleuze renders sensation entirely independent of the subject and of form; affect, indeed, is the very ground of structure and of subjective perception, but its polymorphous, unconscious, always excessive ground. It is this sub-formal, sub-subjective account of sensation I would like to term a ‘proto-aesthetic’, and which, I argue, underlies the fascination with the putrefactive body in early modern culture. 

After two decades or so when, under the influence of New Historicism, aesthetic concerns were considered virtually taboo in early modern studies, a growing number of studies in recent years have suggested that the absence of aesthetics as an independent field of philosophical enquiry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries need not entail the total irrelevance of aesthetic concerns to this period. Drawing on the German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s Marxist revision of Kant’s aesthetics, many of these studies have tied the emergence of an autonomous or quasi-autonomous aesthetic in the early modern period to the rise of market capitalism and modern empirical science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This thesis joins these studies in detailing the pre-Kantian history of the aesthetic in early modernity, especially those which have emphasised the close connection between the

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34 This study thus joins other recent studies which have argued for the presence in early modernity of aesthetics that depart from Kant’s formalism and privileging of beauty, such as Hugh Grady’s John Donne and Baroque Allegory: The Aesthetics of Fragmentation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), and Joel Elliot Slotkin, Sinister Aesthetics: The Appeal of Evil in Early Modern English Literature (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).


36 See, in particular, Grady, Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics; Joughin, ‘Shakespeare, Modernity and the Aesthetic’; and Eisendrath, Poetry in a World of Things.
emergence of the aesthetic and the epistemological crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To the extent that these studies have been interested in identifying the presence of a Kantian aesthetic in early modernity, however, their accounts have often linked the aesthetic closely to the rise of the autonomous, immaterial subject. In turning to Deleuze’s aesthetics rather than Kant’s, I am arguing for the presence in early modern culture of an aesthetic which depends upon a much more fully embodied conception of inner experience than Kant’s aesthetics allowed. Rather than affirming subjective autonomy, this is an aesthetic whose appeal stems from its power to unsettle the illusion of subjective autonomy and immateriality, to re-immerses the subject in the flux of matter.

VI. Proto-Aesthetics II: Literary Form and Formlessness

One of the questions this thesis will ask is whether early modern texts might embody the forming formlessness which so fascinates them. To what extent might the very language and formal features of a text unsettle their aspirations to taxonomy, totality, system? In my chapter on Spenser’s Faerie Queene, for example, I highlight the tensions between the poem’s famous sensuality—its richness of visual detail and its musicality, as well as its uncontrollably expansive narrative—and its desire for allegorical clarity and distinctness; this is, as G. Wilson Knight once complained, a poem which ‘is [...] always decomposing’, and which struggles to rein in its own excessive materiality in the service of moral abstraction. When, in my second chapter, I turn to John Donne’s Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, similarly, I will draw a parallel between the affective rhythms of devotion enacted by its repeated cycles of anxious meditation, pained expostulation, and calmed prayer and the text’s own reflections on the body’s energetic drive toward self-destruction through decay and dissolution. The text’s own immense affective charge, I argue, is inseparable from the paradoxical energy, indeed, the vitality of the diseased body, even while that energy threatens to disrupt the temporal, devotional, and eschatological arc of the Devotions as a whole. In my chapter on Thomas Browne, I suggest that Browne’s penchant for neologisms enacts in language the very generation from decay which, as I shall show, repeatedly draws his attention in his numerous musings about the phenomenon of spontaneously generative putrefaction.

Indeed, it is, as I have already begun to suggest, in the language used to describe processes of dissolution and decay that the Deleuzean ontology whose contours I have sketched in this introduction most powerfully manifests itself. I discussed briefly above Deleuze’s ontology of the event, which sees the infinitive verb rather than the adjective or noun as constitutive of being, understood as becoming rather than essence. For Deleuze, verbs undermine the common-sense identities we attach to things and people, and even chronological direction itself: when I say, ‘Alice becomes larger’, for example, Alice

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61 Pye in particular ties the rise of the aesthetic closely to the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity in this period; see The Storm at Sea.
becomes larger and smaller simultaneously (larger than she was, smaller than she will be)." In this introduction we have already stumbled again and again upon the extraordinary verbs used to describe processes of disintegration—many of them neologisms invented by these writers themselves, or introduced only recently to English—and the chapters to come will add to this number: ‘incrassate’ (Browne; first appearing in English in 1601); ‘interanimate’, ‘interaniminate’, and ‘inanimate’ (the first two Donne’s neologisms; I will discuss these in greater detail in Chapter 2); ‘vellicate’ (Bacon; first appearing in English in 1604); ‘vermiculate’ (Bacon imports this word as an adjective from the Latin passive verb vermiculari); to these we could add the Nashean solecism ‘pestilenzing’, which appears to make a participial form out of the noun ‘pestilence’, and, conversely, Bacon’s entire list of bodily afflictions, which transforms verbs into nouns as if to make bodily processes more amenable to taxonomical order: ‘impostumations, exulcerations [from ‘exulcerate’], discontinuations, putrefactions, consumptions, contractions, extensions, convulsions, dislocations, obstructions, repletions’. These texts, it would seem, invent (and I intend the word in the dual sense familiar in the Renaissance, both ‘to create’ and ‘to discover’) verbs from the dissolution of predicates—even when, as in the case of Bacon, that process of dissolution is immediately re-stabilised in rather awkward nominal forms like ‘impostumation’. A striking number of these verbs also include the prefix ‘in-’, which has been such a recurrent motif in this introduction and will continue to be throughout the thesis. Where verbs deform linguistic stasis, ‘in-’ constitutes a parallel undoing of linguistic abstraction, returning generalisations to their experiential source inside the body and its putrefactive processes.

VII. Indistinct Matter and Materialism in Early Modern Studies

As should be clear at this point in my argument, my interest in early modern writing about the putrefactive body differs significantly from that animating many recent studies invoking superficially similar concepts, such as vital materialism, hybridity and cross-species encounters, ‘transcorporeality’, the ‘indistinct human’, and the ‘Body without Organs’. Often drawing on the ontology of theorists such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, and sometimes Deleuze’s later collaborations with Félix Guattari, these approaches have sought to show how early modern texts trouble the category of ‘the human’ by emphasising the similarities and continuities between human subjects and their nonhuman counterparts. This so-called ‘posthuman’ turn has seen itself as a turn away from the

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63 On Alice’s paradoxical becomings, which ‘move[...] in two directions at once, and [...] fragment [...] the subject following this double direction’, see Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, pp. 1-3 (p. 3).
questions of epistemology and language that were a dominant feature of early critical theory in Renaissance studies, arguing that such concerns are anthropocentric and reinforce destructive divisions between the human subject and its material environment. I would argue, however, that any attempt to de-centre the subject by invoking empirical conceptions of materiality risks upholding those structures of knowledge which produced the human/nonhuman binary in the first place. My own focus in this study on questions of aesthetics and epistemology seeks to show how early modern texts trouble the binaries of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought not by asserting the likeness of humans and nonhumans on empirical grounds, but by calling into question the essentialist assumptions which have informed Western epistemology, idealist and empiricist, since its inception.

My interest in the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology in Deleuze’s early single-authored works also distinguishes it from other recent uses of Deleuze in early modern studies, in particular those drawing on Deleuze’s later collaborations with Guattari, where his thought tends in more naturalistic directions than in his independent writings. Jonathan Goldberg’s The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations invokes Deleuze’s reading of Lucretius in The Logic of Sense, but does not engage with Deleuze’s aesthetics, taking his cue instead from Foucault’s interpretation of Lucretian atomism.66 Drew Daniel, similarly, draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘assemblage’ to theorise early modern melancholy as a network of relationships between people, bodies, linguistic and social structures, and material things; though Daniel’s study invokes epistemological questions, he is primarily interested in the problem of the legibility of emotion.67 Perhaps most influentially, Gail Kern Paster invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Body without Organs’ as a model for the permeable, passionate selfhood of early modern humoral discourse, but does not discuss Deleuze’s independent work.68 Other recent scholarship of the affective turn has tended to invoke models of affect borrowed from the social and biological sciences rather than from Deleuze.69

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66 Goldberg, pp. 31-63.
68 Paster, Humoring the Body, pp. 21-22.
VIII. The Aesthetics of Putrefaction in Early Modern Literature: Spenser, Donne, Browne

Though a fascination with putrefactive matter spans numerous early modern texts, I have focused in this thesis on the poetry and prose of three late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century writers: Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and Thomas Browne. I have chosen these three writers in part because their writings evince especially clearly the aesthetic and epistemological concerns in which this thesis is primarily interested. My attention was especially drawn to the first two, however, in part because they have long been central to literary critical debates about the relationship between aesthetic form and matter in Renaissance poetry; in studying their fascination with decaying matter, and, I have suggested, their formal enactment of processes of dissolution and decay, I hope to shed light on new ways we might understand that relationship to function in early modern texts. Browne, on the other hand, has, in recent scholarship, assumed a new centrality to the history of the emergence of modern empirical science in the seventeenth century. My analysis of Browne’s own preoccupation with processes of dissolution permits me to highlight what might be called the dark underbelly of the new science’s drive to classify and taxonomise material phenomena, extensively detailed by Foucault among others.⁷⁰

My first chapter will study Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, beginning with the poem’s first epic simile, which compares the alarmingly animate vomit of the monster Errour to the decaying, generative muck exuded by the Nile River during springtime flooding. Borrowing from the aesthetics of Walter Benjamin, readings of Spenser’s poem in the last thirty years have tended to emphasise the deadness and passivity of materiality in Spenserian allegory; the process of allegorising, it is suggested, saps the vitality of allegorical signifiers, whose excess over allegorical significance is figured in their seeming emptiness or lifelessness.⁷¹ The Nile’s ‘fertile slime’, however, offers a starkly different image of allegorical materiality in this poem, one which suggests the autonomous vitality, indeed, generativity of formlessness. Tracing Spenser’s fascination with slime and other viscous, non-organic materialities in *The Faerie Queene*, I suggest some ways in which Spenser’s poem might be understood to generate form precisely from its famously deliquescent materiality. In particular, I compare the landscape of Faerie itself to Deleuze’s plane of immanence, and Spenser’s allegorical knights and personifications—springing to life seemingly from the very slime of Faerie itself, and disappearing as suddenly into it— to Deleuzean affects, the inform, ephemeral, and mutable productions of a matter always in process.

My second chapter turns to the poetry and devotional writings of John Donne, whose obsession with the grim realities of bodily decay has long been notorious in criticism of his writings. Donne’s fascination with putrefactive matter, evident from his earliest poems to his final sermon, *Deaths Duell*, has been understood to express his preoccupation with his own mortality, and, in more extreme

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⁷⁰ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2001).
readings, his pathological narcissism. I argue, however, that a Donnean neologism which has long plagued textual studies of Donne’s ‘The Extasie’—the word ‘interinanimate’—points toward a more paradoxical conception of the relation between inwardness and materiality than this would entail, one in which spirit and matter, life and decay, continually inanimate one another. After studying Donne’s numerous representations of decaying bodies in the sermons, I turn to his Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, where the paradoxical vitality of the lived experience of bodily decay and the aesthetic vitality of the poetic text itself become impossible to disentangle from one another.

The third and final chapter of this thesis studies the writings of the mid-seventeenth-century physician, essayist, and encyclopaedist Thomas Browne. Browne’s unsettling descriptions of processes of organic decay in his late essay Hydriotaphia, or, Urne-Buriall, a study of what were thought to be Roman funerary urns found in Norwich in the mid-1650s, offers an example of what I will argue is an early aesthetic of the sublime—but one whose premises differ markedly from those of the modern sublime: where in its Kantian instantiation the sublime elicits fear and horror, Browne’s elicits disgust; where the modern sublime ultimately affirms the transcendence of the human subject, consequently, Browne’s unsettles subjective autonomy, immateriality, and rationality. Drawing on studies which have traced the intertwined histories of scepticism and the aesthetic of the sublime in Western thought, I link this aesthetic closely to the epistemological concerns that animate Browne’s writings.

72 To name only a few of the more prominent examples of this argument: John Carey, John Donne, Life, Mind, and Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); Robert N. Watson, The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Ramie Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
Chapter One

*Spenser’s Slime: Indistinct Matter in The Faerie Queene*

The first epic simile of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* compares the alarmingly animate vomit of the monster Error to the ‘fertile slime’ of the bed of the river Nile in springtime:

As when old father Nilus gins to swell
With timely pride aboute the Aegyptian vale
His fattie waues doe fertile slime outwell,
And ouerflow each plaine and lowly dale:
But when his later spring gins to auale,
Huge heapes of mudd he leaues, wherin there breed
Ten thousand kindes of creatures partly male
And partly femall of his fruitful seed;
Such vugly monstrous shapes elswhere may no man reed. (1.1.21)

The *OED* cites this stanza as an instance of its first definition of the word ‘slime’: ‘Soft glutinous mud; alluvial ooze’, from the Old English *slím*, probably from the Latin *línus*, ‘slime, mud, mire’. Evocative both of semen and of excrement, the river god’s slimy ooze also, however, recalls the *OED*’s second definition, whose first usage in English dates from the thirteenth century: ‘A viscous substance or fluid of animal or vegetable origin; mucus, semen, etc.’ In the sixteenth century, slime was especially closely associated with the mysterious boundary between animacy and inanimacy; with, on the one hand, the putrefaction, decay, corruption of bodies, but also with the origins of life itself: slime and its cousins mud and mire were widely believed in this period to be especially conducive to the spontaneous production of so-called ‘imperfect creatures’. This viscous, indeterminate substance was conceived to be the primal substance not only of toads and mice, however, but also of the human creature; in Genesis 2:7, God fashions Adam from the ground or dust (Hebrew *adamah*), which is rendered in the Vulgate translation ‘*línus terrae*, ‘slime’ or ‘mud of the earth’, an association which makes its way into numerous homiletic and satirical texts of this period. Spenser’s fertile slime, then, is a substance *between*, between bodies, between animacy and inanimacy, between generation and corruption, a betweenness phenomenally manifested in the betweenness of its physical state, between solid and liquid.

In its entry on the Nile River, Stephen Bateman’s popular 1582 translation of the 13th-century encyclopaedia *De Proprietatibus Rerum* attributes the river’s famed fertility directly to its oozy mix of matter from various sources: the Nile, he writes,

> is troubly [turbid], and draweth much slime and wose [ooze], and therc because of slyme and wose that he beareth with him his course, he maketh the land that he ouerpasseth to be full plenteous of corne, and fruite.

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75 Bartholomaeus Anglicus and Stephen Bateman, *Batman vppon Bartholome His Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum* (London, 1582), fol. 2K6r.
Quite literally bogged down by corporeal mixture, the Heraclitean image of the river as continual material flux becomes one not of effortless flow but of viscous turbidity and confusion—and, at the same time, of inexplicable generativity. Bateman elaborates:

[...] Nilus was famous for the vertue of the water thereof, which ouerflowing the countrey of Aegypt, made y’ ground wonderfull fertill many yeares after: so that without labouring y’ earth brought forth abundance of sundry grains and plants delectable and profitable. Also beastes of sundry kindes, without other forme of generation [...]

Associated with bodily mixture, with decomposition, and with life, Spenser’s fertile slime offers a remarkably apposite image for what Deleuze has called ‘intensity’. Intensity, recall, is a dimension of corporeal interrelation and variation which is both immanent in materiality and yet irreducible to any actual body, conceived as an autonomous, monadic form. It is, as I described it in my introduction, a dimension of (in)corporeal interconnection where the traces or effects of physical encounters are rendered autonomous from actual bodies and allowed to resonate with one another in ways that ramify far beyond immediate physical context. Corporeal but not bodily, formless and forming, dissolving and generating, intensity, like slime, bespeaks the nonhuman fertility of decaying matter itself.

Spenser’s use of the image of fertile slime here in *The Faerie Queene*’s famous opening epic simile compounds slime’s Deleuzean quality. ‘Overflowing’, ‘outwelling’ its banks, the patriarchal river god loses his (is the male pronoun even appropriate?) distinctness as a personification and dissolves into inchoate heaps of materiality, much like one of Deleuze’s ‘becomings’ or ‘zones of indifferentiation’.

From these decaying lumps of mud and muck emerge ‘ugly monstrous shapes’ which, both male and female, elude classification: they are forms which, like Affects, are produced from the very dissolution of prior ontological categories. I find myself imagining, too, that these slimy creatures never fully detach themselves from their slimy wombs, going about their slimy lives in the mud and muck till they, too, dissolve into inchoate lumps. This outwelling of inchoate materiality is mirrored in the diction and form of the stanza: a viscous trail of ‘ell’s and ‘ale’s, of ‘f’s and ‘m’s, oozes along from the beginning of the stanza to the alexandrine at the end, which itself exceeds the stanza’s visual form, twelve syllables to the other lines’ ten.

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76 *Batman vpon Bartholome*, fol. 2K6r.
78 I would strongly object to Jonathan Goldberg’s reading of Nilus as a ‘paternal sign of negativity and decration [...] [of] a life that is annihilative, negative’ (*The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Materiality in Renaissance Representations* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2009], p. 83). For me, this stanza’s planting of creatural life in putrefaction and decay offers an image of material excess and superfluity, not of negativity and mortality. Supriya Chaudhuri, too, has seen in Spenser’s ‘fertile slime’ an image of ‘nonhuman generation, of breeding, of creatural life’, though, like Goldberg, she frames the understanding of materiality offered in this stanza in Lucretian terms (‘Thinking through Symbionts: Spenser with Donna Haraway’, forthcoming in *Spenser Studies*, 36 [2022]).
‘Such vgly monstrous shapes elswher may no man reed’: at the end of the simile, having, perhaps, been submerged by its mucky materiality and temporarily forgotten about Error and her amphibious vomit, we are abruptly reminded that we are meant to be ‘reading’ it; and yet the stanza foregrounds the singularity, the incomparability of its forms: what are we supposed to make of shapes which we cannot ‘read’ anywhere else? Should we assume that we should ‘reed’ the Nile’s ‘vgly monstrous shapes’, as Error’s ‘loathly frogs and toads’ have been, in light of the frog-spewing dragon of Revelations, or, like Error’s books and papers, in light of the broadsheets of Catholic propaganda? If these shapes cannot elsewhere be read, why are they a fitting subject for simile at all (a simile, furthermore, which is itself an intertextual one, closely following Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 1.416-37)? The usual interpretation of the word ‘reed’ in the stanza’s final line is ‘to see, discern’, a usage limited, according to the *OED*, to Spenser.\(^\text{79}\) It is as if reading this stanza cannot entirely be separated from seeing—as if sight, rather than calling for interpretation, were already an interpretive act. ‘For [Spenser], to read is to see’, notes Hamilton’s indispensable commentary; but that formulation could equally be reversed: for Spenser, to see is to read. The Nile simile, then, problematises our usual conception of interpretation, wherein meaning is understood as somehow subtending and determining aesthetic surface, which must be pierced or peeled back in order to reveal truth. And to see (or read) this stanza is to read (or see) indeterminacy—that which can be ‘read’ as both (and neither) male and female, matter and form, animate and inanimate, solid and liquid. Spenser’s fertile slime thus unsettles some of the central assumptions about allegorical reading which, as a long scholarly tradition has argued, the first episode of *The Faerie Queene* is meant to teach us.\(^\text{80}\) In this respect, too, the poem’s first epic simile is Deleuzean. For Deleuze, there is no fundamental truth underlying the flux of appearances, nor can ideas or forms be understood as metaphysically prior to appearances. Intensity does not lie below or beyond a surface, awaiting analysis or interpretation: it is what animates surfaces. In Deleuze’s philosophy, too, one could say, to see is to read: far from a distortion of a Reality prior to and independent of the particularity of sense experience, and which can be known only by piercing the veil of sensory appearances, affect is a perspective on a reality which is in itself multiple, perspectival, indeterminate.

Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* is fascinated by viscous, mucky, muddy materialities: ‘slime’ alone appears eight times in the poem, alongside several other words referring to similarly glutinous substances, especially ‘mud’ and ‘niure’.\(^\text{81}\) This chapter examines Spenser’s numerous references to


\(^{80}\) For a relatively recent example of this argument, see Hester Lees-Jeffries, ‘From the Fountain to the Well: Redcrosse Learns to Read’, *Studies in Philology*, 100 (2003), pp. 135-176.

\(^{81}\) Mud and slime were not as distinguishable in the sixteenth century as they might seem today, when the word ‘slime’ has primarily lost its associations with alluvial ooze. Many languages do not have a separate word for slime; ancient Greek and Latin tend to use the same word for both (*limus* in Latin, ἰμός in Greek). First noted by John Erskine Hankins (*Source and Meaning in Spenser’s Allegory: A Study of The Faerie Queene* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], pp. 137-8, 278), *The Faerie Queene*’s preoccupation with slime in been the subject of much comment in Spenser scholarship in recent years. Bruce Boehringer and Brent...
inchoate mucky stuff, arguing that slime, mud, and mire—evocative, as we have seen, of corporeal mixture, of death and life, decay and fertility—offers Spenser’s poem a powerful image of its own materiality, a materiality which, as I will also suggest, is also profoundly Deleuzean. After a short survey of the somewhat overlooked history of slime in Western philosophy and culture, I study several instances of the poem’s fascination with muck that I find especially evocative of the aesthetic and ontological paradoxes intimates in Deleuze’s concept of intensity. I then turn to two episodes in which the Deleuzean aesthetics and metaphysics of process, implicit in the poem’s very formal structures, are given explicit articulation: the seventh canto of Mutabilitie and the Bower of Blisse. I then suggest some implications of this understanding of materiality in The Faerie Queene for a conception of Spenserian allegory as a whole, comparing the poem’s indeterminate landscape, from which allegorical characters and loci seem spontaneously to emanate, to Deleuze’s concept of the ‘plane of immanence’. Returning briefly to Spenserian slime through a reading of the Orgoglio episode, I forward a ‘rhizomatic’ theory of allegory in The Faerie Queene.

In comparing Spenser’s Faerie to the Deleuzean plane of immanence, I am in part responding to a prominent trend in Spenser criticism which has tended to characterise Spenserian materiality in terms of deadness and aesthetic emptiness. According to some of the most influential accounts of allegory in recent years, matter appears in Spenserian allegory in the form of waste, ruin, or corpse, excess matter which has lost any appearance of vitality and intrinsic significance. These accounts have tended to draw on Walter Benjamin’s now-famous analysis of materiality in Baroque allegory, which argued that allegory emerged in its modern form in the context of the crisis of meaning brought about by the Protestant Reformation; for Benjamin, the loss of metaphysical immanence attendant upon

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82 This chapter is not the first to consider The Faerie Queene in light of Deleuze’s philosophy. Jon Quitslund refers to Deleuze’s discussion of Plato’s simulacrum in The Logic of Sense in order to suggest how the literary uses to which Spenser puts Platonic metaphysics might intersect with postmodern interpretations (Spenser’s Supreme Fiction: Platonic Natural Philosophy and The Faerie Queene [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001], pp. 299-305). In a forthcoming article in Spenser Studies, Yulia Ryzhik considers Spenserian allegory in the light of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the plateau and the rhizome; she does not, however, engage Deleuze’s theory of affect (‘Spenser with Deleuze and Guattari’, forthcoming in Spenser Studies, 36 [2022]).

Protestantism’s internalisation of religious experience manifested itself in allegorical drama in a profusion of materiality that seemed to flaunt its deadness and mortality. ‘So much meaning, so much forfeiture to death,’ Benjamin wrote, ‘for at the deepest level death incises the jagged line of demarcation between physis and meaning.’ 84

Yet the otherness of allegorical materiality to transcendent signification need not be conceptualised solely in terms of loss and meaninglessness. Deleuze’s concept of affect, I would argue, offers a way of thinking about allegorical materiality as simultaneously alien to allegory’s universalising impulses, and, at the same time, aesthetically generative, continually producing difference and variation in excess of any determinate meaning or interpretation. One of Deleuze’s central aims in his early work on sense is to develop an account of a form of signification which is independent from signification. Even while always pulled in the direction of structure and totality, Spenser’s poem, too, equally insists upon the non-conceptual significance of its rich and varied aesthetic surfaces, surfaces which, like Deleuze’s plane of immanence, continually elude penetration to a reality beyond or within.

I. Plato’s Mud: A Brief Secret History of Viscosity

In one of the defining texts of twentieth-century French existentialism, Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre indulges in what, though ostensibly a discourse on ontology, might best be described as a profoundly misogynistic tirade about a substance for which he allegedly had a particular horror: ‘le visqueux’, ‘the viscous’, usually translated into English as ‘the slimy’. 85 Sartre’s anxieties about viscous substance—that ‘aberrant fluid’, the ‘agony of water’—centre on its phenomenological elusiveness. 86 At first, slime appears to us to be a liquid, embodying, like water, the impossible unity of temporality and permanence, heterogeneity and identity: ‘it manifests to us a being which is everywhere fleeing and yet everywhere similar to itself, [...] which eternally is changed into itself, [...] a perpetual change without anything which changes’. 87 Upon closer inspection, however, we realise that slime also bears certain properties of solids: it ‘represents [...] a dawning triumph of the solid over the liquid’. 88 Hence, where water presents ‘permanence within change’, slime ‘presents itself as a phenomenon in process of becoming’, a ‘fixed instability’—not the unity of the permanent, but the multiplicity of the seemingly homogeneous. 89 In its powerful ambiguity, slime subverts the efforts of perceiver to conceptualise it; not

85 Like Latin and Greek, French does not have a word that directly corresponds to the English ‘slime’. The Oxford French-English dictionary defines ‘visqueux’ as ‘viscous, viscid’ or ‘sticky, gooey’, though its description in Being and Nothingness also strongly suggests the slipperiness English speakers associate with slime. ‘Visqueux’, Oxford Dictionaries Online, <https://premium.oxforddictionaries.com/translate/french-english> [accessed 7 March 2022].
87 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 607.
88 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 607.
89 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 607.
only that, but it appears to turn the tables on its perceiver: ‘Only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me’. Most objects passively allow themselves to be grasped, physically or intellectually, without compromising the subject’s own being. But slime assumes a weird animacy as soon as we try to handle it: ‘I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me’, ‘like a liquid seen in a nightmare, where all its properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me’. Seeming to slurp out my very interiority, le visqueux calls into question my very being as an autonomous body and consciousness. Indeed, even more unsettlingly, it calls into question the very distinction between individuation and formlessness: ‘there is a sly solidarity and complicity of all its leechlike parts, a vague, soft effort made by each to individualize itself, followed by a falling back and flattening out that is emptied of the individual’.

Although in some ways it evinces an especially modern fear of that which threatens to compromise individual autonomy, Sartre’s phobic obsession with viscosity also reflects recurrent human anxieties about, and fascination with, the fluidity of the physical boundaries of the body and of the boundary between animacy and inanimacy. ‘[O]ur bodily frontiers [...] are marked in slime’, Susanne Wedlich’s recent natural and cultural history of the substance has commented.

During sex, slime is the boundary between me and you, even desirable in the moment for frictionless contact. Slime often highlights the transition from good health to sickness. And it represents the crossing of the last barrier between life and death, when the body loses all definition during slimy decomposition. [...] Sex is an embarrassment, disease is a weakness, and death our greatest fear. [...] Perhaps there is an unconscious belief that if we push slime to the margins of our consciousness, we might be able to ignore our biological finitude, too.

Slime and other viscous materialities, in other words, offer a paradigmatic example of what the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva has termed ‘the abject’, those liminal materialities which defy the binary between self and other, and in doing so provoke intense feelings of both desire and repulsion. But if viscosity is associated with death and decomposition, it has also, as Wedlich notes, long been associated with the very origins of life itself. In an era prior to the modern scientific understanding of processes of generation and to chemical analyses of the makeup of hydrogels, the bizarrely inanimate vitality of slime and other mucky substances would have presented itself as something more than a mere metaphor.

