“SOLITUDE SOMETIMES IS BEST SOCIETY”:

MILTON, CONVERSATION, AND SOLITUDE

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ABSTRACT

The seventeenth century witnessed a dramatic change in the discourse of solitude reflected in some of the period's most influential poetry. In light of this fact, and in response to John Milton's enduring interest on the desirability of being alone and his reputation as one of the most "isolated English poet[s] of any significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Helgerson 233), this thesis examines the trajectory of Milton's attitude towards solitude from his early works until *Paradise Lost*. Taking into consideration the moral ambivalence associated with solitude and retirement in the early seventeenth-century, I argue that solitude becomes increasingly problematic for Milton as he encounters not only the pleasures of solitary conversation, with its capacity for heightened creative and spiritual sensitivity, but also the emotional force of loneliness. Through close readings of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, *Prolusion 7*, various shorter poems and letters, the divorce tracts, and finally *Paradise Lost*, this project traces Milton's pained transition from delight in solitary conversation with the Muses, dead authors, and God, to his resentment of solitary life and subsequently his renewed desire for conversation between husband and wife and between God and man. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton depicts the paradoxical "blissful solitude" of Adam and Eve alone together, signaling their completion as two halves of one flesh, heart, and soul (3.69, 8.499). Nevertheless, he also represents the destructive potential of an unqualified solitude in Satan, whose self-conversation leads first to a fractured psyche and then solipsism. The study concludes with a discussion of Milton's God, a deity who, despite being uniquely qualified to be alone, seeks "social communication" with the angels and mankind (8.429).

RÉSUMÉ

Au 17e siècle, on a vu un changement radical dans le discours de la solitude, reflétée dans les œuvres poétiques les plus influentes de cette période. Dans ce contexte, cette thèse examine l'orientation de John Milton vers la solitude de ses premières œuvres jusqu'à *Paradise Lost*. Milton était reconnu pour son intérêt dirigé vers les attraits de la solitude et il avait gagné la réputation d'être l'un des poètes les plus isolés et influent du 16e et 17e siècle (Helgerson 233). Prenant en considération l'ambivalence morale associée à la solitude et la retraite au début du 17e siècle, je soutiens que la solitude devient de plus en plus problématique pour Milton : il rencontre non seulement les plaisirs de la conversation solitaire, avec sa capacité de sensibilité créatrice et spirituelle accrue, mais aussi la force émotionnelle de l'isolement. En examinant *L'Allegro* et *Il Penseroso*, *Prolusion 7*, divers poèmes et lettres, les traités de divorce et *Paradise Lost*, ce projet retrace la transformation douloureuse de la passation du plaisir dans la conversation solitaire avec les Muses, les auteurs morts et Dieu, au ressentiment de la vie solitaire suivi par un désir renouvelé pour la conversation entre mari et femme et entre Dieu et l'homme. Dans *Paradise Lost*, la paradoxale « solitude bienheureuse » d'Adam et Ève indique qu'ils sont à la fois seuls et ensemble : deux moitiés d'une chaire, un cœur et une âme (3,69, 8,499). Néanmoins, il représente également le potentiel destructeur d'une solitude impropre en Satan qui conduit d'abord à une psyché fracturée et au solipsisme. L'étude conclut avec une discussion du Dieu de Milton qui cherche à communiquer avec les anges et les hommes malgré le fait qu'il est le seul parfaitement qualifié pour être seul (8,429).

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Introduction: Solitary Milton and the Ambivalence of Solitude

The first day of his life was a busy one for Adam: he meets God, names all his fellow creatures, undergoes rib surgery, and marries his wife—all in less than 250 lines of *Paradise Lost* (8.278-520). Yet John Milton dedicates the majority of this episode (and perhaps the most memorable part) to the conversation Adam initiates with God about his perceived lack of appropriate company. Thanking his creator for the splendours of Eden, Adam expresses his concern about his status as its only human: "but with mee / I see not who partakes. In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (8.363-6).[1] Adam's question reveals his perspicacity. In Milton's day the nature and merits of solitude were still under discussion, and the word itself was "not in common use in English until the seventeenth century" (*OED*, *s.v.* "solitude"). The following conversation—Adam's very first—raises several issues that Milton seems to have been contemplating through much of his adult life. Is the solitary life desirable? What does it mean to be alone? Is solitude conducive to writing good poetry? The poet appears to give different answers at various stages of his life and career.

