This essay argues that the textual/sexual ethos of *Metempsychosis* is most evidenced in Donne’s use of rhetorical strategies and mnemonic devices to engage the reader. *Metempsychosis* is about sex, poetry and ethics, and incorporates notions of both spiritual transcendence and physical immanence. In this poem Donne narrates the soul’s various erotic exploits in its metamorphic journey “from her first making when she was that apple which Eve eat [sic], to this time when she is he, whose life you shall find in the end of this book” (Epistle 34-9). The strategies of reading Donne inscribes in *Metempsychosis* encourage the ideal (male) reader to recognize the soul’s appetitive bodily exploits as part of his own bestial heritage. This recognition, which depends on the reader’s acceptance of the interdependence of body and soul in the formation of self, has salvationist possibilities. However Donne’s depiction of the soul’s physical adventures manifests a deep, if ambivalent, commitment to the sexual body that challenges, but does not obliterate, the spiritual ethos of his poem.

The grotesque bodily sphere is described as the point of intersection and division between one body and another: “One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image” (Bakhtin 1995: 230). This “two-bodied image” inundates Donne’s *Metempsychosis* (1601). In this poem, along with bestial sex, we find images of “mingled bloods” (502) signifying life, bodies swallowed by bodies that are in turn themselves swallowed (symbols of death and destruction), and the pulsation of life within life in the detailing of the intricate formation of the embryo within the womb—life and death as one in the process of becoming.

*Metempsychosis* is comprised of an Epistle followed by fifty-two stanzas, of ten lines each, entitled “First Song.” In the Epistle the narrator proposes to map the progress of the soul, through all its bodily transmigrations, from its beginning in paradise to its final embodiment in contemporary England. What Donne does in *Metempsychosis* is explore the origins of the conflict between the transient body and the eternal soul, life and death, in the myth of Genesis, which he depicts in overtly sexual terms. This poem then traces the progress of the soul through a hierarchical scale of
earthly being—plant, animal and human—detailing the sexual exploits of an increasingly cognizant fallen nature. The heretical Pythagorean doctrine is Donne’s controlling myth. Following the death of one bodily host the soul moves into another and so on over twelve episodes (detailing twelve various embodiments) the soul rotates in cycles of sin and degeneracy through corrupting time. Grotesque realism in *Metempsychosis* emphasizes the material and the bodily. In this poem Donne universalizes the particular and particularizes the universal in relation to appetite and desire, presenting a richer repository of contemporary cultural anxieties, fears and fantasies about sexuality than has yet been realized.

Before commencing with my analysis of *Metempsychosis*, which will focus on how the text performs its own, sometimes ambivalent, textual/sexual ethos, I will first outline its critical reception. This will show how Donne’s emphasis on the penetrable and degenerative nature of the grotesque body, along with his authorial advice to the reader to seek the identity of the wandering soul’s last bodily host, has been misunderstood, resulting in an assumed incoherence within the text. Herbert Grierson, for instance, argues that *Metempsychosis* is not only incomplete but maintains a “vein of sheer ugliness” throughout, lacking both “invention” and “wit” and presenting episodes and details that are “pointless,” “disgusting” and “wantonly repulsive” (1912: 2:xx). I contend that critics read the text too narrowly as a commentary on specific socio-historical events, generating a negative and reductive evaluation of what in my opinion is Donne’s most extended poetic exploration of metaphysics. In the process of reading the poem’s ethical performance I will propose an identity for the wandering soul that involves a shift of expectation on the part of the reader and does not reduce any of the stanzas to futility.

Grierson’s damning dismissal of *Metempsychosis* in 1912 is compounded by Douglas Bush’s inability to discern why Donne “dwells with mingled gloating and loathing upon a succession of animal couplings” (1945: 131). The influence of these earlier critics is evident in D. C. Allen’s argument that in the final analysis *Metempsychosis* is incoherent (1952: 83-99). Janel Mueller’s essay pointedly eschews any attempt “to raise the esteem” of *Metempsychosis* but concentrates on making it a “more intelligible—and hence more tolerable failure” (1972: 109). Mueller consolidates earlier disparaging arguments with her conclusion that in *Metempsychosis* “the vision is of a world so bad […] that it is to be rejected, not reformed” (135). Ronald Corthell describes Donne’s poem as an “abortive epic,” which “celebrates deeds and persons unworthy of our esteem” and “falls short of sustained high seriousness” (1981: 101). Wyman Herendeen’s essay tries to justify the “irreverent, carnal and nasty”