Belief in the spontaneous generation of imperfect creatures from mud, slime, and decaying organic remains is found as early as the ancient Egyptians, and was codified in early Western science by prominent figures such as Pliny the Elder and Aristotle. Indeed, some ancient philosophers went so far as to speculate that the origins of all life lay in fertile muck: in Book 5 of De Rerum Natura, the Roman Epicurean philosopher Lucretius imagines the first creatures crawling out of warm, moist, muddy

90 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 608.
91 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 609.
92 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 610.
94 On the ancient Egyptians’ belief in the spontaneous generativity of slime, see Wedlich, Slime, p. 4.
wombs bubbling up on the surface of the earth at the beginning of the created world. The Judeo-Christian tradition, too, planted the origins of corporeal existence firmly in viscous matter; in Genesis 2:7, God fashions Adam from the ground or dust (Hebrew *adamah*), rendered in the Vulgate translation ‘*limus terrae*’, ‘slime’ or ‘mud of the earth’—a translation which curiously transforms dry, atomised dust particles into moist, sticky viscosity. The persistence of belief in the spontaneous generativity of decaying muck long after the experimental disproof of the phenomenon in the experiments of Francesco Redi in the latter half of the seventeenth century suggests that the association between viscous matter and generativity stems from more than simply the empirical evidence of muck’s fertility. As Sartre suggests—along with innumerable low-budget horror films of the twentieth century—it is precisely slime’s undefinability, its power to elude even the very binary of form and formlessness, that makes it seem so weirdly alive. Belief in the literal generativity of viscous matter gives pseudo-scientific and mythological form to the problems Sartre addresses in phenomenological and ontological terms: questions about the relationship between form and formlessness, between matter and spirit, consciousness and its other.

Muck’s indeterminacy disturbed even Plato. In the *Parmenides*, one of Plato’s late sceptical dialogues, Socrates’ eponymous interlocutor asks him whether ‘hair, mud, dirt, or anything else particularly vile and worthless’ can be said to have their own ideal forms, and Socrates responds with some confusion:

‘By no means,’ said Socrates, ‘No, I think these things are such as they appear to us, and it would be quite absurd to believe that there is an idea of them; and yet I am sometimes disturbed by the thought that perhaps what is true of one thing is true of all. Then when I have taken up this position, I run away for fear of falling into some abyss of nonsense and perishing.’

Plato’s mud is not quite as creepily animate as Sartre’s personified slime, but Socrates nonetheless suggests that something about these inchoate materialities eludes Plato’s guiding metaphysical distinction between the passive and the active, between matter and Form, between copy and model, as if they belong to a category entirely of their own: that of the pure phenomenon, of that which completely lacks interiority or signification. Nor is it entirely clear why mud, dirt, and hair should not, in Plato’s system, have ideal forms like all other phenomena. An aesthetic judgement about the viliness of these inchoate or excremental materialities, it would seem, is interfering with what should be a purely epistemological one, about the nature of the relationship between particular and universal. Perhaps Plato’s confusion on this subject stems from the fact that muddy matter is powerfully evocative of what, in his seminal discussion of matter and form in the *Timaeus*, Plato described as the *chora*, the formless, non-predicable receptacle of Becoming which, in receiving the imprint of the divine Forms, becomes

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95 The word Plato uses for ‘mud’ is *pʰlóξ*, ‘clay, earth, mud, mire’.
perceptible materiality: ‘void of all forms’, ‘a Kind invisible and unshaped, all-receptive, and in some most perplexing and most baffling way partaking of the intelligible’, comparable to the odourless liquid forming the base of a perfume, or the ‘soft material’ a sculptor might use to fashion a statue.” Mud seems to give a kind of form to formlessness, a kind of being to becoming.

Spenser’s numerous references to glutinous materiality in *The Faerie Queene* pick up on its ancient associations with the fluid boundary between animate and inanimate existence, drawing in particular on the word’s Biblical resonances. The allegorical representation of the human body in Book 2’s Castle of Alma episode, for instance, compares human skin, the literal boundary between self and other, to a ‘thing like to that *Egyptian* slime,/ Whereof king Nine whilome built *Babell towre*’, a thing which, though of ‘goodly workemanship’, the narrator laments, ‘Soone [...] must turne to earth; no earthly thing is sure’ (2.9.21). Other epithets attached to the word ‘slime’ similarly suggest the intimacy between human flesh and inorganic substance, while the frequent crime/slime rhyme suggests the broader theological implications of this quasi-organic stuff: one character in the poem, the nymph Cymoent, is said in Book 3 to be ‘deuoide of mortall slime’ (3.4.35), while Belphoebe is described as ‘Pure and unspotted from all loathly crime/ That is ingenerate in fleshly slime’ (3.6.3); in Briton moniments, the beginning of the mythical reign of Cymbeline is aligned with the time when Christ was ‘in fleshly slime/ Enwombed [...] from wretched *Adams* line/ To purge away the guilt of sinfull crime’ (2.10.50). Finally, at the close of the poem, the titaness Mutabilitie launches her argument for cosmic hegemony with a paean to the fertility of decaying slime in which the poem’s persistent emphasis on the intimacy between organic and inorganic substance attains a new, explicitly metaphysical significance; I will examine this passage in some detail momentarily.

*Mire*—‘wet or soft mud; ooze’; also ‘an area of swampy ground; a boggy place’, evocative of the swamps of Spenser’s Ireland—is similarly closely associated with human corporeality as well as with sin and desire. In his battle with the dragon at the end of Book 1, for example, Redcrosse’s literal and figural backsliding ‘in the mire’ sends him tumbling into the Well of Life, an event which has traditionally been understood to signify the congenital nature of sin and the unavoidable human need for divine grace. ‘Sinfull mire’ clads the babes sent forth from the Garden of Adonis to assume mortal existence in Book 3, canto 7, and, in Book 3 the pansexual giantess Argante is described as ‘wallow[ing] in all [...] fleshly myre’ (3.7.49), indiscriminately human or animal. Yet the poem’s repeated references to mire also suggest its fascination with the indeterminacy of this boggy, sticky, inchoate substance. Take, for example, the sluggish waters of Phaedria’s Ydle Lake, ‘engrost with mud’ (2.6.46), their ‘dull billowes thicke as troubled mire’ (2.6.20)—an image evocative of Bateman’s description of the Nile’s ‘troublly’ ooze. Spenser’s poem repeatedly emphasises that this oozy body of water combines the

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properties of solid and liquid: its ‘dull billowes’, ‘Whom nether wind out of their seat could forse,/ Nor timely tides did drine out of their sluggish sourse’ (2.6.20), seem to move without actually changing position; though apparently fluid, the lake’s sludgy waves bear up on its surface anything that tries to submerge itself within it. Like Plato’s mud, Phaedria’s miry lake resists impression from outside or above it; it contains depths but nevertheless foils any attempt to penetrate those depths, to locate within it a reality beyond the inchoate surfaces of bodies.

Indeed, Spenser’s poem shows a persistent interest in the paradoxes of definition that perplex Sartre and Plato. Two instances in particular of the poem’s references to muck strike me as especially evocative of epistemological and ontological problems raised by muck and slime. The first is the poem’s description of Belphoebe, mentioned above, as ‘Pure and unspotted from all loathly crime/ That is ingenerate in fleshly slime’. The most common signification of the adjective ‘ingenerate’ is ‘innate’. If the prefix ‘in’- is understood privatively, however, the innateness of the ingenerate slips into its opposite, ungenerated, self-existent; the word is used explicitly in this sense at least as early as 1656.99 There is an implied tension, then, between, on the one hand, a conception of fleshly slime as the mere passive recipient of congenital sinfulness— the receptacle in which sin is, according to another common use of the word in this period, ‘ingenerated’—and, on the other, as a substance in which loathly crime somehow engenders itself—in which it is in-generated, without external determination, lacking a determining Form, and generative precisely to the extent that it eludes external determination.

The second occurs when, describing the virginal impregnation of Chrysogone by a sunbeam in the Garden of Adonis episode, the poem refers again to the myth of the spontaneous generativity of Nile effluvia:

So after Nilus inundation,

Infinite shapes of creatures men do fynd,

Informed in the mud, on which the Sunne hath shynd. (3.6.8)

This stanza at first appears to rewrite the poem’s opening epic simile, where mud and slime seem to assume uncontrollable, monstrous powers of generation, by attributing generative agency to the sun’s warming rays. But even here the simile, which does not directly attribute formative power to the sun, is, I would argue, more ambiguous than this argument permits. I discussed in my introduction Georges Bataille’s paradox of l’Informe, which evokes both formlessness and a certain formative power immanent in formlessness. While ‘Informed’ initially suggests mud’s formation by an external agency, the stanza’s repetition of the ‘in’- prefix in its various senses (‘inundation’, ‘infinite’) points to other possible significations: on the one hand, ‘rendered formless’ in the mud; on the other hand, formed, in their in-finite forms, in the formless mud.

One could even draw a parallel between Sartre’s rant about slime and the opening episode of The Faerie Queene. It is, indeed, difficult for a Spenserian reading Sartre’s description of slime—

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grotesquely adhering to any one who tries to grasp it, trapping them, sucking at the very marrow of their selfhood—not to think of Spenser’s Redcrosse, trapped in the sinuous folds of Errour’s tail and retching as she spews her filth over his red-crossed breastplate. Insofar as Spenser’s poem aims, as he announces in the Letter of the Authors, to ‘fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline’, the appearance of the autonomously animate matter of slime in the first episode of The Faerie Queene represents a threat to its central ethical and allegorical project as much as le visqueux does to Sartre’s own profoundly individualistic philosophy. And for Spenser, as for Sartre, the problem is not that slime in any simple sense lacks individuation. Like Sartre’s visqueux, insidiously collecting itself into soft heaps before dissolving once more, Spenser’s viscous materiality implies the problematic inseparability of form and formlessness.

The poem’s final use of the word ‘slime’ is reserved, as I noted above, for the poem’s culminating book, the Cantos of Mutabilitie, and I will argue that it is here, in its final pages, that the poem most explicitly develops the metaphysical and ontological paradoxes implicit in these meditations on form and formlessness, and implicit, too, I have argued, in Plato’s and Sartre’s troubled meditations on glutinous materiality. In doing so, Mutabilitie also points the way to a Deleuzean metaphysics which insists on the immanence of form in decaying, generative materiality.

II. Mutabilitie’s Transversal Universe

Mutabilitie’s reference to slime occurs, crucially, at the very beginning of her argument, as she turns her attention first to the earth in order to destabilise the common-sense perception of its permanence and immovability:

For, all that from her [the earth] springs, and is ybredde,
    How-euer fayre it flourish for a time,
    Yet see we soone decay; and, being dead,
    To turne again vnto their earthly slime:
    Yet out of their decay and mortall crime,
    We daily see new creatures to arize;
    And of their Winter spring another Prime,
    Vnlike in forme, and chang’d by strange disguise:
So turne they still about, and change in restlesse wise. (7.7.18)

As befits Mutabilitie’s attack on Olympian patriarchy, this description of spontaneous generation, like that of the fertile mud of the Nile in the poem’s first episode, entirely avoids any mention at all of the sun or of any external formative agency. While the conception of the process of generation and decay implied here initially appears hylomorphic, furthermore—old forms corrupt, new forms, ‘Vnlike in forme’, are generated in their place—the peculiar phrase ‘chang’d by strange disguise’ points to an epistemological problematic not entirely resolvable in hylomorphic terms. Are the ‘new creatures’ new in substance, or are they mere disguises assumed by the old creatures? The ambiguity of the antecedent of ‘chang’d’ further compounds this confusion; while intuitively ‘chang’d’ should refer to the decaying forms, its immediate referent is ‘another Prime’. Mutabilitie calls into question the common-sense
Aristotelian understanding of material becoming as a one-directional process which changes one form into another over time. Phenomenal forms, in this reading, are not separable: new ‘disguises’ and old are inextricably entangled with one another. This entanglement is what Mutabilitie calls ‘slime’—a fundamentally (if the word may be permitted) indeterminate materiality which can be ‘seen’, simultaneously, though from different perspectives, in one disguise, or in another.

For similar reasons, the conception of change Mutabilitie articulates over the course of her argument differs also from the Lucretian paradigm which has frequently been cited as a source of Mutabilitie’s radically sceptical vision of cosmic change. Insofar as it sees phenomenal forms as ultimately determined by the innate qualities (size and shape in particular) of the semina rerum, Epicureanism entails a certain positivism that Mutabilitie’s argument avoids. For Mutabilitie, there is no ultimate part, possessed of inalienable physical properties, not susceptible to phenomenal change; even the elements, she argues, the seeming ‘ground-work [...] Of all the world’ (7.7.25), do not escape flux: ‘Thus, all these fower’, that is, earth, fire, water, and air, 

(the which the ground-work bee)
Of all the world, and of all living beings:
To thousand sorts of Change we subject see:
Yet are they chang’d (by other wondrous sights)
Into themselves, and lose their native mights;
The Fire to Aire, and th’Ayre to Water sheerly,
And Water into Earth: yet Water fights
With Fire, and Aire, with Earth approaching near:
Yet all are in one body, and as one appeare. (7.7.25)

No matter how deeply one penetrates into things, one cannot simply get past the becoming of appearances. (The word ‘appeare’ surfaces eight times in the seventh canto of Mutabilitie alone, suggesting the depth of Mutabilitie’s engagement with the sceptical problematic.) The phrase ‘chang’d [...] Into themselves’—not, as we would expect, ‘into each other’—points to an ontological paradox similar to that earlier suggested by ‘chang’d by strange disguise’: for something to become something else, it must also become itself, even while, in the process, losing its ‘native might’. New form and old form meld into ‘one body’, one differential ‘appearance’, possessed of multiple warring forms simultaneously. In the absence of a Lucretian emphasis on innate physical qualities, and of an Aristotelian conception of change as inhering in formal attributes, we are left with a metaphysics of pure

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differential process, a pure, proto-phenomenal becoming of phenomena. This too is what Mutabilitie means by ‘slime’.

Mutabilitie concludes her argument with a remarkable image of the cosmos itself as a single flow of appearances within which individual things are mere transient whirls or eddies inseparable from a broader current—or, to borrow an image from the poem’s first pages, oozy lumps in a viscous flow:

Then since within this wide great Vniuerse

Nothing doth firme and permanent appeare,
But all things tossed and turned by transverse:
What then should let, but I aloft should reare
My Trophee, and from all, the triumph beare?
Now judge then (o thou greatest goddesse trew!)
According as thy selle doest see and heare,
And unto me addoom that is my dew;
That is the rule of all, all being rul’d by you. (7.7.56)

The phrase ‘by transverse’—a Spenserian neologism—derives from the Latin phrase per transversum, from transvertto, ‘to turn or direct across or athwart’; the Latin per transversum signified ‘crosswise, obliquely, sideways’, while de or ex transverso could also be used to mean ‘unexpectedly’. Tossed and turned ‘by transverse’, things eschew the straight pathways of being for an ontology characterised by relation, by criss-crossing at odd angles, counter to expectation. No longer a uni-ty in which difference and particularity are subordinated to the One, a uni-verse characterised by such encounters is both a one-turning and a cross-turning—a oneness defined not by interiority or essence but by the possibility for intersection across ostensible differences of being and identity.

It is a sign of the subversive power of Mutabilitie’s argument that in her judgment of the titaness’s case Nature appropriates for her own purposes Mutabilitie’s rhetoric of things ‘chang’d/ Into themselves’:

I well consider all that ye haue sayd,
And find that all things stedfastnes doe hate
And changed be: yet being rightly wayd
They are not changed from their first estate;
But by their change their being doe dilate:
And turning to themselfes at length againe,
Doe worke their owne perfection so by fate:
Then ouer them Change doth not rule and raigne;

But they raigne ouer change, and do their states maintaine. (7.7.58)

Where for Mutabilitie things, in changing into themselves, produce ‘strange disguise[s]’ irreducible to prior identities, Nature re-grounds the turning of things in Aristotelian physics, where physical change truly entails the turning of substances ‘to themselves’, the teleological realisation of their essence. The tension between these two conceptions of material change, one transversal, the other substantial, outlines what I will argue is the tension in the poem as a whole between the plane of immanence—that of transversal variation and becoming—and allegory.
The word ‘transverse’, or rather, ‘transversal’, is, in fact, an important one in Deleuze’s philosophy, where it is borrowed, in the 1972 edition of his book *Proust and Signs*, from the writing of Marcel Proust, as well as from Deleuze’s collaborator-to-be, Félix Guattari. There Deleuze uses the term *transversal* to refer to the non-totalising unity of the Proustian work of art, an aesthetic unity, Deleuze argues, defined not by a prior or organic meaning which totalises the parts of which it is made, but by the ‘transversal’ ‘communication’ among irreducibly heterogeneous material fragments or points of view. This transversal aesthetic unity does not belong to an exclusively aesthetic domain, however; rather, the work of art expresses in a particularly revealing way the transversal conditions of all experience, of Being itself, a Being, according to Deleuze, defined not as a single ‘reality’ or ‘Reality’ but as the communication of absolutely divergent perspectives.

For Deleuze, transversal Being is independent both of the transcendent metaphysical identities of idealist thought and of the physical laws of causation of today’s empirical science, both of which assume that there is ‘a’ reality, material or ideal, subtending the multiplicity of the ways things appear to us. For Mutabilitie, too, I have been arguing, the conditions of existence in the sublunary world are transversal. On the one hand, nothing—no eternal essence, no material substance—guarantees the convergence of appearances on a single reality. On the other, the very divergence of things permits transversal connection, the generation of ‘disguises’ irreducible to prior identities. This transversal entanglement of forms, in which no form can become another without also transforming the term it would become, is what I have been describing as ‘intensity’, or ‘affect’.

III. ‘Upstart Vitality’: The Bower of Blisse

Mutabilitie’s insistence that ontology cannot be separated from aesthetics—that the being of things cannot simply be separated from their perceptible surfaces—distinguishes her vision of cosmic decay and generativity from that of another well-known site of reflection on processes of generation and decay in *The Faerie Queene*, the Garden of Adonis episode. Despite the complexity of the relationship between form and matter in Book 3, canto 6, and despite its celebration of the variability of creation, this episode tends to invoke a more naturalistic conception of form than Mutabilitie’s. Where Mutabilitie envisions a cosmos characterised by the universal entanglement of phenomenal forms without determining physical quality, the ‘Infinite shapes of creatures’ cultivated in the Garden are arranged in orderly rows, separated by species:

Infinite shapes of creatures there are bred,
And uncouth formes, which none yet euer knew,
And euer sort is in a sondry bed
Sett by it selfe, and ranckt in comely rew:
Some fitt for reasonable sowles t’indew,
Some made for beasts, some made for birds to weare,

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And all the fruitfull spawne of fishes hew
In endlesse rancks along enraunged were[,] (3.6.35)

Whether we understand these shapes, as Robert Ellrodt did, as the Augustinian rationes seminales or, as Edwin Greenlaw argued, as the Lucretian semina rerum, the emphasis is very much on taxonomical order determined by innate identities. When the canto comes to its famous discussion of the decay and variability of all natural forms, similarly, we find that the natural rhythms of generation and decay are determined ‘By course of kinde, and by occasion’ (3.6.38)—by nature and by necessity, according to Hamilton’s note. Mutabilitie’s metaphysics of pure process and becoming is substituted with a metaphysics of eternity in transience in which matter remains self-identical despite transformation: ‘The substance is not chaungd, nor altered,/ But th’only forme and outward fashion’ (3.6.38).

It is instead in what since C. S. Lewis has often been seen as the Garden of Adonis’s degenerate counterpart, Book 2’s Bower of Bliss, that we can see the Deleuzian ontology and aesthetics of process expressed in the Mutabilitie Cantos emerge in all its force. Acrasia’s pleasure garden is a place where the boundary between interior and exterior seems to exist only in order to be transgressed. The Bower’s striking number of gated enclosures, for example, seem designed to welcome interlopers in instead of keeping them out; far from interrogating the two travellers, the very porter of the Bower himself ‘seem[s] to entize’ (2.12.46) them to enter. The boundaries between bodies, too, are troublingly hazy. Ontological distinctions between the natural and the artificial and among human, animal, and vegetable seem to dissolve under the pressure of the Bower’s voluptuous sensuousness: precious metals mimic the properties of organic bodies, while the garden’s real vegetation mimics those of sentient beings, appearing wilfully, almost consciously, to expand itself, like one of the garden’s arbours,

goodly dight
With bowes and braunches, which did broad dilate
Their clasping armes, in wanton wreathings intricate. (2.12.53)

‘Dilate’, as Patricia Parker has shown, evokes associations not only with spatial expansion, but also the temporal deferral of romance narrative itself, a deferral exquisitely realised in this canto of an

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102 This emphasis on the distinctness of species is consistent with Lucretian atomism; for Lucretius’s argument that all species arise from fixed seeds formed by specific atomic mixtures, see Lucretius, The Nature of Things, trans. by A. E. Stallings (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 1.168-179. For Ellrodt’s argument that the ‘infinite shapes’ of the Garden represent the Augustinian seminal reasons, preformed by God at the Creation and awaiting in a state of pure potentiality for the time of their generation in the created world, see Robert Ellrodt, Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1960), pp. 77-84. For Greenlaw’s argument that they represent Lucretius’s atomic semina, see Greenlaw, ‘Spenser and Lucretius’, pp. 444-448.


104 On the Bower’s blurring of the distinction between human, animal, and vegetable life, see Paul Joseph Zajac, ‘Reading through the Fog: Perception, the Passions, and Poetry in Spenser’s Bower of Bliss’, ELR, 43 (2013), 211-238 (pp. 227-230).
unparalleled eighty-seven stanzas. ‘Dilate’, however, is only one among a striking number of verbs connoting corporeal intermixture and almost liquid expansion: ‘enfold’, ‘swell’, the wonderful neologism ‘scruze’ (a word which is itself a mixture of ‘screw’ and ‘squeeze’), ‘stain’, ‘abound’, ‘mingle’, ‘embay’, ‘spread’, ‘crepe’, ‘rip’, ‘steepe’, ‘weep’, ‘well’, ‘embrace’, ‘melt’, ‘flow’, ‘bedew’, ‘suck’, ‘distil’, ‘tril’, ‘blend’. While critics have often highlighted the Bower’s aesthetics of fluidity, these verbs suggest, somewhat more unsettlingly, that things in the Bower exist somewhere between solid and liquid state—much like Excesse’s wine, itself a delectable intermingling of flesh and liquid, which, when knocked to the ground by Guyon, seeps almost dreamily into the earth:

all in peeces [the cup] was broken fond,
And with the liquor stained all the lond. (57)


The distinction between human interiority and its exterior, too, disintegrates in the face of this onslaught of oozing, seeping, creeping, expanding materiality. When, at the end of the canto, we finally glimpse Verdant asleep in the arms of Acrasia, the narrator laments his moral and physical degeneracy: ‘O horrible enchantment, that him so did blend’ (2.12.80). ‘Blend’, as Hamilton notes, signifies both ‘to blind’ and ‘to defile’, but also, like so many of the other verbs in this canto, suggests physical mixture; fading into his verdant surroundings, Verdant slips from proper noun to adjective, from autonomous moral agent to some quasi-vegetative form of existence. Even Guyon is susceptible to the Bower’s emollient effects. When the stolid knight of temperance finally begins to relent at the sight of the naked maidens frolicking in the fountain, his desire is signalled by not one but two participials:

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107 As Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan have suggested, Verdant’s ‘blending’ also reflects Galenic beliefs about the mutual interpenetrability of the human body and its environment in the medical discourses of this period; see their introduction to *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*, pp. 1-13, esp. pp. 1-3. I would argue, however, that the confounding of ontological categories in the Bower of Blisse is not wholly reducible to a humoral explanatory framework. As in the Mutabilitie Cantos, the ontological problem of the relationship between interior and exterior is primarily posed in terms of the epistemological problem of the relationship between the fluid appearances of things and their inner essence. The Bower’s aesthetics of deliquescence unsettles not just the distinction between human and nonhuman, but descriptive categorisation itself.
‘melting hart’ (2.12.66) and ‘sparkling face’ (2.12.68), the latter notably reminiscent of Acrasia’s eyes, which the narrator compares to ‘starry light [...] sparkling on [...] silent waves’ (2.12.78). Threatening to reduce male subjects to an affective becoming, a transcorporeal vitality, which traverses distinctions between inside and out, between one body and another, the Bower’s aesthetics of indistinctness thus powerfully undermines the ethics of passional self-regulation and somatic autonomy integral, as Michael Schoenfeldt has elegantly shown, to the Legend of Temperance.\(^{108}\)

Calling into question the dialectical opposition between fluid appearance and discrete essence, and between affective experience and rational interiority, the Bower of Blisse gives a local habitation and a name to the metaphysics of ungrounded process Mutabilitie articulates in the concluding cantos of the poem. Insofar as allegory, especially in the Legend of Temperance, depends upon what Harry Berger, Jr., has called a ‘moral taxidermy’—emptying empirical being of immanent reality and stuffing it, so to speak, with rational interiority—this aesthetics of indistinction threatens the phenomenological foundations of allegory itself.\(^{109}\) Indeed, I would argue that the challenge the Bower presents to the overarching morality of the Legend of Temperance has less to do with the sensual pleasures it offers in themselves, so long the focus of critical debate about this episode, than with its undermining of the binary between surface and depth, between formless appearance and informing essence, upon which the poem’s moral pedagogy depends. It is, therefore, no surprise that the successful achievement of Guyon’s quest appears to involve the reassertion of form over the Bower’s pervasive indeterminacies. Ambushing Acrasia and the sleeping Verdant, Guyon and his trusty guide throw over them a ‘subtile net’ which the ‘skilfull Palmer formally did frame’ (2.12.81) expressly for the purpose. A synonym of ‘form’, ‘frame’ returns the reader to the beginning of the canto, where the ‘goodly frame of Temperaunce’ (2.12.1) rears its head somewhat threateningly in its first stanza, as well as to the ‘frame’ and ‘worke diuine’ of the Castle of Alma (2.9.22). In a recent article, Paul Joseph Zajac has suggested that Guyon’s destruction of the Bower permits Spenser to distinguish his own allegorical strategies from the Bower’s artifice of indifferenciation:

\begin{quote}
The climactic actions of Guyon and the Palmer at the end of Book II expose the Bower’s state of extreme intermixture before ultimately reestablishing boundaries of difference and individuation [...] Only through the Bower’s destruction can Spenser assert the difference of the\end{quote}

\(^{108}\) Michael C. Schoenfeldt, ‘Fortifying inwardness: Spenser’s castle of moral health’, chapter 2 of Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 40-74. Joseph Campana has perceived in the Bower episode a critique of the ideology of temperate self-regulation Schoenfeldt identifies, arguing that it forwards an alternative ethics and aesthetics ‘rooted in morally problematic flows of pleasure’, in ‘the excited, vulnerable body, its transmissible energies, and the ethical states that [...] arise from a vulnerability to carnal experience’ (The Pain of Reformation, p. 131, 136). I too see the Bower’s profound affectivity as a subversive challenge to the model of interiority articulated by the book as a whole. As I will describe below, however, I understand this challenge to lie less in the Bower’s embrace of pleasure itself than in the way the episode’s depiction of the deliquescent effects of sensation participates in its broader questioning of the abstractions upon which Book II’s conception of rational morality depends.

Acrasian aesthetics of befogment from his own poetic techniques [...] By rendering so radically the confounding of categories in the Bower, Spenser upholds his own allegorical poem as a more stable, virtuous alternative in an attempt to distinguish himself from a form of art that recognizes no distinctions.\textsuperscript{110}

Zajac, I would argue, underestimates both the degree to which the poem’s own poetics is aligned with the Bower’s aesthetics of indistinction—a point I will return to momentarily—and the powerful challenge the Bower presents to the epistemology of Spenserian allegory. Yet I would also question his suggestion that Guyon and the Palmer succeed in exterminating the Bower’s effusive materiality. When the Palmer returns the victims of Acrasia’s spells to their former, human forms, one Gryll famously refuses to leave behind his animal form:

Saide \textit{Guyon}. See the mind of beastly man,  
That hath so soone forgot the excellence  
Of his creation, when he life began,  
That now he chooseth, with vile difference,  
To be a beast, and lacke intelligence,  
To whom the Palmer thus, The donghill kinde  
Delights in filth and fowle incontinence:  
Let \textit{Gryll} be \textit{Gryll}, and haue his hoggiish minde;  
But let vs hence depart, whilest wether serues and winde. (2.12.87)

Gryll’s ‘vile difference’ does not only, as several critics have claimed, cast a shadow upon the ethics of temperance Guyon has so violently upheld, calling into question its ethical privileging of violence in service of state and nation over sensory and aesthetic pleasure; it is also yet one more example of the Bower’s tendency to exceed its own ostensible spatiotemporal boundaries.\textsuperscript{111} Resisting containment within any discrete place or time in Faerie, the Bower’s ambiguous, weirdly ungrounded materiality persists despite, even because of, its extermination. The image the Palmer attaches to this ungrounded, excessive materiality, appropriately, is of yet another formless, glutinous, mucky materiality: dung.

