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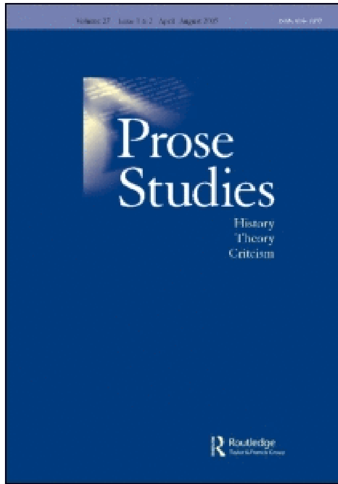

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**Michael Martin**

# LOVE'S ALCHEMIST
## Science and resurrection in the writing of Sir Kenelm Digby

*Sir Kenelm Digby was arguably one of seventeenth-century England's most interesting figures. An accomplished scientist and friend of Europe's leading intellectuals (Boyle, Descartes, and Hobbes among them), Digby's genius touched not only on natural science but he also made his mark as a courtier and diplomat, literary critic, swashbuckler, and Roman Catholic apologist.*

*In this essay, I argue that Digby was not quite aware of what game language was playing with him in his experiments and research related to palingenesis. Indeed, in this scientific endeavor Digby was at the mercy of what I call "unconscious metalepsis," a figure of speech that controlled Digby much more than he controlled it.*

**Keywords** Kenelm Digby; palingenesis; metalepsis; Venetia; resurrection

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> Our unconscious, then, does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal [. . ..] Thus there is nothing instinctual in us which responds to a belief in death. This may even be the secret of heroism. (Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death")

> [D]eath drive is a very paradoxical notion if you read Freud closely. Death drive is basically, I claim, the Freudian term for immortality. (Slavoj Žižek)[1]

In the spring of 1634, a strange and imposing figure was often seen in the shadowed halls of Gresham College, Oxford. Sir Kenelm Digby was the elder son of the late Sir Everard Digby whom the Crown had hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1606 for participation in the Gunpowder Plot. A giant of a man, Sir Kenelm stood nearly six foot five and during his stay at Gresham his brown hair grew long and shaggy, his beard untrimmed, and he habitually wore a long black cloak of mourning (Aubrey 99). Digby had arrived at the college following the sudden death of his young wife, Lady Venetia Stanley Digby, on May Day of 1633. Venetia's father, Lord Edward Stanley, had sought solace in scholarship and religion following his own wife's death, and at Gresham Sir Kenelm hoped to similarly distract himself. However, rather than diverting himself from the tragedy of his wife's death in his devotion to scientific research, in actuality

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Digby immersed himself all the more deeply, if unconsciously, in her memory. Venetia quite *literally* haunts his scientific work.

Digby, by all accounts, could rightfully claim to be listed among the virtuosi of the late Renaissance. He was among the first asked to join the Royal Society soon after its founding, and his peers and associates included such notable scientists and thinkers as René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Robert Boyle, and Athanasius Kircher. He also made his mark as a memoirist, as a courtier, as a privateer, and as a Roman Catholic apologist. An expert swordsman, he killed a French rival in a duel after the Frenchman insulted Charles II, an account of which gained Digby notoriety and prestige (at least in England) when it was published in 1641 as *Sr. Kenelme Digbyes Honour Maintained*. Digby's activities also touched on the world of literature. Digby is distinguished for writing the first commentary on Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and for an intriguing response to Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici.* Digby possessed a capacious and far-ranging intellect. His scientific researches touched upon all branches of the day's natural philosophy. He investigated astronomy, chemistry, optics, the properties of the lodestone, and he held a keen interest in botany. In time he would conclude that "there is in the Aire a hidden food of life" in regards to the plant kingdom, but that day had not yet come (Digby, *Vegetation of Plants* 65). In his rooms at Gresham following his wife's death, Sir Kenelm addressed himself to a scientific problem long intriguing to natural philosophers: palingenesis, the attempt to raise a plant, phoenix-like, from its own ashes.

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Having roots in Pythagorean mystico-scientific notions of metempsychosis, the idea of palingenesis is found as early as Lucretius. In *De rerum natura* (3: 843–61) the poet entertains the possibility of the literal recycling of a person's physical being in the service of its reincarnation, writing

> *nec, si materiem nostrum collegerit aetas*
> *post obitum rursumque redegerit ut sita nunc est*
> *atque iterum nobis fuerint data lumina vitae*,
> *peritineat quicquam tamen ad nos id quoque factum*,
> *interrupta semel cum sit repentia nostri*.

> (Nor, if our matter is collected in the state after death and again returns as now it is situated, and a second time the lights of life will be given to us, then should anything concern us that this also has happened, when it might be recalled by us to have been interrupted once?)[2]

That the same aggregate of atoms might gather again into the same combination Lucretius finds entirely plausible. As we shall see, Lucretius's materialism is in complete accord with Sir Kenelm Digby's.

Closer to Digby's time, the German *medicus et magus* Paracelsus explored early modern understandings of palingenesis in his book *De natura rerum* (1573). In this work Paracelsus presents palingenesis not as metaphysical theory, but as a practical science, albeit a difficult undertaking. "The resuscitation and restoration of wood," he writes, "is difficult and arduous; possible, indeed, but not to be accomplished without exceptional skill and industry" (149). He instructs the operator through the stages of the work, from subjecting the ash to the appropriate heat and humidity in a "*venter*

*equinus*" to allowing it to putrefy before burying the remains in rich soil in which, he assures us, "you will see it begin to revive, and a tree or a little log will be produced from it, which, indeed, is in its nature much higher than the original one" (150).[3]

Following the introduction of Paracelsus' ideas on palingenesis in sixteenth-century print culture, the seventeenth century saw a regular stream of works on the subject, either supportive of its possibility or skeptical about it.[4] In the "pro" column, Lynn Thorndike lists the opinions of the natural philosophers Gottfried Voigt (7: 349), Jacques Gaffarel (7: 187), David von der Beck (7: 236), the Jesuits Marin Mersenne (7: 439) and Athanasius Kircher (7: 607), Johann Daniel Major (8: 33), Johann Ludwig Hannemann (8: 388), and Sebastian Wirdig (8: 439). More suspicious of these claims were Werner Rolfinck (8: 71), the Jesuit Laurentius Foreus (7: 607), and the anonymous author of the tract *Non-Entia chymica sive catalogus* . . . (Frankfort, 1645; 1670 [7: 197]). These were continental scientists, so the Englishman Digby – living in exile in France and engaged with the work of these men – found himself on the forefront of debates surrounding Paracelsian science and palingenesis.