The present thesis considers these answers to examine how Milton understood solitude and how solitude in turn informed his writing. Although several detailed studies of solitude exist for later poets such as Pope, Keats, and Wordsworth,[2] there is no equivalent scholarship in Milton studies—despite the fact that Milton's aggressive self-presentation as solitary poet likely influenced his Romantic successors. A study dedicated to Milton's notion of solitude is especially rewarding because it appears to have been the impetus for, and context of, much of his

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[1] All quotations from *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd*, and *Samson Agonistes* are from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan.

[2] See, for example, John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England*; Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Latter Poetry of Pope*; and Eleanor Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist: Moods and Themes of Melancholy from Gray to Keats*.

writing. In this thesis I will therefore consider the poet's portrayal of solitude at key points of his career, tracing his developing understanding of what it means to be alone. Solitude, I suggest, becomes increasingly complex for Milton as he encounters not only the pleasures of solitary conversation, with its capacity for heightened creative and spiritual sensitivity, but also the emotional force of loneliness. The Latin word *solitudo* is itself ambiguous and may be translated as either "solitude," as in *Prolusion 7*, or "loneliness," as in the preface to *Epitaphium Damonis*. Especially in his later works, the poet's recognition of the threat of loneliness accompanying solitude leads him to advocate conversation in society. Though "solitude sometimes is best society," the "sweet return" to companionship is more authentically human, and utter isolation is shown to be a mark of the demonic rather than the divine (*PL* 8.249-50).

The issue is all the more pressing for its enduring presence in Milton's poems and prose. As early as *Prolusion 7*, written during his university years, the young Milton praises "a cultured and liberal leisure" ["*erudito et liberali otio*"] as the ideal condition for the "development and well-being of the mind" (*CPW* 1: 289).[3] It is this leisure, says Milton, which helped Hesiod become a great poet on Mount Helicon, just as it was Caucasus' "lofty solitude" which allowed Prometheus to become a divinely inspired prophet—"the wisest of gods and men," such that even Jupiter sought his advice (289). It is precisely these roles of poet, prophet, and counsellor that Milton wished to assume. Forty years later, an older Milton was still preoccupied with the theme of solitude, as his final two major poems show; *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson Agonistes* feature isolated figures engaged in debate with themselves and others (Lewalski 2003: 510). Indeed, both major characters initially seek out that isolation, though perhaps with different

[3] All citations from Milton's prose, unless otherwise noted, are from the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe. Citations from the shorter poems are from the Oxford *Complete Works of John Milton*, vol. 3, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski and Estelle Haan.

intentions: Jesus "forth walk'd alone" with "his deep thoughts, the better to converse / With solitude" (*PR* 1.189-91), while Samson, "[r]etiring from the popular noise," goes to an "unfrequented place to find some ease.… From restless thoughts" (*SA* 16-7; 19). That Samson finds "Ease to the body some, [but] none to the mind" already suggests a difference between the two figures and invites the reader to consider the moral landscape of their solitudes (*SA* 18).

These are not isolated examples. Milton's literary exploration of solitude continues between these career bookends in much of his major poetry, including *Il Penseroso*, *A Mask*, *Lycidas*, *Epitaphium Damonis*, and, of course, *Paradise Lost*. Given his praise of leisure and solitude in *Prolusion 7*, it is perhaps not surprising that in *Il Penseroso*, probably also written in 1631,[4] Milton's speaker revels in sequestered study and meditation. He is accompanied by Melancholy, a "pensive Nun, devout and pure," who is, fittingly, the daughter of "solitary *Saturn*" (line 31; 24). The speaker takes after Melancholy, and he expresses his desire to spend his life in "the studious Cloysters pale" and "the peacefull hermitage" in solitary raptures (156; 168). This is perhaps the same kind of experience described by the Attendant Spirit in Milton's *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*, as he too is "Wrapt in a pleasing fit of melancholy" amid rural scenes (546).[5] The Attendant Spirit's felicitous lone experience is contrasted with that of the Lady, "one Virgin/ Alone, and helpless" in the woods (582-3). Her obvious vulnerability occasions a debate between her two brothers about whether she is safe or even better off by herself. The Second Brother is justifiably worried about the "single helpless maiden" (402), but according to the Elder Brother, she is in no danger, for even "Wisdoms self / Often seeks to sweet retired Solitude" (375-6). However, the Lady plainly did not seek out her solitude, and in

[4] Campbell and Corns provide circumstantial evidence for 1631 as a likely date (60).
[5] It is hard to ignore the biographical overtones of such descriptions. Cp. *Prolusion 7*: "There I too, amid rural scenes and woodland solitudes, felt that I had enjoyed a season of growth in a life of seclusion" (*CPW* 1: 289).

describing that second type of involuntary aloneness, Milton has already begun to tease out some of the issues he would explore in full in his major poetry.