\textbf{IV. Transversal Allegory and the \textit{Pla(i)ne} of Immanence}

[\textit{The Faerie Queene}] lacks organic warmth. It tends to split, dissolve: the whole into books, books into cantos, cantos into events, events into descriptive luxuriance [...] Instead of building up and cohering, the poem is thus always decomposing. Its finest units, being so independently fine, are, even if in themselves organic, rich rather with a cancerous and upstart vitality, drawing attention from that whole they should serve. Hence the baggy, bulgy, loose effect, the fluidity. [...] \textit{The Faery Queen} is itself one vast Bower of Bliss.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110}Zajac, ‘Reading through the Fog’, p. 212.

\textsuperscript{111}For Joseph Campana, Gryll ‘refuses to participate in the experience of labor governed by Guyon and the Palmer, an experience in “which man alienates himself,” and which “is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification’ (\textit{Pain of Reformation}, p. 157); for Joe Moshenska, Gryll is a ‘final leftover’ of Book II, ‘a figure for the forms of pleasure that Guyon never fully overcomes’ (‘Aristotle and the Virtues’, in \textit{Edmund Spenser in Context}, ed. by Andrew Escobedo [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016], pp. 282-289 [pp. 288]).

The words ‘universe’ and ‘transverse’ both contain the word ‘verse’, which itself comes from the Latin verb *verto*, ‘to turn’. This bilingual pun suggests that poetry’s formal coherence, like that of Mutabilitie’s universe, may be transversal, not imprinted on it from without but generated from within decaying substance. And indeed, the formal qualities of Spenser’s verse exquisitely exemplify this process of generation from dissolution. Spenser’s penchant for alliteration, the incessant beat of the poem’s iambics, the astonishingly regular rhythms of its rhyme scheme across 36,000 lines, the long tail of the final alexandrine, the continual repetition and variation of the Spenserian stanzaic structure—all these features, both visual and aural, give the sense that no individual unit in the poem, even the smallest syllable, can wholly be severed from any other, that, somehow, any given line or even word is not an autonomous entity, but rather a tossing and turning of the ones that came before it, viscous solids in the troubled flow of the poem’s river. At the level of the poem’s famously distractible romance narrative, too, the poem seems autonomously to generate form from matter—though the twists and turns of its narrative are equally susceptible to violent corrections from a force outside its own flow, such as when Britomart, one of the poem’s richest characters, is abruptly banished from the poem in the middle of Book 5. This fabric of pervasive interconnection within change, of continual decay and regeneration, is the shifting ground upon which *The Faerie Queene* seeks to erect the structure of its allegory.

But the interanimation of form and formlessness in *The Faerie Queene* is most immediately evident in what, I would argue, is one of the defining features of our experience of reading the poem: the strange suddenness with which Spenser’s allegorical personifications materialise in the poem, rarely given anything in the way of biographical detail or backstory, as if regurgitated by the mysterious innards of the Faerie landscape itself. The poem’s famously enigmatic opening, in which we are presented with an unnamed ‘Gentle Knight’ ‘pricking on the plain’ (1.1.1), offers a characteristic example. Readers have long puzzled over almost every word of this line: who is this ‘Gentle Knight’? Is he the same knight

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[iii] In suggesting that the poetics of *The Faerie Queene* expresses Mutabilitie’s conception of materiality as transversal flux, I differ from Debapriya Sarkar, who argues that it reflects a ‘philosophy of conservation of matter that privileges metaphysical continuity over phenomenal mutability’, one she sees articulated in Nature’s affirmation that things ‘doe their states maintaine’ (7.7.58) through change. ‘Dilated Materiality and Formal Restraint in *The Faerie Queene*’, *Spenser Studies*, 31-2 (2017/2018), pp. 137-166 (p. 138).

[iv] William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp. 33-34, remains the classic analysis of the structure of the Spenserian stanza. It has recently been reappraised in some detail by Jeff Dolven in ‘The Method of Spenser’s Stanza’, *Spenser Studies*, 19 (2004), 17-25, and by Kenneth Gross in ‘Shapes of Time: The Spenserian Stanza’, *Spenser Studies*, 19 (2004), 27-35. For Gross, the form of the Spenserian stanza concretises the poem’s broader ‘inter-animations of the temporal and the eternal, death and life, of going on and holding back, the [...] gathering and intertwining of its radically disparate materials within an emergent structure of life’, providing a basic principle of order which protects against the narrative’s tendency toward ‘the aleatory and the dispersed, threatening merely to decompose or deliquesce’ (p. 32). I see the stanza as more intimately rooted in the rhythms of earthly decay and generation than this argument suggests.

as the ‘Patrone of true Holinesse’ announced in the argument to the canto? And where is this ‘plaine’? Why ‘the’ plain, not a plain? Is this just any randomly chosen plain in Faerie? Or is there only one plain in Faerie? Or are all plains in what we will learn to call Faerie somehow the same? As we progress in reading Spenser’s enormous poem, we learn that this mode of presenting the poem’s characters is entirely typical: whether knights or giants or witches or nymphs, or even geographical topos-like castles or houses, the denizens of Faerie tend simply to appear in this way, not infrequently upon yet another plain. Even Britomart, whose history is later detailed at length, is first spotted from afar riding upon ‘an open plaine’ (1.1.4) somewhere in Faerie, leaving Guyon, Arthur, and the poem’s readers to guess at her identity for several more stanzas.

A plain is in itself perhaps the single most nondescript landscape imaginable; plains are, indeed, plain: ‘A broad tract of land which is comparatively flat; an expanse of level ground; (occasionally) terrain of this kind’, the *OED* offers. Understood in this sense, the plain which so often serves as the indeterminate backdrop for the poem’s events offers a fitting visual image for the seeming inexplicability and originlessness of Spenser’s allegorical characters as they first appear to us. In the sixteenth century, furthermore, ‘plaine’ or ‘playne’ was also the most common spelling of ‘plane’ in the geometrical sense. Defined in geometry as a flat surface upon which a straight line joining any two points on the plane would lie wholly upon it, a plane is a site of intersection. In this sense, too, Spenser’s Faerie is a pla(i)ne: it is a two-dimensional surface where encounters happen, where one curve meets another, where they might run parallel for a while, where finally they go their separate ways. Indeed, one often gets the sense when reading *The Faerie Queene* that, having little or no prior history, at least as revealed to us, Spenser’s characters somehow come into being through their various intersections. This is especially the case in the first few stanzas of Book 1, Canto 1, where, defying the laws of physics, Redcrosse, pricking on his foaming steed, Una on her donkey, Una’s lamb, and her baggage-laden

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118 ‘Plain, n.1’ in *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 24 July, 2021]. For Barrett, the very plainness of the plain ‘becomes part of a significantly unsignifying ecology of unelaborated phenomena’ (‘Allegraphy’, p. 14) in Spenser’s poem, a network of animals, humans, and things which resist assimilation by the poem’s allegory. Rather than conceiving the Spenserian plain as unsignifying, this article instead sees in the plain (and Spenserian materiality more widely) an irreducible excess of potential signification which allegorical system seeks, unsuccessfully, to delimit, order, and contain.

dwarf, form a visual geometry, a quadrilateral set of intersections, which will immediately begin to vary as new points on the plane appear and others disappear: Archimago’s imminent materialisation, for example, will put into play a new set of coordinates that threaten to swallow Una up entirely.

In an essay on the early modern philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Deleuze writes of a ‘plane of immanence’ upon which ‘all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated’ in Spinoza’s metaphysics. ‘This plane of immanence or consistency is a plan [plan],’ writes Deleuze, punning on the homonymy of ‘plan’ and ‘plane’ in French, ‘but not in the sense of a mental design, a project, a program; it is a plan [plan] in the geometric sense: a section, an intersection, a diagram.’ Rather than a field of a priori universals, the plane of immanence, as Deleuze describes it, is a field of extensive encounters and intensive relations: of, on the one hand, physical bodies and their meetings and mixtures; and, on the other, of non-extensive affects, degrees of power constituted in relation to one another and continually varying as bodies interact with each other in physical space. It is, to borrow Deleuze’s term from his later work on Proust, a transversal rather than transcendental field.

The feeling of being inserted onto a plane of immanence, from which beings seem to emanate spontaneously without distinct or readily identifiable origin; a surface where things are defined only as indeterminate quantities of energy or desire, ‘prickings’ which will be actualised only in their relations; a plane upon which, as a consequence, things seem to metamorphose in unpredictable ways over the course of their various meetings and adventures, eluding the constraints imposed by their conscious identities: this feeling is, I think, familiar to anyone who has spent enough time wandering the inner regions of Spenser’s Faerie land. In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to suggest that we consider the ‘mental space’ of Faerie, as Coleridge called it, a Deleuzean pla(i)ne of immanence: an intensive field, defined by repetition and variation, immanence within materiality, and excess over conscious signification, where things come into being not as a priori abstractions, but as affects or becomings, multiple capacities for meaning determined in dynamic relation to one another.

How, then, might thinking of Faerie as a Deleuzean pla(i)ne of immanence affect our understanding of allegory in The Faerie Queene? We might see Spenser’s allegory as having three dimensions: an extensive dimension composed of allegorical signifiers in actual, visible space, and a transcendental dimension, composed of the poem’s explicit allegory; but also, between these, an intensive dimension characterised by autonomous interconnection and relationality. In this intensive dimension float what, using Spinozist terminology, we might call allegorical affections or traces, of which the transcendental significations of the poem’s allegory compose only a part; others, more shadowy and subliminal, might include the various textual, contextual, and intertextual allusions or parallels a given signifier sets in play. The poem’s field of intensity allows these allegorical traces to resonate, to repeat...

and vary, without order or hierarchy, giving rise to the sense one gets, when reading the poem, that every detail in the poem, every trace of meaning, is somehow related to every other, forming a field of rhizomatic interconnection which does not necessarily converge upon totalising allegory’s transcendent significations. The various denizens of Faerie could then be conceived as affects, indeterminate quantities of intensive energy which combine a certain number of traces and set them in motion through their own movements and encounters with other bodies in extended Faerie space. These physical encounters, every one of which repeats and varies every single trace of meaning to a greater or lesser degree, activate the intensive field of resonance in new ways, bringing new meanings to the fore and allowing others to recede into an indistinct background. Speeding about and colliding on the plateau of immanence, the poem’s characters enter into non-teleological Becomings which threaten to destabilise the system of distinctions upon which the poem’s plan de transcendence depends. Indeed, I will argue in my reading of the Orgoglio episode, the surfeit of resonance these encounters produce occasionally gives birth to a very different kind of allegory—a transversal, rather than transcendent, one.

When Redcrosse springs so abruptly into our field of vision in the poem’s opening, for instance, we are confronted with an indeterminate quantity of affective or intensive energy, roughly identifiable with the young, inexperienced knight inside the armour, attached to a set of extensive signifiers (the battered armour, the shield and breastplate with the red cross, the horse) and various historical, Biblical, and literary allusions (Hamilton’s edition records England’s St George, the Christian man of Ephesians 6, and the young King David among the allusions set in play by the poem’s first two stanzas, to which Judith Anderson has added another, more incongruous, intertextual precursor, Chaucer’s Sir Thopas). This intensive dimension is characterised by an interpretative multiplicity and excess which sits uneasily with the identification of this gentle knight as the ‘Patrone of true Holiness’ in the canto’s argument. We are immediately clued to multiple ways Redcrosse might actualise the affective traces that constitute his intensive indeterminacy: on the one hand, the legend of St George’s defeat of the dragon, and the Biblical story of the young shepherd boy, armed only with a slingshot and his faith in God, waging battle with Goliath; on the other, Chaucer’s ludicrous (and unfinished) tale of an encounter between a young boy and a giant. Throughout Book I, the respective intensities of these resonating series will vary continuously in relation to one another as Redcrosse moves within the land of Faerie and as his various encounters—with the Sans-brothers, with Duessa, with Lucifer, with the giant Orgoglio, and, later, with Caelia and Contemplation—determine him in different ways, involve him in new becomings. To examine in further detail the non-teleological becomings Redcrosse enters as a consequence of his movements on the plane of immanence, I would like to turn to Book 1, canto 7, the Orgoglio episode.

V. ‘Inwardly Dismayde’: Redcrosse, Orgoglio, and the Zone of Indifferentiation

Orgoglio stumbles upon Redcrosse as the latter lies disarmed and making love with Duessa near a fountain in a typically underdetermined place in Faerie:

Yet goodly court he made still to his Dame,  
Pour'd out in losness on the grassy grownd,  
Both carelesse of his health, and of his fame:  
Till at the last he heard a dreadfull sownd,  
Which through the wood loud bellowing, did rebownd,  
That all the earth for terror seemd to shake,  
And trees did tremble. Th'Elfe therewith astownd,  
Upstarted lightly from his looser make,  
And his vnready weapons gan in hand to take. (1.7.7)

Having set aside the signifiers of his allegorical identity, Redcrosse Knight seems almost to deliquesce: it is as if his armour, rather than shielding him from the onslaught of forces from without, were in fact intended to contain the fluid physicality of the body within, a metamorphic intensity hidden by the knight’s red-crossed shell. Redcrosse, as he and we will discover a few cantos later, made his first appearance in the land of Faerie in the furrow of a plough, and his true name, we learn, is George, a compound, as the Golden Legend records, of geos and orge, ‘earth’ and ‘tilling’, ‘so george’, the Legend informs us, ‘is to say as tilyenge therthe that is his flesshe’.123 Redcrosse’s moment of dalliance with Duessa constitutes, however, his un-tilling, the overflowing of form by a matter longing to rejoin the fertile loam from which it originated. The knight, as the narrator will comment punningly a few stanzas later, as Orgoglio launches his attack, is ‘inwardly dismayde’ (11), dis-made as well as dismayed.124 Leaching into the indistinct plane of Faerie, Redcrosse, in Deleuze’s terms, approaches a ‘zone of indiscernibility’ or ‘zone of indifferentiation’, where his materiality begins to assert its autonomy from his ‘health’ and ‘fame’.125

It is at this moment of bodily indiscernability that Orgoglio appears—or, initially, that he resounds, before assuming determinate visual form. Orgoglio too is intimately associated with the earth:

The greatest Earth his uncouth mother was,  
And blustering Aeolus his boasted syre,  
Who with his breath, which through the world doth pas,  
Her hollow womb did secretly inspyre,  
And fild her hidden caues with stormie yre,  
That she conceiu’d; and trebling the dew time,  
In which the wombes of wemen doe expyre,  
Brought forth this monstrous masse of earthly slyme,

Puft vp with emptie wynd, and fild with sinfull cryme. (9)

Parodying Redcrosse’s own discovery in the furrow of a plough, Orgoglio’s bubbly conception recalls Aristotle’s account of the spontaneous generation of molluscs from putrefactive slime and mud in his biological treatises. Aristotle speculated that these creatures are engendered when viscous, slimy earth entraps within it a certain quantity of pneuma—that is, life force, but also air, the breath of life—and is thereby inflated into a ‘frothy bubble’. This compound of air and earth would subsequently harden into a mussel or other mollusc. Orgoglio’s conception is equally evocative of Lucretius’s famous description of animals bursting forth from wombs spontaneously bubbling up in fertile mud at the beginning of time.

Orgoglio, then, is the effervescent (and ephemeral) product of the aparental, illegitimate generativity of decaying matter—specifically, the matter of Redcrosse’s dis-making. If Redcrosse is a capacity to be affected, an intensity varying continuously within a field of indeterminacy, Orgoglio can be understood as an affect, a slice in that becoming-with-the-world considered as an effect of Redcrosse’s encounters with another body, in this case, that of Duessa, in his intensive field. The giant, then, is more than a projection of Redcrosse’s internal state; if intensity is not a discrete interiority but the becoming of the body in the world, Orgoglio too must be understood as a product of the interpenetration of inside and outside, of spirit and body. Indeed, Orgoglio’s empty airiness, which expands and deflates with such astonishing rapidity, is a striking image of an interiority characterised precisely by hollowness—that is, a lack of prior essence, of being constituted in advance of material variation. Rather than a projection of Redcrosse’s psyche, Orgoglio, I would argue, is more like a shadow of the knight, an intensive double which gestures toward unrealised potentials for actualisation.

In different ways, the knight and the giant each repeat and vary the series of traces that have constituted Redcrosse’s journey through Faerie thus far, including the figures of the Sans-brothers (who, like Orgoglio, call the earth their mother), the regurgitated spawn of Error (who are spontaneously generated from the fertile slime of the Nile River), and Lucifera (like Orgoglio, an allegorical representation of Pride). In another intimation of this repetition-in-variation, Orgoglio, as many critics have noted, also

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129 See Hamilton, Structure of Allegory, p. 76: ‘poured out upon the ground, [Redcrosse] becomes earth and water, that earthly slime which is Orgoglio. God’s image is being erased in him, though not totally, he is re-created in Satan’s image’.
130 To these textual traces we can add a historical one: the Orgoglio episode, Susannah Brietz Monta has argued, permits the Book of Holiness to exorcise the ghosts of St George’s Catholic past, in particular George’s etymological affinity with earthiness and flesh. In this way, too, the giant activates latent, potentially subversive vestiges of meaning in Spenser’s allegory. ‘Saints, Legends, and Calendars’ in Escobedo, ed., Edmund Spenser in Context, 317-18.
shares with Redcrosse half of the knight’s name—orgos, ‘tiller’. Not only are the knight and the giant each born from the earth, but they are each also born to cultivate it, to give it form and bring it to life. While Redcrosse sows the seeds of holiness, however, Orgoglio activates within matter the decaying residues of meaning which Redcrosse’s teleological determination as the knight of holiness constitutively excludes. The result is an allegorical creation which eschews (w)holiness—the single, the one, the unified—for transversal multiplicity. To the primary, psychological dimension of the allegory, which identifies Orgoglio as a representation of pride, Spenser adds multiple other dimensions: historical (Orgoglio as Philip of Spain), religious (Orgoglio as Satan), physiological (Orgoglio as erection), and even geological (Orgoglio as earthquake). In opposition to an allegory of transcendent Being, Orgoglio cultivates an allegory of immanent becoming, of differential relation among irreducibly heterogeneous traces, without essence or discrete interiority.

In this respect, Orgoglio resembles the material but inorganic assemblage of meaning that Deleuze and Guattari, in the introduction to A Thousand Plateaus, call a rhizome. In contrast with what they call the ‘root-book’, an arboreal system of thought which seeks to ground the empirical real in a single ‘root’, a transcendent, unifying Reality, the rhizome is characterised by heterogeneity, interconnection, and ‘asignifying rupture’. A rhizome composes not innate, hierarchical, organic structures, but subterranean ‘lines of flight’ that connect disparate entities across various ontological classes—material and ideal, scientific and cultural, aesthetic and political. Whereas a root-book seeks to represent the world, furthermore, the rhizome seeks to evolve with it, to disrupt it, reorder it, and, always, to constitute the new, what cannot already be known or identified: ‘[C]ontrary to a deeply rooted belief,’ they write, ‘the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparellel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can)’. Orgoglio, we could say, deterritorialises The Faerie Queene, sowing within its fertile plain wilder, more exotic species of allegory.

VI. Rhizomatic Allegory

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132 Perhaps the most familiar rhizome in the modern Western culinary repertoire, the potato, was introduced to England by Francis Drake in 1580. William H. McNeill, ‘How the Potato Changed the World’s History’, Social Research, 66 (1999), 67–83. The potato is enthusiastically detailed in John Gerard’s 1597 Herball or Generall Historie of Plants (ed. by Thomas Johnson [London, 1633]), where Gerard notes the most distinctive feature of the rhizome: the fact that new shoots will grow from any cut-off of a rhizome’s root structure (fol 4H4r–v).

Can we, then, extrapolate from the Orgoglio episode in order to call Spenserian allegory rhizomatic? To do so would not be to deny the impulses of Spenser’s allegory toward system, its attempt to construct a stable order of signs referring to a prior reality. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a rhizome is always subjected to numerous pressures to ‘reterritorialize’, to stabilise meaning, to force it to refer to a single, organised, coherent reality, whether that of God, Philosophy, or Science. Spenser’s Letter to Ralegh is such an effort of reterritorialisation, a likely belated attempt to rearrange the massive, heaving body of the poem’s first three books into a Plan involving twelve knights, each representing the twelve Aristotelian virtues, the twelve branches of a tree rooted in the tap-root, so to speak, of Gloriana’s court. The poem itself, furthermore, weaves between more rhizomatic and more emblematic moments, when the numerous meanings which the poem sets in play seem to constrict momentarily, to repress their shadows and resonance.

An especially striking example of rhizomatic allegory in *The Faerie Queene* can be found in Britomart, the female protagonist of Book 3’s Legend of Chastity. Like Orgoglio and Redcrosse, Britomart combines a bewildering number of traces in what I have been calling the poem’s intensive field: she is simultaneously the Knight of Chastity, the progenitor of the Tudor dynasty, and a young girl passionately in love, to which critics of the poem have added other intertextual allusions. At the same time, Britomart betrays a remarkable ‘openness of character that leads her into unexpected adventures and makes her respond in unpredictable ways’, as Susanne Wofford has put it. For Wofford, this openness to experience aligns Britomart more closely with the psychologically complex characters of the modern novel than it does with the abstract personifications of allegory, which tend to be emptied of agency and particularity. Rather than placing Britomart in opposition to allegory, Britomart’s openness to experience, I would argue, allows her to manifest the plasticity characteristic of the allegorical rhizome, her intensive signification shifting rapidly and unpredictably as the Knight of Chastity enters into numerous Becomings in the plat(i)ne of immanence—with Scudamour, for example, as she takes on herself Scudamour’s own quest to rescue Amoret, or with Amoret herself, as their relationship, early in Book 4, blossoms into something that seems more than merely Platonic. That the poem suddenly

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134 The rhizome, in fact, has long proved a suggestive image for Spenserians: Harry Berger, Jr., once deemed the Spenserian text rhizomatic in its writerly subversion of the ostensible rhetorical aims of Spenserian narrative and allegory (‘Narrative as Rhetoric in *The Faerie Queene*’, in *Resisting Allegory: Interpretive Delirium in Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, ed. by David Lee Miller [New York: Fordham University Press, 2020], pp. 103-142 [p. 142]). In a forthcoming article in *Spenser Studies*, Yulia Ryzhik also invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome; while our respective interpretations of the Deleuzean rhizome share an emphasis on its multiplicity and heterogeneity, Ryzhik is primarily interested in the rhizome’s flattening of the form/content hierarchy. Ryzhik, ‘Spenser with Deleuze and Guattari’.

135 In his own ‘rhizomatic’ reading of Book 3, for example, Harry Berger, Jr., cites Ovid’s Myrrha and pseudo-Vergil’s Ciris as prominent subtexts which challenge Britomart’s allegorical conscription in the service of Tudor ideology; see ‘Narrative as Rhetoric’, p. 179.

excises Britomart following her rescue mission to save her betrothed from Radegund in Book 5 testifies to the subversive power of her spontaneously generative materiality.

VII. Reading Spenser with Deleuze

I have argued in this chapter that Deleuze’s theory of affect offers us interesting new ways to think about allegory and materiality in *The Faerie Queene*. Yet the experience of reading Spenserian allegory can also, I would argue, shed light on how we read Deleuze. Deleuze’s best writings weave continually between systematic philosophical argument and more affective forms of writing in ways that have frequently proved frustrating to professional philosophers. The challenge of reading Deleuze—much like that of reading Spenser—lies in the task of positioning these two aspects of his thought in relation to one another. When is a particular image, or a citation of a literary text or work of art, or a stylistic peculiarity, merely an example of a broader philosophical point, and when is it being used to unsettle or call into question Deleuze’s own arguments? What are we to do with the feelings Deleuze’s powerful prose style sometimes arouses in us? Does affective appeal come at the expense of epistemic certainty? *Should* we feel so affectively engaged with a text which aspires to philosophical rigour? These questions, I think, will seem strangely familiar to anyone who, like our pricking knight, has spent enough time erring upon Spenser’s plain of immanence.
Chapter Two

‘Perplex’d Discomposition’: The (In)animacy of Dissolution in the Writings of John Donne

Reclining on a verdant hillside, sweaty palm to sweaty palm, their eyes locked in a loving gaze, the two lovers of John Donne’s poem ‘The Ecstasy’ affirm the mutual inseparability of their souls:

When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two souls:
That abler Soule which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls. (40-44)

Early manuscript copiers of the poem appear to have stumbled over Donne’s neologism ‘interinanimates’, dropping the prefix ‘in-’ despite the consequent metrical inconsistency. Although editors have long since argued for the superiority of ‘interinanimates’ to ‘interanimates’, in part on the basis of Donne’s extensive use of the verb ‘inanimate’ elsewhere in his writings, the poem’s modern readers have nonetheless followed their seventeenth-century forebears in understanding the two variants as more or less identical in meaning, assuming that Donne is here referring to the mutual animation of the two lovers’ souls. Yet ‘interinanimates’, I would argue, intimates a more complex meaning than its alternative, one which speaks powerfully if ambiguously to the poem’s overall metaphysical concerns. Donne often uses the word ‘inanimates’, especially in his sermons, to refer to the infusion of the soul within the body; used in this sense, ‘interinanimates’ insists upon the inseparability not only of the two lovers’ souls, but also of the soul and the body, thereby cutting against the speakers’ initial argument that love is primarily a spiritual experience, and their suggestion that selfhood is separable from the body (the speakers’ bodies, they aver, are ‘ours, though they’re not “we”: we are/ Th’intelligences, they the sphere’ [49-52]). In a poem replete with imagery that associates the lovers’ bodies with death,

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138 See Ramie Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 54-55, and Catherine Ginelli Martin, ‘The Erotology of Donne’s “Extasie” and the Secret History of Voluptuous Rationalism’, SEL, 44 (2004), 121-147 (p. 137). Though he does not discuss ‘interanimates’ specifically, Jonathan Sawday too sees the poem as asserting a Platonic or even proto-Cartesian dualism which perceives the body as a mere vehicle for the soul’s principle of intelligence (The Body Embazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture [London: Routledge, 1995], p. 20, pp. 146-7). A recent exception to the rule is offered in Michael Ursell’s ‘Interinanimation and Lifelessness in John Donne’s Book Studies’ (SEL, 56 [2011], 71-92), where Ursell stresses the presence of the adjective ‘inanimate’ in Donne’s ‘interanimates’. Ursell, however, is interested in the category of what he calls ‘nonlife’—a realm that cannot be explained as death or immortality [...] including inanimate things that persist with or without living beings’ (p. 72), in particular, the material book—rather than, as in this chapter, in Donne’s representations of the materiality of death.
139 This is the substance of Targoff’s illuminating reading of the poem, which opposed a long tradition of reading ‘The Ecstasy’ as an expression of Neo-Platonic contempt for the body; see Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul, pp. 53-57.
furthermore, the interinanimation of two souls and two bodies also carries a suggestion of the privative use of the prefix ‘in-’: love brings souls and bodies to life; but in bringing souls into their bodies, bodies ‘animate’ souls, confronting them with their mortality. Yet ‘interanimate’ may be more two-footed than even this would suggest. The prefix ‘inter-’, of course, suggests mutuality. If the interinanimation of bodies and souls brings bodies to life, then so too may bodies animate souls, precisely in their inanimacy, their mortality. Bodies may have their own animacy, entirely independent of the rational, even the organic soul—entirely, that is, ‘in’ the matter of the mortal body.

In a late essay on T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars*, Deleuze suggests that a similar paradox informs Lawrence’s understanding of the relationship between mind and matter. For Lawrence, tortured and raped by the soldiers of the Ottoman bey,

> [...] the body is not even a means or a vehicle for the mind, but rather a ‘molecular sludge’ that adheres to all the mind’s actions. When we act, the body lets itself be forgotten. But when it is reduced to a state of sludge, on the contrary, one has the strange feeling that it finally makes itself visible and attains its ultimate aim [...] The idea that horror nonetheless has an aim stems from the fact that molecular sludge is the body’s final state, which the mind contemplates with a certain attraction, finding in it the security of a final level that it cannot pass beyond.\(^{140}\)

Reduced to formless muck, the body reveals a kind of vitality entirely autonomous from the consciousness that inhabits it: ‘The body is an animal. What the body does it does alone [...] In the midst of his tortures, an erection; even in the state of sludge, there are convulsions that jolt the body, like the reflexes that still animate a dead frog.’\(^{141}\) And the mind’s confrontation with the weirdly autonomous ‘sludge’ of the body is strangely generative. Shocked out of the clichés of abstraction, the mind produces from its confrontation with the body ‘entities’ that ‘provoke, at the limit of language, the apparition of great visual and sonorous images’.\(^ {142}\) For Lawrence, too, the clash of mind and matter is ‘animating’; it produces novel aesthetic forms, forms barely articulable in language, from the inchoate muck of matter.

