

Student Responses to RENEWAL Questions

The following apply only for renewal applications. Please consider these responses in making your assessment of the application.

1. Please describe how successful you were in achieving the intended outcomes of and adhering to the plan/timeline of your original proposal.

While the overarching ideas driving my project remain the same, I misjudged the time it would take to work through my theoretical framework. I adopted unfamiliar concepts from contemporary philosophy, which proved to be challenging to understand and articulate. Incorporating this framework required additional reading and continued effort, but I believe it will ultimately make the final draft of my project stronger. Now that I have worked through the theory behind my analysis, I will continue to investigate how this theory applies to my own readings of metaphysical poetry.

2. Please describe how successful you think your relationship with your mentor was during your first semester of UROP.

My mentor has remained supportive throughout my first semester of UROP. Professor [REDACTED] provided important recommendations as I worked to strengthen the theoretical frame of my research, and he has given me the freedom to structure this project around my own interests while being accessible as a mentor.

3. Please explain what you think the impact of an additional semester in UROP would be to your educational and career goals.

Going into my final semester of my undergraduate, I hope to complete my thesis and graduate with an Honors degree in English. The Fall 2019 semester was mostly spent creating a theoretical frame for my thesis and writing a preliminary draft, but writing is only part of the research experience. I think it's important to present this material, and an additional semester in UROP would allow me to gain experience sharing my research with a broader audience.

UROP Proposal

Title of Proposal

Abject Subjects: Bodily Imagery in the Metaphysical Conceit

Problem/Topic of Research or Creative Work

My research will investigate how seventeenth-century metaphysical poets used bodily imagery to complicate and expand the emotional and spiritual subjects of their poetry. As Samuel Johnson observed in a 1779 essay, metaphysical poetry often creates discomfort for readers by forcing unnatural comparisons between two disparate objects. Its practitioners draw out peculiar and sometimes paradoxical relationships in extended metaphors known as conceits, yoking their ideas together, in Johnson's words, "by violence." For this study, I plan to look at the way anatomical fragments are mobilized as objects and given agency outside of the bodies in which they exist. The work of Richard Crashaw, a metaphysical poet active in the mid-seventeenth century, provides a particularly deep well from which to pull material for this project: his poetry utilizes hearts, tears and blood, layering metaphorical and theological significance into extreme images

that ultimately become distant from their subjects. This grotesque exaggeration of bodily sensation has given Crashaw a poor critical reputation, and his work is traditionally associated with bodily excesses that border on the repellent. In fact, Crashaw is famous - or, rather, infamous - for the ways in which he uses intensely physical descriptions to access religious themes, often blurring the line between the sacred and irreverent or erotic.

Crashaw, however, is not alone in his metaphorical expansion and mobilization of the body. John Donne, a metaphysical contemporary, elaborates on many of the same elements in his poetry, drawing hearts and tears into emotional conceits that restructure their relationships to their subjects. Bodily fragments in Donne's poetry, however, seem to take on a more subordinate role, serving as a reference point for a larger whole. Strangely, these referential objects are often imbued with the essence of a poetic subject, becoming a different substance than their physical reality.

Exploring the treatment of bodily objects in the metaphysical conceit offers an opportunity to reconfigure our historical understanding of the relationship between these two poets. In existing criticism, Crashaw and Donne are often kept decidedly separate. Readers have struggled to stomach Crashaw's extreme imagery, and they tend to fixate on the purely sensational aspects of his poetry, denouncing this physicality as an undesirable divergence from Donne's more cerebral musings. In order to investigate this disparity, I turn to a more contemporary framework: Object-Oriented Ontology, or OOO. OOO aims to decenter human experience as the ultimate marker of subjectivity by arguing that no object can fully understand another object and that any relation between objects is indirect and therefore incomplete. Combining these two tenants, OOO proponents suggest that objects that are not human-anything from trees and squirrels to galaxies and grains of sand-exist in a world that is not necessarily human, and therefore beyond the realm of human perception. In Crashaw and Donne's poetry, bodily objects are allowed to exist outside the control of their speaker in a manner that seems preemptive of object-oriented thought. While this ontology offers an unexpected way to interpret bodily imagery, I'm especially interested in where these conceits break OOO framework. The treatment of body parts as objects actually seems to complicate traditional notions of OOO-hearts, for example, are physically essential to our humanity, and it is therefore difficult to separate them entirely from the human subject. OOO also seems to ignore the contrived nature of poetry: any agency given to an object within a conceit is by nature a product of poet's thought, reliant on the author's creative decisions. In continuing this project, these sorts of questions drive me to complicate the notion of "objectification" as it is applied to bodies.

Relevant Background/Literature Review

Compared with his metaphysical contemporaries, Richard Crashaw's poetry is often critically associated with excess: his poems contain too much body, too much blood, too many baroque conceits. This overload is likely to induce in readers what George Williamson, in his canonical book *The Donne Tradition*, termed the "Metaphysical shudder." The Metaphysicals, Williamson argued, have a unique way of targeting emotional nerves through their poetry. Their conceits force readers to regard ordinary objects in "unearthly" ways, connecting us with the "terrible nebula of emotion which surrounds our life" (93). When we read this sort of verse (Williamson uses the example of Donne's "bracelet of bright hair about the bone") we "shudder at the strangeness of so simple a thing." In this light, part of the experience of reading metaphysical poetry is a sort of discomfort or destabilization, a reevaluation of an object in an unfamiliar context.