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William R. Newman has argued that, combined with the scientific interest of the topic, palingenesis also held "a widespread religious signification" well into the seventeenth century (227). Science, art, and religion were not yet sequestered into isolated spheres, and Sir Kenelm Digby's work with palingenesis exemplifies the scientific-artistic-religious synergy characteristic of early modern natural science. Digby's work, however, is evidence of more than an interdisciplinary approach to studying the natural world. In his case, palingenesis became a kind of "waking dream symbol," an absent referent for his absent wife and a receptacle for his desire to bring her back to life. And it does not appear that Digby was able to recognize palingenesis as such a metaphor; rather, it operated in him through what I call an *unconscious metalepsis*.

Metalepsis itself is a rather complicated literary trope that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "The rhetorical figure consisting in the metonymical substitution of one word for another which is itself a metonym; (more generally) any metaphorical usage resulting from a series or succession of figurative substitutions." In a grade school example of metalepsis's chain of signification, one might say "Seeing you is good for my eyes" is a metalepsis of the old saw "You're a sight for sore eyes," which, of course, is a metaphor for being happy to see someone. But most literary examples lack the clarity of this easy associative sequence. Erasmus gives an example from the *Aeneid* (1. 60): "*sed pater omnipotens speluncis abdidit atris*" (But the father omnipotent hid them in the lusterless caves), in which we find metalepsis in the way *ater* ("blackness") signifies obscurity and occultation (Cummings 220). Metalepsis's slippery and subtle figuration has inspired John Hollander to call it "both elusive and allusive at once" (116). It is, indeed, difficult to avoid obscurity when parsing the meaning of metalepsis, an often frustrating figure, and its imprecision drove George Puttenham in his distaste for it to designate it as "*farfet*," or far-fetched (193). This subtle trope of distancing has moved Harold Bloom to describe metalepsis as "maddeningly but accurately, a metonymy of a metonymy" (*Map* 102).

Bloom extends our understanding of metalepsis (also called transumption) when he uses it as a term for tracing literary influences in poetic creation, reading metalepsis as a kind of psychological mechanism, a "transumption of reading (and writing) poems, a final ratio of revision [an] *apophrades,* or a return of the precursors" (*Map* 73–4; see also his *Breaking* 73–107). Hollander reads this more directly as a "return of the dead"

(101). Bloom's conception of metalepsis is an important feature in his theory of the anxiety of influences. According to Bloom's take on metalepsis/transumption, a poet's precursors metaphorically come back to life in the poet's own work, lending to the creative process a certain unease (agon) as the poet wrestles with the presences of these ghosts.

But what I have in mind goes further, extending the understanding of this trope away from – but not entirely detached from – its literary application and further towards its psychological equivalent, which unfolds more in the way of Jungian projection or in terms of Freudian sublimation or cathexis,[5] wherein the subject invests the object in question (palingenesis in Digby's case) with a significant amount of (unconscious) emotional and psychological capital. Because the relationship between signifier and signified is disjointed, the trope subverts its own functionality to act as a trope. The metaphor intrudes upon the interpretive field to the point where the author no longer controls the quanta, or degrees, of meaning, an example of what Heidegger describes when he says, "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man" (215). The figure, then, becomes a hologram or fractal of language – a piece of a piece of a metaphor in which the originary signified is inherent but not necessarily explicit and, thus, easily sinks below the threshold of the subject's psychological control.

Digby invests a profound degree of psychic energy in palingenesis, so much so that it becomes the conduit for a very real, if metaphorical, return of the dead Venetia. Palingenesis is not a figure of speech for Digby: it is a scientific fact. And while he believes he writes of objective scientific phenomena, in reality he moves into the poetic realm of metalepsis. Palingenesis is the object, inspired ("breathed in") by the metaphor of resurrection which acts as the receiver of Digby's projection. For Digby, metalepsis's elusive nature, its double substitution of the signified, like electronic double encryption in Internet security, renders the signified inaccessible to his awareness.

Digby's scientific research into palingenesis coupled with his psychic state following his wife's death could only have been exacerbated by his awareness of Venetia's middle name, Anastasia, Greek for "resurrection." The name certainly begs for a way to read Digby. But, at least in his scientific work, Digby shows himself to be nothing but a sober, methodical, and exacting natural philosopher, much more in the mold of Hobbes and Descartes than of Robert Fludd. He in no way countenances mystification of phenomena and is not very patient with those who do. This is not the case, however, in his private correspondence and memoir, wherein he adopts many of the same tropes and conventions common to Christian Neoplatonism. It is as if we have two Digbys before us: the Aristotelian scientist, and the Christian Neoplatonist. And rarely do the two overlap.

Arising more from the Christian Neoplatonist side of his personality, Digby grew to be a close friend of the aging Ben Jonson and served as the poet and playwright's literary executor, bringing out the second folio of Jonson's work in 1641. As a result of their friendship, Jonson dedicated poetry to Venetia: "An Epigram to My Muse, the Lady Digby, on Her Husband, Sir Kenelme Digby" as well as the five poems and one poetic fragment surviving from the series about Lady Digby, "Eupheme; or, The Faire Fame. Left to Posteritie." The poems are quite excessively laudatory, and one wonders

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whether or not Digby may have contributed at least a little "over-editing" as he prepared his edition.