This chapter revisits Donne’s own notorious obsession with the molecular sludge of the body. Death, as critics have long recognised, was for Donne not an abstraction, like the hooded, scythe-bearing personifications of the medieval *momento mori* tradition, nor did it represent simply the termination of mortal consciousness at the moment when body and soul separated; it was a profoundly physical reality, one which defined bodily existence from the moment of conception, even prior to the moment of conception, all the way to the numerous metamorphoses the body suffered in death. From ‘The Relic’, where Donne envisions his skeleton, along with that of his mistress, exhumed and sanctified by the lovers of the future, to Donne’s vivid fantasy of posthumous scattering in his final sermon *Deaths Duel*, from ‘The Dissolution’, where Donne, in a morbid inversion of ‘The Ecstasy’, imagines his body

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\(^{141}\) Deleuze, ‘The Shame and the Glory’, p. 123.

wretchedly augmented by the decayed elements of his lover’s body, to the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, where Donne, awaiting his own death, grapples movingly with the lived experience of physical dissolution; from the *First Anniversarie*, where Donne compares the body of the world, lamenting the loss of Elizabeth Drury, to the putrefying corpse of an anatomy demonstration, to his verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, where the putrefying body alchemically transmutes its earthy dross into golden matter for its resurrection, Donne’s writings repeatedly meditate, often in horrifying detail, upon the materiality of the dead and dying body. Donne’s critics have provided numerous explanations for this preoccupation with the most gruesome aspects of bodily existence, but most have assumed that it originates in Donne’s anxieties about his own death. 143 This chapter, by contrast, takes off from the paradox intimated, as I suggested above, both in Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars* and in Donne’s ‘The Ecstasy’. Like Lawrence, Donne contemplates the putrefying, slimy, dusty, atomised remains of the body with the ‘attraction’ that accompanies the mind’s encounter with the limits of its representational powers. And he repeatedly finds that encounter inanimating. Not only does the body display an autonomous vitality even in the extremes of putrefaction, decay, and dissolution; Donne also finds the sensed experience of the body’s formlessness—however indivisible from sickness and pain—spiritually, rhetorically, and aesthetically generative. 144


144 Eileen M. Sperry, too, has recently focussed on Donne’s images of decay as figures for aesthetic form. For Sperry, however, who treats the lyric poems, decay, which dissolves the boundaries between individual bodies, ultimately serves as an image of material unity and the overcoming of difference: decay ‘unit[es] separate individuals into a stable and cohesive union’ which intimates the unity of the lyric poem itself ‘as a space of potentiality, unbounded by the limits of rationality and everyday language’. Though I too am interested in Donne’s representations of decay as figures for a kind of immanent coherence, for me decay evokes process and multiplicity, not the undoing of differentiation. Eileen M. Sperry, ‘Decay, Intimacy, and the Lyric Metaphor in John Donne’, *SEL*, 39 (2019), 45-66 (p. 49, 46).
While, as I have mentioned, Donne’s early poetry features numerous representations of corpses, this chapter will concentrate in particular on Donne’s homiletic and devotional writings, where Donne’s fascination with the decaying body as in-animating process comes particularly into focus. The first part of this chapter will study the aesthetics of putrefaction in Donne’s sermons, suggesting that Donne’s numerous depictions of decaying bodies in the sermons allow him to probe the being of bodily matter in the abeyance of form and totality, as a pure, indeterminate process of change. For Donne, dissolution revealed the body’s alienness to the unifying structures of human consciousness and thought, an alienness that fascinated and thrilled Donne’s imagination. In particular, Donne is captivated by the aesthetic multiplicity of decaying matter, the infinite plurality of its appearances in excess of any unifying essence or identity. The various dust, jellies, humours, and worms produced by the decaying body suggest to Donne a principle of form immanent in those processes of material change that, as John Carey once demonstrated, so animate his imagination.145

For Donne, however, death and dissolution was not merely a fate suffered by the posthumous body; it also was integral to, even constitutive of, the lived experience of embodiment. Infused with a desperate energy which has no other source than the body’s disintegration, Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* use Donne’s experience of what he thought to be a terminal illness in the winter of 1623 to explore the way the sick body, careening toward death, makes its autonomy from spirit sensibly present to us in the moment when its normal functioning fails. Here again, I will argue, the body’s mortality is in-animating. In the *Devotions*, the hermeneutic indeterminacy of diseased, decaying matter—its autonomy from prior structures of meaning—itself opens the space for eschatological hope, and, therefore, agency.

I. The Putrefactive Body in the Sermons

Although Donne’s early poetry frequently features images of decaying corpses, nowhere is Donne’s obsession with the dusty, slimy, smelly, sticky materiality of putrefaction more pronounced than in his sermons. References to processes of dissolution are scattered throughout his homiletic texts, but occur with particular frequency in his numerous sermons on the resurrection of the body, a topic about which, from his earliest sermons delivered at Lincoln’s Inn to his very last, delivered at court days prior to Donne’s own death, Donne seems to have needed very little excuse to preach. As Ramie Targoff has noted, Donne’s preoccupation with the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is unusual among seventeenth-century English ministers.146 Indeed, the Church of England seems to have minimised the doctrine’s importance to the new Protestant faith. The sole reference to the resurrection of the body in early drafts of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* was excised in the final version published by Elizabeth in 1563; even the liturgical rites prescribed for the burial of the dead in the *Book of Common

Prayer are largely dismissive of the eschatological significance of the earthly body.\textsuperscript{147} By contrast, the attention Donne devotes to the question of bodily resurrection far outweighs that devoted to any other eschatological question; and within his discussions of bodily resurrection, the imaginative energy he devotes to the atomisation, liquefaction, and vermiculation of the dead body far outweighs that dedicated to the resurrected body itself.\textsuperscript{148}

By far Donne’s most famous portrayal of the posthumous fate of the body is that of his dramatic final sermon, delivered at court during Lent 1631, only days prior to Donne’s own death from stomach cancer. Although it cannot be attributed to Donne himself, the title given to the sermon in its first printed edition, 	extit{Deaths Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and liuing Death of the Body}, pithily summarises the paradox that guides Donne’s meditations on death and dissolution in this sermon, and in his sermons on the resurrection of the body more generally. 	extit{Deaths Duell} makes death vividly present to his auditors not as the eventual culmination of bodily existence but as its defining feature from the moment of conception—the moment, as Donne punningly puts it, when we are ‘inanimated’ in the womb. I will argue in my analysis of Donne’s 	extit{Devotions} below that this conception of bodily life as a process of dying has roots not just in an abstract theological point about humanity’s fallenness, but in Donne’s understanding of the lived experience of the body, one he understood to be profoundly informed by the reality of decay, dissolution, and body mutability. Yet Donne’s paradox also has a flip side. If life is a process of dying, then the body itself is weirdly animate \textit{in} its very death and continual dissolution. For Donne, death is anything but conclusive—anything, that is, but passive nonexistence.\textsuperscript{149} When Donne’s description of the numerous deaths of this life appears finally to come to rest in the dissolution of body and soul, we are surprised to learn that this is not, in fact, ‘the last death that the body shall suffer’: ‘though it bee an issue from the manifold deaths of this world,’ the dissolution of body and soul ‘is an entrance into the death of corruption and putrefaction &

\textsuperscript{147} Targoff, \textit{John Donne, Body and Soul}, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{148} Donne’s preoccupation with the putrefying body in the sermons has proved a particular point of contention in the critical debate about Donne’s obsession with death, discussed in footnote 7 above. For T. S. Eliot, who compared Donne’s sermons unfavourably in this respect to those of his contemporary Lancelot Andrews, Donne’s intense focus on the posthumous fate of the human body was nothing more than a cheap rhetorical trick, designed to seize and keep the attention of his listeners as he attended to the dusty particulars of Scriptural interpretation. John Carey argued that Donne sought to displace his intense personal anxieties about the posthumous scattering and fragmentation of the self onto his auditors (\textit{John Donne, Life Mind, and Art}, p. 212). Drawing on Caroline Walker Bynum’s work, Targoff places Donne’s sermons in the context of much older theological debates about the nature of the relationship between the earthly and resurrected bodies (\textit{John Donne, Body and Soul}, pp. 170-172; see also Caroline Walker Bynum, \textit{The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336} [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995]). For Felicia Wright McDuffie, Donne’s fixation on bodily disintegration serves a pastoral purpose, warning his audience of the consequences of sin while also reminding them of the promise of ultimate redemption: \textit{To Our Bodies Turn We Then: Body As Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne} (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 41-52, 83-96.

\textsuperscript{149} Carey has commented on Donne’s tendency to ‘treat death as a form of life’, even to imagine it as ‘more dynamic than life [...] more flamboyant’, though for him the remarkable vitality of death in Donne’s writings suggests Donne’s desire simply to ‘negate death by removing its deathliness’ (\textit{John Donne: Life Mind, and Art}, p. 188, 189, 205).
vermiculation and incineration, and dispersion in and from the graue, in which ev'ry dead man dyes ouer againe’. Severed from the soul, the body resumes its central activity—dying—pretty much as usual, as if it had a life of its own entirely independent of the soul’s direction.

After a brief excursus discussing some of Donne’s favourite theological conundrums relating to the body’s posthumous dissolution—why did the dead body of Christ not suffer putrefaction prior to its resurrection? will the bodies of those still living on Judgment Day immediately be admitted to heaven, avoiding the necessity of bodily dissolution entirely?—Donne finally turns to a meticulously detailed description of the body’s posthumous fate:

But for vs that dye now and sleepe in the state of the dead, we must al passe this posthume death, this death after death, nay this death after buriall, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrification, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the graue, when these bodies that have bene the children of royall parents, & the parents of royall children, must say with Job, Corruption thou art my father, and to the Worne thou art my mother & my sister. Miserable riddle, when I must bee maried to my mother and my sister, and bee both father and mother to my mother and sister, beget & beare that worme which is all that miserable penury; when my mouth shall be filled with dust, and the worme shall feed, and feed sweetely vpon me [...] ¹⁰⁴

While this passage may in part express Donne’s horror at the ‘prospect of our vermiculated remains being contaminated by the remains of others’, the rhetorical energy of this passage also suggests that Donne relished the alienness of putrefying flesh, its irreducibility to the identities attached to the body in this life. ¹¹² In corruption, as one scholar has commented about this passage, ‘the flesh becom[es] fundamentally transgressive merely by virtue of its corporeality’, and indeed that subversiveness carries over into Donne’s own lingering over the body’s posthumous rebellion against social order: Donne’s reminder that even the monarchical body is not spared the posthumous humiliations of the flesh is, as Targoff points out, a daring one in a sermon delivered at the court of King Charles himself, who had lost his own royal father less than six years previously. ¹¹³ Social hierarchy and even the patriarchal structure of the family fall prey to the undifferentiating process of corruption, dissolution, and vermiculation, and descriptive language, too, seems to fail: Donne’s restless shifting from one way of describing the body’s fragmentation and dispersal to another to another—from dissolution to corruption to putrefaction to vermiculation to incineration to dissolution to dispersion—suggests the inadequacy of any single noun to grasp the reality of a body which has lost any appearance of discrete existence, now

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¹¹³ Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul, p. 165.

subsisting only as an incessant process of transformation. The passage, furthermore, refuses his auditors any distance from this putrefactive non-differentiation: Donne’s profound commitment to the materiality of selfhood is evident here less in any anxiety about the loss of the body’s physical integrity than in his rather horrifying insistence on imagining the putrefactive body as a subject of experience, even of discourse, despite its inchoate mingling with dust and worms. It is ‘we’, ‘I’, not just my body, that becomes pure putrefactive process in this passage. For Donne, embodied selfhood is not easily separable from the mortality and putrescibility of the body. Conversely, the putrefactive body is given a form of consciousness no longer entirely human, no longer entirely that of the self.

Rational identities radically failing to grasp the inchoate state of the posthumous body, Donne invites us instead to imagine the flavour of decay, first, from our own human perspective, in the taste of the dust that will fill our mouths as we lie decomposing underground, and second—as if the mingling of bodies permitted, too, the conjunction of human and nonhuman sensibilities—that of the human body itself as it delectably fills the mouths of worms. Where distinct visual form is absent, the sense of taste, long counted, as I showed in my introduction, among the less discerning, less rational bodily senses, takes the place of sight as the sense best suited to register sensory ind differentiation—indeed, not only to register it, but, once again transgressively, to take pleasure in it.

In a detailed close reading, Kimberly Johnson has argued that this passage’s powerfully repulsive depiction of the dissolution of the flesh forces us to reckon with the body as ‘an irredeemably physical object’:

Donne’s language [...] forces our awareness of what’s being described as an object in itself rather than a sign pointing to some meaning beyond itself [...] And it is this quality of the grotesque body that [...] animates Donne’s enthusiasm for it [...] it persists, it remains interpretively present to the understanding, rather than becoming abstracted away into meaning. The body *in extremis*, in decay, sweetly in the mouths of worms, is obscenely corporeal, resisting symbolic significance, and as such it remains literal, asserting its implacable presence as it refuses symbolic absorption.154

Precisely in its dissolution, the body evinces a paradoxical ‘embodied immortality’ insofar as its visceral, overwhelming sensory presence steadfastly refuses abstraction into a mere sign of human fallenness, for example, or of a future eschatological existence. Retaining Johnson’s perceptive insight into the way Donne’s description of putrefying flesh foregrounds the body’s otherness to a certain kind of abstract signification, I would nonetheless question her insistence upon the absolute literalness of the putrefying body of *Deaths Duell*. Indeed, it is not clear what the ‘literal’ body would even look like, since Donne, it seems to me, has done his best to demolish any sense of the body as an object in itself, of ‘the body’ as a monadic entity. If the passage forces upon us an awareness of the irreducible physicality of decaying matter, it equally refuses, as I suggested in my analysis of the restless language of this passage, to reduce the latter to any descriptive object of our experience. So too does the intriguing textual history of the

word ‘vermiculation’—a word which, although not entirely new to Donne as Targoff claims, was rare enough to be included in Henry Cockeram’s 1623 lexicon An Interpreter of Hard English Words. In the 1660 edition of the sermon, one which, David Colclough hypothesises, may have been based on a different manuscript from that used in the 1632 edition, the word was printed ‘virmiculation’, a variant which recalls the Latin word for ‘man’, *vür*. ‘Virmiculation’ suggests the fundamental ontological ambiguity of the once-human body caught up in the ceaseless revolutions of the grave: the virmiculated body is a body which can be understood in two ways simultaneously, as worm and as man. ‘Posthume’, a word with its own history of lexical metamorphosis, suggests a similar ambiguity. The late Latin *posthumus* is an alteration of the earlier ‘*postumnus*’, ‘last-born’, ‘by a folk-etymological association with either *humus* earth [...] or [...] *humare*, to bury’. In English, ‘humus’ also evokes ‘human’. This ‘posthume death’ is after, post-, something, but what that something is remains ambiguous: inhumation? human? humus, the dust from which man was made and to which he must return? all of them simultaneously? ‘Posthume’ thereby echoes Donne’s incessant modulation of the words he uses to describe the body’s process of disintegration (‘this death after death, nay this death after buriall, this dissolution after dissolution [...]’ and so on).

‘Virmiculation’ and ‘posthume’, then, not only call into question the literalness of the dead body but also revoke retrospectively that of the living body. If *Deaths Duell*, as Johnson suggests, makes the body paradoxically immortal by so viscerally and vividly rendering its physical presence, its immortality—or, to play on Donne’s own formulation of this paradox, its inanimate-ness—consists not in its monadic objecthood but in its always already (post)hum(us/an) multiplicity, a thing always ambiguously in process, both human and worm, both delicious and repulsive, simultaneously.

This sense of the animate multiplicity of decaying matter, its excess over any single form or descriptive category, is evident throughout Donne’s many sermons on the resurrection of the body. The earliest sermon Donne preached on this topic was delivered at Lincoln’s Inn, likely in Easter Term 1620. The text was Job 19:26, ‘And though, after my skin, wormes destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God’. Donne goes to great lengths at the beginning of the sermon to insist that the text does indeed refer to the resurrection of the body, a point which had been disputed by as prominent a Scriptural interpreter as Calvin, who had understood it to refer to God’s promise to restore Job’s earthly wellbeing. That Donne knowingly chose a text which was not universally accepted as a foreshadowing of the Christian promise of the resurrection surely had something to do with the gruesome frankness with which it describes the posthumous fate of the body. Donne is especially fascinated by the distinction Job seems to draw between skin and body. The skin is the body’s ‘outward beauty’, its externally

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recognisable form, signifier of the identity of the person within. It is also, in Donne’s remarkable image, the ‘velim’ or ‘parchmin’ which binds the ‘book of God, the Law, written in our own hearts; [...] the image of God imprinted in our own souls; [...] the character, and seal of God stamped in us, in our baptism’. In putrefaction, however, the skin is so utterly consumed that the skeleton serves as a better indication of a body’s identity than whatever puny fragments of the body’s former binding remain:

thy skin shall come to that absolute corruption, as that, though a hundred years after thou art buried, one may find thy bones, and say, this was a tall man, this was a strong man, yet we shall soon be past saying, upon any relique of thy skinne, This was a fair man; Corruption seises the skinne, all outward beauty quickly [...]"

In fact, in its horrifying corruptibility the skin serves as a better indicator of the posthumous body’s inner reality than does the illusively durable skeleton. If the metaphor of the book imagines the bodily interior as a sheaf of pages upon which God could inscribe His own image and law, the body’s parchment and vellum reveals, upon disintegration, a much less malleable materiality:

*If the whole body were an eye, or an ear, where were the body, says Saint Paul; but, when of the whole body there is neither eye nor ear, nor any member left, where is the body? And what should an eye do there, where there is nothing to be seen but loathsomenesse; or a nose there, where there is nothing to be smelt but putrefaction; or an ear, where in the grave they doe not praise God? [...] Painters have presented to us with some horrour, the skeleton, the frame of the bones of a mans body; but the state of a body, in the dissolution of the grave, no pencil can present to us. Between that excrementall jelly that thy body is made of at first, and that jelly which thy body dissolves to at last; there is not so noysome, so putrid a thing in nature.*

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the invitation to imagine the entire body assuming the form of only one of its parts is meant to remind the reader of the ultimate unity and mutual interdependence of all the members of the mystical body of the Christian church (1 Corinthians 12-31). In Donne’s sermon, however, it becomes an excuse to imagine the complete demolition of the body as a vehicle for metaphor, and, indeed, of any kind of representation whatsoever. In a morbid inversion of the Renaissance paragone, Donne attempts to outstrip the visual arts in representing unrepresentable formlessness itself. Despite Donne’s seeming insistence here and elsewhere in the sermon on the annihilation of the body in the state of putrefaction, however, this passage also foregrounds the persistence of putrefactive flesh: no thing, the body’s putrefactive stuff is nonetheless not nothing; imperceptible as a unified form, it is nonetheless overwhelmingly, viscerally present to the senses, as indescribable loathsomeness, horrifying malodorousness. It is as if the body—its decaying, slimy stuff ordinarily bound up tidily within the body’s outer parchment, ready to be inscribed by God—is made all the more viscerally present as matter when it has lost any recognisable humanness.

Richard Sugg is right to see in Donne’s excremental jelly an image whose ‘mingling of familiarity and strangeness, of form and chaos, was [...] the most disturbing condition of all’—though

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Sugg himself continues to emphasise the ‘formlessness of the dead or decaying body’, which he perceives to be in dialectical opposition to the ‘energetic self-definition of Donne the author’.¹⁶¹ In my chapter on Spenser, we saw how slime and other mucky materialities have long embodied a paradox of form in formlessness, of the animacy of dissolution, in the Western cultural imagination. Both semen and putrefactive mire, Donne’s jelly, too, is an image of both fertility and decay. Indeed, the image transforms the seminal substance of human procreativity itself into something not entirely human, into something both proto- and post-human. No longer the image of God imprinted upon the blank pages of His earthly commonplace book, the human form itself now becomes a product of a wholly material process of generative dissolution.

In the face of this sermon’s powerful evocation of the body as formless and forming process, Donne’s ultimate affirmation of God’s power to reconstitute the individual seems not altogether convincing, despite the striking simile Donne employs to convey the immediacy and comprehensiveness of bodily restitution:

> Shall I imagine a difficulty in my body, because I have lost an Arme in the East, and a leg in the West? because I have left some bloud in the North, and some bones in the South? Doe but remember, with what ease you have sate in the chaire, casting an account, and made a shilling on one hand, a pound on the other, or five shillings below, ten above, because all these lay easily within your reach. Consider how much lesse, all this earth is to him, that sits in heaven, and spans all this world, and reunites in an instant armes, and legs, bloud, and bones, in what corners so ever they be scattered.¹⁶²

Targoff suggests that the bizarre contrast between the quotidian image of a merchant tallying up his earnings and that of the body’s fragments rising up from their various resting places may well have underscored the absolute otherness of divine omnipotence for its original audience.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, I would argue that the image fails to be fully persuasive, not so much because it is drawn from familiar experience but because the particular terms of the simile—the coins—reinstate the illusion of bodily solidity, even of a certain however fragmented bodily integrity, that Donne’s earlier evocation of slimy bodily process utterly demolished. Where earlier Donne’s jellies and odours framed the body as continual, indeterminate process, we are here suddenly presented again with reassuringly recognisable fragments. It is relatively easy to imagine God refashioning the resurrected body from arms, legs, blood, and bones, however scattered they may be. It is more difficult to image him doing so from the ambiguous nothingness of a bad smell. Equally, Donne’s emphasis on the material continuity between earthly and resurrected selfhood, I would argue, actually underscores the differences rather than similarities between the body experienced in this world and that constituting selfhood in the next. ‘Ego, I, I the same body, and the same soul, shall be recompact again, and be identically, numerically, individually the same man. The same integrity of body, and soul, and the same integrity in the Organs,

¹⁶¹ Sugg, Smoke of the Soul, p. 242.
¹⁶³ Targoff, John Donne, Body and Soul, p. 168.
and in the faculties of my soul too', Donne insists. And yet: 'I cannot say, you cannot say so perfectly, so entirely now, as at the Resurrection, Ego, I am here; I, body and soul; I, soul and faculties [...]'. The resurrected body, and soul, attain a perfection, a stability, an integrity entirely alien to it in this life. The persuasiveness of Donne’s insistence upon the absolute continuity between earthly and resurrected selves depends on the assumption that the body—and person—constitute a single self-identical thing which persists despite material change and can simply be reconstituted as such, a notion his sermon as a whole has profoundly called into question.

Indeed, I would argue, Donne is drawn to the putrefactive body’s ambiguously animate jellies, its startlingly sensate worms, even its atomisation and dispersal, precisely because—pace Sugg—they offer images of a kind of formative power which is independent of the totalising artistry of the Divine Creator, which Donne found so alien to his own experience of embodiment. In a sermon preached at Whitehall in early 1623 on Christ’s raising of Lazarus, Donne, yet again pondering the body’s posthumous incarnations, imagines, among the limbs of other prominent members of society rotting in the earth, the brain of a great and religious Counsellor [...] that produced means to becalme gusts at Councell tables, stormes in Parliaments, tempests in popular commotions [...] produce nothing but swarmes of wormes and no Proclamation to disperse them [...]"

On the one hand, we might interpret this passage as an expression of Donne’s horror at the prospect of the very organ of intellect, speech, and writing reduced to undifferentiated earth writhing with worms. On the other hand, we might see this image as expressing a sense of the autonomous fertility of the brain as a material organ, independent of the soul it houses. Even in its very formlessness, in its very non-differentiation and inextricability from a wider material world, the brain is nonetheless productive—though what it produces is, once again, ‘no thing’ but formless, squirming heaps of maggots.

Donne’s sermons, however, do not always articulate a simple opposition between the integrating, reconstituting power of the divine spirit and the abject transformations of putrefying flesh. The last sermon I would like to examine in detail is one Donne preached at the wedding of the daughter of the Earl of Bridgewater in November 1627, a sermon even Potter and Simpson, usually reluctant to acknowledge the grimier depths of Donne’s imagination, describe as ‘morbid’. Donne’s decision to address his favourite topic in gruesome detail at a marriage celebration has often struck critics as injudicious to say the least, and has encouraged them to treat the horrifying description of bodily dissolution Donne offers in this sermon independently of the concerns of the sermon as a whole. To do so, however, is to risk missing the sermon’s abiding concern with physical dissolution as

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168 Targoff, for example, calls Donne’s choice of text ‘almost comically inappropriate’ to the occasion, arguing that it ‘speaks to the depths of his obsession with the subject of our posthumous fate’ (*John Donne, Body and Soul*, p. 167, 168).
a lived experience which profoundly affects interpersonal relationships, such as that of marriage, which we now no longer conceive in quite as physical terms as Donne and his contemporaries would have. Donne’s sermon is unusual among marriage addresses then and now in its honesty about the quotidian difficulties of marriage, the numerous forces, from petty disagreements to wayward desires, which threaten to corrode marriages from within. Near the conclusion to the sermon, Donne uses the language of dissolution to describe these corrosive forces:

[...] no two can be so made one in this world, but that that unity may be, though not Dissolved, no nor Rent, no nor Endangered; yet shaked sometimes by domestique occasions, by Matrimoniall encumbrances, by perversnesse of servants, by impertinencies of Children, by private whisperings, and calumnies of Strangers.  

Although it immediately refers to the break-up of a marriage, the word ‘dissolved’, I would argue, also has more intensely physical connotations in this context than modern readers might assume. Throughout the sermon, Donne repeatedly draws comparisons between the human body and larger social institutions and cosmic structures, the ‘politik body’ of society and the ‘Catholik, [and] universall body’ of the ‘whole world’. Even as the human body needs food to supply it with energy and the repair of its damaged parts, Donne argues, the universal body needs ‘Mariage’ for the ‘sustentation, and reparation of the world’. Indeed, marriage is not merely food, but medicine, a ‘physicke against inordinate affections’. As such, it is a necessary institutional and social defence against the individual’s tendency toward physical and spiritual dispersion:

They that scatter themselves in various lusts, commit wast, and shall undergoe at last, a heavy condemnation upon that Action of wast in their souls, as they shall feel it before in their bodies which they have wasted. They that mary not, do not keep the world in reparation; And the common law, the law of nature, and the generall law of God bindes man in generall to that reparation of the world, to Mariage.

In early modern English common law, ‘waste’ referred to ‘the illegal spoil or destruction of an estate, to the prejudice of the heir or reversioner’. Donne no doubt has in mind the common belief that the ejaculation of semen contributed to the irreversible expenditure of men’s vital energies, a belief he cites elsewhere in his writings. Scattering their seed outside the institutional constraints of marriage, individuals waste themselves in body and in soul, and in doing so endanger the social and natural order itself. Semen, once again, suggests the fertility of bodily disunity and fragmentation, this time in a context which stresses the potential subversiveness of that fertility, its autonomy from the rule of law and virtuous selfhood.

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170 Potter and Simpson, VIII, p. 100.
172 Potter and Simpson, VIII, p. 100.
174 See, for example, ‘The First Anniversarie’, l. 110: ‘We kill ourselves to propagate our kind’.
However inappropriate it might seem to us, then, Donne’s decision to address the topic of the resurrection of the body in a marriage sermon speaks to the sermon’s overall concerns about the relationship between the body’s innate tendency to waste itself and the individual and institutional forces meant to ensure social and even cosmic unity and stability. Donne’s albeit gruesome description of the physical dispersion of the body as it putrefies merely takes to an extreme the broader tension between the dispersive energies of matter and the ‘coherence’ and ‘dependence’, the ‘relation’ and ‘correspondence’, supposedly embodied by microcosm and macrocosm:

Where be all the splinters of that Bone, which a shot hath shivered and scattered in the Ayre? Where be all the Atoms of that flesh, which a Corrasive hath eat away, or a Consumption hath breath’d, and exhal’d away from our arms, and other Limbs? In what wrinkle, in what furrow, in what bowel of the earth, ly all the graines of the ashes of a body burnt a thousand years since? In what corner, in what ventricle of the sea, lies all the jelly of a Body drowned in the general flood? What coherence, what dependence maintains any relation, any correspondence, between that arm that was lost in Europe, and that legge that was lost in Afrique or Asia, scores of yeers between? One humour of our dead body produces worms, and those worms suck and exhaust all other humour, and then all dies, and all dries, and molders into dust, and that dust is blowen into the River, and that puddled water tumbled into the sea, and that ebs and flows in infinite revolutions, and still, still God knows in what Cabinet every seed-Pearle lies, in what part of the world every graine of every mans dust lies; and, sibilat populum suum, (as his Prophet speaks in another case) he whispers, he hisses, he beckens for the bodies of his Saints, and in the twinkling of an eye, that body that was scattered over all the elements, is sate down at the right hand of God, in a glorious resurrection.

