Sex Theory: Theology of the Body as Literary Criticism

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Throughout his papacy, John Paul II delivered a series of 129 audiences about the body, sex, and the meaning of life; his exegesis was later published as the text titled *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. His work is not only a reaction against the sexual revolution, but also against modernity’s neo-Manichaean culture and ethics in general. At the core of his theological anthropology are the truths that the body is an expression of the person; that the human person is most fulfilled in the gift of self; and that together, in mutual self-giving, the male and female bodies constitute a spousal analogy through which we may come to an understanding of the Trinity on earth.

This project aims to condense the text and apply it as a literary theory to elucidate three novels: *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Written on the Body*. 
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Acknowledgments

(Blessed John Paul II, pray for us.)

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# Table of Contents

I am 1

A theological unconscious 5

Why Catholic theology [of the body]? 6

I. Language 8

What does the body have to do with words? 8

Original man: “from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8) 9

Words as a chiasmic medium 11

Bodies as a chiasmic medium 12

II. Literature 22

III. Love 48

Works Cited 50
Illustrations

The three ontological realities of human nature 20

Body as word 20

Body as flesh 21
I am

I am a Catholic, American woman with an English Literature major; “I am a multitude,” as Whitman said. However, through the various facets of my person, I have found that my underlying identity is that of a reader. Each part of me serves as a method of discovering Truth as I synthesize beauty in the world around me—that is, as I read. I read books, I read the world, and I have come to realize that on a written page, the tangible meets the abstract in a vortex of signifiers.

For three years as an English major, the most significant dialogue has occurred between my Catholic faith and the novel—in particular, between *Theology of the Body* and the novel. *Theology of the Body* is a series of 129 (in some publications, 134) audiences that Pope John Paul II held during his papacy on the body, sex, and the meaning of life. I heard about it in high school from a friend who described it as the latest craze in Catholicism. However, I knew nothing more about it until attending a conference with Christopher West—an international lecturer who puts *TOB* into simpler terms—my sophomore year of college. I was quickly dumbfounded at the amount of truth (an unthinkable concept for our postmodern condition) I encountered there: the type of truth that bypasses rationalization, hits you at your innermost being, and compels your entire self to say, “I get that.” During the same academic year, although I had not yet read the actual *TOB* text, I used the little knowledge I had of it for a paper on *A Clockwork Orange*. My entire class unanimously opposed Anthony Burgess’s anticlimactic ending; I agreed that it was odd for a character to be a belligerent criminal for twenty chapters and suddenly, in the twenty-first, decide he desires a wife and child.
However, through the lens of *TOB*, the final chapter made perfect sense; in fact, the rest of the novel made *no* sense without it.

In short, my paper argued that Alex’s criminal behavior is a disordered expression of a holy desire. Rape, which is called “ultra-violence” in the novel, is a disgusting perversion of the spousal relationship, which is intended to reveal a bit of the joy found in the eternal exchange of love in the Trinity. Because this exchange is an abstract theological reality, the visible symbol of the male-female union helps us on earth understand it. As human beings created in the image and likeness of God, we inherently gravitate toward this understanding. Thus, Alex is searching for truth, but he is using a distorted means to find it. The final chapter shows a subtle yet significant redirection of this inborn desire that had been driving him all along. My professor, who was not at all familiar with *Theology of the Body*, said it was the most successful vindication of the 21st chapter he had ever read.

I do not say this to draw attention to my work. Rather, I say this to indicate when I realized how self-evident the truth of *TOB* is; I began to find its traces in many novels thereafter, and its potential as literary theory unfolded itself. Surprisingly, I was not surprised to discover that many nonreligious authors (unwittingly) write very Catholic ideas, when I considered my personal faith. I would not choose to center my life around anything less than Truth, and if I believe in truth inspired by a Creator, why would that truth not speak for itself in the world around us? Why would God make it entirely out of reach? If the fundamental aim of literature is to share and make sense of the human
experience, then of course any author is going to find some sense, by virtue of being a co-creator.

Why *Theology of the Body*, though? First, it is culturally relevant. We are living at the peak of the sexual revolution; sex sells everything, abortion and birth control are arguably society’s most heated topics of discussion, and much of my generation has grown up hearing our parents and grandparents lament, “the world is [the youth are] so corrupt! You would have *never* seen that [Lady Gaga, string bikini, etc.] back in *my* day.” *TOB* is enticing because it makes sense of this corruption without condemning the people involved.

Second, *Theology of the Body* is deeply rooted in semiotics, as is literature; therefore, Truth and truth are bound to collide on a page when that page is an interpretation of a physically lived experience. This became increasingly evident when I read *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson; I owe her the credit for my subsequent infatuation with the Bible verse “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In his *Letter to Families*, John Paul II wrote that the “richest source for knowledge of the body is the Word made flesh” (Waldstein 96); it “represents the very ‘logic’ of Christianity” (West xxvii) by making that which is invisible visible (TOB 19:4). Christ was both divine Word and human flesh: a divinized human body. By understanding this, in the context of ontological query, we discover that every human being is both body and spirit enmeshed—not a dualistic being, but an inspired body. In the beginning of his extensive catechesis, John Paul II reflects upon this interpenetration of material and
abstract, immaterial by reflecting on a similar false dichotomy of experience and
revelation:

In the interpretation of the revelation about man, and above all about the body, we
must, for understandable reasons, appeal to experience, because bodily man is
perceived by us above all in experience...we have every right to be convinced that
this “historical” experience of ours...is in some way a legitimate means for
theological interpretation. (4:5)

His words parallel readers’ and writers’ relationship to literature: as living bodies, we
physically and emotionally experience the world around us. We are then compelled to
interpret, aestheticize, redeem, and communicate those experiences through writing.
Others read this writing, and as they do their own interpreting, aestheticizing, redeeming
and communicating, literature cyclically influences the way they live as persons. Bits of
truth are thus passed from body to page and back to the body—and so on. Throughout
man’s existence, this contributes to the type of progress that John Paul II applauds in his
final audience, stating that “true progress consists in...the development of the human
person” (133:3).

If the human person—through his and her bodiliness—signifies the Spiritual, then
it must speak its own language (104:4). Thus, it follows that any point at which verbal
language intersects body language is where the richest Truth may be found. It is the goal
of this project to offer a methodology for finding and interpreting these places in
literature—in modern and postmodern literature, particularly, for its frequent (and often
highly controversial) representation of the body and sex. The aim of this methodology is
twofold: 1) to unearth a “theological unconscious”—adapting Fredric Jameson’s
terminology—for non-Catholic readers, and 2) to offer Catholic readers a means of finding truth in even the most “trashy” literature.

A theological unconscious

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Jameson argues that we never interpret a text as a “thing-in-itself.” Instead, we use “sedimented layers of previous interpretations” that prompt us to read with a specific method, or “metacommentary” (Jameson ix-x). The Marxist framework he employs is not simply another discursive angle competing against these methods: “the ethical, the psychoanalytic, the myth-critical, the semiotic, the structural, and the theological...” To Jameson, these are only locally authoritative, while Marxism is an “‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (x). Although I nod to the structure of his claim, I instead propose that it is a *theological* unconscious that at once cancels and preserves these metacommentaries. This unconscious not only cancels and preserves, but is also primordially responsible for the very existence of these competing interpretive methodologies; not all literary frameworks are equally authoritative, but without a diversity of frameworks, no authority is attainable at all. I will demonstrate later why and how Theology of the Body inspires the “‘pluralism’ of the intellectual marketplace” (x).

Meanwhile, it is important to recognize that the meaning of the body and sex is technically a philosophical, a-historical matter, aside from the concrete relations between
man and woman that physically propel history. However, I am concerned with the paradox that John Paul II calls

an inner dimension that escapes the outer criteria of historicity, but that can still be considered ‘historical.’ Even more: it stands at the root of all facts that constitute man’s history—also the history of sin and salvation—and in this way [the body and sex] reveal the depth and very root of his historicity. (31:5)

Jameson may say, “always historicize!” (ix), but I proffer that what prompts him to demand this is an even deeper “untranscendable” desire to “always theologize!”; that is, a foundational and formative desire to find truth, latent in every human being, initiates every other desire to superimpose a metacommentary onto historical matters. In John Paul II’s terms, Jameson’s idea of history is theological.