Not only did the death of Lady Digby inspire Jonson; obviously, it also served as a key event of Sir Kenelm's life. Though he and Venetia had been friends from childhood, as a youth of 17 Digby became smitten with this beauty three years his senior and this infatuation led to a tempestuous courtship that ended in a clandestine marriage in about 1625. According to Aubrey, they kept the wedding secret because Digby's mother disapproved of the reputation Venetia had earned as "a celebrated Beautie and Courtezane" (98). Aubrey claims that prior to marrying Digby, Venetia had borne at least one child to Richard, third Earl of Dorset, and he insinuates that she had also been mistress to Sir Edmund Wyld (Aubrey 98–103). Of course, Aubrey was writing long after the fact and from hearsay, so placing much credence in his remarks warrants caution. Whatever the case, after marriage Lady Digby appears to have become a very devout Catholic and Sir Kenelm's condition at that point has been described as "deeply uxorious" (Foster).

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Digby tells the story of his travels abroad and his courtship of Venetia in a very curious work published as his *Private Memoirs* by Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas in 1827. Nicolas found several sections of the manuscript inappropriate for his audience due to their erotic nature and did not include them in his edition, though he thought better of it and privately published the expunged material in 1828 in a volume entitled *Castrations*. A full edition, under the editorship of Vittorio Gabrieli, was not published until 1968 under Digby's original title, *Loose Fantasies*. The work itself is a *roman-à-clef*, but, indeed, a very odd one and tells the story of Theagenes (Digby) and his transcendent love for Stelliana (Venetia). In it, Digby paints a portrait of himself as Virgilian hero, of Venetia as immortal beloved, and of their love as Neoplatonic legend. Though the work is not without charm, in Gabrieli's words, its "strictly literary merits [...] do not rank very high" ("Introduction", *Loose Fantasies* xvi). Nevertheless, it is an interestingly self-attesting, often self-aggrandizing, document the author records for posterity.

Digby drafted the work as early as August of 1628 while on a privateering expedition (the same journey that yielded the comments on Spenser's *Faerie Queene*). The *Fantasies* obviously held importance for Digby, but his intentions concerning its possible readership are unclear. Jackson I. Cope believes that in the *Loose Fantasies* "Digby's baroque treatment of love and death was quite conscious, and self-consciously aimed at his contemporary audience through a calculated manipulation of figures" (53), a view also maintained by Digby's descendent Roy Digby Thomas (Thomas 27). However, Gabrieli asserts that there is no evidence that the work was circulated – even among friends – during Digby's lifetime ("Introduction", *Loose Fantasies*, xviii). And the readership that finally received the text, certainly, was not comprised of Digby's contemporaries.

Though modern readers may be tempted to read *Loose Fantasies* as a document of Renaissance self-fashioning, Digby himself, I believe, would have described the work as a testament of love. The work reads more in the way of a philosophical gesture than a memoir, a document in which Digby articulates for himself the "truth event" induced by the love he shares with Venetia, and in which, as Alain Badiou might say, the lovers "enter into the composition of *one* loving subject, who *exceeds* them both" (43; emphasis in original). We can easily detect the imprint of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* in the work. Castiglione concludes his treatise with a paean (attributed in the text to

Pietro Bembo) on the courtier as apostle of transcendent beauty (333–43), and such a move is entirely consonant with Digby's aesthetics and philosophical pose.

In appropriating for his constructed self in the romance the name Theagenes, Digby points to the epithet (*nate dea*) Virgil assigns to Aeneas. In *Sir Kenelm Digby and His Venetia,* E. W. Bligh includes a photographic plate of the flyleaf to Digby's volume of Virgil, upon which Digby copied Petrarch's account on first seeing Laura: an interesting if inconclusive piece of evidence illustrating the Digby-as-Theagenes-as-Aeneas-as-Petrarch chain of signification (plate facing page 206). Likewise, by changing Venetia's name to Stelliana, Digby evokes a host of goddess associations, from *Aphrodite Urania* to the woman clothed with the sun and crowned with stars in Revelation – which is not too much of a stretch, considering the hagiographic portrait of Venetia Digby paints in his letters. This glorification is most apparent in a section of the *Loose Fantasies* in which Theagenes engages in a dialogue with the character "Rogesilius" (whom the key accompanying the Nicolas edition identifies as Sir Kenelm's cousin Robert Digby). Theagenes in his discourse meditates on love in true Christian Neoplatonic terms:

> [T]his is the blessed state of the divinity, to have eternally the understanding replenished with notions of infinite perfection, and to have the will continually taken up entirely in loving and being loved; which causeth a perfect joy in this happy and eternal society (Digby, *Private Memoirs,* 234).

He closes his argument with an avowal that Stelliana is the *exemplum* of divine love on earth:

> I having proved how noble a thing love is, and how necessary to make a man completely happy, and that in the object of mine there is so much perfection, as I am sure you will say, who are yet an indifferent and unpassionate judge, that she deserveth it beyond all women that you or I have ever known (242–3).

Besides Castiglione, beneath the palimpsest of these lines we can discern traces of the teachings on love of the First Letter of St John, of Plato's Diotima, and the *Theologiae Platonicae* of Marsilio Ficino.[6] First, Digby transforms Venetia figuratively into Stelliana ("the star woman"), who is herself further allegorized as a Neoplatonic love goddess. This is, of course, standard Renaissance Neoplatonism, and Digby still realizes he is involved in a rhetorical game here. But not long after he initially recorded his *Loose Fantasies*, his beloved was indeed exiled to heaven through the agency of death, mitigating the representational character of the trope and edging it toward a more literal understanding. That is, the heavenly Venetia/Stelliana was no longer a metaphor. Or perhaps it is better to say that, in Digby's psyche at least, the Venetia of metaphor replaced the Venetia of flesh, blood, and spirit. The "real" Venetia disappeared, and the ideal, figurative Venetia became the new real. As Gabrieli observes, "it is hard to assess how far the *Fantasies* 'literally' reflect Digby's life, and where the transposition and stylization of actually experienced reality – which is the function of art – begins and ends" ("Introduction" xxxii). Digby assuredly revised the work following Venetia's death (Bligh 13; see also Gabrieli's note to Digby, *Loose Fantasies*, 179), and it is not too much of a risk to speculate that in his later emendations

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he exalted his beloved in more glorified terms than in earlier drafts. He certainly tends in this direction in some of the letters he wrote after his wife died. But he also evinces a propensity for glorification in his scientific work.