As in the Lincoln’s Inn sermon, Donne turns to the dissolution of the corpse because it so powerfully evokes the lived experience of the body not as a unified totality but as an ceaseless, indeterminate, chaotic process of decay: Donne’s image of the consumptive exhaling or perhaps coughing out her very physical substance will, I think, resonate powerfully with anyone who has fallen ill with COVID-19 in the last two years. Rather than mirroring the world, the body indiscriminately mingles with it, mixing the ashes and atoms of its own innards with the very guts of the earth, exuding its jellies—surely Donne is thinking once again of semen—into the belly of the ocean, giving birth to worms from its moist putrefaction. Donne’s cataloguing of the ‘infinite revolutions’ of matter in this sermon is perhaps the most eloquent articulation we have seen yet of the aesthetic polymorphousness of materiality released from the supervenient order of the organic, social, and cosmic bodies: these images transform the experience of pain, of illness, and of sinful wastage—that is, of material dissolution as it is experienced in this life—into one of infinite potentiality, even, I would argue, of eschatological promise. Imbibed by worms, scattered into various waterways, and washed into the wide ocean, the grains of the decaying body finally mutate into tiny jewels hidden in the metamorphic bowels of the sea, from which God, like the indigenous pearl divers Europeans were encountering in their journeys to the New World, will fish them on Judgment Day. Whereas in the Lincoln’s Inn sermon Donne seems unable to reconcile his

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175 Potter and Simpson, VIII, p. 98.
176 Although the genesis of pearls was much debated in this period, with individuals increasingly sceptical of the ancient belief that they were formed from the dew of heaven swallowed by oysters and other molluscs,
vision of the resurrection to his conviction of the comprehensiveness of the body’s posthumous transformation, the marriage sermon manages to render processes of material transformation—suffered by the flesh in death, but also lived by the individual in the continual physical and psychological dissolutions constituting earthly life—integral to the divine reconstitution of the individual. Where in the writings of another preacher of this period, or even at a different moment in Donne’s own homiletic writings, dissolution might serve as a mere sign of or metaphor for human sinfulness, Donne transforms corruptive matter, however ambiguously, into an agent of the resurrection itself. As a rhetorical figure, furthermore, the image of the pearl, both the physical result of the infinite submarine transformations of matter and the tiny jewel God removes from his safe, hovers somewhere between the literal and the metaphorical, between the physical translation of matter and those enacted by figurative language. Donne’s artistry thus delicately positions itself in the paradoxical conjunction between the material and the spiritual, at precisely the point where the corruptions of matter become the riches of rhetoric and poetry.

Donne’s meditations on bodily decay in the sermons, then, embody what might, to borrow a word from Deaths Duell, be called a ‘posthume poetics’, one which is not only fascinated by the nonhuman transformations of human materiality, but which makes matter’s infinite revolutions the basis for its own striking rhetorical conjunctions, for the discordia concors which would so disturb the neoclassical sensibilities of Dr Johnson, a man himself profoundly horrified by his own mortality. Donne’s metaphysical artistry may well have been too intimately tied to the infinite revolutions of matter for the taste of a man born in an era with very different assumptions about the relationship between spirit and materiality, between selfhood and the decaying body.

II. ‘So Insensible a Thing’: Indeterminate Materiality in the Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

Written in a haze of feverish productivity during his recovery from a severe bout of typhoid fever in late 1623, Donne’s Devotions upon Emergent Occasions describes the body’s posthumous disintegration only once, poignantly, in the eighteenth meditation, as Donne hears the tolling of a nearby church bell announcing the death of one of Donne’s neighbours, whose identity remains unknown:

Who would not bee affected, to see a cleere and sweet River in the Morning, grow a kennell of muddy land water by noone; and condemned to the saltnesse of the Sea by night? And how lame a Picture, how faint a representation, is that, of the precipitation of mans body to dissolution? Now all the parts built up, and knit by a lovely soule, now but a statue of clay, and

there was as far as I can tell no awareness of their actual process of formation—from layers of calcium carbonate deposited around irritants such as grains of sand.

now; these limbs melted off, as if that clay were but snow; and now, the whole house is but a handful of sand, so much dust, and but a pecke of Rubbidge, so much bone."

Here we can see Donne again fascinated by the body’s resistance to representation in its ‘precipitation [...] to dissolution’, a phrase which evokes not only the haste of the body’s decay, a continual concern in this work, but also descent and fallenness. Indeed, the Devotions, a series of meditations on the state and spiritual significance of the changes occurring to Donne’s body during each day of his illness, represents Donne’s most sustained engagement with the paradox of the body’s in-animacy. If the sermons find in the body’s posthumous putrefaction a kind of animateness and formal principle independent of representable form and totality, the Devotions discover the same in the lived experience of sickness. I will argue, furthermore, that this paradox is the very condition of the Devotions’ formal possibility. The Devotions continually enacts, in content and in form, a tension between the body’s ‘precipitation to dissolution’ and its desire for the body to be made spiritually and eschatologically legible through Scriptural exegesis and typology, a tension which constitutes the central feature of the experience of reading Donne’s devotional work.

In the tenth meditation of the Devotions, during the so-called ‘critical days’ of Donne’s illness, a period which, according to Galenic medicine, would determine the possibility or otherwise of recovery, Donne ponders the ubiquity of corruption in a fallen universe. ‘This is Natures nest of Boxes’, Donne begins; ‘The Heavens containe the Earth; the Earth, Cities; Cities, Men. And all these are Concentricque; the common center to them all, is decay, ruine.’ Only the eternal heavens, Donne remarks, are exempt from Nature’s energetic drive toward self-annihilation; ‘even Angels, even our soules’, if they were not ‘made immortall by preservation, their Nature could not keepe them from sinking to this center, Annihilation’.\(^\text{179}\) For Donne, the corruptibility of fallen Nature poses an epistemological problem. ‘In all these (the frame of the heavens, the States upon earth, and Men in them),’ he continues, ‘Those are the greatest mischifs, which are least discerned; the most insensible in their wayes come to bee the most sensible in their ends.’\(^\text{180}\) We have no foreknowledge, no advance indication, of the coming of ‘Comets and blazing starres’, whose effects are nonetheless ‘most dangerous’; in states, ‘Twentie rebellious drums make not so dangerous a noise, as a few whisperers, and secret plotters in corners’; and in Donne’s sick body, ‘it is so too’: ‘The pulse, the urine, the sweat, all have sworn to say nothing, to give no Indication of any dangerous sicknesse.’\(^\text{181}\) Disease, sickness, corruption—these are the central features of physical existence, bespeaking the body’s participation in the broader drive toward annihilation characterising sublunar materiality as a whole. And yet in their most potent instantiations they remain ‘insensible’. The physicians ‘find the Disease to steale on


\(^{177}\) Devotions, p. 269.

\(^{178}\) Devotions, p. 269.

\(^{181}\) Devotions, pp. 269-270.
"insensibly" (my emphasis), the Latin verse heading reads. While ‘[m]y forces are not enfeebled, I find no decay in my strength; my provisions are not cut off; I find no abhorring in mine appetite’, Donne reports, extending the metaphor of internal rebellion to the microcosm of his body, his physicians ‘see, that invisibly, and I feel, that insensibly the disease prevails’.

The ‘insensible’ nature of Donne’s illness, which seems so to trouble him in this meditation, might on the one hand be understood simply as an expression of the idea that Donne’s fever had not yet made itself visible in the outward ‘indications’ which, as Stephen Pender has shown, were integral to the ‘semiotics’ of Galenic medicine in this period, allowing physicians to deduce through probable inference the cause, nature, and progress of a disease from its external, visible manifestations. As Pender demonstrates, this ‘medical semiotics’ is integral to the spiritual hermeneutics of sickness Donne offers in the Devotions. The Devotions participates, as Jonathan Goldberg once showed, in a genre of devotional manuals for the sick which encouraged sufferers to understand their illness as tests of the faithful sent by God, intended both as reminders of the reality and consequences of sin and as inducements to spiritual reform. The work is, however, as Pender suggests, extraordinary in this genre in its detailed attention to the particularity of the physiological event, from the appearance of spots on Donne’s body to the consistency of his urine. Throughout the Devotions, even as Donne’s physicians deduce the inward condition of Donne’s illness from the outward physical manifestations of the disease, Donne seeks to read the various stages in the physical progression of his sickness as signs of his spiritual state, in the process consulting Scripture as a source of Biblical types which may illuminate the intention behind God’s various inscriptions upon the body and set Donne’s own experience in the context of the broader arc of eschatological history. The Devotions’ repeated cycles of meditation, expostulation, and devotion track the various stages of this simultaneously interpretive and devotional process: in the largely secular meditations, Donne contemplates his own illness a manifestation of the corruptibility of the fallen universe; in the expostulations, Donne, rifling through a bewildering array of Scriptural passages, beseeches God to reveal the eschatological significance of Donne’s illness; in the more placid prayers, Donne asks God to buttress his faith in God’s care for him, despite Donne’s suffering.

In a strictly medical sense, ‘insensible’ simply suggests that Donne’s disease had not yet produced the semeia endeiktika which could permit both the physicians’ physiological diagnosis, and Donne’s spiritual one. Yet we might also take it in a slightly stronger sense, keeping in mind, as ever, the dual signification of the prefix ‘in-’. Donne’s repeated use of this word in Meditation 10—and elsewhere,

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182 Devotions, p. 269.
183 Devotions, p. 270.
185 Pender, ‘Essaying the Body’, p. 219.
187 Pender, ‘Essaying the Body’, p. 216.
as we shall later see—suggests his fascination with the idea that there might be something in the body, and in matter more widely, that does not directly manifest itself in the body’s external form—not any particular sickness, but the very ‘ decay, ruine’ of matter itself, that is, matter’s very rebellion against form. One is continually struck reading the Devotions by the degree of energy, of vitality, with which Donne invests matter’s ostensible nothingness. This is not the only place Donne insists upon matter’s lack of essence, but elsewhere in his writings, his disquisitions on what in this period would have been a metaphysical platitude can be somewhat dry and scholastic:

> As man had one eternall not beeing before, and would have another after, so for that beeing which he seems to have here now, it is a continuall declination into a not being, because he is in continuall change, and mutation, quae desinit in non esse; as [Plato] saies well; Every change and mutation bends to a not beeing, because in every change, it comes to a not being that which it was before; onely the name of God is I am.188

In the Devotions, though, matter’s nonbeing is anything but a technicality; sickness seems to have invested Donne with a powerful sense of matter’s presence precisely in its very nothingness, its agency in its formlessness, its being, so to speak, in nonbeing and mutability. That presence in nonbeing is expressed by the paradox with which the meditation concludes, that Donne ‘feele[s], that insensibly the disease prevails’. Imperceptible in the body’s outward form, the corruption of Donne’s body is nonetheless insensible, sensible from within.

This sense of the body’s autonomous vitality, a vitality inseparable from the body’s very formlessness, its energetic drive toward ruin and decay, suffuses the Devotions. Donne is fascinated by the way the experience of pain and sickness disorders the normal spatiotemporal boundaries of selfhood. In the first meditation, the onset of Donne’s sickness is imagined as an armed assault on the castle of the body:

> We study Health, and we deliberate upon our meats, and drink, and Ayre, and exercises, and we hew, and we polish every stone that goes to that building; [...] But in a minute a Cannon batters all, overthrowes all, demolishes all[,]189

Donne repeatedly imagines the experience of sickness as destroying one’s sense of spatial distinctness and physical autonomy, using, as Mary Ann Lund has shown, images of liquefaction and scattering, sometimes drawn from alchemy, to convey his experience of illness; in a period in which the physical boundaries of the body were becoming increasingly important in demarcating the boundaries of interiority or selfhood itself, these would have been something more than mere metaphors, expressing a sense of a loss of control over the body’s humoral balance so crucial, as scholarship of the last thirty years has shown, to conceptions of interiority in this period.190 In light of the concerns of the tenth

188 Sermons, VIII, 145.
189 Devotions, p. 232.
190 Mary Ann Lund, ‘Experiencing Pain in John Donne’s Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions’, in Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen and Karl A.E. Enever, eds., The Sense of Suffering: Constructions of Physical Pain in Early Modern Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 323-345. On the importance of control over the influx and efflux of humours in the body to this period’s conception of interiority, see esp. Michael Schoenfeldt, Bodies and
meditation, however, we might also understand Donne’s tendency to imagine the experience of sickness in terms of the destruction of the physical boundary between interior and exterior in epistemological terms: the body’s liquefaction, its dissolution, in disease, of the very boundary between interior and exterior, undermines the very principle of the body’s external legibility, its formal integrity. It discloses in the bodily interior an ‘insensible’ process of corruption and decay which actively demolishes the outwardly perceptible physical boundaries of body.

In the more intense moments of the Devotions, this disordering of discrete selfhood in sickness threatens to undermine Donne’s sense of cosmic order and coherence as well. In the fourth meditation, Donne extensively employs his favourite analogy of the human body as microcosm of the universe only in order to push it to its breaking point: ‘It is too little to call Man a little World; [...] Man consistes of more pieces, more parts than the world; than the world doth, nay then the world is [...] as the whole world hath nothing, to which something in man doth not answere, so hath man many pieces, of which the whole world hath no representation’. The human body is a febrile miasma which defies the principles of order, legibility, and distinction upon which cosmic analogies depend:

And then as the other world produces Serpents, and Vipers, malignant, and venimous creatures, and Wormes, and Caterpillars, that endeavour to devour that world which produces them, and Monsters compiled and complicated of divers parents, and kinds, so this world, our selves, produces all these in us, in producing diseases, and sicknesses, of all those sorts; venimous, and infectious diseases, feeding and consuming diseases, and manifold, and entangled diseases, made up of many several ones. And can the other world name so many venimous, so many consuming, so many monstrous creatures, as we can diseases, of all these kindes?

If the world bears ‘no representation’ of the human body’s infinite multitude of pieces, neither does language: the body’s power to generate new forms of disease through the very putrefaction of its inner depths outstrips the capacity of what Pender calls ‘medical semiotics’ to decipher its plurality of forms. ‘[H]ow much do we lacke of having remedies for every disease, when as yet we have not names for them?’, Donne laments. Pender clarifies that Donne’s ‘manifold, and entangled’ diseases referred to what were known as febres confusae, ‘combined fevers’, fevers which ‘originate in different humors, which are mingled; the humors are held in the same place and they putrefy simultaneously [...] Hence, all the symptoms and signs are mixed together, and it is scarcely possible to tell them apart’. The monstrous fertility of the bodily interior is inseparable from its power to destroy the distinctions upon


*Devotions*, pp. 242-3.


*Devotions*, p. 243.

which representation depends—distinctions between one disease and another, between bodily interior and exterior, between body and universe.

Donne’s reflections on the autonomous vitality of the body’s formlessness reach a height in the twelfth meditation, as Donne’s fever, and the hermeneutic and eschatological anxieties it provokes, intensify. This time, Donne’s anxious probing of the inscrutability of his disease is inspired by the decision of Donne’s physicians, following a fashionable humoral remedy of the 1620s, to apply a dead pigeon to their patient’s feet to draw maleficent vapours away from his head. The treatment calls forth another series of intense reflections on the self-destructiveness of the body, this time centred on the elusive materiality of the vapour. Before quoting the meditation, which I will do at length because of its rhetorical richness, it is worth pausing a moment to consider the centrality of the vapour—a matter which, as Donne’s meditation will make clear, itself hovers ambiguously between the visible and visible realms—to the understanding of both physiological and psychological processes in this period. Referring to any material substance, but especially heated liquids, mixed with air, the vapour was adduced in early modern medical theory to explain a wide range of phenomena in the humoral body. On the one hand, the pneumatic spirits, which formed the very link between body and soul and in doing so made life, movement, and sensation possible, were thought to take the form of a vapour which steamed off the blood. The humours themselves, too, could take vaporous forms, especially when they putrefied upon being prevented from escaping the body; mixing with the pneumatic spirits, they were believed to be able to cause a wide range of physical and physiological phenomena, ranging from fevers to dreams and hallucinations. Melancholy, for example, was thought to be caused by the emission of ‘inward vapours’ from the burning of overheated humours in the spleen or other parts of the digestive tract, causing, as Robert Burton would have it, ‘phantasmes, Chimeraes, noyses, visions’.

Donne’s physicians seem to have ascribed his illness to this process, as Donne reveals over the course of the twelfth meditation. Finally, putrefactive vapours inhaled from the body’s immediate environment were also thought to have an effect on physical and psychological wellbeing, wielding the power not only to alter the body’s humoral balance, causing disease and emotional disorder.

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195 See ‘vapour | vapor, n.’, in OED Online, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 29 March 2022]. Gail Kern Paster briefly addresses the central role played by vapours in early modern medical theory in the context of a broader discussion of what she calls the ‘pneumatic character of premodern life’, which she sees as indicative of the ‘physiological and environmental determinism’ of this period’s psychophysiology (Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004], pp. 66; on vapours, see 236-241). I will argue, however, that Donne discovers a space for individual agency in the aesthetic indeterminacy and consequent interpretative ambiguity of the vapour.

196 ‘Spirit, is a most subtile vapor, which is expressed from the Blood, and the Instruments of the Soule, to perfore his Actions, a common tye or medium, betwixt the Body and the Soule’, as Robert Burton informs us (The Anatomy of Melancholy [London, 1621], 1.1.2.1. Cf. Sugg, Smoke of the Soul, pp. 16-19.

197 Anatomy of Melancholy, 1.3.3.1.

198 Burton recommends the avoidance of ‘bogs, fens, mists, all manner of putrefaction, contagious and filthy noysome smels’ in order to prevent the onset of melancholy (Anatomy of Melancholy, 2.2.3).
The meditation begins, in a fashion typical of the *Devotions*, by reflecting on the irony that the noble frame of the human body could be destroyed by something so miniscule as to be practically invisible; it then shifts its focus to yet another irony, that a substance produced by the body itself might be the cause of the body’s own demise:

What will not kill a man, if a vapor will? how great an Elephant, how small a Mouse destroyes? [...] If this were a violent shaking of the Ayre by Thunder, or by Cannon, in that case the Ayre is condensed above the thicknesses of water, of water baked into Ice, almost petrified, almost made stone, and no wonder that that kills; but that that which is but a vapor, and a vapor not forced, but breathed, should kill, that our Nourse should overlay us, and Ayre, that nourishes us, should destroy us, but that it is a halfe Atheisme to murmur against Nature, who is Gods immediate Commissioner, who would not think himselfe miserable to bee put into the hands of Nature, who does not only set him up for a mark for others to shoote at, but delights her selfe to blow him up like a glasse; till shee see him breake, even with her owne breath? Nay if this infectious vapour were sought for, or travel’d to, as Pliny hunted after the vapor of Aetna and dar’d, and challenged Death in the forme of a vapor to do his worst, and felt the worst, he dyed; or if this vapor were met withall in an ambush, and we surprized with it, out of a long shutt Well, or out of a new opened Myne, who would lament, who would accuse, when we had nothing to accuse, none to lament against, but Fortune, who is lesse than a vapor: But when our selves are the Well, that breathes out this exhalation, the Oven that spits out this fiery smoke, the Myne that spues out this suffocating, and strangling dampe, who can ever after this, aggravate his sorrow, by this Circumstance, That it was his Neighbor, his familiar friend, his brother that destroyed him [...] when we our selves doe it to our selves [...], kill our selves with our owne vapors? Or if these occasions of this selfe-destruction, had any contribution from our owne wils, any assistance from our owne intentions, nay from our owne errors, wee might divide the rebuke, and chide our selves as much as them. [...] But what have I done, either to breed, or to breathe these vapors? They tell me it is my Melancholy; Did I infuse, did I drinke in Melancholy into my selfe? It is my thoughtfulnesse; was I not made to thinke? [...] I have done nothing, wilfully, perversly toward it, yet must suffer in it, die by it. There are too many Examples of men, that haue bin their own executioners, and that haue made hard shift to bee so; some haue alwayes had poyson about them, in a hollow ring vpo[n] their finger, and somein [sic] their Pen that they vsed to write with : some haue beat out their braines at the wal of their prison, and some haue eate the fire out of their chimneys: and one is said to haue come neerer our case then so, to haue strangled himself, though hi[s] hands were bound, by crushing his throat between his knees; But I doe nothing vpon my selfe, and yet am mine owne Executioner;"'

"But", Donne continues, ‘when I haue said, a vapour, if I were asked again, what is a vapour, I could not tell, it is so insensible a thing; so neere nothing is that that reduces vs to nothing." What is this corporeal nothingness? The very indeterminacy of haze allows it to manifest the sensory multiplicity of the whole of creation: whispering like rumour, rumbling like a cannon; as thick as water, as hard as stone; dark as smoke, translucent as glass; damp but fiery; nowhere but everywhere. If this meditation echoes the tenth devotion’s reflections on matter’s self-annihilating energies, it nonetheless seems to reverse this collapse, allowing the near-nothingness of the vapour to expand, like blown glass, to encompass everything, the very fabric of Nature and the universe, in its own indeterminate substance. In

199 *Devotions*, pp. 278-279.
200 *Devotions*, p. 279.
its rapid movement from microcosm to body politic to macrocosm, the *Devotions*, furthermore, formally mimics the rarefaction of the vapour it describes.

Donne may have been drawn to the materiality of the vapour precisely because, in its own imperceptible formlessness, it seems to embody the very nothingness which characterises matter’s immanent propulsion toward decay and ruin in this work, and all the more so because the vapour was thought to be the product of humoral putrefaction. Hovering on the edges of the visible, the imperceptible vapour gestures towards, without determinately revealing, the inner body’s own ‘insensible’ inner processes, processes which we should understand, in the context of the period’s materialist conception of mind, as psychological as well as physiological. The vapour also embodies the body’s tendency to exceed its own formal boundaries. Donne seems uncertain about the genesis of the vapours: ‘what haue I done, either to breed, or to breath these vapors?’ were they produced by his own body? or did he inhale them from his environment? Indeed, the aural similarity between ‘breed’ and ‘breathe’ suggests that breeding and breathing, endogenous generativity and exogenous transgression, may not be entirely separable. The vapour bespeaks a wholly material fertility independent of distinctions between internal and external, human body and environment.

Donne’s startling ruminations on suicide resume a theme he first pursued in *Biathanatos*, in which he argued that self-slaughter was defensible in certain cases, and that, because we cannot have direct access to another’s subjectivity, we should refrain from moral judgement in such cases. In the *Devotions*, self-slaughter is not consciously willed or controlled, a product not of intention but of the rebellious materiality of the body and its will, its mind. That psychophysiological interiority shares, however, the opacity Donne defended in *Biathanatos*. We might say that Donne posits an aerial unconscious: ‘what haue I done, either to breed, or to breath these vapors?’. One is reminded of Spinoza’s formulation, quoted by Deleuze in the essay I discussed at the beginning of this introduction: ‘We do not know what a body can do!’ The cloudiness of humoral corporeality bespeaks the alterity of the body and its psychophysiological processes, their resistance to the desire for epistemological certainty about the relationship between the body’s outward forms and its inner being: ‘if I were asked again, what is a vapour, I could not tell’. And yet the body, in its alterity to consciousness, is autonomously fertile, giving life to pestilent vapours which explode into conscious awareness not in any outwardly perceptible form but in the less differentiated register of intense pain, a pain that, in its affective intensity, the meditation makes us feel, too.

However painful Donne’s confrontation with the body’s insensible nothingness might be, however, the perceptual and ontological indeterminacy of the vapour also, I would argue, permits this passage’s rich association of images, in which the vapour’s very nothingness seems to allow it to evoke any number of phenomena, physiological, meteorological, even, in a more earthly register, and beyond any microcosmic likenesses, once invoking the artisanal world of modern London; indeed, the very

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denial of relation between material phenomena in this passage seems to permit their relation: Donne did not, like Pliny, go out hunting for the vapours of Mount Etna; on the other hand, his body is that very volcano. Matter’s ‘declination into a not being’, as Donne put it in the sermon I quoted earlier, seems to permit the catastrophistic figuration so integral to Donne’s style.

The perceptual indeterminacy of the vapour makes possible, too, Donne’s remarkable hermeneutic manoeuvring in the following expostulation, where Donne turns from the book of the body to the books of Scripture in order to discern the eschatological significance of his vapours. Although he borrows almost verbatim from the King James Bible, Donne takes the liberty of translating every nebulosity recorded in Scripture into the single capacious term ‘vapour’: mist, cloud, dew, the smoke of incense, breath, and, finally, the Holy Spirit. The expostulation initially expresses frustration at the impossibility of finding unity among these divergent uses. In Genesis, the vapour, watering the newly created earth, signifies God’s fertility; in the Books of Wisdom, Joel, Apocalypse, and others, smoke denotes punishment: ‘Thou has made vapor so indifferent a thing’, he tells God despairingly, ‘as that thy Blessings, and thy Judgements are equally expressed by it, and is made by thee the Hierogliphique of both. Why should not that bee alwaies good, by which thou hast declared thy plentifull goodnes to us?’.

Finally, the vapour denotes human sin and blindness: ‘what is sinne, but a vapor; but a smoke; [...] such a smoke, as takes away our sight, and disables vs from seeing our danger[?]’. The expansive vapour is the lexical vehicle for the simultaneously material and semantic fertility of God’s Word; but vapour also veils God’s meaning from human understanding. What, then, is the spiritual significance of Donne’s vaporous malady: is the vapour God’s punishment? or a test that offers the opportunity for redemption and ultimately divine blessing? or is the vapour sin itself, which obfuscates the true meaning of God’s creation? If the latter, then Donne is damned indeed, condemned, by the very medium of God’s blessing, to find legible in the general haze, of Scripture, of his body, of his world, only his own error and spiritual recalcitrance.

Donne’s troubled questioning, however, precedes an extraordinary hermeneutic arabesque by which he transforms the clouds of sin into the very substance of bodily and spiritual remedy. Vapours prompt him to think of breath, and breath the breath of the Holy Spirit. And, in the baptism of Christ, the Holy Spirit took the form of a dove, a more elegant iteration of the dead pigeon used in Donne’s peculiar humoral treatment. ‘Therefore hast thou bin pleased’, he tells God, ‘to afford us this remedy in Nature, by this application of a Dove, to our lower parts, to make these vapors in our bodies, to descend, and to make that a type to us, that by the visitation of thy Spirit, the vapors of sin shall descend, and we tread them under our feet’.

In the crucible of exegesis, the haze of body, mind, and Scripture has, miraculously, produced both Donne’s disease and its remedy.

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202 Devotions, p. 280.
203 Devotions, p. 280-1.
204 Devotions, p. 281.
While the indeterminacy of the vapour initially provokes hermeneutic anxiety, then, it ultimately enables Donne to perceive the semiotic multiplicity of God’s inscription of the universe; the vapour’s formlessness is inseparable from its polysemousness. As Judith Anderson has pointed out in her elegant reading of this passage, Donne’s expostulation effects a movement from the physical, and relatively literal, register of the meditation to a more explicitly metaphorical register, in which the vapour is understood ‘less as natural, physical or political phenomenon than as an enigmatic symbol [...] linking the physical and spiritual realms’. Donne’s ‘emphasis [is] now [...] distinctively more verbal’, she writes, with the vapour now acting as a ‘symbolic verbal sign, effect[ing] a dynamic exchange, a traffic, between heaven and earth’. Even as Donne moves into this figural register, I would argue that the physical qualities of the vapour which so fascinate the meditation—its formless indeterminacy, its associations with corruption and physical process, its capacity to assume so many different forms, inside the body and out—-are not entirely left behind. Not only does the expostulation continue to foreground the actual putrefactive vapours of Donne’s body even as it searches Scripture for types which can render them meaningful, but it also, I suggest, internalises the corruptive mutability that the vapour represented in the earlier meditation. The disorientingly rapid movement between scriptural passages evident in Expostulation 12 is characteristic of Donne’s expostulations more broadly. ‘Unlike his use of scripture in the sermons,’ Pender comments, ‘in the Devotions biblical passages, scriptural echoes, and citations are subordinated to [Donne’s] personal cogitations, legitimising rather than defining his intellection’. Taken completely out of context, Donne’s biblical citations are submitted to the particularities of Donne’s own sickness, of the experience of his body in all its disorder and painfulness; it is as if Donne integrates Scripture into the vapid transmutations of his own body, allowing scripture itself to assume new meaning when dissolved, disordered, and transformed by the exigencies of the bodily moment. God’s inscription upon the universe, and on Donne’s sick body, may employ Donne’s vapours as mere vehicles for divine significiation, a transcendent, unified order of meaning, but the figural transformations of Donne’s art depend more intimately on the physical corruptions and, inseparably, productions of his own diseased body.