Why Catholic theology [of the body]?

It must be noted precisely what is meant in this paper by a theological unconscious, or [t,T]ruth. After this referent is established, other important terms such as subjectivity, beauty, and communion can be clarified as well. Truth, in this context, will denote Catholic theology in terms of the human person. What I term “Sex Theory” is concerned not simply with a general Christian essence, but rather with specific tenets of Catholicism. This is partially because I can only fairly explicate the doctrine with which I am familiar. Furthermore, the [Roman] Catholic church—and here I mean its prelatic leaders under the guidance of the Pope—aims to be unified in its interpretation and promulgation of Truth (of course, I do not claim that these leaders always follow what they promulgate). In contrast, there are countless variations of Christian doctrine, and this project requires more theological specificity than their basic binding sentiment, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior.” This is a sentiment shared by Catholics as well, but for
Catholics it has been translated into clearly defined standards of behavior and morality; underneath these standards and far more pertinent to this project, however, lies a theological and anthropological understanding of the human person as a living body.

Thus, unlike other literary theories, Sex Theory will stem from a pre-existing referent: John Paul II’s extensive exegesis on that which the body and sex communicate about God and the meaning of life. I will first put these teachings into more condensed terms, in hopes of making them comprehensible to all readers, whether or not they have a personal knowledge of Catholicism. These simplified teachings will comprise Truth, the skeleton of Sex Theory and the ontological understanding of man’s existence. While the underlying premises of, for instance, feminist theory are continually subject to debate among literary critics, the underlying premises of Sex Theory are not. This renders the nature and direction of Sex Theory’s methodology—the application of that Truth to a text—different from that of other theories. Instead of using a theory to construct (or discover, depending upon one’s relation to postmodern notions) truth (meaning) from a text, Sex Theory will provide tools for finding Truth manifested as truths in literature. Therefore:

1) Its initial applicative direction is backward; its initial character is disintegrative; its initial process is an unfolding.

1a) Truth becomes truth when human beings write.

2) Its second applicative direction is cyclical; its second character is restorative; its second process is an assimilation.

2a) truth suggests Truth when human beings read.
This circular quality of reading via Sex Theory results from the very nucleus of Theology of the Body and of Catholic doctrine in its entirety: “the mystery and reality of the Incarnation. Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology...through the main door” (23:4). I hope to show that writing, because it always reflects one’s human experience and consciousness lived as a body, can connect us back to a central mystery of embodied Word. Consequently, Sex Theory is additionally unique because it examines not only literary content but also the nature of language itself. Although these areas are closely intertwined from the perspective of this theory, I will discuss language first and literature second.

I. Language

*What does the body have to do with words?*

John Paul II devotes hundreds of pages to developing his thesis about the human body. Using key passages from Genesis, Matthew, and 1 Corinthians, he spans his analysis of human love and sexuality across three spheres: from “original man” to “historical man” to “eschatological man” (Waldstein 113). Separating the first two spheres is the entrance of original sin into the world, and separating the latter two is the reality of the resurrection. Thus, this scope is extra-temporal; the only realm that operates inside the limits of time is that of historical man, while all three realms operate significantly within the limits of man. It is crucial to note that when I say “man,” I imply its primordial definition: the whole “human body in all the original truth of its masculinity and femininity” (TOB 14:4). It is my hope that one day, women who have been personally injured by the patriarchal usurpation of this word’s original inclusivity
will be able to read “man” as “human being.” The bi-subjective manifestation of the human person, as it exists as a prototype for all of human community, is one of John Paul II’s key points that I adapt as a foundation for Sex Theory. This foundation also includes the three ontological dimensions of man and the notion of the sacramental order—that is, the human body as an efficacious sign of grace (93:5). Thus, while John Paul II’s theological and anthropological exegesis ultimately leads to a conjugal ethics, I am more interested in his foundational explanations of the truth about the human person as a body, which precedes that ethos and sexual morality. Where he uses a theological understanding of the body to elucidate moral norms, I diverge to illuminate lingual and literary tendencies.

*Original man: “from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8)*

To delineate the ontological dimensions of man, John Paul II primarily refers to the two accounts of man’s creation in Genesis, treating the stories not as historical fact, but as an a-historical explanation of human nature. When Adam and Eve chose the knowledge of good and evil, the mysteries of sin and death entered the world: “mysterium iniquitatis” and “mysterium mortis,” respectively. Before these mysteries completely disoriented man’s ontological clarity,

...that man is the only creature in the world that the Creator willed ‘for its own sake’...that this same man, willed in this way by the Creator from the ‘beginning,’ can only find himself through a disinterested gift of self. [Gaudim et Spes, 24:3]. (15:3)

This self-evidence is illustrated in the statement that Adam and Eve were naked without shame (Gen 2:25); after the fall, however, they experienced shame as a “‘limit’...
experience” (26:5), becoming afraid because they were naked (Gen 3:10). The loincloths they consequently wore in order to guard themselves point to an ontological barrier between the original “man of innocence” and the historical “man of concupiscence” (TOB 18:3, 26:5).

On the “original” side of this barrier:

[the body, as the expression of the person, was the first sign of the presence of man in the visible world. In that world, from the very beginning, man was able to distinguish himself, to identify himself, as it were—that is, to confirm himself as a person—also through his body. In fact, the body was from the beginning marked, so to speak, as the visible factor of transcendence...through masculinity and femininity, a transparent component of reciprocal giving in the communion of persons. Thus, in the mystery of creation, the human body carried within itself an unquestionable sign of the ‘image of God’ and also constituted the specific source of certainty about this image, present in the whole human being...he himself participated in the divine vision of the world and of his own humanity, which gave him a deep peace and joy in living the truth and value of his body in all its simplicity. (27:3-4)

Through man’s certainty of the image of God, the body—masculine or feminine—perfectly expressed the spirit. The Divinity that the body signified was simple and self-evident. After the fall, however, on the historical side of the ontological barrier of shame, man experienced

a certain constitutive fracture in the human person’s interior, *a breakup, as it were, of man’s original spiritual and somatic unity*. He realize[d] for the first time that his body [had] ceased drawing on the power of the spirit, which raised him to the level of the image of God. (28:2)

It is absolutely crucial to recognize that the experience of shame was “mediated by the body” and thus created “a fundamental disquiet in the whole of human existence” caused by the body’s newly inherited resistance against the spirit and, therefore, against man’s
unity as a person (28:2-3). It is this *fundamental disquiet* that I propose is responsible for all human questions, conversations, and literature.

*Words as a chiasmic medium*

Words allow us to quell this disquiet, to understand human existence, and to mend the break in man’s spiritual and somatic unity. To demonstrate exactly how words function, I wish to adapt Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the *chiasm*. As previously noted, the fall of man resulted not in a complete severance, but rather an ever-recurrent tension between the body and the spirit—between man’s objective and subjective identities. This resonates in all similar antithetical pairs: visible and invisible, signifier and signified, concrete and abstract, emotional and physical. Merleau-Ponty claimed that the viewed and the viewing, the touched and the touching—object and subject, essentially—do not exist in opposition to each other, but in a complementary dynamism: an intertwining, a chiasm, *flesh*. They possess a sort of reversibility that is never fully realized (Merleau-Ponty 147); consequently, we cannot encounter ideas independently of our “carnal experience” (150). This is but a snippet of Merleau-Ponty’s work, but the point at which his phenomenology becomes most pertinent to *Theology of the Body* occurs when he writes of beings both sensible and sentient:

> it is evident, that [our body] unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other. (137)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to contradict his own claim that the human body unites objectivity and subjectivity; the following statement indicates a disequilibrium:
My seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visible with it. There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather, if, as once again we must, we eschew the thinking by planes and perspectives, there are two circles, or vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naively, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other. (138, emphasis added)

From the perspective of Theology of the Body and original man, the object and subject spheres were created to be concentric. In all of historical man’s existence, however, they have been ontologically off-kilter. Despite this innate unrest, the form of the human body itself, in its masculinity and femininity, still signifies and drives us toward the spiritual-somatic unity of original innocence. That is, our bodies are oriented extra-temporally, toward the physically self-evident Truth and Love from which we came and for which we are destined: that is, the sphere of eschatological man, another a-historical realm of existence which will manifest itself post-Resurrection.