Milton ended the English and Latin sections of his 1645 Poems with the elegies *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*. Critics since at least E.M.W. Tillyard have remarked how these poems frequently have more to do with the experiences of Milton's speaker than with the person they mourn or celebrate (1930: 80-85), and a key parallel between the poems is each speaker's crushing sense of aloneness upon the death of the friend. Milton describes the *Epitaphium Damonis* in the Argument as "a lament for himself and his loneliness" ("suamque solitudinem hoc carmine deplorat")—a rather peculiar construction, given that elegies are usually laments for the deceased person. Though the speaker continues his role as poet-shepherd, he bitterly complains that "now alone, alone I wander fields and pastures" (line 58). Death, as an accomplice to aloneness, paradoxically also gives birth to poetry, and solitude appears once again to be conducive to writing good poetry.

Paradise Lost is where Milton most fully explores the desirability and consequences of solitude. Besides the aforementioned discussion of solitude between Adam and God, Milton's epic features a host of solitary characters. Words like "alone" and "sole" abound in the text, frequently with unstable connotation.[6] Adam, as we saw above, experiences a dissatisfying solitude, but Eve seems to have enjoyed her time alone, as Mary Beth Long has argued (103-6). Adam and Eve are nevertheless also paradoxically described as alone together. Heavenly beings, too, appear to experience solitude: Satan is routinely described as "alone" in the first few books; God himself is "alone/ From all eternity" (8.505-6); and the Son is "sole," described thus by the

[6] James A. Freeman cites a more extensive list and suggests that the presence of such words "should condition us to think, as Milton did, about the relation of the one to the many" (55).

epic narrator, the Father, the demons, and Satan. As we shall see, the state of being alone is morally ambiguous in *Paradise Lost*, and can no longer be characterized as simply a pleasant retirement or solitude. The nature and extent of a character's solitude—and his or her response to that experience—become evidence of self-understanding and moral tenacity or of a fractured psyche and moral instability.

John Milton, Poet of Isolation?

And yet perhaps Milton's most solitary character is himself. For better or worse, critics have generally accepted the centuries-old, inherited image of the isolated Milton. Richard Helgerson goes as far as to say that Milton was "the most isolated English poet of any significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – one of the most isolated in English literary history" (233-4). While this stereotype is certainly overstated, much of the poet's oeuvre seems to support a view of a solitary Milton—as though that is precisely how he wished to be viewed. Stephen B. Dobranski shows how Milton took pains to construct himself as such throughout his public life in "The Myth of the Solitary Genius." Milton's construction of "the author as a solitary figure," suggests Dobranski, began with the antiprelatical tracts, despite the fact that those writings were themselves "clearly produced through a social process" (73). In *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), for example, Milton expresses his reluctance to set aside his individual artistic preparation and his habit of "intent study" to enter the prelacy controversy in the first place (*CPW* 1: 810):

> I trust hereby to make it manifest with what small willingnesse I endure to interrupt the pursuit of no lesse hopes then these, and leave *a calme and pleasing solitarynes* fed with cherful and confident thoughts, to embark in a troubled sea of noises and hoars disputes.… (*CPW* 1: 821, emphasis added)

Why does he leave that idyllic solitude, then? Milton says it is because "when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say, or what he shall conceal" (*CPW* 1: 803).[7] He would have us believe that the intervention is at his own personal cost, especially because he can gain nothing by joining such a controversial topic in such "tumultuous times" except the kind of abuse experienced by "the sad Prophet Ieremiah," with whom the poet frequently identifies (*CPW* 1: 802). When he does join that sea of noises, he does so while insisting on his independence.[8] Milton's public self-portrayal in the first book in which he is identified as the author is therefore that of an unwilling but necessary contributor—an informed, solitary outsider whom God has appointed to comment on the matter.