However, there remains an obvious divide in the tones and poetic methods of Crashaw and

metaphysical giant Donne. Joan Bennet, in *Four Metaphysical Poets*, offers an explanation for the rift in the way Donne and Crashaw use their conceits to induce this Metaphysical shudder: "Whereas [Donne] tend[s] to overelaborate an idea," she clarifies, "Crashaw loves to elaborate sensations. Moreover, his sensations are peculiar and sometimes repellent" (109). Bennet categorizes Donne's metaphorical extension as one that deals with intellect and ideation, whereas Crashaw's is one that exaggerates physical feelings to the point of discomfort.

Richard Rambuss, a contemporary Crashaw critic, disagrees with Bennet's characterization of Crashaw as purely a sensational poet. Instead, he recognizes a more intellectual side to Crashaw's work, contending that intellectual and spiritual concepts actually develop somatically throughout his poems. For Rambuss, the shock that Crashaw propels through his readers with his extreme imagery is simply characteristic of metaphysical poetry. He even goes so far as to link Crashaw directly to Donne, claiming that "both poets sensationalize the most fundamental tenets of the Incarnational Christianity they espoused to such palpable effect that we are jolted into experiencing anew (or perhaps even for the first time) the expressive strangeness of the religion's conventions" (507). Like Williamson's Metaphysical shudder, the physical manifestations of Crashaw's themes serve to dis-acquaint audiences with familiar and unquestioned beliefs, revealing their ultimate peculiarity.

My research is interested in what has historically made critics uncomfortable, and where Rambuss sees another avenue through which to access spiritual themes: bodily imagery used in the metaphysical conceits. In order to understand how bodily objects relate to poetic subjects, I first draw from Julia Kristeva's formulation of the "abject" in her influential 1980 essay *Powers of Horror*, and then from Graham Harman's recent articulation of OOO in *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*.

Specific Activities to be Undertaken and Timeframe for Each Activity

During the Fall 2019 semester, I worked to establish a theoretical framework for my project and apply this framework to my readings. In my final semester, Spring 2020, I will continue to develop my existing draft and prepare to present my research, devoting about eight hours a week to the project.

Weeks 1-5: I will continue to apply my theory frame to literary sources, refining my close readings and identifying coherent arguments. My drafting during this time will focus on organization, and meetings with my mentor will focus on organizing major arguments.

Estimated time: 40 hours

Weeks 6-10: During these weeks, I will be focusing on finalizing my draft as well as creating a presentation for the upcoming Undergraduate Research Symposium. I plan to give an oral presentation, so I will generate a lecture plan as well as visual aids to use during my talk. Meetings with my mentor will focus on effective strategies for presenting literary research.

Estimated time: 40 hours

Weeks 11-15: In the final weeks of the semester, I will be presenting my research and polishing my thesis. My mentor and I have discussed the possibility of submitting this work for publication, so these weeks will be focused on planning strategies to distribute my research.

Estimated time: 40 hours

Total estimated time: 120 hours

Relationship of the Proposed Work to the Expertise of the Faculty Mentor

██████████ is an Assistant Professor in the Honors College. He received his Ph.D. in English in 2015, and his research focuses on the relationship between technology and religion in early modern England. I have worked with Professor ██████████ in an Honors Intellectual Traditions class as well as a Renaissance Literature class, and the content of both courses has shaped my research interests. Because of Professor ██████████'s familiarity with the time period and the authors that my project will focus on, he has been able to provide valuable guidance as I have carried out my research. Professor ██████████ has been a supportive mentor throughout the development of this project, and I believe his expertise will continue to be useful as I complete my thesis.

Relationship of the Proposed Work to Student's Future Goals

I am entering my senior year, and I am set to graduate with degrees in English, Political Science, International Studies and Chinese. I am completing my Honors thesis in English, and this work is driven in part by my goal of graduating with an Honors degree and an Undergraduate Research Scholar Designation. However, in addition to simply fulfilling a graduation requirement, this project will add a valuable dimension to my undergraduate education. Over the course of my first semester with UROP, I have found a passion for research in the humanities-finish my thesis with the support of UROP offers a unique opportunity to complete an individual project in a discipline that often feels underrepresented in research programs.

Participating in UROP so far has allowed me to develop a research question and grapple with complex intellectual problems, and it has taught me that this sort of work requires patience and perseverance. With an additional semester of UROP, I look forward to further refining my thesis and learning how to share my research with the communities around me. After two semesters of UROP, I will have developed skills that will help me beyond my degree. After I graduate, I plan on applying for graduate programs in international relations. Having this sort of research experience will strengthen my graduate school applications and show that I am able to generate, plan and execute long-term research projects. It will also equip me with the skills I need to complete an advanced degree, communicate my research, and hopefully begin a career in international policy research.

References

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