Bodies as a chiasmic medium

Until humankind reaches this eschatological reality, which lies partially outside of our present comprehension, we live as perpetually fragmented glimpses thereof: recall that the body makes the invisible—the spiritual and the divine—visible (TOB 19:4). The male and the female bodies are a prime example of a chiasmic relationship, a microcosm of every other subject-object dynamic within human knowledge. The body has a spousal meaning, John Paul II says, and if we merge Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the chiasm and John Paul II’s spousal analogy, we can discover the theological unconscious written dynamically into creation. Man, in our masculinity and femininity, is best understood in the context of gift—of Love—because God’s creation of man was a “‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing” (13:3).
Because it was not good for the man-male to be alone, God created man-female as a gift, for whom the man-male was to reciprocate in giving himself. Their original call to mutual self-giving echoes throughout humanity; since original existence, “the visible world has been created ‘for [man]’...[c]onsequently, every creature bears within itself the sign of the original and fundamental gift” (13:4). With Adam and Eve as the original prototypes:

[...]he body, which expresses femininity ‘for’ masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity ‘for’ femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons. It expresses it through gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is the body: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs. Masculinity-femininity—namely, sex—is the original sign of a creative donation...This is the meaning with which sex enters into the theology of the body. (14:4)

Therefore, the body, because of its spousal quality which “plunges its roots deeply into [historical man’s] theological ‘prehistory,’” speaks a language of its own (4:1). Our “‘co-inheritance’ of sin,” however, produces a perennial disconnect (but not complete severance) between our inherent system of meaning and our comprehension thereof. The dimension of historical man is a tense middle ground in which we venture (with varying degrees of awareness) toward Truth—toward Love—through our fractured (but not ineffective) bodies.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the chiasm, or “flesh,” is pivotal for understanding the fluid relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds, between the original and historical ontological dimensions. It is helpful to think of these dimensions in terms of the body’s language, its innate system of powers: put simply, we live in a world of truths and loves, which functions as a glimpse of a World of Truth and Love. The human
person is a body, not has a body, and is consequently a point of intersection between these [w,W]orlds. Unfortunately, human beings waver between subject and object, between World and world, and this disequilibrium typically results in the body’s objectification; sin and death tend to render the body a mere thing, instead of an integral person (this issue will be better illustrated when I apply this theory to novels). Even though “a perfect system of powers [exists] in the reciprocal relations between what is spiritual and what is bodily in man...’historical’ man experiences many imperfections of this system of powers” (67:1) Eventually, though, the body of historical man will experience complete and self-sufficient spiritualization; that is, the spirit of eschatological man will “fully permeate the body and the powers of the spirit will permeate the energies of the body.” (67:1). The chiasmic relationship between spirit and body will collapse; throughout historical man’s existence, the spirit and body still interpenetrate, but in the beginning they were indiscernible.

Therefore, words and writing are a perpetual human endeavor to reconnect the objective body with its subjective experiences. John Paul II alludes to this in Theology of the Body: “[w]orks of culture, especially works of art, allow those dimensions of ‘being body’ and of ‘experiencing the body’ to extend in some way beyond these living persons” (60:1-2). Although we can never fully overlap subject and object, abstract and concrete, et cetera, historical man’s latent connection to original innocence motivates us to asymptotically attempt such a recovery. This has deep theological roots in Catholic doctrine: the three Persons of the Trinity, the Church and Christ, every interpersonal relationship, and every husband and wife form a rich intersubjectivity in the visible
world, because of their (chiasmic) union-communion. These union-communions are spousal in nature—and not always, but sometimes, sexual—because they are comprised of reciprocal gifts of selves.

Just as the eternal exchange of Love in the Trinity prompted God to reveal Truth through a visible creation—the basic reality of man’s “theological prehistory” (25:1)—the (spousal) relationships among human beings, mediated through human bodies, prompt us to find and share truths through our own creation: through literature: through co-creation. Recall that the mysteries of sin and death caused a rupture in man and woman’s awareness of the truth of their bodies, because their fall first manifested itself as a mutual experience of shame about their nakedness. Because the human person does not have a body, but is a body (Waldstein 103-104), this rupture has offset historical man’s entire ontological stability. Consequently, writing reflects the constant need of human beings to make sense of maimed relationships and sometimes confusing (yet inherently beautiful) experiences. John Paul II’s following statement, which I have divided into segments, summarizes Sex Theory and demonstrates that understanding [Divine] Love in all of its visible manifestations [human love]—and sometimes misrepresentations—forms the complex, intersubjective matrix of our visible realm and the meaning of human life:

Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless,

(of Christ:)

if love is not revealed to him,

(of human relationships:)
if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.

(of theology:)

This...is why Christ the Redeemer “fully reveals man to himself.”...The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into Him with all his own self, he must

(of reading and writing:)

“appropriate” and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and redemption in order to find himself. (Waldstein 86)

Essentially, if there were no disconnect between historical man’s body and his awareness of its male and female mystery, human beings would not write at all.

In order to better understand the semiotics of the body, we must align the writing and reading cycle within the three dimensions of man: the Truth enjoyed by original man becomes truth when human beings write, and through the communicative arts, human beings assimilate these fragmented truths as they read, temporarily connecting us to the realm of eschatological man. This is the type of “theological reconstruction” of which John Paul II speaks (69:3). Reading and writing, because of the chiasmic nature of language, move us from concrete experience toward abstract Truth (and perennially back again) by helping us to understand our subjective dimension of wonder, beauty, and emotion: we glean experiential truths by aestheticizing or re-creating our lives. Although “the subjective dimension of experience...cannot be separated from the ‘language of the body’” (111:2), the objectification of our own bodies damages the interpenetration of visible and invisible. In a voice of atonement that resonates from the beginning to the
end of time, words configure a pliable middle space between the visible and invisible aspects of life through which we can re-subjectify our physicality. In this manner, language holds an important role in the co-redemption of mankind. We, historical man, exist in a “phase of revelation and realization” (94:3) through the complex interplay of life and language.

This phase of revelation and realization, mediated through the spousal language of the body, “is perfectly personal and communitarian at the same time,” because the image of God—that is, the person as male-female—is actualized in both the communion of man and woman and the communion of all persons in the mystical body of Christ (69:4), prefiguring the perfect bodily and spiritual unity that we will enjoy after the Resurrection; the sexual expression of the spousal analogy will no longer be necessary, because the spousal quality of Love will be self-evident again. The sole glimpse of Truth’s self-evidence on earth is Christ, who serves as the nexus of all three dimensions of human nature. As Word made flesh, He collapses the distance between signifier and signified, between visible and Invisible, fully revealing man to himself (Waldstein 86). While He lived in perfect psychosomatic unity and self-evidence of Love, we live in a working and participatory effort toward such unity.

Like Christ—rather, with Christ—we are also word embodied, but “word” with a lowercase w because of sin; despite this, we can come closer to an understanding of Word embodied by continually co-creating a body of words—literature—that becomes more alive the more writers and readers there are participating. This corresponds to the mystical body of Christ—the Church—which is only complete in light of all the unique
human beings that comprise it; similarly, the body of all writing throughout historical
man’s existence, constantly in flux, shapes an understanding of divine Truth the more
truths we read and write. This is because of the individual nature of every human being,
of which we are reminded through every male-female union: “precisely through being
man and woman, each of them is ‘given’ to the other as a unique and unrepeatable
subject, as ‘I,’ as person. [Sex] is not only decisive for man’s somatic individuality, but
at the same time it defines his personal identity and concreteness” (20:5). When man and
woman conjugally unite as one flesh, this is when the truth of the human person—and the
omnigendered Truth of God—is expressed most completely. Their union serves as a
microcosmic example of the wholeness of the human person expressed in the
communitarian “flesh” of the Church: their spousal analogy demonstrates that “the
perennial and ever new ‘language of the body’ is not only the ‘substratum,’ but in some
sense also the constitutive content of the communion of persons” (103:5), complete only
in its endless manifestations of being a body.