‘So indifferent a thing’, Donne calls the vapour. The OED defines indifferent as ‘Of a word: Of neutral signification or application; hence, Equivocal, ambiguous’. It may also evoke the Reformation concept of adiaphora, interpretive questions not essential for salvation. Equally, though, it recalls Deleuze’s ‘zone of indifferentiation’, which I described briefly in my introduction. In his late literary critical writings, Deleuze describes affect as a ‘zone of indifferentiation’ where two or more heterogeneous phenomena enter into a ‘becoming’:

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206 Pender, ‘Essaying the Body’, p. 223.

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To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.²⁰⁸

For Deleuze, attaining the zone of indifferentiation is not something one can simply will; rather, it is achieved only through the perceptual and phenomenological disorientations of art and, especially, of writing. ‘Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience. It is a process, that is, a passage of Life that traverses both the livable and the lived’.²⁰⁹ The ‘Affects’ or ‘spiritual entities’ of T. E. Lawrence’s The Seven Pillars, emanating from the molecular sludge of the abject body, and reworked in the crucible of Lawrence’s ethereal descriptive style, are such ‘zones of indifferentiation’, Ideas which are not abstractions but novel compositions created by the dissolution of the illusion of the body as unified, totalised form.

In one of his final devotions, as his physicians detect signs of recovery in the cloudiness of his urine, Donne, becalmed but still anxiously meditating on the impossibility of true spiritual recovery in this life, again returns to the imagery of the nebulous. In the expostulation, Donne, who has deployed a nautical metaphor throughout the devotion to convey the journey of his sickness, once more expresses frustration with the indeterminacy of material signs, urinary and otherwise: ‘But, O my God, my God, [...] why are we yet no nearer land? [...] Every thing is immediately done, which is done when thou wouldst have it done [...] Shall that slacken my hope? [...] what is my assurance now? What is my seal? It is but a cloud; that which my Physicians call a cloud, is that, which gives them their Indication’.²¹⁰

Healing takes time, and how can one know that deferral does indeed promise restoration and not final condemnation?

Certain knowledge is impossible, for the clouds of sin and the clouds of God’s semantic fertility veil divine intention. But while one cannot know, one can read, and interpret. ‘But a Cloud?’ Donne queries. ‘Thy great Seal to all the world, the rain-bow, that secured the world for ever, from drowning, was but a reflexion upon a cloud.’²¹¹ The vapours of sin impede epistemic certainty; but that very uncertainty itself—the hallucinatory perception of the haze—permits a hermeneutic play in which the possibility for repentance and reform is created, not inherent. The many colours of eschatological futurity are emitted only when the light of the particular, material self shines upon, and is refracted by, the intractable cloudiness of Scripture.

Maria Devlin has recently argued that, in contrast to the assumption, in Calvinist theology of the period, that the saved will be aware of their ultimate salvation in this life, the rhetorical form of early

²¹⁰ Devotions, p. 312.
²¹¹ Devotions, p. 312.
modern English sermons insisted on the epistemological indeterminacy of the eschatological fate of their auditors. Impelled by the pastoral concerns peculiar to homiletic address, the rhetorical practice, though not the systematic theological doctrine, of early modern sermons encouraged the English faithful to consider each moment of a life, regardless of any past history of sin, indispensable to a person’s final salvation. ‘Systematic theology’, she writes, ‘treats the logical relations between propositions without positing any particular speaker, audience, or occasion.’ Rhetorical theology, however, ‘is always situated between teacher and believer and is governed by its purpose [...] In systematic theology, the narrative of despair assumes a debilitating determinism. Rhetorical theology, by contrast, implies a spiritual drama that re-opens a place for temporality, indeterminacy, and human agency’. 

The Devotions, too, opens a space for agency through an emphasis on epistemological uncertainty and interpretive ambiguity. In this devotional work, however, Donne’s rhetorical transfigurations are also mapped onto the transformations and indeterminacies of the putrefactive yet fertile body, which Donne so intently scrutinises for its eschatological significance. Matter’s corruption and formlessness, its obscuring of God’s writing in the natural world, also ensures its amenability to Donne’s creative hermeneutics. In this sense, Donne’s meditation on the vapour can be understood as a response to the determinism not only of Calvinist theology, but also of certain aspects of early modern psychophysiology. If, as Gail Kern Paster argues, the ‘pneumatic character of early modern life’ entails that ‘substance embodies significance; the humors are imbued with moral density and spiritual import’, Donne reminds himself, and his readers, that what that spiritual import might be remains, in the polymorphous nothingness of the vapour, ‘indifferent’.

III. ‘Perplex’d Discomposition’: Form and Formlessness in the Devotions

It is not only in the expostulations that the Devotions comes to embody the formless, ‘insensible’ process that so fascinates it. The experience of reading the Devotions as a whole is, indeed, very much like inhabiting a diseased, decaying, febrile body. The Devotions is an intensely affecting work, not least in the twelfth meditation, where the incessant piling up of imagery and Donne’s seemingly interminable sentences seem to effect precisely the suffocation it describes, as if Donne’s words were themselves nebulous vapours emanating from the page. And its unstable rhetorical and affective power does not always sit easily within the outward structure of the work as a whole. As Kate Gartner Frost argued, the Devotions conforms to a genre of spiritual autobiography, modelled on

213 Paster, Humoring the Body, p. 9, p. 6.
214 In this sense, the Devotions achieves the opposite of what Michael Schoenfeldt has described as the ‘aesthetic effects of literary and artistic representation’ in an era prior to modern analgesics (Schoenfeldt, Michael, ‘Aesthetics and Anesthetics: The Art of Pain Management in Early Modern England’, in van Dijkhuizen and Enenkel, eds, The Sense of Suffering, pp. 19-38 (p. 33).
Augustine’s *Confessions*, which seeks to render the particular events of an individual’s life legible as signs of Christian eschatological history, mirroring the individual life on humanity’s broader trajectory from fall through abjection to redemption. Appropriately entitled ‘*stationes*’, from the Latin *statio*, ‘a standing, standing still’, the Latin verse headings of the *Devotions* broadly trace this narrative arc from spiritual sickness to health—if not quite to the moment of redemption—precisely seeking to still the ‘perplex’d disposition’ of sickness and transform it into a coherent progression of ‘steps’ or stages rendered in an atemporal dead language. In its repeated cycles of affective descent in the meditations and ascent in the expostulations and prayers, of ‘emergent’ (Latin *emergo*, ‘to arise’) ‘occasions’ (Latin *occasio*, literally ‘a falling’, though also ‘opportunity, a fit time’), however, the rhetorical rhythms and energies of the *Devotions* continually come into conflict with this teleology. In a recent article, Jessica Tabak has emphasised how the ‘disordered textual body’ of the *Devotions* continually undermines the medical and eschatological narrative traced by the work as a whole, from sickness to health and from sin to repentance and renewal. Even at the end of the *Devotions*, when Donne’s physicians express hope in his recovery, Donne remains mired in affective uncertainty, and his text in images of formless (though still ambiguously fertile) materiality: soils where ‘every stone, beares weeds’, ‘slimie sands’, marshes, ‘perfume[d] dung’. Though Tabak sees the ‘disordered textual body’ of the *Devotions* primarily as deforming—contorting the cohesive experience of time and selfhood, infusing it with uncertainty and anxiety—its affective deformations, I would suggest, are also inseparable from the autonomous generativity which, I have argued in this chapter, is so integral to Donne’s conception of matter and the body. Indeed, the very affective descents of the meditations can also be seen, and inseparably so, as the spontaneous emergence, the rising up, of the body’s alien formlessness, its indifferent molecular sludge. This is perhaps most evident in the famous beginning of the first meditation, where, following the ‘stationes’ and stasis of the prefatory material, we are suddenly presented with an explosion of corporeality:

Variable, and therefore miserable condition of Man; this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute. I am surpriz’d with a sodaine change, and alteration to worse, and can impute it to no cause, nor call it by any name."

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219 *Devotions*, p. 323, 324, 325.
220 “‘O Multiplied Misery!’”, p. 179.
221 *Devotions*, p. 232.
Like the disease itself, the first devotion inexplicably emerges—or does it fall?—out of nowhere; we are
given no context, no awareness of the speaker’s prior history, merely presented with the suffocating
immediacy of the devotion’s present tense. To read the *Devotions* is to experience these affective
explosions, like sudden vaporous eruptions from a subterranean volcanic flow, over and over again, all
the way up to its very last meditations, where the immediate bodily moment has lost none of its urgency.
And Donne’s text derives most of its rhetorical energies from this in-sensible corporeal and affective
flux, however much the text as a whole may seek to transcend them into the atemporal order of the
verse headings and, ultimately, of eschatological typology. ‘What’s pain to the poetry of John Donne—
punishment or poetics, salve or salvation?' Joseph Campana has recently quipped.222 In the *Devotions, I*
would argue, pain inhabits the ambiguity of the in-animate and in-animating body, infusing experience
and text alike with a spirit all its own.

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Chapter Three
‘Living Corruptions’: Thomas Browne’s Equivocal Materiality

Tucked away in the notebooks of the seventeenth-century physician, essayist, and naturalist Thomas Browne, among a characteristically diverse array of observations on topics ranging from the history of castration in antiquity to the effects of administering opium to various avian species, lies a brief note about *garum*, a fermented fish sauce popular among the ancient Romans:

High esteeme was made of *Garum* by the ancients & was used in sawces, puddings, &c. If simply made with Aromatic mixture, as is delivered, it cannot butt have an ungratefull smell, however a *haut goust & appetisant tange*, for it was the liquore or the resolution of the gutts of fishes, salt & insolated.\(^{223}\)

That a condiment made from the putrefying inwards of fish—‘resolution’ in this period being a synonym for decomposition—might have been one of the most highly valued commodities of the ancient Roman world must have delighted Browne’s prodigious sense of paradox. Ever keenly aware of the descriptive limitations of quotidian English vocabulary, Browne reaches for two French, or French-inflected, phrases to describe the sensory enigma of delicious yet malodorous decay. The first, ‘*haut goust*’, was first imported into English in a 1653 translation of a contemporary French cookbook, where, remaining untranslated and italicised, it was used several times to signify a strong taste or seasoning.\(^{224}\) By 1680, still within Browne’s lifetime, the word had begun to acquire its contemporary association with the slight whiff of decay given to meats in particular to enhance their complexity. The second, ‘*Appetisant tange*’, is more obscure. ‘*Tange*’, which is not a French word, is perhaps best read as an approximation of the English ‘tang’ or ‘tange’, ‘a penetrating taste or flavour’, as the OED informs us, often associated with a ‘disagreeable or alien taste from contact with something else’.\(^{225}\) The word originally comes from the early Scandinavian word for a sharp point, such as that of a knife, though by the early modern period it had, because of its similarity with the Latin *tangere*, become associated with the sense of touch, its intimacies as well as its dangers.\(^{226}\)

Prickly but pleasant, smelly but somehow tasty, these delectably rotten fish guts embody an aesthetic paradox which recurs repeatedly in Browne’s writings, one which this chapter will call the putrefactive sublime. From his early essay *Religio Medici*, where he imagines his rotting corpse providing a wholesome meal for worms, to his encyclopaedia *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, where he

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\(^{224}\) François Pierre de Varenne, The French Cook, trans. by I. D. G. (London, 1653). Because Browne did not date his commonplace books, it is unclear whether his reference to *haut goust* precedes or follows this usage.


contemplates the flower-scented, semi-solid oils leaching from the putrefying carcass of a whale recently beached on the coast of Norfolk, to his treatise *Hydriotaphia, or, Urne-Buriall*, where he describes in chilling detail the various kinds of corruption suffered by the inhumed corpse, Browne’s works evince a pervasive fascination with processes of decay and dissolution. As this chapter will demonstrate, Browne shared this preoccupation with many of the period’s naturalists and early scientists: writers as diverse as Francis Bacon, Margaret Cavendish, and Robert Boyle all addressed the question of how and why bodies decay, seeking to explain in empirical terms those processes by which the external forms of bodies dissolved into dusty, slimy, putrid indistinction. This troubled fascination with processes of decay in early science, I will argue, should be seen as closely related to its central aim, described by numerous scholars in recent years, of developing a comprehensive taxonomical order with which to describe and analyse the polymorphous forms of the natural world: being the very process by which things lose the forms upon which classification is based, putrefaction embodies things’ seeming resistance to, even their active divergence from, taxonomical abstraction.\footnote{Michel Foucault’s work was seminal in suggesting the centrality of taxonomy to early modern and Enlightenment epistemology; see *The Order of Things* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2001). On taxonomy in early modern natural history, see especially Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).} Browne’s writings, as Claire Preston has shown, were intimately engaged with the classificatory project of early modern science.\footnote{Claire Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).} And yet, I will argue, the same taxonomical and epistemological difficulties which so troubled Browne’s contemporaries about putrefactive matter held, for Browne, a certain aesthetic thrill, one which surfaces when, as he does several times in his notebooks and elsewhere, he ponders the paradox of delectable or odoriferous dissolution.\footnote{In an excellent recent article, Jessica Wolfe has identified a tension in Browne’s scientific writings between his Baconian desire for taxonomy and his ‘peculiar interest in substances that resist taxonomic classification’, like minerals, which seemed to Renaissance natural philosophers to bear characteristics of both animate beings and inanimate matter. Her emphasis, however, differs from mine insofar she sees Browne as interested in specific classes of things which resist taxonomy, whereas I suggest that Browne is interested in matter’s capacity to elude classification altogether. See Jessica Lynne Wolfe, ‘Gorgonick Spirits: Myth, Figuration, and Mineral Vivency in the Writings of Thomas Browne’, in *Organic Supplements: Bodies and Things of the Natural World, 1580-1790*, ed. by Miriam Jacobson and Julie Park (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), pp. 103-27 (p. 112). Separately, Wolfe has also studied Browne’s interest in various processes of natural metamorphosis, including generation and decay, in the context of his commitment to the idea of the perdurance of form, the persistence of form through material change. This chapter does not intend to deny that commitment, but rather to suggest that Browne’s *aesthetics* may express an ontology that unsettles his explicitly avowed metaphysics. “Men are Lived Over Againe”: The Transmigrations of Sir Thomas Browne’, *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 83 (2020), 61-93.} Building on recent scholarship tracing the premodern history of the sublime, especially in its relationship to the emergence of sceptical thought in the Renaissance, this chapter will consider Browne’s interest in processes of dissolution in light of the paradoxical pleasures of that most privileged of modern aesthetic categories, even while, I will suggest, Browne’s writings complicate some of the foundational premises of the sublime as it has been understood in modernity. My discussion will focus primarily on Browne’s *Hydriotaphia*, where he most explicitly engages with empirical discourses about...
processes of dissolution, though in the latter half of the chapter I will suggest that the aesthetic thrill of the putrefactive sublime haunts Browne’s earlier encyclopaedia, too, where it troubles Browne’s profoundly theological hermeneutics of nature as well as its ostensible commitment to the Baconian agenda. Throughout, I will also be concerned with the ways in which Browne’s style and language might embody the sublimity it describes: to what extent might Browne’s own writing discover new formal possibilities in the very dissolution of taxonomic structure and descriptive language?

In my introduction, I discussed the French philosopher Georges Bataille’s concept of *l’Informé*, the formless or base materiality which ‘declassifies’, disrupting abstract taxonomical systems, in particular those of scientific materialism. I argued that declassification, for Bataille, intimates the paradox of a form immanent in formlessness, inseparable from material process itself. Writing at the very beginning of the scientific revolution whose premises Bataille critiqued, Browne, too, this chapter suggests, will be fascinated by the immanent forms of formlessness, the serpents, incrassated gellies, and flosculous oils generated by matter as it decays. Browne’s meditation upon the delicious indeterminacy of *garum*, described above, suggests just this paradox. In the seventeenth century, ‘resolution’ did not only signify ‘dissolution’; it could also mean ‘an answer, an explanation’, a usage Browne famously employs in *Religio Medici*:230

> I can answer all the objections of Satan, and my rebellious reason, with that odde resolution I learned of Tertullian, *certum est quia impossibile est.*231

Used in this way, a resolution explains by refusing to explain, lingering in indeterminacy and paradox; it is an answer that retains within it the very question it is supposed to resolve. ‘Resolution’, then, suggests something other than either definitive conclusion or epistemological aporia, something other than either form or formlessness. For Browne, the indeterminacy of decaying fish guts may, perhaps, elude abstract classification. Evading rational certainty, however, resolution nonetheless makes itself available to a different, sensory, kind of knowledge, one which makes room for paradox and indeterminacy.

I. ‘A Meere Confusion, and Unformed Mixture of the Part: The Problem of Putrefaction in Early Science

*Putrefaction*, which we conceiue to be so *Naturall a Period of Bodies*, is but an *Accident*: [...] *Matter* maketh not that Haste to *Corruption*, that is conceiued [...] If you prouide against three *Causes of Putrefaction*, *Bodies* will not corrupt.232

Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, section 771

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232 Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum: or A Naturall Historie in Ten Centuries* (London, 1626), fol. 2C3r.
The question of how, and why, bodies decay was a live and pressing one in early science. ‘The Enduing and Accelerating of Putrefaction,’ Sir Francis Bacon wrote in his posthumously published natural history *Sylva Sylvarum,*

is a Subject of a very Vniuersall Enquiry: For Corruption is a Reciprocall to Generation: And they Two, are as Natures two Termes or Boundaries [sic]; And the Guides to Life and Death.233

The study of processes of corruption in bodies animate and inanimate was, in fact, absolutely central to the new empirical science as Bacon envisioned it in his *Instauratio Magna.* Bacon himself included a natural history of processes of ageing and decay in a list of six he planned to author as paradigms of the kind of experimental and observational work he thought should form the foundation of scientific knowledge. By the time he passed away—allegedly from a chill he caught while conducting an experiment into the use of snow as a means of preventing putrefaction in chicken flesh—the *Historia Vitæ et Mortis* formed one of only two Bacon had managed to write and publish, having been promoted from sixth to second place on account of the urgency of the topic under scrutiny.234 The importance of the study of such processes to Bacon lay, as Graham Rees has argued, in his belief that they held the key to the prolongation of human life. In contrast to the medieval vital moisture theory, which attributed ageing and death in living bodies to the gradual wasting of the body’s innate vital humours, Bacon believed that such processes were in part caused by the same factors that spurred the dissolution of inanimate objects; the aim of extending human life, then, required study of the human body first and foremost as an inanimate object, subject to the same processes of putrefaction and decay as all material substances. Rees writes that Bacon’s ambitions in his studies of putrefaction and decay epitomize[...] the aims of Bacon’s programme as a whole. Certain that he lived in an age ordained by Providence for the advancement of knowledge, he believed that philosophy should improve [the] material conditions of the human race, and so in part restore prelapsarian felicity. He marked out the prolongation of life as the first and highest objective of the new philosophy. Realization of that ancient dream would fulfil a programme proposing a material soteriology for this world.235

As early as the 1610s, Bacon was already at work on a speculative treatise entitled *An Inquiry concerning the Ways of Death, the postponing of Old Age, and the Restoring of the Vital Powers,* in which he attributes processes of decay and dissolution to the disturbance of bodies’ inanimate pneumatic spirits, which, seeking to escape into the surrounding air, aggressively attack their ‘gross matter’, resulting, in various cases, in the arefaction, liquefaction, and, sometimes, vermiculation of the body’s form. Bacon would incorporate many of these insights into his later *Historia Vitæ,* as well as his posthumously published experimental history *Sylva Sylvarum.* In these later histories Bacon also

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233 *Sylva Sylvarum,* fol. M3v.
includes numerous experiments and observations relating to processes of dissolution in bodies: observations about the relative corruptibility or incorruptibility of various substances (metals, stones, plants and woods, animal bones and skins, glass, bricks, cooked and uncooked food, gums, wax, honey); and experiments relating to the effects of various environmental conditions on processes of decay, and to various means of preventing putrefaction in bodies: refrigeration, preservation in oil or syrup, excluding air from the body or exposing it to air, motion and stasis, incubation, salting, smoking, embalming, and so on.

The aim of prolonging human life was not, I would argue, the only reason Bacon was interested in putrefaction. Bacon’s studies of dissolution also contribute to a larger discourse in the early seventeenth century about the physical and epistemological consequences of the Fall, a discourse which has been seen as central to the crystallisation of the aims of Baconian empirical science during this period. In the 1610s, as Bacon was beginning his studies of bodily decay, Bishop Godfrey Goodman published a popular treatise arguing that the Fall had irreparably impaired both the natural order and human epistemological capacities, rendering efforts to know and restore order to the natural world not only fruitless but also sinful. Throughout the treatise, Goodman uses vivid images of physical putrefaction and decay to demonstrate the pervasive physical, moral, and social corruption and disorder which ensued from the first temptation:

For those mixt imperfect creatures (the worms, and the flies, which seeme to excell all others, in the variety, and excellencie of glittering colours, *generantur ex putri*, they are ingendred of corruption [...] worse then corruption it selfe, being indeed the fruites of corruption [...] If nature were sound and entire, [...] shee would not busie her selfe, to beget such base and contemptible wormes [...].

for euery thing containeth in it selfe the inbred seedes of corruption, and the more perfect the creature is, the more apt for corruption [...] The finest wooll soonest breedes the moth; the most delicious fruite is aptest to perish; the fairest beautie hastens to wither; the strongest oake is most annoyed with the Iuie. [...] Behold nature discouers her selfe, and shewes the impostume to have first bred in that radicall humour, which is the foundation of nature [...].

Demonstrating that putrefaction was not ‘inbred’ but only, as Bacon once put it, ‘but an Accident’ of matter was indispensable to his argument that the effects of the Fall were not irreversible, and that rational order could be discovered in and restored to the natural world, with diligent effort on the part of the scientific community Bacon hoped to bring into being.

The contrast Goodman presents between the glittering appearances of things and the ‘inbred seedes of corruption’ invokes an epistemological problem which haunts scientific writings on processes of dissolution in this period, and Bacon’s in particular. For these writings repeatedly imagine corruption

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238 *The Fall of Man*, fol. C4v.
as something internal to things in quite a literal sense, an invisible process emerging from deep within the bodily interior in order to undermine and destroy their external forms. ‘All Putrefactions come chiefly from the Inward Spirits of the Body’, Bacon writes in the *Sylva*, whose agitation is often imagined in Bacon’s texts as a literal rebellion of the inward parts against the ‘Government’ of external form:“

> If the *Spirits* be not merely Detained, but Protrude a little, and that Motion be Confused, and Inordinate, there followeth *Putrefaction;* Which euer dissolueth the Consistence of the Body into much Inequality: As in *Flesh, Rotten Fruits, Shining Wood,* &c. And also in the *Rust of Metals.*

The Fifth [means of inducing putrefaction] is, either by the *Exhaling,* or by the *Driving back of the Principal Spirits,* which preserve the Consistence of the *Body;* So that when their Government is Dissolued, every *Part* returneth to his Nature, or Homogeneity. And this appeareth in *Vrune,* and *Blood,* when they coole, and thereby breake; It appeareth also in the *Gangrene,* or *Mortification of Flesh,* either by *Opiates,* or by *Intense Cold.* I conceive also the same Effect is in *Pestilences,* for that the *Malignity of the Infecting Vapour,* daunceth the *Principal Spirits,* and maketh them fly, and leaue their *Regiment;* And then the *Humours, Flesh,* and *Secondary Spirits,* doe dissolve, and breake, as in an *Anarchy.*

Being a ‘meere Confusion, and Unformed Mixture of the Part’, as Bacon describes them in the *Sylva,* processes of decay evince bodies’ invisible tendency toward disorder, heterogeneity, and formlessness, a tendency barely held in check even in living bodies, whose vital spirits endowed them with greater capacity for internal self-organisation. Insofar as the new science as Bacon imagined it set itself the task of analysing, describing, and ordering the empirical world of ‘things-in-themselves’, providing a physics which could account for this inmanent rebellion of bodies against their own monadic thingliness—and which would finally subordinate ‘inbred’ corruption to external, rational form—would be indispensable to the new scientific enterprise. Indeed, mastery over things’ inner corruptibility is marked out as a central aim of empirical science as early as Bacon’s 1605 *Advancement of Learning*, where he complains that the new discipline of anatomy, having exquisitely detailed the body’s ‘parts, [...] substances, figures, and collocations’, had not done enough to scrutinise the processes that threatened to destroy those ‘inward parts’:

> And as for the footesteps of diseases, & their deuastations of the inward parts, impostumations, exucerations, discontinuations, putrefactions, consumptions, contractions, extensions, convulsions, dislocations, obstructions, repletions, together with all preternatural substances, as stones, carmosities, excrescences, worms, and the like: they ought to haue beene exactly observed by multitude of Anatomies [...] whereas now vpon opening of bodies, they are passed ouer sleightly and in silence.”

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“*Sylva Sylvarum*, fol. F1v.

“*Sylva Sylvarum*, fol. M4r.

“*Sylva Sylvarum*, fol. M4r.

“*Sylva Sylvarum*, fol. 2F1r.

The forms and figures of the body, Bacon supposes, have provided the primary target of anatomical enquiry because they are common to all bodies, and therefore easily demonstrable in ‘one or a few anatomies’, whereas diseases and their causes vary from body to body, requiring a ‘comparative and causal’ enquiry among numerous bodies. Stones, carnosities, excrescences, wormes, and the like: taxonomy itself seems to struggle to stem this explosion of bodily particularity, which calls into question the very validity of static forms and structures as the predominant matrix through which to analyse the empirical world.

Although the decay of nature thesis lost its influence over the course of the seventeenth century, interest in processes of dissolution remained strong in the scientific community much later in the century. In his 1663 volume of essays Some Considerations Touching the Vsefvlesse of Experimental Naturall Philosophy, Robert Boyle, noting the difficulties faced by anatomists trying to perform dissections on bodies rapidly descending into putrefactive indistinction, includes a set of observations remarkably similar to Bacon’s enquiries in Historia Vitæ and the Sylva half a century earlier:

Of the preservation of an Embryo divers Years by Embalming it with Oyl of Spike.

Instances of men in the American Mountains kill’d, and afterward preserv’d from putrefaction only by the Wind.

Of the use of Spirit of Wine for the preservation of Bodies from putrefaction.

For Boyle, too, the preservation of bodies against corruption was a matter of protecting external, visible form against the invisible depredations of the internal: the most reliable way to preserve the ‘external Idea’ of organic bodies (at least of those ‘more bulky Bodies’, such as ‘Fishes, Crocodiles, Birds, and even Horses’, which cannot be desiccated or preserved in amber), Boyle comments, is simply to remove their ‘corruptible parts’ altogether and stuff them—though, of course, this technique has the distinct disadvantage of removing all those parts of the body of greatest interest to the anatomist. This desire to preserve bodies against the natural cycles of change and decay, of which the embalmed embryo is a stellar example, can be seen as a literalisation of the reifying tendencies of empirical epistemologies: processes of embalming and preserving quite literally render the body a static, inanimate object of observation. Processes of putrefaction, meanwhile, suggest the troubling withdrawal of the body from external, objective knowing, a growing discrepancy between outward form and the invisible, and disturbingly changeable, inner natures of things.

244 Advancement of Learning, p. 211.
Margaret Cavendish, too, includes remarks about various strategies for preserving bodies from putrefaction in her 1666 *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*—refrigeration, alcohol, salting—and she too was fascinated by the question of the relationship between the body’s external form and its more corruptible inner regions:

there may be an art to preserve the exterior shapes of some animal bodies, but not their interior forms; for although their exterior shapes, even after the dissolution of the animal figure, may be somewhat like the shapes and figures of their bodies, when they had the life of an animal, yet they being transformed into some other creatures by the alteration of their interior figurative motions, can no ways keep the same interior figure which they had when they were living animals.32

The differences between Boyle’s wholly empirical and Cavendish’s more speculative epistemologies, however, is clear in their position toward the body so preserved. Where for Boyle the preservation of the external idea remains an object of scientific interest even without its inner corruptible parts, for Cavendish outward form lacks epistemological significance as soon as it is separated from the body’s internal ‘motions’—the animate though wholly material self-movement Cavendish believed constituted the forms of material things.

Processes of putrefaction and decay, then, raised central questions in early science about the relation between stasis and process in material bodies, between the relatively static, perceptible forms of things and their inner tendency toward formlessness and disorder. Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* was written amidst this widespread scientific interest in and debate about what was actually happening when bodily form dissolved into formlessness, but its distance from the aims Bacon set out for the study of decay in the new science could not be greater: if Bacon thought the study of decay held the key to the indefinite extension of human material existence, Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* is precisely a reflection on the folly of human dreams of immortality and self-preservation, in their various forms, in the face of the ubiquity of material dissolution and decay. Browne’s essay gives the lie to the fantasy that to preserve the ‘external Idea’ of a thing, at the expense of its corruptible interiority, is to preserve its fundamental being. Instead, *Hydriotaphia* is fascinated by the strange way in which material bodies, in their very corruptibility, outlive and outlast the human meanings attached to them, even despite our best efforts to preserve those meanings against the effects of time—as if they had an internal life entirely other to their outward appearances, a life composed precisely of rust, rot, corrosion, and decay.