Digby invested considerable speculation, experiment, and, one may assume, expense on the possibility of effecting palingenesis. Nearly 30 years transpired from what were probably his earliest researches into the subject during his seclusion at Gresham College in the mid-1630s to the presentation of his findings on botany "at a Meeting of the Society for promoting Philosophical Knowledge by Experiments," also at Gresham, on 23 January 1660. During that period, Digby had twice lived in exile in France and had been imprisoned for a time because of his support for the Catholic cause in England. He habitually fell in and out of the confidences of kings and Parliamentarians. Despite his troubles and peregrinations, palingenesis remained an intriguing subject for him.

Digby's first published mention of palingenesis appears in the response to Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* written while under confinement in 1643, ten years after Venetia's death. Browne, in a section of his text that begins with a consideration of the resurrection of the dead, affirms the possibility of the palingenesis of mercury, of animals, and, especially, of plants:

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> Let us speake naturally, and like Philosophers, the formes of alterable bodies in their sensible corruption perish not; nor, as wee imagine, wholly quit their mansions, but retire and contract themselves into their secret and inaccessible parts, where they may best protect themselves from the action of their Antagonist. A plant or vegetable consumed to ashes, to a contemplative and schoole Philosopher seemes utterly destroyed, and the forme to have taken his leave for ever: But to a sensible Artist the formes are not perished, but withdrawne into their incombustible part, where they lie secure from the action of that devouring element. This is made good by experience, which can from the ashes of a plant revivifie the plant, and from its cinders recall it into its stalk and leaves againe. What the Art of man can doe in these inferiour pieces, what blasphemy is it to affirme the finger of God cannot doe in these more perfect and sensible structures? This is that mysticall Philosophy, from whence no true Scholler becomes an Atheist, but from the visible effects of nature growes up a reall Divine, and beholds not in a dreame, as *Ezekiel*, but in an ocular and visible object the types of his resurrection (Browne 63; emphasis in original).

Certainly, for Browne, as for Digby, this science is informed by a theological belief in the resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, and curiously, Digby *disavows*, somewhat mildly, palingenesis in the *Observations*, saying of Browne,

> His owne store furnisheth him with a most pregnant example [of the soul's immortality] of reviving a plant (the same numericall plant) out of his owne ashes. But under his favour, I beleeve his experiment will faile, if under the notion of the same, hee comprehendeth all the Accidents that first accompanied the plant; for since in the ashes there remaineth onely the fixed Salt, I am very confident that all the colour, and much of the odor and Taste of it, is flowne away with the Volatile salt (Digby, *Observations* 52).

And while Digby's pronouncements here might *seem* to stem purely from theory, they are in fact the result of experience. However, being somewhat the cagey and secretive scientist, Digby did not divulge his findings until his *Discourse Concerning Vegetation of Plants* in 1660. There Digby describes an experiment in palingenesis in which he "calcined [that is, incinerated] a good quantity of Nettles, Roots, Stalks, Leaves, Flowers" and subjected the ashes to a cycle of moistening, warming, filtering, and congealing. He tells his audience

> it is most true, that when the water [of the distillation of the ash] was congealed into ice, there appeared to be abundance of Nettles frozen in the ice. They had not the colour of Nettles. No greennesse accompanied them. They were white. But otherwise, it is impossible for any Painter to delineate a throng of Nettles more exactly, then they were designed in the water (*Vegetation of Plants* 76–8).[7]

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This was as close as Digby could get to achieving palingenesis of *plants*, though his friend Athanasius Kircher "assured" Digby he had accomplished it (*Vegetation of Plants* 75). Digby's results may have been as much as anyone could have expected, as success in palingenesis could also be counted in the operator's beholding the dead body's form "in a smokelike image" (Silberer 142).

However his vegetable experiments may have proceeded, Digby was able to convince himself he had achieved the palingenesis of "Cray-Fishes" – through some dubious methodology (*Vegetation of Plants*, 83–5). Digby, generally following the same procedure with crayfish as he had with nettles, contributed one extra step – and a whopper of a mistake it was. He added sand and water to his decoction and before too many days saw crayfish, indeed, appear in his alembic. Crayfish eggs, apparently, were hidden in the sand. He concludes that one "cannot allow Plants to have Life. They are not *Se Moventia*". Crayfish, on the other hand, unlike plants, do move by their own volition.

The idea of resurrection underwrites Digby's preoccupation with palingenesis. He prefaces his discussion of palingenesis with the hope that through this work the operator will produce from the ashes "a kind of glorified body, such as we hope ours will be after the Resurrection" (73). After Digby relates his experiences with palingenesis, his language morphs from scientific discourse to theological meditation upon the restoration of the body in glory as promised to faithful Christians. Of the Resurrection, in the *Vegetation of Plants* Digby says,

> it will follow out of the force of nature, after the great dayes Conflagration hath calcined the whole Masse of Matter into a formlesse heap of Ashes: So disposing it, by excluding and destroying all particular formes, to admit the action of subsistent ones upon it (88).

Resurrection, then, is absolutely rational, a thoroughly scientific process. God, for Digby, is the ultimate alchemist.