In 1993, John Paul II reflected on the responsibility of Catholic exegetes. His
following advice for reading the Bible is equally applicable for assembling truth from any
text and for understanding the complex diversity of the communion of persons:

[Exeges] tend to believe that, since God is the absolute Being, each of his words
has an absolute value, independent of all the conditions of human language.
Thus, according to them, there is no room for studying these conditions in order to
make distinctions that would relativize the significance of the words. However,
that is where the illusion occurs and the mysteries of scriptural inspiration and the
incarnation are really rejected, by clinging to a false notion of the Absolute. The
God of the Bible is not an absolute Being who, crushing everything he touches,
would suppress all differences and all nuances. On the contrary, he is God the
Creator, who created the astonishing variety of beings “each according to its
kind”...Far from destroying differences, God respects them and makes use of
them (cf. 1 Cor 12:18, 24, 28). Although he expresses himself in human language, he does not give each expression a uniform value, but uses its possible nuances with extreme flexibility and likewise accepts its limitations. That is what makes the task of exegetes so complex, so necessary, and so fascinating! (Waldstein 19)

If we broaden the scope of this advice to include the seemingly infinite body of human literature, we can certainly expect an increase in the infinitesimal manifestations of God in human language—an explosive dissolution and decentralization of Truth. However, contrary to that which these words may connote, this fragmentation is not negative, but fantastically multifaceted. Because human art is continually [re-]generated over time, the truths it explores are forever dynamic, forever nuanced, and that is what makes “the task of [readers and writers] so complex, so necessary, and so fascinating.” Fredric Jameson is right in reading texts politically. Judith Butler is right in reading texts from a feminist perspective. The post-colonialists, the structuralists, the queer theorists all contribute something important to our innate, insatiable, and thus invariably theological quest for [t,T]ruth.

In summary, I attempt to condense these thoughts into the following charts. Italicized terms indicate the functions of the arrows, some of which are two-directional to signify reciprocity. In other areas there are two arrows to signify repetition. It is impossible, humanly, to depict any process in non-linear or non-directional terms, but I try to show that this process, by which the Trinity manifests itself in the visible world as physical (and secondarily written) symbols, is a constant cycle that occurs all at once in God’s comprehensive vision of historical man. It is cyclical because “visibility does not make the mystery cease to be a mystery” (97:5). Rather, as “[the spousal analogy]
illuminates the mystery, it itself in turn is illuminated by that mystery” (90:2). This is where an adaptation of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm is most evident:

*The three ontological realities of human nature*

*Body as word*
The manner in which the perennial relationships between man and woman (23:4) perpetuate the materialization of the Invisible closely parallels the manner in which the perennial use of language materializes the Invisible. In the same way that God is a Mystery that evokes Wonder within our material world, the materiality of literature evokes something wonderful, mysterious—true—about the human experience, something that is never fully describable—and thus we keep writing. Words are symbols that give substance and transmissibility to the otherwise intangible truths of existing as human bodies, concrete symbols that give substance and transmissibility to the otherwise intangible Truth of the Love responsible for every individual person’s existence. Without human relationships, literature would be aimless—and arguably nonexistent in the first place. Similarly, without the relationship between God and human beings, the creation of the world would have been aimless—and actually nonexistent.
To apply *Theology of the Body* as literary theory, I will first analyze Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a novel that deals largely with the objectification of women, the family, and reproduction. The story comes close to accurately demonstrating the repercussions of severing procreation from love, but its tone of forewarning is incomplete without a theological lens—ironically one of the targets of *Handmaid’s* critique. I will then explain Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, a novel propelled by the inversion of every basic truth that the human body expresses. Lastly, Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* will exemplify a positive and successful illustration of physical beauty, sexual love, and the integrity of the human person these outward expressions communicate when secured in Truth.

**II. Literature**

“My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood 61).

“Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better. Love, said Aunt Lydia with distaste. Don’t let me catch you at it. No mooning and June- ing around here, girls. Wagging her finger at us. Love is not the point” (216).

*The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts the Republic of Gilead, a dystopian region in which society is micromanaged by an oppressive theocracy. The narrator, Offred, is a Handmaid that the government has assigned to a Commander and his Wife in a perverse attempt to have a baby: she is nothing but a womb for an arranged marriage that is no longer fertile without a surrogate. Periodically throughout the story, Offred recalls a previous time in which she had a husband, Lucas, and a daughter. She sketches scenes
from the pro-choice rallies and pornography bonfires in which her mother partook. She remembers playing in the yard with her child, wearing shorts, and feeling loved. Her back-and-forth narrative eventually reveals that one day, the government interrupted this freedom by closing off all women’s bank accounts. She and her husband recognized something askew and tried to flee the country, but they were intercepted at the border; Offred was then forced into training (brainwashing) as a Handmaid, never to know anything more about Lucas or her daughter. Her role under the new governmental rule is to fetch groceries and try every month to be impregnated by the Commander. The society lives under close surveillance by “the Eyes,” and the details of Offred’s everyday life—down to the language with which she can greet other people—are strictly controlled.

Atwood’s novel is thus a response to reproductive tensions—that is, between the pro-life and pro-choice movements in recent decades—and to religious teachings—particularly those of Christianity—on sex. With the narrator’s descriptions of “the time before” when women were able to choose (23-24), I think it reasonable to assume that the novel’s themes oppose a lot of the procreative truths that Theology of the Body has to offer, making it an excellent source of discussion. Even in what seems to be a satirical critique of religion and reproductive “restrictions,” Margaret Atwood writes a lot of right.

In order to signify the reduction of human persons, Atwood dips her pages in blinding red. She uses red as that—simply red—and the color becomes a domineering means of eradicating individuality. The Republic of Gilead that Atwood creates is a product of objectification at its worst, in which women are grouped according to various
functions to serve society: Wives, Marthas, Aunts, Econowives, Unwomen, and Handmaids. The men are similarly grouped: Commanders, Angels, and Guardians. The Handmaids, who are assigned to families because they are still fertile, are the embodiment of the ascetic, Puritan mentality toward sexuality:

...red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed...Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (4)

This is the way that Offred, the narrator, describes herself and all the other Handmaids. She never discloses her real name; we are only given her patronymic substitute, which would immediately change if she were ever assigned to a new Commander: Ofwayne, Ofwarren, Ofglen, her subjectivity belongs to a man who does not—must not—love her. Through an oppressive use of colors and pronouns, the integrity and rightful freedom of both the human person and of sex are fragmented, depersonalized, and consequently manipulated.

This division of the person could be read politically; for instance, the Econowives, “of the poorer men,” “are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can” (23). While the class hierarchy in this dystopian Republic is carefully enforced, it is more pertinent here to examine the way in which reproduction is carefully enforced. If sex is the catalyst of human history, if it forms the substratum of persons, treating it in a utilitarian fashion precedes and/or contributes to the utilitarian treatment of persons in every other aspect of life. Thus, I will focus on the Commander-Wife-Martha-Handmaid dynamic—which, in actuality, is not dynamic in the slightest.
Like the Handmaids, the Wives also lose all sense of identity they had accumulated, before becoming Wives with a capital W. Offred is placed under the supervision of the Commander’s Wife, or the Wife of Fred. Both women are thus defined by the grammar of possession. The Wives are additionally set apart for their marriage roles in blue attire, while the Marthas are set apart for the housework in green. The Wives and Commanders, who are paired off into arranged marriages when they are daughters and Angels, are given Handmaids when the Wives are no longer fertile. 

Ironically, the perverse attempts at reproduction that result from this mechanization are not incredibly different—in terms of the body’s theology—from the sexual “freedom” that this novel advocates. “The Ceremony,” which occurs monthly in an awfully impersonal manner, is not just an imagined reality:

Above me, toward the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings on her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge. My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. (88-89)

This passage is vital for clarifying what happens to the integrity of the woman and of the family when sex is objectified.