II. ‘Peculiar Unto Parts’: Hydriotaphia’s Aesthetics of Dissolution

The third chapter of Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* is littered with images of the same processes which so fascinated and troubled Bacon, along with numerous observations about the relative incorruptibility, or otherwise, of various bodies and substances and the effects of environmental conditions on processes of dissolution, observations which likewise recall Bacon’s studies in *Historia Vitæ* and *Sylva Sylvarum*. Browne ponders, for example, the relative susceptibility of different kinds of metal to rust and verdigris, and discusses the effects of exposure to air on the speed with which metals corrode; he includes a series of observations about the relative corruptibility of various materials, including various types of wood, charcoal, egg-shells, and even different parts of the human body; he contemplates the reputed congelation of Roman burial unguents buried thousands of years underground; much like Boyle, he wonders how best to preserve the human corpse from corruption without exenterating it—‘an hazardous peece of art, in our choisest practise’, he remarks, as if one could find nothing better to do with one’s time than embalm dead bodies. *Hydriotaphia* has often been seen as a treatise of predominantly antiquarian concerns, but these observations, many of which are drawn from Browne’s own empirical studies of the urns as well as of other burial sites, can also be understood in light of the broader fascination with processes of dissolution in early empirical science I described above. The fact that Browne did not, like Bacon or even Cavendish, seem interested in incorporating his observations into a larger speculative physics, and instead was content to sprinkle them throughout an essay ostensibly considering a markedly different topic, however, speaks to the differences in epistemological outlook between Browne’s late essay and the writings of his contemporaries on this subject. As is typical of this essay more generally, Browne is decidedly reluctant to collect his observations into any overarching conclusion like those reached in Bacon’s *Historia Vitæ*. ‘It is scarce to be imagined’, Samuel Johnson wrote of *Hydriotaphia*, ‘how many particulars [Browne] has amassed together’ in compiling his essay, and in Chapter 3 in particular Browne seems especially interested in the very particularity of particulars,

248 Rusting and other processes of metallic corrosion were not well distinguished from processes of organic decay in this period; Bacon, for example, uses the encompassing term ‘putrefaction’ to describe rust, verdigris, and other patinas in *Sylva Sylvarum*; see, for example, fols. K4v-L1r, M4r (quoted above), and N1r.


250 The scepticism that has long been considered a hallmark of Browne’s late essay has often been understood as directed primarily toward the empirical epistemologies of Renaissance antiquarianism, and has been contrasted with the general optimism of Browne’s epistemology in his writings on the natural world, especially *The Garden of Cyrus*. But *Hydriotaphia*, too, is interested in natural materials as well as human artefacts, and Browne’s scepticism in this essay also has implications for the metaphysics and epistemology of the burgeoning empirical sciences. See Frank Livingstone Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), pp. 204-223; Leonard Nathanson, *The Strategy of Truth: A Study of Sir Thomas Browne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 177-202; Preston, *Thomas Browne*, pp. 123-154.
their resistance to generalisation. His discussion of the metal pieces included in the Norfolk urns, for example, emphasises the singularity of the processes of corrosion affecting not only different types of metal but even the same kind of metal in different conditions:

In the monument of King Childerick, the iron relics were found all rusty and crumbling into pieces. But our little iron pins which fastened the ivory works, held well together, and lost not their magnetic quality, though wanting a tenacious moisture for the firmer union of parts, although it be hardly drawn into fusion, yet that metal soon submitth unto rust and dissolution. In the brazen pieces we admired not the duration but the freedome from rust, and ill savour; upon the hardest attrition, but now exposed unto the piercing atomes of ayre; in the space of a few moneths, they begin to spot and betray their green entrals.

In Bacon’s *Historia Vitæ*, such observations would have culminated in some kind of inductive conclusion about the effects of different environmental conditions on different kinds of metal, but here any such induction is noticeably absent: without even a paragraph break, Browne immediately segues to a discussion of ancient practices of burial adornment. If this passage seems reluctant to generalise, however, it is nonetheless fascinated by the paradox that matter might evince a kind of form or coherence precisely in the process of losing its formal identity. Childeric’s iron pieces crumbled to dust; the iron pieces in the Norfolk urns, however, retained a kind of structural integrity, even while lacking ‘a firmer union of parts’; iron resists melting (‘fusion’), but is susceptible to rust; brass initially eludes rusting altogether, but ultimately falls prey to verdigris—exposing their very bowels to view as if, violently attacked by the air, finally yielding to the world their innermost being. Like Bataille’s *informe*, these decaying stuffs betray a kind of internal cohesion which is not quite a unified totality, and which is inseparable from the very process of their disintegration. The phrase ‘ill savour’ points to a further difference between Browne’s and Bacon’s epistemologies. Bacon’s observations and inductive conclusions depend primarily on visual evidence, sight, as I mentioned in my introduction, long having been privileged in the Western philosophical tradition as the most rational and discerning of the senses.

Although ‘savour’ might mean only ‘quality’ (definition 4b in the *OED*), the word has strong associations with smell and taste, and especially with appetising flavours. Even if Browne was not actually smelling and tasting the brass pieces included in the urns, ‘ill savour’, rather than the more neutral ‘quality’, still suggests that Browne was less willing than Bacon to dispense with the subjective, less rational elements of experiment and observation, and, not least, with the sensible paradox of a delectable distaste.

‘Ill savour’ also echoes Browne’s startling fantasy about the taste of the congealed burial unguents:

> Some finde sepulchrall vessels containing liquors, which time hath incrassated into gellies. For besides these lachrymatories, notable lamps, with vessels of oyles and aromaticall liquors

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252 *Hydriotaphia*, p. 528.

attended noble ossuaries. And some yet retaining a vinosity and spirit in them, which if any have tasted they have farre exceeded the palats of antiquity. Liquors not to be computed by years of annual magistrates, but by great conjunctions and the fatall periods of kingdomes. The draughts of consulary date, were but crude unto these, and Opimian wine but in the must unto them.  

Imported into English around the turn of the seventeenth century from the Latin *incrassare*, ‘to thicken’, *in*-crassate plays on the essay’s fascination with the discrepancy between outward forms of bodies and the putrefactive processes concealed within their interior, as if, just as the brass pieces betrayed their entrails when exposed to the air, so too these liquors reveal their gelid inner truth only after thousands of years of burial underground. And yet, it would seem, it is precisely in decaying, in revealing their profoundly ambiguous material depths, that things appear to outlast any humanly meaningful entity, whether the hundred-year vintage of the Roman consul Opimius or the Roman empire itself. This paradox of putrefactive immortality Browne contemplates with the same thrill of disgusted delight suggested by the ‘ill savour’ of the brass pieces.  

Browne’s fascination with the singularity and variety of corruptive processes reaches its apex when Browne at last considers the putrefactive processes afflicting the human corpse:

> Urnall enterrments, and burnt reliques lye not in fear of worms, or to be an heritage for serpents; in carnall sepultures corruptions seem peculiar unto parts, and some speak of snakes out of the spinall marrow. But while we suppose common wormes in graves, ’tis not easie to finde any there; few in church-yards above a foot deep, fewer or none in churches, though in fresh decayed bodies. Teeth, bones, and hair, give the most lasting defiance to corruption. In an hydropicall body ten years buried in a church-yard, we met with a fat concretion, where the nitre of the earth, and the salt and lixivious liquor of the body, had coagulated large lumps of fat, into the substance of hardest castle-soap; whereof part remaineth with us. After a battle with the Persians the Roman Corps decayed in few dayes, while the Persian bodies remained dry and uncorrupted. Bodies in the same ground do not uniformly dissolve, nor bones equally moulder; whereof in the opprobrious disease we expect no long duration. The body of the Marquesse of Dorset seemed sound and handsomely cereclothed, that after seventy eight years was found uncorrupted. Common Tombs preserve not beyond powder: A firmer consistence and compage of parts might be expected from arefaction, deep buriall or charcoal. The greatest antiquities of mortall bodies may remain in petrified bones, whereof, though we take not in the pillar of Lots wife, or metamorphosis of Ortelius, some may be older then pyramids, in the petrified reliques of the generall inundation.

‘Corruptions’ are ‘peculiar’ to different bodies, even to different parts of the body; newly buried corpses heave with worms, those buried deep underground do not; the bodies of the Roman soldiers putrefied quickly, the bodies of the Persian soldiers merely desiccated; bodies buried in the same conditions corrupt at different speeds; some bones disintegrate more quickly than others; preservation ‘might’ be expected from bodies buried deeply underground or buried in charcoal; the best means of preserving skeletal material ‘may’ be petrification: processes of dissolution, Browne makes clear, are profoundly rooted in the idiosyncrasies of individual bodies and their immediate material contexts. The English
The word *peculiar* comes from the classical Latin *peculiaris*, ‘belonging to a person, one’s own, personal, private, that characterizes or belongs to a person, thing, or place, specific, special, singular, exceptional’, which in turn comes from the word *peculum*, ‘private property’. In Renaissance Latin it was also sometimes used to mean ‘exempt from diocesan authority’. The word *peculiar* migrated into English in the mid-fifteenth century, where for a long time it retained its association with private property, usually in contrast with what was held in common, the commonwealth. ‘Peculiar unto parts’ suggests, then, a tension between part and totality and between individual and universal: each body, each part of the body seems to appropriate to itself a singular means of decay, in defiance of universal natural law.

If bodies do not ‘uniformly’ dissolve, they also do not dissolve uni-formly, as a single form: in putrefying, bodies diverge from the uniform to become multiple, like the serpents, or to assume more ambiguous forms: ‘concretion’, ‘coagulate’, ‘consistence’, ‘compage’—all these words, like the rusting iron pieces which lack firmer union, suggest forms of material self-aggregation that do not quite amount to totality. As we will see below, this is one of several places in his writings where Browne discusses Pliny’s belief that the decay of the human medulla—surely the innermost of the human interior, quite literally its pith and marrow—could engender serpents: a myth to send shudders down the spine even of those, like us, who no longer believe in its empirical truth. Yet matter’s self-organising power extends also to less obviously animate forms. The above passage records one of Browne’s few or perhaps his only contribution to novel scientific knowledge in the seventeenth century, his discovery of what is now known as adipocere, or ‘grave wax’, a waxy, greasy organic substance produced by decomposing bodies as the result of the anaerobic breakdown of body fat by bacteria. Browne’s grave wax recalls one of the most famous moments in modern Western philosophy, Descartes’s consideration of a piece of wax in his *Meditations upon First Philosophy*, written a little over a decade prior to *Hydriotaphia*. Wax drew Descartes’s attention, as adipocere does Browne’s, because it is susceptible to state changes which entirely transform its sensible properties (smell, taste, colour, shape, sound, and, especially, solidity). Beginning with an extraordinary evocation of the sensuality of this piece of wax—its floral scent, its

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257 The OED cites its use in Edward Hall’s 1548 The union of the two noble and illustrate famelies of Lancaster [and] Yorke: ‘The Duke of Gloucester, had not so muche aduaunced...the common wealth and publique vtilitie, as his awne priuate things & peculier estate.’ The contrast between peculiar and public recurs in the OED’s fourth citation, from 1652: ‘The Sun, Aer, Water, Nature did not frame Peculiar; A Publique gift I claim’. See ‘peculiar, adj. and n.’, definition 2a.

258 Douglas H. Ubelaker and Kristina M. Zarenko, ‘Adipocere: What is known after over two centuries of research’, Forensic Science International, 208 (2011), 167-172. That Browne recorded what would prove to be his single most important contribution to the empirical sciences not in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, perhaps the most ‘scientific’ of Browne’s works in modern terms, but in a late essay seemingly preoccupied by very different questions has long puzzled critics. Frank Livingstone Huntley, for example, calls it ‘ironically appropriate’ that this ‘single, accidental, unimportant discovery’ should feature in a text he sees as dedicated to the ‘small, temporal, local, sui generis, mutable, pathetic, nameless’. Sir Thomas Browne, p. 217, p. 211. See also William H. Barnes, ‘Browne’s “Hydriotaphia” with a Reference to Adipocere’, Isis, 20 (1934), pp. 337-343, and Jeremiah S. Finch, Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor’s Life of Science and Faith (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), p. 182. Jessica Wolfe has recently associated Browne’s reference to grave wax in *Hydriotaphia* with his broader interest in the formative properties of salt; see ‘Gorgonick Spirits’, p. 110.
lingering flavour of honey, its hardness and coldness—Descartes nonetheless uses the example to conclude that essence is independent of the metamorphic sensible qualities of bodies:

 [...] even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it, and if you strike it, it no longer makes a sound. But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what wax is in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch, or hearing has now altered—yet the wax remains. 259

Descartes records the dissolution of the wax’s solid form into formless liquidity, a process which for him speaks to the evanescence of things’ material properties. Browne’s adipocere, too, evokes liquefaction—in this case, the dissolution of human flesh into ‘lixivious liquors’ and inchoate lumps of fat—but what interests him above all is the subsequent hardening of these fluids and jellies into solid forms so alien to their prior iteration, to the fleshy substantiality of the human body. Where Descartes seems confident that the persistence of the essence of the wax despite the accidental changes which have occurred to it cannot be denied, the identity between the human body and the mysterious, hardened, soaplike concretion Browne describes seems less than obvious, to say the least. Browne’s alliteration in this passage (‘lixivious liquors’, ‘large lumps’), too, foregrounds the sensuous particularity of the body’s decaying forms, as does, I would argue, the word ‘lixivious’ itself—‘Of, relating to, or of the nature of lixivium or lye’, that is, alkalized water, usually made from vegetable ashes and used as a detergent in this period. 260 Introduced to English only three years prior to the publication of Hydriotaphia, this Latinate inkhorn term might, on the one hand, be understood to be reaching for maximal referential precision in its attempt to describe a novel material form unrecorded in any prior ancient or modern text, as Claire Preston has argued is characteristic of Browne’s neologisms more generally. 261 On the other hand, ‘lixivious’ might equally be seen as underscoring the taxonomical elusiveness and illegibility of the body’s decomposing mixtures, the salty, ashen fluids produced from the commingling of flesh and earth.

Accreting observation upon fragmentary observation, Browne’s enumeration of the variety of corruptive processes to which human bodies, in all their individuality, are susceptible similarly evinces what Umberto Eco has described as the ambiguity of the list, a literary form which ‘swing[s] between a poetics of “everything included” and a poetics of the “etcetera”’, that is, which may either assert its own comprehensiveness or gesture toward the infinity which lies beyond its own frame. 262 Bacon’s

enumeration of the body’s corruptions, as we saw earlier, similarly vacillates between a desire for
comprehensiveness and the admission of its impossibility. Where the infinite plurality of the body’s
means of decomposition confronts Bacon with a frustratingly insurmountable obstacle to the advance of
rational scientific knowledge of the body, however, the impossibility of taxonomical exhaustiveness
seems rather to appeal to Browne’s own sensibility. The fragmented, frequently list-like quality of
*Hydriotaphia*’s central chapters might be understood as a formless form similar to the ones it describes:
much as the saponified adipocere agglomerates the body’s dust and ashes, so too do Browne’s
miscellaneous learned references and empirical observations congeal into something, at the same time,
rather less than a totality and rather more than formless particulars.

III. *Ill Savour: A Brownean Sublime*

Browne’s evident attraction to the indescribable forms assumed by the decomposing body
closely resembles one of the most famous paradoxes of the history of aesthetic philosophy, that of the
sublime. As with much else in aesthetic theory, Kant’s formulation of the sublime in his 1790 *Critique
of Judgment* has set the tone for the majority of later discussions of the topic. Kant distinguishes the
feeling associated with the sublime from that of the other paradigmatic aesthetic experience, the
beautiful, on three counts. First, while for Kant the sensation of beauty was associated with formal unity,
the sublime object is characterised by formlessness and unboundedness; Kant gives the classic examples
of sublime objects taken from the natural world: ‘bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks,
thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps,
volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the
boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on’. Second, the feeling of the
sublime is a ‘negative pleasure’ insofar as it involves repulsion as well as attraction, fear as well as
respect. Finally, while the feeling of the beautiful springs from our perception of the suitability of the
material world for our cognition, Kant suggests that the sublime, by contrast, arouses a profound
epistemological anxiety. The experience of the sublime, according to Kant, is finally the experience of
the inadequacy of one’s phenomenological frames of reference; defying the effort of the imagination to
present it to the understanding for cognition, the sublime object confronts the subject with the very
failure of the senses to grasp the phenomenal world. Yet for Kant the anxiety experienced in the face of
the sublime is inseparable from a feeling of pleasure, insofar as the very failure of the senses awakens in
us an awareness of the supersensible—of our own rational powers, which transcend any merely sensual
or material being. It is not, finally, the natural object which for Kant is sublime, but only the human
mind itself.

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Subsequent accounts of the sublime have taken off from Kant’s insight into the close relationship between epistemology and aesthetic feeling in the sublime, postmodern philosophy in particular being especially drawn to the sublime’s power to unsettle symbolic frameworks of understanding. Recently, however, scholars interested in the history of Western aesthetics have also begun to trace the premodern history of this aesthetic experience, especially in relation to the epistemological questions which have proved so central to it in modernity. These have sought to call into question traditional histories of the sublime, which have seen it as originating in the Greek rhetorician Longinus’s treatise on the topic before being essentially submerged until the fervour of commentary on sublimity following Boileau’s translation of Peri Hypsous in 1674. James Porter and Philip Hardie, for instance, have argued that Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura provides a crucial link between the Longinian and the modern sublime; sublimity, they suggest, was the privileged aesthetic effect of an atomist philosophy which, like Enlightenment thought, sought to estrange its readers from received conceptions of the natural world and affirm the hegemony of reason over religion and superstition. In the field of early modern studies, David Sedley has drawn attention to the intimate relationship between the aesthetic of the sublime and sceptical epistemologies in Western thought, and traces the intertwined histories of modern aesthetics and epistemology from the writings of Montaigne to postmodern philosophers such as Paul de Man and François Lyotard. Scepticism, according to Sedley, provokes, and is provoked by, a desire for the transcendence of determinate knowledge.

Browne’s attraction to the ill savours of putrefactive matter should be understood as participating in this premodern history of the sublime. Like Kant’s tempests and boundless oceans, the formless incrassated gellies and saponified fats of Hydriotaphia, too, elude integration into symbolic frames of reference, in this case, as I have argued, the taxonomical systems to which early science sought to assimilate material forms. In doing so, they elicit both a feeling of aversion and one of attraction, as the perceiver bumps up against the limits of imagination and understanding. For Browne, then, as for modern aesthetic philosophers, epistemological difficulty provokes a certain paradoxical aesthetic thrill.

At the same time, the particular quality of the aversive emotion elicited by Browne’s serpents and saponified body fats also indicates certain differences between Hydriotaphia’s version of the

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sublime and the Kantian one that has previously served as the reference point for premodern histories of the sublime. If for Kant the sublime primarily arouses fear, the awe experienced by the human animal in its abrupt confrontation with the might of Nature, the decomposing bodies of *Hydriotaphia* arouse not fear so much as disgust—‘ill savour’, indeed. Disgust, as many affect theorists and aesthetic philosophers, Kant among them, have noted, is an emotion deeply grounded in the body; indeed, it is precisely for this reason that Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, names the disgusting the single kind of ugliness which cannot be assimilated into the beautiful work of art.\(^{268}\) In particular, disgust discomfortingly highlights the continuities between the human and the nonhuman world in its least attractive aspects—most of all, the roots, and culmination, of human life in muck, decomposition, and, ultimately, with special horror, in other forms of life.\(^{269}\) In doing so, this powerful emotion points not, like the fear and awe of the sublime proper, to the majestic power and otherness of the natural world outside us, but to the repulsive nonhumanness, the alienness, of the nature within. The account of abjection offered by the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her 1980 work *The Powers of Horror*—among other things a systematic appropriation and subversion of Kant’s account of the sublime—suggests a further connection between disgust and particularly modern, that is, post-Enlightenment, ways of thinking about materiality and selfhood. For Kristeva, as we saw in my introduction, the feeling of abjection stems from the power of the disgusting object to undermine the physical boundary between self and world, a boundary Kristeva believes foundational to subjectivity, and, therefore, to rational order itself. While Kristeva herself understands the psychic structures she describes as universal, they are in many ways, as we also saw, rooted in historical developments emerging in the early modern period and intensifying in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods, developments which include the gradual severance of subjectivity from materiality and of rational essence from physical substance. Disgust, as Kristeva describes it, then, may be a particularly modern affective experience, closely linked to the assumptions of bodily autonomy, subjective transcendence, and rational essence undergirding Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy and culture. If so, the repulsiveness of Browne’s putrefactive forms may stem from their powerful undermining of epistemological premises of modern thought, premises just beginning to coalesce in the science and philosophy of the early modern period.

If Browne’s fascination with putrefactive matter reflects an aesthetic of the sublime, it is one that, like Kristeva’s abject sublime, affirms nondistinctness rather than subjective autonomy, irreducible materiality rather than transcendence, and the ultimate indeterminacy of material phenomena—their lack of intrinsic essence—rather than the triumph of rationality over formless sensible chaos. Instead of

\(^{268}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §48.

upholding the central values of the Enlightenment, Browne’s putrefactive sublime suggests their dark underbelly, the subversive attractiveness of that which eludes system and rational order. There is, however, one further distinction I would like to draw between the Enlightenment aesthetic of the sublime and Browne’s own, proto-modern one. For Browne, as we have seen, the decomposing remains of the body may elude symbolic frames of reference, but they are not therefore wholly formless. The appeal of the putrefactive sublime may lie most of all in its intimation of a kind of form lying beyond rational symbolic structures, inhering in matter and sensory experience. If Kant’s sublime affirms the autonomy of the subject, Browne’s, perhaps, affirms the autonomy of sensible materiality itself—its capacity to generate forms irreducible to taxonomy and rational abstraction, forms which may de-form descriptive language itself.

IV. *‘Living Corruptions’: Animacy and Equivocacy in Pseudodoxia Epidemica*

If, as Sedley and others have suggested, the history of the sublime is intimately bound up with the history of scepticism in Western thought, it is perhaps unsurprising that we might find an aesthetic of the sublime such as I have described in Browne’s own famously sceptical late essay. I would argue, however, that intimations of this aesthetic can also be found even in Browne’s more Baconian works, including his earlier encyclopaedia *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. Before returning to *Hydriotaphia* at the end of this chapter, I would like to illuminate Browne’s brief reference in that essay to the ancient myth, passed down to posterity by Pliny’s *Natural Histories*, of the spontaneous generation of serpents from the putrefaction of the human spinal cord by turning to Browne’s numerous discussions of spontaneous or ‘equivocal’ generation in his earlier encyclopaedia. Browne’s repeated consideration of this topic evinces the same fascination with the paradoxical animacy of decomposing matter evident throughout the third chapter of *Hydriotaphia*. In the *Pseudodoxia*, however, the phenomenon of equivocal generation poses immediate problems for hermeneutic as well as empirical principles that guide Browne’s understanding of the natural world, hermeneutic principles informed, as Kevin Killeen has shown, as much by Renaissance traditions of scriptural exegesis as by Baconian empiricism.270

First, some comments are in order about the history of the phrase ‘equivocal generation’ itself, a phrase which, however commonly used in natural philosophical contexts in this period, could not, for a thinker as steeped in the Renaissance exegetical tradition as Browne, have avoided a certain association with hermeneutic difficulty. ‘Equivocal’ comes from the Latin *equivocus*, ‘ambiguous’, from *aequus*, ‘equal’, and *vocare*, ‘to call’, and seems to have entered English in the sixteenth century.271 Sometime around the turn of the seventeenth century, the phrase ‘equivocal generation’, contrasted with ‘univocal’, came to be applied to all forms of generation in which the offspring did not resemble its

parent, and eventually to the specific case of generation from corruption. Citing Browne’s use of the phrase in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, the *OED* suggests that this usage signifies ‘Of uncertain nature; not admitting of being classified, “nondescript”’:⁷⁷³

The *Æquivocall* production of things under undiscerned principles, makes a large part of generation, though they seem to hold a wide univocacy in their set and certain originals, while almost every plant breeds its peculiar insect [...]⁷⁷⁴

There is, however, probably another source for this usage of the word, which derives from the scholastic ontological distinction between the univocal cause, whose effects are identical to it, and the equivocal cause, whose effects are not fully like it. Thomas Aquinas made extensive use of this distinction in the *Summa Theologiae*, where he argues that God must be understood as an equivocal cause of his creatures, the latter lacking the perfection of the former, though he goes on to discuss the extent to which qualities predicated of God should be understood as *purely* equivocal: do they designate utterly different realities—in which case the application of the same term to God and his effects would be purely accidental or nominal—or differing degrees of the same reality?⁷⁷⁵

The phenomenon of equivocal generation poses a similar epistemological and metaphysical problem in Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, where, however, the question is about the relation not between the creaturely and the divine but between nature’s equivocal productions and the universal principles of natural law. This question was attracting much attention among natural philosophers during the decades Browne was writing and revising *Pseudodoxia*.⁷⁷⁶ Though Francesco Redi would disprove the phenomenon of spontaneous generation with the publication of his *Experiments on the Generation of Insects* in 1668, the main question being addressed in the 1650s and early 1660s was not whether generation from decaying matter did occur, but rather how it occurred. Philosophers were especially concerned to avoid the Epicurean idea that life could emerge spontaneously from the random encounter of particles. Thus, where the Paracelsian van Helmont argued that equivocally generated forms arose directly from corruption, scientists such as Pierre Gassendi and Robert Boyle attributed the phenomenon to so-called ‘seminal principles’—the immaterial Ideas or shaping power then thought to direct growth in living bodies—hidden in decaying matter.⁷⁷⁷

Although his position on this topic is not entirely consistent across his encyclopaedia, Browne seems to have believed that generation from decay could and did occur, and his primary concern, as

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⁷⁷² Ibid., definition 3a.
⁷⁷⁶ On the mid-century debate concerning the presence or absence of ‘seminal principles’ in corruptive generation, see Peter R. Anstey, ‘Boyle on Seminal Principles’, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 33 (2002), 597-630 (pp. 614-19).
Killeen has suggested, is to distinguish ‘equivocal’ from ‘univocal’ generation—that is, corruptive generation from ‘seminal’ generation, generation from seminal principles.\textsuperscript{277} In one chapter, for instance, he attacks the myth that mandrakes grow from the excretions of dead bodies in places of execution because it confuses seminal generation, where like engenders like, with corruptive generation, where the offspring engendered is different from the body that produced it. Such a myth is ‘not only erroneous in the foundation,’ Browne argues, ‘but injurious unto philosophy in the superstruction, making putrificative generations, correspondent unto seminall productions, and conceiving in equivocal effects an univocal conformity unto the efficient’.\textsuperscript{278} In the chapter on the phoenix, Browne elucidates the profoundly theological underpinning of this logic: to confuse corruptive and seminal generation would be ‘a frustration of that seminall power committed to animals at the creation. The probleme might have been spared, why wee love not our lice as well as our children, Noahs Arke had beene needlesse, the graves of animals would be the fruitfulllest wombs; for death would not destroy, but empeople the world again’.\textsuperscript{279} Nonetheless, even corruptive generation is not random, but follows natural law, every perfect creature having its correspondent equivocal production:

So the corrupt and excrementous humors in man are animated into lice; and we may observe that hogs, sheep, goats, hawkes, hens, and divers other, have one peculiar and proper kind of vermine, not resembling themselves according to seminall conditions, it carrying a settled and confined habitude unto their corruptive originalls; and therefore come not forth in generations erraticall, or different from each other, but seem specifically and in regular shapes to attend the corruption of their bodyes, as doe more perfect conceptions, the rule of seminall productions.\textsuperscript{280}

Browne’s confidence that the equivocal and anomalous can be recuperated into an abiding natural law or order was not, however, unassailable. His doubts about the regularity of processes of generation collect with particular frequency in relation to serpents. In a discussion of the sexual habits of the amphishæna, he refers with some perplexity to the ‘various shapes [and] mixed formations’ sometimes produced when snake eggs ‘conjoyne and inoculate into each other’: ‘these are monstrous productions’, he writes, and beside the intention of Nature, and the statutes of generation, neither begotten of like parents, nor begetting the like againe, but irregularly produced do stand as anomalies, and make up the \textit{qua genus}, in the generall booke of nature; which being the shifts and forced pieces, rather then the genuine and proper effects, they afford us no illation, nor is it reasonable to conclude, from a monstrosity unto a species, or from accidentall effects, unto the regular workes of nature.\textsuperscript{281}

\textsuperscript{279} \textit{Pseudodoxia}, 2.12, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{280} \textit{Pseudodoxia}, 2.6, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{281} \textit{Pseudodoxia}, 2.15, p. 271.
In the late additions made to the end of Book III of *Vulgar Errors*, where, significantly, it is poised precisely between the volume’s study of animals and its turn to the human world, he mentions the myth that serpents can be generated from human spinal marrow:

Many more there are whose serious enquiries we must request of others, and shall only awake considerations, Whether that common opinion that Snakes doe breed out of the back or spinall marrow of man, doth build upon any constant root or seed in nature; or did not arise from contingent generation in some single bodies remembred by Pliny or others, and might be paralleld since in living corruptions of the guts and other parts; which regularly proceed not to putrifactions of that nature.  