This is the point when it comes to early modern scientific discourse. As Ann Blair argues, the entire scientific project of Renaissance natural theology was engaged with leading the student toward God through "observing and understanding the intricate and causal interconnections that account for the harmonious arrangement and variety of the

creation" (26). This way of viewing the world was not regarded as mystical, however, but as thoroughly rational. Indeed, Digby upbraids Sir Thomas Browne for sloppy scientific thinking as regards, among other things, the existence of witches; and, following Aristotle, he admonishes Browne to stick to phenomena (*Observations* 36–7, 40–1). Not that Digby is always so demanding of himself.

Association of the perfection of bodies through chemistry with the Resurrection was, of course, a tenet of the alchemists. Comparing the perfection of nature to the glorified body was nothing new. In the *Bibliotheca chemica* (printed in 1546, but written as early as 1330) Petrus Bonus makes the connection easily (Jung 297–8). As scholars have observed, the alchemist could easily associate the language and aims of alchemy with the Christian program of salvation, perfection, and resurrection (Jung 299; Vidal 947–8, 952–7). This metaphor occurs in the alchemical tract *The Glory of the World*, wherein the unnamed author compares perfection of matter to resurrection and describes alchemical work in theological terms: "the body loses all its grossness, and becomes new and pure; nor can this body and soul ever die, seeing that they have entered into an eternal union, such as the union of our bodies and souls shall be on the last day" ("The Glory of the World" 1: 175). Compare these to Digby's words that the plant raised from its ashes would have "a kind of glorified body" (*Vegetation of Plants* 73). In a letter dated 11 September 1633 and addressed to "My kinde frend," Digby employs similar language: "Glory neither destroyeth nor drowneth nature, but refineth her and then leaueth her att liberty to exercise all her orderly functions; of wch loue is the noblest" ("Letter-Book" 147).

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It would be wrong, however, to interpret Digby's philosophical/scientific stance as idealist. On the contrary, his is a thoroughly materialist project, grounded as it is in an Aristotelian/empiricist framework.[8] Indeed, in his *Two Treatises. In the One of Which, the Nature of Bodies; In the Other, the Nature of Mans Soule* Digby upbraids those who apply spiritual terminology to physical realities and admonishes them to stick to describing the soul in terms of observable qualities (394–7).[9] In the section treating the soul in *Two Treatises*, Digby considers not a taxonomy of the soul, but limits himself to describing its operations: logic, the accumulation of knowledge, the experience of time, and the like. In this, he follows Aristotle's assertion that "all the affections of the soul involve a body" (*De Anima* 1.1.403a.16). Even Digby's experiments with the so-called "Powder of Sympathy," though laughable to us, were based on a materialist understanding of the atomic nature of the world.

While his scientific work is grounded in an Aristotelian sensibility, Digby reveals himself in the letters and *Loose Fantasies* as imbued with the spirit and aesthetics of Christian Neoplatonism, evidence of a truly impressive intellectual ambidextrousness. But what is interesting in his scientific work concerned with palingenesis is the way the Christian Neoplatonist haunts the Aristotelian. He thinks he is treating the subject as a scientist, when in fact he is unconsciously treating it as a metaphysical poet.

Michel de Certeau describes the mysticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a "bereavement" that "emerges from mourning," and results from "absence" (1–2). This is certainly the trajectory onto which unconscious metalepsis draws Digby following Venetia's death: one which he traces until his own. Certeau further defines the mystic's desire as a desire for the absent God and suggests that the Mystical Body of the Church becomes a kind of surrogate for the hidden deity. For de Certeau,

> this central logos calls back one who has disappeared and calls for an effectuality. Those who take this discourse seriously are those who feel the pain of an absence of body. The "birth" they all await, in one way or another, must invent for the verb a body of love (80).

Digby's researches into palingenesis received all the intensity of his bereavement for "the one who has disappeared," and his pain for the "absence of [a] body" was very real. As a result of this very palpable absence, Digby created a surrogate for the absent body in his attention to palingenesis and its promise of resurrection. Palingenesis became the psychic object of Digby's cathexis, wherein Digby the Aristotelian and Digby the Neoplatonist found momentary stasis. His incredibly romantic nature, unbeknownst to him, left him prey to a symbol of transcendence from which he never escaped.

The letters Digby wrote to his family and friends following Venetia's death offer the best insight into the manner in which unconscious metalepsis works in Digby's scientific work. These letters, entitled "In Praise of Venetia," were meticulously copied by Digby's scribe and are preserved in the Morgan MSS of the New York Public Library, documentary evidence not publicly available until 1937. In Gabrieli's opinion "they read like formalised soliloquies wherein Digby tried to clarify his feelings, work off his despondent mood and give vent to his equally sincere instinct for self-dramatization" ("Introduction," "Letter-Book" 114). Gabrieli follows the tradition, begun by Digby himself and followed upon by E. W. Bligh and R. T. Petersson, which depicts Venetia's death as *the* psychological threshold in Digby's life (115). And while Venetia's death was no doubt a key event in his life, one can speculate as to whether the seeds of Digby's own psychological palingenesis were not planted long before Digby encountered his immortal beloved.

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As he does in considering the *Loose Fantasies*, Cope questions whether Digby's series of letters written subsequent to Venetia's death may be an attempt to rehabilitate his wife's reputation (59). But before whom? Not, as Cope suggests, before the Digbys' peers, who probably never saw the letters in question. Perhaps, we might argue, Digby's project of rehabilitation was enacted for the edification of his sons, still very young children at the time of their mother's death. Perhaps, it is obvious, his marital apologetics were performed before the addressees of the letters, Digby's brother John among them. Even here, though, the relationship between form and intention is hazy. Gabrieli, for one, questions whether or not the letters ever reached their addressees. "Some of them," he admits, "no less than meditations, may very well have been composed as literary exercises" ("Introduction", "Letter-Book" 113). More likely, the letters were written as a glorification, a theological transumption, of Venetia before Digby himself.