First, the division of women according to their isolated functions parallels the dissonance that can occur within a woman’s subjectivity when her body is objectified. The men in this novel are certainly objectified as well—in a Ceremony, the Commander performs his part of “sex” without pleasure or personhood—but the women have a very
specific role in reproduction, rendering them more favorable to this discussion. Atwood portrays a false sense of oneness among the women of Gilead: Handmaids are not allowed to walk anywhere alone. They walk as pairs of red dresses down red brick sidewalks. They have been brainwashed at the “Red Centre,” where they learn to understand themselves as failures every time they have their period. To appease the Eyes, the red pairs stop by the Wall to remind themselves of the repercussions for people who do not act in line. Doctors who perform abortions, men who commit rape, and adulterous women are hanged on display:

on one bag there’s blood, which has seeped through the white cloth…I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. (32-33)

As Offred tirelessly describes her surroundings, she claims that the reds are not associated. This reflects the complete lack of true friendship, true relationship, true community in the Republic of Gilead. Every sort of connection is feigned, outwardly simulated through rituals, and the actual disconnect—antagonism, even—beneath these simulated connections is the result of treating persons as objects. “It’s hard to imagine now, having a friend,” says Offred (25). Even though her position as a Handmaid is supposed to be honorable, the Wives and Marthas view her as a reproachful necessity. Conversely, she envies them the little bits of work they get to do (10). When we read these divided women as the divided parts of a woman, we start to see what occurs when we deny and/or divide the unitive and procreative meanings of sex, which were originally designed to be inseparable (Waldstein 99).
We see these meanings of sex literally divided according to Wives (unitive) and Handmaids (procreative). Paradoxically, however, neither meaning—neither person—is actually involved with the Commander during the Ceremony. This represents the “symptom of man’s detachment from love” (TOB 29:4), which occurs when the unitive purpose of sex is misdirected in order to obtain self-gratifying pleasure, or when the procreative purpose of sex is negated altogether. This is not to say that all sex must result in pregnancy—such an ascetic mindset is precisely what Atwood is rightfully criticizing—however, sex that is not at least open to the possibility does result in a reduction of sex and the persons involved. Deliberately, artificially obstructing the possibility of a child (natural sterility is not so) destroys not only the procreative meaning of sex but, simultaneously, the unitive meaning as well. Divine Love freely chose to create the visible world; to attempt to erase this aspect of the human parallel is a degradation. It directs the persons, in a futile manner, back upon themselves—the man toward himself and the woman toward herself—instead of directing the persons, in a fruitful manner, outward beyond themselves, with each other, as the image of God.

Thus, the division of women according to their isolated functions also parallels the dissonance that can occur between a man and a woman when their bodies are objectified. The moment a couple begins to use each other for any reason, their love is no longer truly free. The freedom that characterizes Offred’s flashbacks to the time before, as well as the freedom that characterizes the Republic of Gilead, are incomplete expressions thereof. Offred recalls some of Aunt Lydia’s instruction at the Red Centre: “There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of
anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (23). This is how Offred proceeds to describe the “freedom to”: “women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word undone. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose.” (24). The type of freedom that both of these women miss, however, can be termed the “freedom with” and “freedom for” (TOB 14:2).

It is difficult to determine which scholar is more aware of the nuances of pronouns, conjunctions, and prepositions: John Paul II or Atwood. John Paul II states that during the state of original innocence, man existed as male and female; now, after breaking the covenant with God, man exists as male or female, not necessarily “united with each other, but rather more divided or even set against each other because of their masculinity and femininity.” This antithesis does not have to spark antagonism between the sexes, however; it “neither destroys nor excludes the conjugal union willed by the Creator (see Gen 2:24) nor its procreative effects; but it confers on the realization of this union another direction” (30:5). The direction that male and female take is toward the other, but this direction can bifurcate within itself and create very different outcomes: male and female can either direct themselves at each other in the “freedom to,” or they can direct themselves to each other in the “freedom with” and “freedom for.” Atwood is incredibly aware of the possessive and suppressive potential of the former; this is illustrated in the way that “of” delineates every Handmaid’s name and subjectivity. The mutual self-giving that should belong to the conjugal union is completely inverted. In possessing these women—Handmaids and Wives alike—the society can proceed to
depersonalize them. Once they are depersonalized, they can be used as society deems necessary: tattooed at the ankle, any woman still fertile is a national resource (Atwood 63). Babies are products, handed immediately after birth from Handmaid to Wife. The family is false.

Atwood also uses pronouns in a particularly subtle manner to invert any form of union and communion in the society. Cora, one of the Marthas stationed in Offred’s home, alludes to the hope that their Ceremony will be fruitful: “‘Maybe we have one, soon,’ she says, shyly. By we she means me. It’s up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs” (129). In this excerpt, the meaning of the word “we” is completely redefined; the women may be grouped, in a sense—each home holds Wife, Martha, and Handmaid with the hope for a baby—yet each woman is isolated from the other by function. The women may sit at public events according to their divisions and the Handmaids may walk the town side-by-side, but within these groups are further degrees of isolation: friendships are suspicious (85).

This false communion of women is most poignantly demonstrated when Offred describes a Birth Day. Fittingly, we are reminded of the blood that “connects” the Handmaids: “The room smells too, the air is close, they should open a window. The smell is our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet...Smell of matrix” (116). As the Handmaids chant and pant together, and the Wife sits behind her Handmaid as if they are both birthing, Offred states, “We grip each other’s hands, we are no longer single...Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy”
What could be a deeply human experience of birth is rendered impersonal by stripping the event, and the women involved, of all individuality. We see this shift from specificity occur within a slight trip over words, mid-sentence, just a few lines later: “We’re with her, we’re the same as her” (119). From with to the same as, the value of community is thus replaced by the use-value of collectivity; the women’s sense of “together” is merely mechanical.

Such obscured disconnect among people, it must be remembered, is rooted in man’s fundamental disconnect from Love. “[Falling in love] was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant, a creature from outer space. Everyone knew that,” Offred reminisces (221). This truth is strikingly similar to the theology that the body expresses: that man cannot live without love. He and his life are senseless to him “if he does not encounter love” and “participate intimately in it” (Waldstein 86).

Therefore, as a society without love, pleasure, or beauty, the Republic of Gilead demonstrates the ontological consequences of objectifying the body; society as a whole and people as individuals fold inward, toward themselves, in Puritan and pleasure-based belief systems alike. If the body does not reach beyond his or herself to connect to others and co-restore truth, the subjective realm of existence is amputated. The historical realm of man destructs itself, becoming material without meaning, and the nature of a person’s value moves from something inherent to something earned: “I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable,” Offred thinks, while remembering her husband Lucas (Atwood 93).
One may see her name shift from “Of Fred” to “off-red,” signifying a character who never fully succumbs to objectification; inside, she maintains the remnants of subjectivity. She discovers and joins a clandestine, anti-government community of Handmaids and Guardians. Her recurrent desire to steal something reflects the need to sustain a bit of the agency denied her. Most importantly, she maintains her voice and identity by telling her story, even when it pains her to remember. In these forms of subversion, she stays slightly off-color, slightly off-red, even though to the Eyes of Gilead, her body is just a body red: never read.

" ‘The sweetest and most heavenly of activities partake in some measure of violence—the act of love, for instance; music, for instance. You must take your chance, boy. The choice has been all yours.’ I didn’t understand all these slovos...” (Burgess 115).

“They made a real pudding out of this starry veck, going crack crack crack at him with their fisty rookers, tearing his platties off and then finishing up by booting his nagoy plot (this lay all krovvy-red in the grahzny mud of the gutter) and then running off very skorry. Then there was the close-up gulliver of this beaten-up starry veck, and the krovvy flowed beautiful red” (103).

Depersonalization also plays an important role in Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange. The main character, Alex, is a fifteen-year-old delinquent who lives to ravage the town, leading his gang of “droogs.” He describes their crimes in gruesome detail, cudgeling ordinary citizens either to steal or simply for the thrill of it. This behavior is common in the city, to the point that cops are overwhelmed and outwitted. Alex usually leaves “Ultra-Violence,” or rape, for later in the night, allowing his thrills to gain momentum through the day. Midway through the novel, the government arrests Alex and uses him for a sort of social experiment; the prison researchers try to “cure” him by forcing him
through violent reenactments of crime after crime and inducing a visceral reaction in conjunction with the videos. Of course, he initially enjoys the scenes—they mirror his own criminal life—but he soon leaves the prison unable to partake in his old fun. The conditioning makes him physically sick whenever he tries. His inability to choose eventually drives him to attempt suicide, the impact of which brings his mind back to “normal.” In the final chapter, Alex loses interest in his gang and their violence.

