John Donne’s *Of the Progress of the Soul*: Unfolding Contemplations on Death and a Spiritual Voyage to the Immortal World

Yu, Jie-Ae
(Changwon National University)

1.

John Donne’s numerous sermons, letters, and prose works (such as *Biathanatos* and *Death’s Duel*) evidently show his persistent meditations on the intimate relationship between death and the immortality of soul. In one of his sermons preached at Lincoln’s Inn on 28 March 1619, Donne declares man’s irresistible destination, mentioning that “all our life is but a going out to the place of execution” to death (280–82)\(^1\). He endorses once again the same issue after three years at Whitehall on Easter day in 1622 by deploying figurative images of “whirlwind” and “dust” compared to be the destructive force of death and man’s frailty abided by it. In accordance with *Biathanatos*, *Death’s Duel*, and a plenty of letters, Donne, however, also recognizes that death embeds simultaneously a “deliverance” because it paves “an entrance to everlasting life” where the human soul is immortal and liberated from the “body of death” (*Biathanatos* 149–50, *Death’s Duel* 409). As one of precise examples, he illustrates with the death of Jesus and his triumph over mortality through his resurrection. It

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\(^1\) All the primary sources of John Donne’s prose and poetry in this article will be taken from *John Donne*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990).
is this complex side of mortality and immortality that drives the author to contemplate in his various prose writings.

Not only Donne’s prose works but also his poetry enriches his religious faith that death is not the end of life, but it is a gateway to get into the eternal life. His early poems of the 1590s, *Songs and Sonnets* largely register his striking diversity of attitudes and viewpoints on the physical domain of love, whereas his poems mostly composed after 1601 (the disastrous year of the loss of his public career as a result of his secret marriage to Ann More) clearly reveal how seriously he was preoccupied with the paradoxical problem of human mortality. For example, some of his *Holy Sonnets*, written during his hard moments, mainly unravel his conception of physical destruction leading to the imperishable domain of human soul. What this article will argue is that it is in his much longer poem, *Of the Progress of the Soul* where he does expand, in great detail, the entangled domain of death and the eternal world after mortality. As Meg Brown points out, one of Donne’s poetic device is to “make a progression” of his thematic ideas throughout his poems (71–72). Brown’s idea is pertinent when we examine the poet’s coherent exploration of his main concern with the tragic aspect of human bereavement in this world, which is nevertheless open to the other side of eternal world after death. This article aims to explore how *Of the Progress of the Soul* embodies the poet’s unswerving investigation into the contrary aspects of the demolition of this human world and the permanent domain of human soul unaffected by such physical destruction.

II.

*Of the Progress of the Soul* is one of the two verse elegies which Donne composed in 1612 in order to pay tribute to the premature, tragic death of fifteen year old Elizabeth Drury, daughter of his patrons, Sir Robert and Lady Drury. Donne, who had already written an epitaph for her stone grave in 1610, commemorated her untimely perishment and innocent virtue for her age. In *Of the Progress of the Soul* he clearly reinstates his consistent rumination on the subjects of death and the

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