In the letter to his sons, Kenelm, John, and George, dated 18 May 1633 (less than three weeks after Venetia's death), Digby writes at very great length and with vehement emotion. He extols Venetia in decidedly Neoplatonic terminology, equating her beauty with virtue in a tone also encountered in the *Loose Fantasies*:

> For a beginning then, I shall tell you that I am confident a richer and a brauer soule was neuer lodged in a fairer and more louely bodie: they held a iust proportion together; they were both master peeces of God and nature, and aequally w$^{th}$ out taint or blemish ("Letter-Book" 122).

Digby in another place explains that Venetia "grew fatt" (131); and Gabrieli, based on evidence he garners from Digby, believes her sublime countenance was marred by the ravages of small pox (440).[10] Digby proceeds to attest Venetia's modesty and her piety.[11] Then he renders a brace of excessive – and slightly creepy – blazons on Venetia's beauty, both living and dead (129–31).

In a letter dated 24 June 1663 to his brother John, Digby gives further evidence of his unconscious metalepsis. Here, following a passage in which he asserts of the body that "the sacrament [of marriage] giveth a diuine addition and confirmation to it," Digby speaks of Venetia in alchemical terms:

> But sometimes (though very rarely) nature will show vnto us, as if to iustifye her power, that she can make a Master piece perfect on euery hand, so that on no side of it censorious critikes shall be able to finde a blemish or a shadow. But (alas) when she parteth with such a Phoenix out of her bosome, and deliuereth her vp in her due season into fortunes handes, that enuious Goddesse repining att the perfection of the others worke, looketh seldom w$^{th}$ a benigne eye vpon her: whereby we often see that they haue the worst fortune, who have in them selues groundes to hope and deserue the best. The Phoenix of this age was my wife: for as in exactnesse of beauty and features, in goodlinesse of shape and person, and in gracefulnesse of behauior, she exceeded y$^{e}$ handsomest of her age, euen of their owne acknowledgement (144).

The phoenix was the symbol par excellence utilized by alchemists as emblematic of the circuit of alchemical perfection and as a cipher for palingenesis: illustrations of an assortment of birds, salamanders, and even anthropomorphic figures arising from ashes or fire are standard features of alchemical iconography. Lyndy Abraham describes the phoenix as "a symbol of renewal and resurrection signifying the philosopher's stone" as well as emblematic of "alchemical multiplication, where the quality and quantity of the elixir are infinitely multiplied by dissolution and coagulation" (152). Digby, in this exuberant description of his deceased beloved, seems to have conveniently "forgotten" the theological-alchemical motif implied in the symbol and relies instead on a figure of excellence. Nevertheless, in Digby's selection of the phoenix as a metaphor for his dead wife, we can read an additional strand of the unconscious metalepsis that played havoc with his psyche.

In a *second* letter to his brother John, also dated 24 June 1663, Digby makes the Venetia-palingenesis-resurrection association even more explicitly. Following the macabre blazon in which the melancholic Digby catalogues the corruption and decay of Venetia's body in the tomb, he conjectures about what she may be pondering in spirit, asking "is not her soule afflicted with thinking that this vncouth carkasse she must one day dwell in againe?" ("Letter-Book" 455). Yet, he already possesses the answer, for he believes Venetia

> knoweth that this is the course of nature and the lawe of God prescribed in the creation, which by such changes bringeth thinges to perfection. In nature euery retrogradation is the meanes to acquire new degrees of excellency; and after euery dissolution, when the partes are ioyned together againe, the meanest thinges multiplye thier vertues a hundred and a thousand fold.

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> I can not place the resurrection of our bodies among miracles, but do reckon it the last worke and periode of nature; to the comprehension of which, examples and reason may carry vs a great way (455).

For Digby, resurrection is not contrary to the laws of nature. Rather, resurrection accords with nature's intention. In his theory of resurrection Digby tries to explain exactly how nature works toward perfection. Furthermore, this is a thoroughly – for the time – *scientific* position, as Digby "proves":

> Lett vs call to our ayde the spagyrike art and that will teach vs that it is not in the power of any agent to destroy the forme of the meanest vegetable that groweth vpon the earth, nor to separate it so totally from the matter it was in but that it will still retaine a seede or rather a sparke of fire that hath power to assimilate other fitt matter into its owne nature, and to make an other substance like the former, but much more noble and perfect. Take but a contemptible nettle out of a ditch, and by putrefaction and distillation separate all the partes of it, and calcine the faeces with the strongest fire that can be made, and vse all the power of art to destroy this poore weede; yet there will remaine a salt which all the elements together can not alter or corrupt; and as soone as that meeteth with a fitt subject (though neuer many so many yeares after), a fresh herbe, the same indiuiduall in essence and substance that was before, will spring vp againe (455).

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Here Digby shows all his cards. We see evidence of his study of Paracelsus, who in a neologism referred to his variety of medical alchemy (also called iatrochemistrie) as the "*ars spagyrica*" ("spagyric art") (Paracelsus 166–7). We also find traces of Digby's own work with palingenesis in the seemingly offhand example of nettles – the very plant he tells his audience at Gresham 30 years later he had used in attempting the palingenesis of plants. When Digby says that the decomposed plant will "retaine a seede or rather a sparke of fire," however, he is not only referring to the physical seed. Rather, we find in this reference an echo or transumption of a passage from St Paul mediated through Paracelsian science:

> But some *man* will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? *Thou* fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other *grain:* But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body [. . .] So also *is* the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory (1 Cor. 15: 35–8, 42; emphasis in original).

As he continues the letter to John, Digby ascribes to the risen plant "the attributes of a gloryfyed bodie" ("Letter-Book" 457). Then, in a bizarre twist, as he contemplates his beloved's state "in heauen," *while addressing his brother*, Digby begins to apostrophize *Venetia*. It is almost as if we witness Digby's breakdown:

> Braue Soule, if thou beest so neere me, or where thou mayst heare my voice, or comprehend the motions of my heart which thinketh of nothing but thee, be so

> charitable as to wipe away the mistes and filmes that so dimme my eyes, as well as vnderstanding as of sense, that I can not see the least glimmering of the light that shineth about thee (458).