It is difficult to find a more blood-soaked novel; twenty chapters of relentless violence make the twenty-one chaptered story seem a perverse attempt at the shock factor. The American edition, because publishers truncated the novel at twenty, is exactly that. Likewise, the film adaptation is hardly bearable. Not only did Burgess’s New York publisher do Burgess the injustice of ignoring his authorial intent, but the publisher also robbed the novel of rich semantic and thematic meanings. At the very end, Alex encounters a former accomplice with his new wife, making him realize that perhaps what he actually wants is a wife and child; this shift certainly does not make much sense at the surface, when juxtaposed with twenty awful chapters. However, quite the opposite is actually true: from the viewpoint of Theology of the Body, the first twenty chapters make no sense without Alex’s shift in the twenty-first.

Burgess roots his explanation of the final chapter in the freedom to choose: “It is as inhuman to be totally good as it is to be totally evil. The important thing is moral choice...Life is sustained by the grinding opposition of moral entities” (ix). This is certainly a valid point; the novel offers no insights about human nature if Alex cannot choose between good and evil. I propose further, though, that if we read into the nature
of his choices and the implications thereof, *A Clockwork Orange* becomes a lot more about the theological anthropology which informs and incites his ability to choose in the first place. *A Clockwork Orange* is about what it means to be a human person, but fundamentally it is about what it means to be a human body.

When we remember that the body is oriented toward Love, that the body in its masculinity and femininity signifies an invisible God, Alex’s obsession with crimes against the body make, surprisingly, theological sense. The red that paints these pages also bears the generalizing function that characterized *The Handmaid’s Tale*; blood-red—or “krovvy,” in Nadsat—constructs an overbearing motif of domination over the body. The perversion in this dystopian novel is far less subtle than the perversion in Gilead, though, making it more difficult to understand how any truth whatsoever could be found underneath Alex’s violence.

In Alex’s case, the aim toward truth is made literal in the “Ode to Joy,” which plays as a warped and muffled soundtrack throughout the novel. Friedrich Schiller’s lyrics, set to Ludwig van Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, elucidate both Alex’s behavior and his affinity for the composition:

Joy, beautiful spark of Gods
Daughter of Elysium
We enter, fire-imbibed
Heavenly, thy sanctuary
Thy magic powers re-unite
What custom’s sword has divided.

Be embraced, millions!
This kiss to the entire world!
Brothers – above the starry canopy
A loving father must dwell
Whoever has had the great fortune
Whoever has won the love of a devoted wife Add his to our jubilation! (Schiller)

Schiller’s lyrics in the left column could not be a more precise description of joy’s conjugative efficacy in our physical realm: “beautiful sparks of God” serve to reunite the
subjective and objective spheres that “custom’s sword has divided” among and within the people of historical existence. Joy connects us to each other and to the extra-temporal ontologies; the specific way that this joy is consummated through the body is demonstrated by Schiller’s lyrics in the right column. “Be embraced, millions!” is a call to union-communion.

Alex’s actions are driven by the same pursuit for joy—“what I do I do because I like to do” (Burgess 40)—but his means are drastically snarled and self-defeating. From an inborn desire for infinite love, expressed in the world by flits of such joy, Alex and his droogs turn to finite substitutions: one-sided power and possession replace mutual freedom and belonging. This is accomplished, of course, through Alex’s rampant domination of bodies: he is enthralled, for the wrong reasons, with corporeality. He never fails to mention blood in every violent scene: “blood, my brothers, real beautiful” (7). Although Burgess creates the language “Nadsat” to evoke a dystopian future, the specific terms he redefines actually evoke, reflexively, an original experience of shame “mediated by the body” (TOB 28:2). This fundamental experience, which sets all of humanity akimbo, results in an inability to face the body in its self-evident truth—in its nakedness. Thus, Nadsat creates layers of perversion that mask the body’s truth. Instead of describing his crimes as good, Alex uses the term “horrorshow” (the inversion here is obvious); he calls his victims the perverts; and he literarily and figuratively dismembers his targets. For instance, he describes one of his murder victims as a “krovvy-covered plot lay[ing] saclike on the floor,” denying the body’s personhood through his words and his actions (Burgess 91).
The most striking of these redefinitions is “Ultra-Violence.” This crime is the paradigmatic example of an inborn, holy desire misdirected, making it the key to understanding the twenty-first chapter. Throughout the novel, Alex’s masculine direction undergoes a distortion far more radical than that which *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrayed; in Alex’s actions, we see masculinity not “with” or “for” femininity, not even “at” femininity, but completely “over” femininity. The consequent objectification is illustrated by further lingual butchery: women are reduced to nothing more than “real horrorshow groodies” (21) or “nogas like Bog in His Heaven” (127). The most disturbing scene, albeit the most informative, occurs when Alex rapes two ten-year-old girls:

Those two were unplatted and smeecking fit to crack in no time at all, and they thought it the bolshiest fun to viddy old Uncle Alex standing there all nagoy and pan-handled, squiting the hypodermic like some bare doctor, then giving myself the old jab of growling jungle-cat secretion in the rooker. Then I pulled the lovely Ninth out of its sleeve, so that Ludwig van was now nagoy too, and I set the needle hissing on to the last movement, which was all bliss...When the last movement had gone round...creeching about Joy Joy Joy Joy, then these two young ptitas were not acting the big lady sophisto no more...saying that they wanted to go home and like I was a wild beast. (45-46)

The “Ode to Joy” in the background may create absolute discord, but it also brings to surface Alex’s meaning as a human person, which he has tried to twist, negate, and obfuscate in a misguided pursuit of pleasure. Midway through the novel, he dreams of “another better world” and hears Beethoven’s song, except Schiller’s words are mixed with Alex’s:

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Boy, thou uproarious shark of heaven,
Slaughter of Elysium,
Hearts on fire, aroused, enraptured,
We will tolchock you on the rot and kick
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Alex is horrified by this misrepresentation, yet he recognizes that that “the tune was right.” At the novel’s close, the outward appearance of his desires may drastically change, but the nature of the desires themselves do not. *The tune was right* all along.

This is why the twenty-first chapter seems nearly déjá-vu. Both the first and last chapters begin with “What’s it going to be then, eh?” as Alex and his droogs enter the Milkbar (1, 180). They are dressed in the latest fashion, they drink Scotch, they plot their night on the town—until, this time around, Alex commissions the droogs without him. The droogs leave, and Alex catches sight of an old friend having coffee with a woman: “not the sort you would want to like throw down and give the old in-out in-out to” (187). He chats with them, then leaves the bar, and as he realizes that he actually wants a wife and child, the veil over his language begins to unravel:

> I kept viddying like visions...Alex coming home from work to a good hot plate of dinner, and there was this ptitsa all welcoming and greeting *like loving*...I had this sudden very strong idea that if I walked into the room next to this room...there I should find what I really wanted...Yes yes yes, brothers, my son. (190, emphasis added)

The subtlety of chapter twenty-one can lead us to overlook its importance—as the American publisher did—but without this artful transfer of desire, the novel is senseless. Ultra-Violence is never ethical, but we can at least understand its anthropological basis in light of the Love our bodies can reveal.

> “Articulacy of fingers, the language of the deaf and dumb, signing on the body body longing. Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a
message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body. Your morse code interferes with my heart beat. I had a steady heart before I met you, I relied upon it, it had seen active service and grown strong. Now you alter its pace with your own rhythm, you play upon me, drumming me taut.

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (Winterson 89).

Winterson’s *Written on the Body* is a nameless, androgynous narrator’s account of his or her numerous love affairs. The sometimes absurd, other times heartrending anecdotes are interwoven with his/her story of Louise, a red-haired woman for whom the narrator finally wants to do the right thing, for the first time in his/her life—rather than getting his/her own way (43-44). The narrator must deal with Louise’s facade of a husband, Elgin, the inability to rid his/herself of previous lovers’ imprints, and finally the discovery that Louise has a terminal form of cancer.

The novel is brimming with examples of the way in which myriad subjective and objective spheres intersect within the human body. The passage above is not simply a poetic representation of the impact a lover can have on one’s life; it is a real, literalized acknowledgment of a dialogue between lovers, a conversation spoken in the theological language of their bodies. Foucault claimed that we use “the image of the imperial prude” (3) as simply another way to put sex into discourse and subversively exercise power in doing so (11). The sexual revolution was only debatably liberating: it should prompt us to look at the proliferation of discourses not for their quantity, but for the “forms of imperatives that were imposed on [sex] by speaking about it” (36). Foucault’s is the usual cry against ideology.
I applaud Foucault for being wary of discourses on sex. However, I propose that the most dangerous form of power exerted over bodies does not find its sources in institutions and authorities separate from ourselves; the most dangerous of discourses are mediated by our own bodies. When we let our bodies speak in contradiction to their original language of truth and love, we risk exerting the most harmful forms of power over each other: possession, self-gratification, objectification. We deny integral personhood, freedom of choice, and the very image of God that is stamped in our bodies. Written on the Body is the paradigm of love stories, because its narrator struggles to understand these three issues.