And in the chapter on the basilisk, as Browne dismantles the myth that this legendary creature is born from a chicken egg hatched by a toad, the spontaneous generation of worms from putrid humours in the human intestinal tract is similarly cited as an example of a wholly anomalous form of generation:

It is not indeed impossible that from the sperme of a Cock, Hen, or other animall being once in putrescence, either from incubation, or otherwise, some generation may ensue, not univocall and of the same species, but some imperfect or monstrous production; even as in the body of man from putrid humours, and peculiar ways of corruption, there have succeeded strange and unseconed shapes of wormes, whereof we have beheld some our selves, and reade of others in medicall observations: and so may strange and venemous Serpents be several ways engendered; but that this generation should be regular, and always produce a Basilisk, is beyond our affirmation, and we have good reason to doubt.

Much as it did in *Hydriotaphia*’s enumeration of the ‘peculiar’ forms of dissolution, taxonomy in these passages seems to crumble in the face of Nature’s equivocal productions: the spontaneous generation of worms from the putrefaction of the human body unsettles the encyclopaedia’s careful distinction between animal and human kingdoms; and Browne seems uncertain how to classify these mysterious forms engendered by corruptive human substance: are they serpents? or are they worms, perhaps like the earthworms that consume the body in the grave? Are all serpentine forms generated in some fashion by the corruption of the human body—in the guts or in the spinal marrow, in ‘living corruptions’ or in the dead body—alike, or, as *Hydriotaphia* suggests, are they ‘peculiar unto parts’? Are the serpents described in ancient texts comparable to the ones recorded in modern medical texts, and to those Browne himself had seen in his years as a doctor in Norwich? It is as if, in the myriad ‘peculiar ways of corruption’, bodies actively diverged from the univocal, producing a discrepancy between ‘severall’ and single, the ‘unseconded’ and the regular.

The equivocal generation of serpents, then, points to the troubling autonomy of matter’s ‘living corruptions’ from the natural order of things. Browne’s observations about the equivocal generation of serpents also speak, however, to much broader hermeneutic and epistemological problems in the *Pseudodoxia*. Throughout Browne’s encyclopaedia, the serpent hovers somewhere between an empirical object of observation and a signature or emblem of human error and sinfulness. The
Pseudodoxia concludes, for example, with an odd reinterpretation of the Pythagorean hypothesis of the transmigration of souls which imagines the souls of human sinners forced to assume serpentine bodies in their subsequent incarnations:

And yet, if as some Stoicks opinion, and Seneca himselfe disputeth, these unruly affections that make us sinne such prodigies, and even sinnes themselves be animals; there is an history of Africa and story of Snakes in these. And if the transanimation of Pythagoras or method thereof were true, that the soules of men transmigrated into species answering their former natures; some men must surely live over many serpents, and cannot escape that very brood whose sire Satan entered[].

This passage concludes a chapter marked by a scepticism and uncertainty uncharacteristic of the Pseudodoxia as a whole, where Browne seems newly resigned to the impossibility of ascertaining truth with any certainty in the face of the interminable proliferation of human error. Yet the connection between serpents and epistemological doubt is present from the very inception of the encyclopaedia, where Browne addresses the origin of all human error: Satan’s deliberate misconstrual of God’s command not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. This was, of course, the first instance of the hermeneutic error Browne calls ‘equivocation’: ‘Ye shall not dye, that was in his equivocation, ye shall not incurre a present death, or a destruction immediately ensuing your transgression.’ The ‘fallacie of Æquivocation and Amphibologie’, as Browne defines it, ‘conclude[s] from the ambiguity of some one word, or the ambiguous sintaxis of many put together’. Not quite lying outright, Satan translates the absolute of divine injunction into an ambiguity, giving birth to interpretive multiplicity from the corruption of the univocal.

Yet Satan’s equivocation is not, Browne points out, properly the origin of human sin. Addressing the difficult question of how the first couple, whose reasoning capacities were unimpaired, were deceived by an incongruously talking serpent, the very first chapter of Pseudodoxia immediately dispenses with the idea that Satan can be held entirely responsible for human error. Rather, he speculates, Adam and Eve were ‘deceived from themselves, and their own apprehensions’. Eve had equivocated before even Satan could do so:

Now Eve upon the question of the Serpent returned [God’s] precept in different termes, You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it lest perhaps you dye. In which delivery, there were no lesse then two mistakes, or rather additionall mendacities [...] And therefore although it be said, and that very truly, that the divell was a liar from the beginning, yet was the woman herein the first exprese beginner, and falsified twice before the replye of Satan, and therefore also to speak strictly, the sin of the fruit was not the first offence, they first transgressed the rule of their own reason, and after the commandement of God.  

Falling for the temptation to interpret rather than receive knowledge, to assume that truth is equivocal rather than given, Eve too renders God’s absolute an uncertainty, generating a new, mendacious voice at

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284 Pseudodoxia, 6.19, p. 608.
285 Pseudodoxia, 1.4, p. 24.
286 Pseudodoxia, 1.4, p. 22.
287 Pseudodoxia, 1.1, pp. 6-7.
variance with the univocal commandment of God. Like equivocally engendered serpents, Eve’s sin is *sui generis*, deceiving and dividing the self from the self, claiming a basis for knowledge other than logic and reason.

In the chapter on the basilisk, Browne’s remarks about the corruptive generation of serpents feature an unusual reference to his own experience as a physician, presumably treating patients with intestinal worms. Though not exclusively so, Browne’s parsing of vulgar errors is usually based on logical and hermeneutic, not empirical, grounds. Indeed, the chapter on the basilisk is a stellar example of Browne’s continuing investment in textual authority, despite his commitment to Baconian epistemology: at the beginning of the chapter, Browne refuses to discount the possibility of the existence of basilisks on the basis of their appearance in several passages of Scripture, as well as numerous attestations to their existence in classical and Renaissance texts. This turn to individual—or ‘peculiar’, to borrow *Hydriotaphia*’s word—experience is a specifically problematic one insofar as it fails to affirm any general law, and in fact registers only an exception to the all-important ‘statutes of generation’. With the transition from the univocal to the equivocal, the grounds for rational certainty are lost, and doubt emerges. Monstrosity and regularity seem no longer so easy to distinguish: ‘that this generation should be regular [...] is beyond our affirmation, and we have good reason to doubt’. As it did for Eve, experience engenders the equivocal, the ambiguous, that which transgresses univocal authority; sceptical doubt is the result.

V. The Equivocal Styles of Thomas Browne

*Hydriotaphia*, as I noted earlier, interweaves references to numerous classical and early modern texts with Browne’s own empirical observations, especially though not exclusively of the urns, and the essay gives the reader little guidance in how to negotiate the competing claims of the numerous authorities it cites. In the paragraph which describes the transformations suffered by the inhumed body, Browne proceeds from a general reference to common opinion in the first sentence (‘some speak of snakes out of the spinall marrow [...]’), to observations presumably drawn from his own experience in the second, third, and fourth (‘while we suppose common wormes in graves, ’tis not easie to finde any there’; ‘we met with a fat concretion [...]’), to ancient history in the fifth (‘After a battle with the Persians the Roman Corps decayed in few dayes [...]’), to an assertion whose authority is unspecified in the sixth (‘Bodies in the same ground do not uniformly dissolve, nor bones equally moulder’), to modern history in the seventh (‘The body of the Marquess of Dorset seemed sound [...]’), to another few assertions whose authority is unspecified (‘Common Tombs preserve not beyond powder [...]’), then back to ancient history (‘When Alexander opened the tomb of Cyrus [...]’), and so on. This progression contrasts notably with that of the chapters of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, which tend to cite textual authorities on a topic first, then proceed to a logical analysis of the vulgar error in question, and then, if relevant, to introduce observations from Browne’s own experiments.
The effect of such abrupt shifts, I would argue, is to unsettle any stable sense of where authority in this essay lies: with ancient or modern texts? with things in themselves? with Browne himself? I noted in my analysis of the chapter on the basilisk how Browne’s reference to his medical work introduces experience as specifically problematic in relation to universal natural law; in \textit{Hydriotaphia}, textual and empirical data destabilise one another, piling up ostensible facts which seem to affirm only endless multiplicity (‘Bodies in the same ground do not uniformly dissolve, nor bones equally moulder’). Even Browne’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ seems to shift in its reference, sometimes appearing to be used as a first-person plural, sometimes a royal ‘we’: ‘But while we suppose common wormes in graves, ’tis not easy to finde any there [...] In an hydropicall body ten yeares buried in a church-yard, we met with a fat concretion [...] In the opprobrious disease we expect no long duration’. Browne’s first-person pronoun is the hallmark of what might be called his ‘equivocal’ style in this essay: a style which speaks in many, mutually contradictory, voices, voices which are allowed to undermine one another rather than coming to rest in a single, authoritative opinion.\footnote{If, as he suggests in the prefatory letter, Browne’s essay seeks to ventriloquise ‘these sad and sepulchral pitchers, which have no joyful voices’, which ‘can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted’ (509), they will nonetheless, through Browne’s prose, come to speak with many tongues.}

In his study of the shifting grounds of representation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, Robert Weimann has argued that, as traditional sites of political and ecclesiastical power began to lose their semblance of givenness over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fictional discourse became a crucial, though conflicted, locus of experimentation with new forms of social and interpretative authority. While a binary relationship between power and knowledge would not emerge until the eighteenth century, early modern writing became a space where traditional sources of authority could be appropriated, contested, and played with through the formal unfolding of fictional discourse itself.\footnote{Though Weimann’s analysis focuses on sermons, the drama, and fictional prose narrative, it is also relevant to \textit{Hydriotaphia} and \textit{Pseudodoxia,} where Browne, too, is continually negotiating his own}

\footnote{Preston eloquently describes \textit{Hydriotaphia}’s ‘turning over of often mutually opposed possibilities, equally promulgated and denied by an unspecified cast of learned voices, almost re-enacting the errant history of relics in its shifting propositions, atomising our sense of certainty like death itself’ (\textit{Thomas Browne}, 135-6). My only qualification would be to question her emphasis on death and fragmentation; as I will argue below, Browne’s ruminative, sceptical style embodies the paradoxical \textit{animacy} of decaying fragments suggested by the equivocally generated serpents.}

\footnote{Browne’s use of the royal ‘we’ is unusual in scientific discourse in this period. Boyle, for example, tends to use the first-person singular except when referring to several observers present at a given experiment. Hooke’s \textit{Micrographia}, too, tends to use the first-person singular. On the displacement of traditional, textual sources of authority with that of the individual observer as a means of validating experimental data in the early years of the Royal Society, see Peter Dear, ‘Totius in Verba: Rhetoric and Authority in the Early Royal Society’, \textit{Isis}, 76 (1985), pp. 144-161. Browne’s ‘we’, however, might be compared to Margaret Cavendish’s unusual habit of ventriloquising her own internal voices in \textit{Observations upon Experimental Philosophy}: ‘my latter thoughts would not believe [...]’; ‘To which my former conceptions answered [...]’; ‘To this, my latter thoughts excepted [...]’; see \textit{Observations}, pp. 23ff.}

\footnote{Robert Weimann, \textit{Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse}, ed. by David Hillman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).}
relationship to textual authority, as well as to the emergent hegemony of empirical things-in-themselves in the new science. Like the fictional texts Weimann describes, Browne’s writings thrive in the hinterlands between traditional and emergent loci of authority—between classical texts and the Bible, on the one hand, and the experimental discourse of modern science on the other. As in those texts, furthermore, the appropriation and sceptical undermining of various loci of authority proves formally generative. Though *Hydriotaphia*’s untidy agglomeration of particulars has been compared to the fragmentary relics he describes, I would suggest that an alternative image for Browne’s prose, which seems to proliferate even as it de-composes the texts it cites, can be found in the formless forms that fascinate Browne in that essay.\(^{291}\) Rather than a solid, uniform totality or a collection of fragmented, mortal relics, Browne’s essay, like rust and adipocere, like the concealed funeral unguents and the equivocally generated serpents, is the result of a process, one which transforms unpredictably as new material is, quite literally, unearthed. *Hydriotaphia* embraces decomposition as the very principle of its formal vitality.

Equivocacy also describes another of Browne’s well-known stylistic peculiarities, the neologism. We have, in fact, already encountered one such neologism: ‘putrescence’, a word which paradoxically juxtaposes verb and noun, process and es(s)ence.\(^{292}\) Numerous others are sprinkled across the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in particular, ranging from now-familiar words like ‘inhumation’, ‘cylindrical’, or ‘salient’ to more idiosyncratic coinages such as ‘suppedaneous’ or ‘nasicornous’. Claire Preston has argued that Browne’s neologisms reflect the pressing need in early science for new, more precise terminology to describe the proliferation of forms confronting the naturalists of the period.\(^{293}\) They can also, however, be seen as an integral part of Browne’s negotiation with the forms of authority, an attempt to produce a new voice from the disinterred relics of ancient and modern languages. Browne, as Preston shows, seems to have combed not only classical literature but also older English texts to rescue linguistic gems from extinction—such as, indeed, the word ‘extinction’ itself.\(^{294}\) Sometimes splicing two words (as in the case of ‘nasicornous’), at other times changing a word’s part of speech (as in the case of ‘putrescence’, or ‘inhumation’), Browne’s ‘neo-logisms generate new forms from the decaying remains of the old. A contemporary of Browne, indeed, once praised him as one of ‘our late Modern Authorizers of words’, a phrase which places Browne somewhere between gatekeeper and inventor, between one who sanctions forms coming from elsewhere and one who authors words himself.\(^{295}\) In this sense, too, Browne’s literary style is putrescent, generative and animate in decomposition.

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291 On Browne’s ‘fragmentary style’ in *Hydriotaphia*, see Preston, *Thomas Browne*, pp. 131-38.
292 An EEBO search yields one occurrence of the adjective ‘putrescent’, from the Latin *putrescere*, ‘to putrefy’, prior to *Pseudodoxia*; the noun form appears to be Browne’s invention. Preston, *Poetics of Scientific Investigation*, pp. 34-68.
293 *Poetics of Scientific Investigation*, p. 44.
VI.  **Coda: Intestinal Resolutions, Revisited**

Browne’s musings on *garum* were not ultimately included in any of his published works. His commonplace book was not, however, the only place in his writings where the inquisitive naturalist would ponder the putrefying gastrointestinal tracts of marine animals. Sometime between the publication of the 1650 and 1658 editions of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, the carcass of a sperm whale washed up on a beach on the Norfolk coast not far from the town of Wells-next-the-Sea. This unusual occurrence provided Browne, or, more likely, Browne’s correspondents, with the rare opportunity to gather first-hand observations relating to the size, shape, and body parts of this gargantuan sea animal, as well as to the spermaceti oil which flowed from the beast’s head as it putrefied—a substance in whose semisolid formations Browne, unsurprisingly, seems to have taken a particular interest. The chapter concludes by lamenting that the decaying animal’s ‘abominable scent’ had prevented the locals from scouring its bowels for ambergris, a brown, wax-like, faecal-looking material then as now commonly used as an ingredient in expensive perfumes:

In vain it was to rake for ambergreece in the panch of this Leviathan, as Greenland discovers, and attests of experience dictate, that they sometimes swallow great lumps thereof in the sea; insufferable fetour denying that enquiry. And yet if, as Paracelsus encourageth, ordure makes the best musk, and from the most fetid substances may be drawn the most odoriferous essences; all that had not Vespasians nose, might boldly swear, here was a subject fit for such extractions. 296

Browne would not have been aware, as we are today, that this pricey substance is produced by the cetacean digestive system itself in order to facilitate the excretion of sharp objects such as squid beaks. Nonetheless, ambergris—hard, waxy, and lumpy like adipocere and extracted like it from putrefactive bodies—may have struck Browne as something like the aquatic equivalent of grave wax, a substance engendered through the metamorphoses rich and strange of submarine existence. 297 Adipocere, garum, ambergris, even the ‘flosculous’ (flower-scented) spermaceti—these, for Browne, are the manifold essences of putrescence itself. 298

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296 *Pseudodoxia*, 3.26, p. 274.
297 Citing this passage, Sophie Read has charted the frustrated efforts of seventeenth-century naturalists to classify and determine the origins of this mysteriously sweet-smelling substance; see ‘Ambergris and Early Modern Languages of Scent’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 28 (2013), 221-237.
298 As Read has pointed out, it was over the course of the seventeenth century that the word ‘essence’ came to refer to ‘an extract obtained by distillation’, ‘a fragrant essence; a perfume, scent’ as well as ‘[t]hat which constitutes the being of a thing’ (*OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 25 March 2022]); see Sophie Read, ‘What the Nose Knew: Renaissance Theologies of Smell’, in *Literature, Belief and Knowledge in Early Modern England: Knowing Faith*, ed. by Subha Mukherji and Tim Stuart-Buttle, Crossroads of Knowledge in Early Modern Literature (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 175-193 (p. 177).
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have primarily considered how Deleuze’s epistemology and ontology might shed light on early modern conceptions of materiality, especially as expressed in early modern writers’ fascination with processes of organic decay. At its close, I would like, in turn, to consider how my own experience of reading early modern texts, particularly the ones I have studied in this thesis, has affected—and I employ the word with Deleuze’s usage in mind—my reading of Deleuze. This involves, in part, an attention to Deleuze’s own ‘literariness’, both as a reader of philosophical texts and as a writer. While Deleuze’s interest in literary texts—Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Melville, Artaud, Borges, and numerous others—has received some attention, the tendency to focus on the theoretical content of Deleuze’s literary criticism has sometimes occluded the pervasive importance of form and style in Deleuze’s philosophical hermeneutics as well as in his own writing. To read Deleuze solely for theoretical content, however, is not only to deny the unusual experience of reading his work; it is also to miss a central aspect of his thought, which insists continually on the epistemological importance of aesthetic form.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested how the forms of the texts I have studied—language, style, structure (and structurelessness)—themselves might express a conception of materiality not always seamlessly convergent with the ones given discursive articulation in these texts. In my introduction, for example, I highlighted the extraordinary array of verbs these texts use to describe putrefactive materiality, as well as its aesthetic effects—verbs which, I argued, undermine the assumptions of stasis and identity at the heart of this period’s well-demonstrated interest in taxonomy. When I turned to Spenser, I suggested how one of the primary features of the experience of reading The Faerie Queene—the suddenness with which Spenser’s allegorical personifications initially appear to us, and the strange ways they seem spontaneously to converge with one other, across ostensible differences in allegorical identity, in the poem’s field of encounters—counteracts allegory’s drive toward totalising system and absolute meaning. In my analysis of Donne’s Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, I emphasised the ways in which the affective rhythms and rhetorical energies of the Devotions pull against the teleological narrative of fallenness, abjection, and repentance mapped by the genre of the spiritual autobiography. And in my chapter on Thomas Browne, we saw how Browne’s neologisms embody the equivocity—the decaying, generative ambiguity—that so captured Browne’s interest in putrefactive materiality, despite his avowed commitment to the Baconian project. It is not simply that the forms of these texts instantiate or exemplify an ontology which is or could be re-expressed discursively; rather, they exact the fluid form of being which is expressed discursively in these texts’ recurrent interest in the phenomenon of decay.

See, for example, Daniel Smith’s introduction to Deleuze’s Essays Critical and Clinical, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. xi-liii.
In this way, early modern texts lend themselves especially well to Deleuze’s own characteristic method of reading in his analyses not only of literary but also of philosophical texts. As demonstrated by his numerous early studies in the history of philosophy, all of Deleuze’s independent work is grounded in a deep familiarity with Western philosophy, not only its major figures (Plato, Kant, Hume) but also its more obscure doctrines (Duns Scotus’s concept of univocity, for example, or the Stoics’ ontology of the event). Yet Deleuze’s interpretative methods profoundly diverge from those employed by most philosophers as engaged with the history of philosophy as he is. These methods might broadly be characterised as constituting a hermeneutics of expression, one appropriately evident in his analysis of the metaphysical architecture of expression in Spinoza’s Ethics. Reading Spinoza’s Ethics only for its content—for what it expresses—one might easily get the sense that Spinoza is dismissive of affect, seeing affects as obstructions to the clarity of rational thought he thought essential to beatitude. Deleuze’s attempt to restore affect to a central place in Spinoza’s ontology and epistemology relies in part on his perceptive analysis of the word ‘express’, which gives rise, Deleuze argues, to an ontology which sees things—including the text of the Ethics itself—not as static instantiations of prior being but as affective expressions of the continual modulation of Being Spinoza calls God or Nature. Yet one of Deleuze’s late essays on Spinoza, perhaps not accidentally included in a volume of essays primarily on literature, also suggests that the former’s intricate, detailed arguments about expression themselves turn on his own experience of reading the Ethics, an experience deeply affected by the form of Spinoza’s philosophical treatise.300 ‘Spinoza and the Three “Ethics”’ highlights how the calm, hyper-rational discourse of the Ethics’ main text is underpinned by the explosive rhetoric of the scholia, somewhat, to borrow Deleuze’s image, like a volcano hidden underneath an outwardly placid, flowing river. The scholia, Deleuze argues, make simultaneously affective and intellectual claims upon us which force us to re-evaluate our initial interpretations of Spinoza’s meaning, pointing to gaps in Spinoza’s discourse which illuminate aspects of his philosophy which otherwise go unspoken. For Deleuze, it is not simply that the form of the Ethics instantiates its content, or even that it yields a ‘deeper’ meaning than that explicitly articulated in the text. Rather, form gives voice to what animates Spinoza’s rational discourse, even if that would appear to unsettle or disturb what the Ethics explicitly says. For Deleuze, what animates Spinoza’s ostensibly abstract geometrical system is, precisely, the lived, affective, corporeal experience of being.

Deleuze’s expressive hermeneutics finds an analogue in his own expressive style of philosophical writing. To those accustomed to abstract systematicity in philosophical texts, Deleuze’s style often seems frustratingly literary. Not only are his writings—both those explicitly dedicated to art and literary criticism and those ostensibly more metaphysically inclined—full of references to literature, but they also often deliberately seek to elicit affective responses from his readers—to arouse feelings of surprise, annoyance, anger, compassion, and pleasure, not all of which sit easily within the development

of his broader philosophical argument. Indeed, Deleuze is precisely interested in using the affective dimensions of writing (figurative language, imagery, narrative) to provoke readers to think more deeply about his argument—to re-evaluate his claims as they have already developed (sometimes in misleading directions, as in the case of his rather cavalier dismissal of Hegel at the beginning of *Difference and Repetition*), and, especially, to consider his arguments in the light of the reader’s own felt experience.

This is not to say that Deleuze is not interested in philosophical rigour; indeed, Deleuze’s arguments are extraordinarily careful and precise, his readings of prior Western philosophers astute if unconventional. Rather, Deleuze’s philosophy steadfastly refuses traditional binaries of the abstract and the concrete, the rational and the affective, the metaphysical and the aesthetic. Continually interested, in his interpretation of other philosophers, in identifying the roots of abstract philosophical system in the sensed experience of existence, Deleuze himself constructs a philosophy which prismatically refracts different colours when placed in different lights—which seeks, in other words, to produce original interpretations, profoundly affected by an individual reader’s own experience of the text, rather than ‘true’ ones.

When, mid-way through my Ph.D., I first began reading Deleuze’s philosophy, I found the experience uncannily similar to my experience of reading early modern texts, especially the ones I have studied in this thesis. Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Donne’s *Devotions*, Browne’s *Hydriotaphia*—these too are texts whose meanings seem to unfold, to flower, at the level of their formal surfaces in ways that do not always immediately lend themselves to abstraction, even when they seem intended to do so. That early modern texts can expand so unpredictably in this way may in part be attributable to these texts’ own relative lack of interest in the rigorous systematicity exacted by post-Renaissance philosophical discourse, as well as to the privileging of formal unity characteristic of later, neoclassicist poetic theory and practice. There may, however, be another, deeper reason, one I hinted at in my introduction. Spenser, Donne, and Browne are products of an era when the experience of being was not yet seen as entirely separable from philosophical truth; and in these writers in particular abstract philosophical concepts are repeatedly, to varying degrees, returned to, measured against, and placed in productive tension with phenomenological experience. Evident less in what they say than in how they express it, the numerous resonances and tensions which result are part of what gives these texts their power. To read *The Faerie Queene*, or Donne’s *Devotions*, or Browne’s *Hydriotaphia*, and, I would insist, to read Deleuze, is to negotiate continually between the competing demands of the abstract and the particular, of thought and experience, of form and content, as these demands are manifested in the formal features of the texts themselves. It is therefore, as C. S. Lewis said of *The Faerie Queene*, something like living.

Near the end of the third year of my Ph.D., a submicroscopic non-cellular organism called SARS-CoV-2 caused the entire global economy to grind to a halt, as people all around the world were forced to shelter indoors and avoid social contact at all costs. Throughout much of the beginning of my doctoral research, I had primarily been interested in detailing the differences between the conception of
materiality I saw expressed in early modern writers’ fascination with the phenomenon of organic decay and those prevailing today, indebted, as I understood them to be, to conceptions of selfhood and embodiment which would fully emerge only in the Enlightenment. When the pandemic arrived, however, I was immediately struck by the similarities between, on the one hand, the virus as it was described by those who had suffered from it, and, on the other, precisely the assumptions about materiality and the physical experience of existence to which I was beginning to draw attention in my research and writing. In a number of ways the virus itself resembles the phenomenon of putrefaction as I have described it in this thesis: possessing both DNA and RNA but having no cellular structure and no capacity to reproduce autonomously, viruses span the divide between animate and inanimate existence, and defy our tendency to identify agency with autonomous actors; they violate physical and ideological boundaries between interior and exterior, hopping from body to body, as well as country to country, with astonishing rapidity; as we have all learned to our dismay in the last twelve months, they mutate unpredictably and at a far faster rate than scientific knowledge and technological innovation are able to keep pace with; and, above all, they are evocative both of decay and a monstrous fertility, destroying the host organism’s body in order to replicate themselves. But what struck me most of all in descriptions of this novel virus was the way in which it transformed people’s experience of their own bodies. It was as if the body, attacked from both within and without, was no longer willing or able to make itself as invisible as, pressured by the demands of work and social engagement, we usually demand of it; as if it were suddenly reminding us of its existence as a fluid, decaying, metamorphic thing, an entity with a will and mind of its own, which sometimes seems even to conspire with that which threatens to destroy it. An op-ed in The New York Times from September 2020 aptly described this feeling of estrangement from the body’s activities:

The virus is deadly serious but plays games. A little relief to tempt you into activity—then it smites you with a cudgel. I felt better last weekend until I tried a peach tart. It’s eerie to experience texture without taste. A Coke with ice and lemon was no more than fizz. My body was a stranger. It was out there somewhere, fighting. The fight demanded all its energy. There was nothing left for me."

The piece moves from a focus on the virus as an external agent of invasion/infection to a focus on the body itself as an alien entity whose very attempt to fight off the virus seems to bring it to life in a new way, no longer the passive vehicle for economic labour and social engagement, but active in the world in its own right, independent of any familiar sense of the self and its agency. Interestingly, this experience of estrangement is here—as it was for many people—identified with the loss of taste and smell, senses whose basic role in relating us to the external world through the medium of what we ingest of it. In the introduction to my thesis, I began by discussing Bosola’s description of bodily corruption as an ‘insensible sickness’, a phrase which, I argued, expressed the paradox of a bodily phenomenon

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simultaneously insensible, unavailable to perception, and in-sensible, present only to sensation, not to abstract knowledge. The coronavirus, too, makes itself present to those it infects in a sensed aporia in the sensible, one which estranges us from our accustomed experience of world and self.
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