And he continues in much the same vein for several lines, before begging John's pardon with the oxymoronic apology, "Mine is a kinde of rationall maddnesse."

Had Digby the language of psychoanalysis at his disposal, he might have been able to identify his obsession with palingenesis as a sublimation of his grief over Venetia's death. But he did not. In this letter more than in any other example found in his written work, we see the left-brain/Aristotelian Digby and the right-brain/Neoplatonic Digby united in a brief but unstable union. This clearly is a "rationall maddnesse." Elsewhere, the scientist and the poet are segregated in neutral corners of his psyche, and he maintained this psychological sequestration throughout the remainder of his life in which his writing fell into two general categories: scientific research, on the one hand, and Catholic apologetics on the other. But in this letter written only six weeks after Venetia's death, Digby comes closer than he ever does in his writing to bringing his conflict to a resolution. Freud might say that, in his state of exalted melancholia, Digby was suffering from a denial of Venetia's death and that he fixated himself on the symbol of palingenesis as a link to "the loved object." But it may also be that the metaleptic chain by which Digby is drawn – and its attendant symbol of resurrection – reaches beyond his love for Venetia and his guilt about her death. It may spring from an even deeper source. And that deeper source lies exactly where Freud told us it would be – in Digby's relationship with his father.

Digby's relationship with his father, however, was characterized more by absence than presence – but his father's was a powerful absence. When, on 30 June 1606, Sir Everard was executed for his participation in the Gunpowder Plot, his elder son Kenelm was only 2 years old. As horses drew the prisoner in a wattle hurdle to the gallows, it is reported, Sir Everard's wife Mary "braved the crowd's displeasure by crying out to him and two small boys waved from a window, keeping their heads low" (Thomas 3). We may safely assume that the two boys were Masters Kenelm and John Digby. When the hangman drew the heart from the still living Sir Everard and held it up to the hostile crowd announcing, "Here is the heart of a Traytor!," legend has it the dying man replied, "Thou liest!" (Aubrey 96; Thomas 3).

It is not hard to conjecture what his father's martyrdom must have meant to Sir Kenelm Digby. Often our first memories – typically registered between the ages of two and five – are connected to an experience of pain or trauma. His father's death may well have been Sir Kenelm Digby's earliest memory. And, even were it not, awareness of the circumstances of his father's death would easily have taken on legendary proportions in the mind and imagination of a personality already prone to interpreting events in mythic terms. While imprisoned and awaiting his execution, the elder Digby wrote a letter to his sons, in which he admonished them to

> Let this end (God's service I mean) be the chief and onely contentious strife between you. . . .Let this be the mark which your thoughts and actions may still level at; for here is the chiefest Prise, to recompense the best deserver . . . I . . . pray that you live as I may hope to die, which is in the perfect obedience of the Catholick and onely saving Church [. . .] Above all things in the world, seek to obey

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> and follow your Mother's will and pleasure; who as she hath been the best wife to me that ever man enjoyed, so can she not fail to shew her self equal to the best Mother, if you deserve not the contrary (quoted in Thomas 19).

According to Roy Digby Thomas, this letter was found among Sir Kenelm Digby's private papers following his death and, while he lived, his servants often found him rereading it. Considering the importance of Sir Everard Digby's letter to his son, one can interpret the letter Digby wrote to his own sons following Venetia's death as a mimesis in which he both imitates his martyred father and calls him back from the dead.

Obviously, Digby's was a thoroughly – and defiantly – Catholic family. His godfather, and a close friend of his parents, was John Gerard, leader of the Jesuit mission in England, and one of the nation's most wanted fugitives (Thomas 9).[12] Further proof of Digby's recusancy is the fact that he left Oxford without taking a degree in order to avoid the mandatory Oath of Supremacy (Petersson 35). Nevertheless, Digby formally converted to the Anglican faith in 1630, a move most critics interpret as political rather than theological.[13] Indeed, his conversion coincided with Digby's being made Commissioner in the Royal Navy, and he is said to have been a candidate for Secretary of State by 1632 (Thomas 113–14).

However, following Venetia's death, Digby returned to the religion of his birth, the religion for which his father died. Digby's friend Archbishop Laud wrote letters urging him to reconsider (Petersson 110, 337, note 138). The date of his re-conversion is assumed to have been between 1633 and 1635. Gabrieli argues that, like the "secret" period of his marriage to Venetia, Digby's formal return to the Catholic Church came in 1635 following a similarly "secret" period. Venetia's death was the zero point of his return to the Catholic fold (Gabrieli, "Introduction" "Letter-Book," 119).

Digby's return to Rome was followed by a fervent engagement in Catholic apologetics on his part. As with the roles of courtier, lover, and scientist, Digby threw himself wholeheartedly into the new role of apologist. Among the first of his works following his ecclesiastical renewal was a preface to Sir Tobie Mathew's translation of St. Augustine's *Confessions* (Paris, 1636). It was at this period that Digby recorded his conversations with Sir Edward Coke's daughter Frances Villiers, Lady Purbeck, present at that time in France, as he attempted to sway her to Catholicism (Petersson 134). These discussions, published as *A Conference with a Lady about Choyce of Religion* (Paris, 1638), show Digby at once fervent, rational, and romantic. Digby also prepared a paraphrase of St Albertus Magnus' *A Treatise of Adhering to God* (London, 1654). In addition to these endeavors, he composed a letter of over 200 pages to his cousin, George Digby, urging him to convert to the Roman Church, published as *Letters between Ld George Digby, and Sr Kenelm Digby, kt. Concerning Religion* (London, 1651).[14] During exile in France, Digby wrote *A Discourse, Concerning Infallibility in Religion* (Paris, 1652; with another edition issued in Amsterdam during the same year). Of Digby's enthusiasm for winning souls to Rome, Robert Sidney, the second Earl of Leicester, writing from France, lamented to King Charles I, "Sir Kenelm is busy in seducing the King's subjects in these parts from the Church of England" (Petersson 142). Digby also consulted with Pope Urban VIII on behalf of England's Catholic Queen Henrietta Maria, who was concerned for the Catholic cause in England, making Digby's return to Rome literal as well as figurative (212–22).