Jeanette Winterson is well aware of the fact that a reader craves to know the name and identity of a novel’s narrator. By withholding his or her biological sex from us readers, yet revealing nearly everything else about his or her sexual behavior, the narrator can engender both his and her. The narrator pulls us along his and her past love affairs for several purposes, but perhaps the most poignant of these is to make us continually self-aware of the subjective limits we impose onto one’s physical sex:

I had a lover once, her name was Bathsheba. (16)
I had a girlfriend once who was addicted to starlit nights. (19)
I was in the last spasms of an affair with a Dutch girl called Inge. (21)
Then I met Jacqueline. (24)
And then I met Louise. (28)
I had a girlfriend once who could only achieve orgasm between the hours of two and five o’clock. (75)

With this series of anecdotes, we purport to have the narrator’s sex pinned after the first half of the novel. The scene in which “anarcha-feminist” Inge commissions the narrator
to take a gun into the men’s urinals confirms our suspicions (22). The narrator must be a man, our heteronormative mindsets assume—until the boyfriends are mentioned.

I had a boyfriend once called Crazy Frank. (92)
I had a boyfriend once, his name was Bruno. (152)

It would be easy to declare, “This narrator is bisexual! How progressive of Jeanette.” And of course, we can be further inclined to conclude that Winterson writes her narrator this way because Winterson is a lesbian. However, to connect an author with her main character’s identity is a mistake not only ignorant but insulting to her creativity. If we set aside these superficial interpretations and truly examine the narrator’s litany of lovers, coupled with the omnigendered subjective viewpoint, a deeper anthropological reality unfolds.

Recall that the spousal relationship—the sexual union between a male and a female—constitutes a substratum for the communion of persons. Through a mutual gift of their individual selves, the two unite to reflect the image of God, in the same manner that the whole of humankind—an expansive host of individual persons—unite not sexually but *spousally* “to complete the ‘image of God’ in the visible world” (TOB 29:3). E.M. Forster once wrote, “only connect.” If every individual subjectivity expresses a unique way of being a body, then the more we connect the more knowledge of God—of Truth—we can try to piece together. Literature, a means of making visible and transmissible one’s abstract identity—one’s emotions, reactions, and reflections mediated through the body—is one way to enable these connections, and sex is a perennial and symbolic reminder thereof.
In *Written on the Body*, the narrator’s mini episodes are not only a source of humor or a standard with which to compare the best lover, Louise. Although both comical and heartrending, at the root of the narrator’s diorama is the fact that language is not separable from the body. The narrator’s lovers are not in his/her past but “written on the body.” The ambivalent “you” on page 88 could reference Louise, the “branding irons” could be her hands, but the “you” is also the narrator’s other loves: Bruno, Bathsheba, et cetera. The fingers may be scorching out of passion, but they also suggest the danger of body language misused:

> [the body] speaks with its masculinity or femininity, it speaks with the mysterious language of the personal gift, it speaks finally—and this happens more often—both in the language of faithfulness, that is, of love, and in the language of conjugal unfaithfulness, that is, of “adultery.” (TOB 104:4)

In this light, the narrator’s affairs are crucial for understanding the tension between word and flesh: in this case, “word” is subjective identity and “flesh” is the individual bodies through which subjectivity is expressed. The affairs are also crucial for understanding the significance of Louise and for conjecturing the reasons that the narrator leaves her.

That is, the many love lives that the narrator discloses become a vehicle for subject and object to surface from inherent forces to visible motifs: word and flesh. The tension between these concentric spheres frames every relationship, illicit or sanctioned, in the novel. “I’ve been through a lot of marriages,” the narrator confesses, “Not down the aisle but always up the stairs. I began to realize I was hearing the same story every time” (Winterson 13). It would be easy for a religious reader to dismiss *Written on the Body* as a crass insult to marriage. Such censorship, however, can rob readers of fascinating insights. By blurring a host of boundaries in the novel—from those of the
characters’ identities to those of their bedrooms—the truly chiasmic relationship between subject and object becomes the catalyst for the entire poetic plot.

The lovers interwoven in this plot and in the narrator’s body are key examples of the potential consequences of sex—personal and historical. When the narrator betrays Jacqueline with Louise, for instance, he/she realizes, “I have already altered my world and Jacqueline’s world for ever” (38). If sex does not involve the whole person, faithfully, it objectifies the bodies involved, reducing them to objects of pleasure (Waldstein 99). In one way or another, the marriages that the narrator invades have lost their subjectivity, and the narrator likens them to empty shells:

[The marriage] has shriveled, lies limp and unused, the shell of a marriage, its inhabitants both fled. People collect shells though don’t they? They spend money on them and display them on their window ledges. Other people admire them...Where I’ve left cracking too severe to mend the owners have simply turned the bad part to the shade. (15)

Thus, affairs that feign to re-subjectify the body—by means of infatuation with another’s person, who presents something unique and new—become an enticing remedy for a marriage that has been reduced to a boring object. However, the same language of unfaithfulness that undermines the marriage will eventually objectify the affair as well: in neither situation is a balance of subject and object maintained—until, perhaps, Louise. One body can communicate polar opposite messages through the same gestures and pleasures, and the narrator teeters precariously on this point of inversion throughout the entire novel.

This is made evident in the narrator’s flashbacks to each lover. He or she tells descriptive stories about each one that appear, on the surface, merely eccentric and
entertaining; however, the extreme uniqueness of each lover serves as a hyperbole for the exclusive “knowledge” of one’s masculine or feminine spouse that sex signifies. Inge employs the narrator as a sidekick for her anti-phallic acts of defiance (21). Bruno claims to find Jesus after a wardrobe nearly crushed him to death (152). Jacqueline is remarkable for her completely unremarkable personality (26). However, each lover’s subjectivity is quickly reduced to a disposable item. In this way, the issue of inevitability assumes a nearly material nature in the novel. Each relationship is doomed from its start: “My circadian clock, which puts me to sleep at night and wakes me up in the morning in a regular twenty-four-hour fashion, has a larger arc that seems set at twenty-four weeks. I can override it, I’ve managed that, but I can’t stop it going off” (79). Louise is unique because she offers the narrator more than a combination of emotive passion and conscious choice; with her, these aspects of a relationship are indiscernible.

Unlike Louise, every other lover is rendered flat over time, objectified when the narrator either focuses only on sex or reduces the lover to some useful quality. The evidence follows shortly after every introduction:

I wanted my letters back. My copyright [Bathsheba] said but her property. She had said the same about my body. (16-17) [a girlfriend]...thought beds belonged in hospitals. Anywhere she could do it that wasn’t pre-sprung was sexy. (19) Why didn’t I dump Inge and head for a Singles Bar? The answer is her breasts. (24) It was Jacqueline’s job to make everything bright and shiny again. (25) ...no-one could take Louise with animal inevitability. (67, emphasis added) Judith’s bottom. I treasure it. (75) I had a boyfriend once called Crazy Frank...His theory was sex and friendship. (92-93) We hadn’t made love. I’d run my hands over [Gail’s] padded flesh with all the enthusiasm of a second-hand sofa dealer. (144)
Thus, under a false or incomplete sense of individuality, these characters become merely utilitarian—and consequently impermanent—pleasures for the narrator. This is not to say that the narrator does not focus on Louise’s body; he/she does, often. But when the narrator describes her body, the words are deeply infused with Louise’s subject, someone different. With so much of our bodies being similar, it is difficult to translate flesh into words, but Winterson manages to lift Louise’s body from the pages, through imagery and powerful poetics.