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Venetia's death, then, tragic in itself, became a further metalepsis of the death of Sir Everard for Digby, which was also a metalepsis of the Catholic Church. The constellation of realities and symbol which intruded upon Digby's psyche following his wife's death brought him back to Rome. His work in palingenesis was an excrescence (perhaps it would be better to say an *inflorescence*) of this chain of tropes: in a sense, the alchemical distillation of his (unconscious) Great Work. Digby's thoughts on palingenesis and the Glorified Body, furthermore, are truly materialist notions, perhaps the epitome of materialism. Finally, the absence upon absence experienced by Digby drove him in response to find "real presences" in every sense of the phrase. As de Certeau describes it, "One suffers the pangs of absence because one suffers the pangs of the One" (2). Digby's suffering was a symptom triggered by the absences of Venetia and his father, but derived from a desire for assurance in a religious context: the real presence standing as the final referent in his long chain of metalepsis was the real presence of the resurrected Christ. Indeed, Digby's period of Catholic apologetic activity can be read as a therapeutic discourse in which he sought to appease the ghosts of his Catholic father and wife while defining his (and his age's) more immediate concerns for religious assurance and at the same time defining for himself his own relationship to a more holy Ghost. His religious writing, then, is as much apology as apologetics.

The Digbian *corpus* can be seen, as Slavoj Žižek says of Christianity itself, as "a militant work of love" (Delpech-Ramey 36). This is why I would hesitate to interpret Digby's train of metalepsis in the Freudian sense of repression, libido, and Oedipal anxiety that Bloom detects in literary influences. The irony resides in the fact that, though Digby focused on the palingenesis of plants and animals in his work, his real sphere of activity is grounded not in biology but in the soul. The manifestations of unconscious metalepsis evident in Digby's life and work are more akin to what George Steiner describes as *real presences*, living presences born of admiration, or love, or appreciation, or duty, or even guilt. That Digby's metalepsis is unconscious for the most part, I have little doubt. But its energy derives as much from love as from anxiety as he strives to forge an epistemology of assurance.

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## Notes

1. Delpech-Ramey, 33.
2. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 3: 847–51. My translation.
3. Lyndy Abraham describes the *venter equus* ("horse-belly") as "a slow, moist heat of dung used for putrefaction and distillation. Horse-belly is a euphuistic term for horse dung"

(103). Allen G. Debus claims that Paracelsian thought was confined to a limited, esoteric following in England until about the 1640s (127). He conjectures that the physician and occultist Robert Fludd first discovered Paracelsian medicine while on the Continent from 1598 to 1604 (105). However, Deborah E. Harkness locates the popularity of Paracelsian medicine in London as early as 1573 (76–83).

4. For more on palingenesis, as well as on the creation of the homunculus, see Chapter 4 ("Artificial Life and the Homunculus") in William R. Newman's *Promethean Ambitions*.
5. Freud well may have described palingenesis as a "hysterical symbol" in Digby's case. See "The Project for a Scientific Psychology (1895)" (Freud 1: 49–50). In the 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction," Freud describes sublimation as a process of "idealization" in that the "object, without any alteration in its nature, is aggrandized and exalted in the subject's mind" (14: 94). This doubtless describes Digby's modus operandi.
6. See especially books 16 and 17 of *Theologiae Platonicae, de immortalitate animorum* in Marsilio Ficino. Vittorio Gabrieli also detects echoes of Pico della Mirandolla's "Oration" in the *Loose Fantasies.* See his "Introduction" to Digby's *Loose Fantasies* (xix).
7. Interestingly, Digby's observation of the crystallization of the "nettles" bears a striking resemblance to experiments in "capillary dynamolysis" undertaken by Eugene and Lilly Kolisko in the 1930s.
8. For more on Digby's Aristotelian materialism see Dobbs. See also Henry.
9. James N. Wise believes Digby's views are materialistic along Cartesian-Hobbesian lines (68).
10. In a letter, undated, written in French, Digby describes Venetia as having "quelques marques et vestiges d'autre fois un mal discourtois" ("Letter-Book" 104). There is much speculation that Nathaniel Hawthorne modeled his characters Aylmer and Georgiana of "The Birth-mark" on Sir Kenelm and Lady Digby (Reid 337 – 51). Apparently, Digby's medical treatment of Venetia included her regular partaking of a "viper wine" as a tonic over a space of *nine years* (!) (Petersson 103).
11. He tells that she had "wi$^{th}$ her a ghostly father; a reverend and holy man," suggesting she was harboring a Catholic priest ("Letter-Book" 125). He likewise describes her devotion to "the Sacrament" and desire that "att the houre of breathing out her soule she might haue the habite of St. Francis vpon her" (132). He also implies that she was a Third Order Franciscan (133).
12. On Fr. Gerard, see, in particular, Hogge. In *The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest,* Fr. Gerard relates that he was responsible for bringing the Digby family into the Roman Church. He instructed Sir Everard in the faith and then the two of them conspired to lead Lady Digby thence as well. He admits of Sir Everard that "I loved him very much" (Gerard 166–8). Later, Sir Everard defended the Jesuit at his trial (Gerard 204).
13. Petersson speculates that Digby's conversion was due to being resigned that the sun had set once and for all on the Catholic faith (92–5). Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas conjectures that Digby was "educated a Protestant for obvious political reasons" in the "Preface" to Digby's *Private Memoirs* (viii). For Nicolas, Digby was never "of any other religion" than that of the Church of Rome.
14. Petersson reports that Digby's evangelical efforts were successful with both George Digby and Lady Purbeck. Lord Digby, however, relapsed into Anglicanism (138); whereas Lady Purbeck's conversion was of a more militant and permanent strain (142).

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