First, Louise’s red hair emphasizes the truth that a lover is an unrepeatable subject (TOB 49:7); the color red, with all of its vivid, often ambiguous connotations, is a strong motif throughout the novel and plays a vastly different role than in the previous two discussed. The narrator begins by setting a tone of warmth, “I am thinking of a certain September: Wood pigeon Red Admiral Yellow Harvest Orange Night. You said, ‘I love you’” (Winterson 9). He/she then depicts a moment with Louise at the beach: “You are creamy but for your hair your red hair that flanks you on either side” (11). With such directly vivid language, it does not take long for Louise’s name to paint red brushstrokes on the page and on the reader’s subconscious. She sparks the type of wonder in the narrator that John Paul II discussed through the Song of Songs: the book of love poetry that marks the center of the Bible. His praise of human love illuminates the narrator’s uncharacteristic devotion to Louise: “[L]ove unleashes a special experience of the beautiful, which focuses on what is visible, although at the same time it involves the entire person. The experience of beauty gives rise to pleasure, which is reciprocal” (TOB 108:6). The narrator discovers this truth in Louise, reflecting that during sex, “[i]t was
necessary to engage her whole person...She would not be divided from herself”

(Winterson 68). Louise reciprocally asks for this engagement from the narrator:

‘Will you be true to me?’
‘With all my heart.’
...‘And with all your flesh?’ (162)

Louise and the narrator, through sex, become inter-subject and inter-object: “Your body is twice. Once you once me” (99). Louise’s person, embodied by her physical beauty, breaks the tension between bodily desire and conscious choice, makes monogamy something liberating instead of limiting: “I want the hoop around our hearts to be a guide not a terror” (88). She and the narrator have a love that is freely exclusive, sealed by the mutual exchange of their bodies:

I was holding Louise’s hand, conscious of it, but sensing too that a further intimacy might begin, the recognition of another person that is deeper than consciousness, lodged in the body more than held in the mind. I didn’t understand that sensing, I wondered if it might be bogus, I’d never known it myself although I’d seen it in a couple who’d been together for a very long time. Time had not diminished their love. They seemed to have become one another without losing their very individual selves. (82)

Winterson’s accurate depiction of a holy relationship, one that respects the theology of each other’s body, is stunning.

Even though the narrator shows that their bodies signify Truth, he/she never disregards the fact that their bodies also have the capacity to betray; without a mutual respect for intersubjectivity, one will deceptively use the outward language of Love as a sort of Trojan horse for infidelity and degradation. Louise’s carmine palate may tie her to the sun, summer, and passion, but it simultaneously connects her to the possibilities of blood, flame, and pain: “I worried that the steady flame [Louise] offered might be fed by
a current far more volatile” (49). Capitalizing on the connotative extent of color, Winterson places Louise at the nexus of subject and object, word and flesh, spiritual and physical. Such a balance has supernatural implications for the narrator.

That is, Louise’s body offers the narrator a salvific opportunity, a redemption from the empty affairs of his/her past; she completes the narrator’s flesh in a way that breaches the ontological barriers of shame and death. First, Louise’s love effects an earthly experience of original innocence, achieved through the chiasmic power of flesh: “Louise’s face. Under her fierce gaze my past is burned away” (77). The narrator remarks that even though he/she has been through a host of such affairs, Louise is somehow new, making the narrator feel like a “convent virgin” (49). Second, Louise’s love effects an earthly experience of eschatological existence, of perfect psychosomatic unity; this is precisely why the narrator leaves Louise when he or she finds out about Louise’s cancer. Elgin, her husband, is a doctor who has the financial resources to potentially cure Louise. Therefore, the convoluted decision to leave her in Elgin’s care does not necessarily reflect cowardice and an inability to face death; on a literary and theological level, this is the first time that the narrator values another person’s living subject as much as the person’s material body. The decision to leave is probably not the best for the two of them—he/she flees without getting Louise’s opinion at all—nor may it be a realistic response, but in order for Louise to be a total antithesis to the narrator’s previous affairs, this outcome is arguably necessary. Leaving Louise radically inverts the self-gratifying objectification that had characterized every affair before her.
This respect for Louise’s body as a person is best demonstrated when the narrator subjectifies a medical text, mid-novel:

Within the clinical language...I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away. (111)

What seems a morbid fascination with the body is actually a poetic means of understanding the spirit embodied in the specificity of every person. That is, the outward difference that one’s male or female physiological sex displays reminds us of the endless spectrum of human beings: of gender. The narrator reads through an impersonal explanation of cells, tissues, systems and cavities of the body, the skin, the skeleton, and the special senses, finding the personal specifics of Louise inside the generic terminology. The spousal, theological nature of the body pervades these pages; a poignant example lies in the narrator’s depiction of Louise’s body cavities:

Womb, gut, brain, neatly labeled and returned. Is that how to know another human being?...Myself in your skin, myself lodged in your bones, myself floating in the cavities that decorate every surgeon’s wall. That is how I know you. You are what I know. (120)

In addition to this marriage of subject and object, we see the type of “knowledge” of which John Paul II writes, the knowledge of another’s person, expressed by the body and thus “acquired” through a sincere gift of self in sex.

It is after comprehending selflessness firsthand that the narrator can deserve Louise and appreciate the unique love that they had; with time, the narrator acknowledges the fear that was involved in his/her choice to leave. In view of our broken, historical existence, however, this confusion is only fitting: “due to the tendency toward sin
contracted as a consequence of original sin, man and woman must reconstruct the meaning of the reciprocal disinterested gift with great effort,” John Paul II writes (TOB 22:4). It is nearly impossible for the narrator to know, with certainty, how to preserve both love and life in their relationship. In the historical realm of existence, maintaining both is not feasible, because death is inevitable, with time. What the narrator does know, with certainty, is that Louise offers at least a glimmer of hope beyond this realm. Spoken correctly, the reciprocal language of their bodies signifies an eschatological existence to come: extra-temporal is the power of authentic Love: “You act as though we will be together for ever. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has been that time always ends” (Winterson 18).

Spousal, salvific, and specific, Louise’s love—“I want to offer you more than infidelity” (84)—is word and flesh “which cannot be the subject of any generalization” (TOB 34:4). She is word embodied, a body written: red body, body read.
III. Love

My exploration of these novels is far from complete; 500 pages of exegesis prove a hefty point of reference from which to read literature. Fortunately, John Paul II’s extensive text lends itself to constant interpretation, and the breadth of literature provides a limitless source for his text’s application: the “fundamental disquiet” in human existence will ensure that this is so. The desire for truth is an asymptotic venture, one that remains as insatiable as the desire for interpersonal union, but this is precisely why Theology of the Body lies at the heart of literature: “above all by following the trail of human hearts...we can reproduce and, as it were, reconstruct that reciprocal exchange of the gift of the person” in the text of Genesis (TOB 17:6). Through literature, we can follow this abstract trail of human hearts by following our tangible experiences and interpretations thereof: the development of the human person (133:3).

We cannot forget that our bodies are at once the guardians and the expressions of an eternal Trinitarian exchange of Love. When we consider what this implicates—the historical years our bodily reality surpasses and the post-Resurrection mystery to which it speaks—we simply cannot be complacent: “Love demands expression. It will not stay still, stay silent, be good, be modest, be seen and not heard, no. It will break out in tongues of praise, the high note that smashes the glass and spills the liquid. It is no conservationist love” (Winterson 9-10). As co-creators and co-redeemers, we can re-subjectify our bodily experiences and, in doing so, re-construct the Abstract on earth: the life and words of historical man are perpetually hyphenated. Until the Resurrection, we
must make our own connections, in order to re-learn the fragmented language and
grammar of our bodies: bodies read.

Thus, if loving one another with “the hermeneutics of the gift” (TOB 13:2)
unpacks ontological, extra-temporal barriers, and if we can envision what that powerful
human love specifically looks like through literary truth, then reading and writing pose an
ethical imperative:

The discovery of the spousal meaning of the body was to cease being for [man
and woman] a simple reality of revelation and of grace. Yet, this meaning was to
remain as a task given to man by the ethos of the gift, inscribed in the depth of the
human heart as a distant echo...From that spousal meaning, human love was to be
formed in its interior truth and authentic subjectivity. And even through the veil
of shame, man was continually to discover himself in it as the guardian of the
mystery of the subject, that is, of the freedom of the gift, in order to defend this
freedom from any reduction to the position of a mere object. (TOB 19:2)

To fulfill the task of guarding the mystery, man may love, write, or better: both.
Works Cited