His self-presentation as "heroically singular," as Stephen M. Fallon puts it (329), continues for the rest of his life, and with increasing boldness. The solitary nature of his writing endeavours takes on a heroic character, as his later political tracts show. When the author picks up his pen again to join the divorce controversy in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1645, he introduces himself as the "sole advocate of a discount'nanc'd truth" (*CPW* 2: 224). Once again, it is "the duty and right of an instructed Christian," not his own inclination, which incites him to write despite the "chance of good or evill report" (*CPW* 2: 224). The connection between writing and fighting later becomes explicit as Milton describes his role in the polemical debate with the respected French scholar Salmasius. Here, Milton constructs himself as a warrior

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[7] An amusing, if disingenuous, motif in Milton's writings is his frequent declaration that he would not be writing if he did not have to, or that he would rather be doing something else. See, for example, the introductions of *Prolusion 6* and *Prolusion 7*, in which Milton complains about being "dragged away" from his studies to make a speech outside of his "own free will" (*CPW* 1: 266; 288).

[8] Douglas Trevor points out that by almost entirely forgoing the commonplace scholarly practice of supporting his arguments with quotations and references along the margins, Milton "further identifies his self-presentation as a deliberately unorthodox [scholar], emphasizing independence and self-determination rather than a network of recommenders and intellectual supporters" (152).

of words in an epic-like account of his defence of the English regicides: "When he with insults was attacking us and our battle array, and our leaders looked first of all to me, I met him in single combat and plunged into his reviling throat this pen, the weapon of his choice" — a kind of English David taking down the theological giant Salmasius (*CPW* 4.1: 556). The military metaphor continues in *Pro Se Defensio*, as the tireless author describes his ongoing debate with England's detractors: "for me alone it remains to fight the rest of this war […] against me they direct their venom and their darts" (*CPW* 4.2:698-9). Milton thus imagined himself heroically joining the ranks of the Republic in a different, and in his mind nobler, capacity.[9]

Though the author managed to leverage his supposed solitude to strong rhetorical effect, it is clear that his sense of isolation deeply affected how he viewed himself, his world, and his works. Biographers and critics have recently downplayed Milton's physical isolation.[10] Dobranski, for example, suggests that even during the six years of the poet's private study at the countryside in Hammersmith and Horton he was not quite as alone as he lets on (64-5). Colin Burrow, in an unpublished lecture on "Milton's Singularity," shrewdly points out that by the time Milton went blind, he would have of necessity been frequently accompanied by someone to help him get around and study. Even if we grant his sociability during these and later times, however, Milton seems to have felt alone for much of his life—regardless of whether he actually was so physically. He makes this distinction in a 1647 letter to his Italian friend Carlo Dati:

> Soon an even heavier mood creeps over me, a mood in which I am accustomed often to bewail my lot, to lament that those whom perhaps proximity or some unprofitable tie has

[9] It seems to have been quite important to Milton to feel as though he contributed in some tangible way to the Revolution. He is rather defensive, for example, about not having joined the military: "I did not avoid the toils and dangers of military service without rendering to my fellow citizens another kind of service that was much more useful and no less perilous" (*CPW* 4.1: 552).
[10] Christopher Hill rightfully considers Milton "more sociable and clubbable than is often thought" (9), but probably goes too far in his portrait of Milton as a frequent bar-hopper (97-9). See Lewalski (2003): 583.

> bound to me, whether by accident or by law, commendable in no other way, daily sit beside me, weary me - even exhaust me, in fact - as often as they please; whereas those whom character, temperament, interests had so finely united are now nearly all begrudged me by death or most hostile distance and are for the most part so quickly torn from my sight that I am forced to live in almost perpetual solitude. (*CPW* 2: 762-3)

The wearisome souls referred to here are probably his in-laws, who were then living in his house.[11] Their presence, even as they "daily sit" beside him, does not alleviate his sense of aloneness but in fact seems to increase it. For Milton, fit companionship is ever elusive, snatched away by death and distance throughout his life.

He can be forgiven for thinking so; Milton's college mate Edward King drowned in 1637, and Charles Diodati, Milton's "oldest, and perhaps only, truly intimate friend" died the following year (Lewalski 2003: 109). These deaths were the occasions for *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*. His romantic life was no more encouraging. Milton surely felt alienated in the early 1640s as his wife left him during the first three years of their marriage. As we shall see, this alienation contributes to the unmistakably personal elements of the divorce tracts. At the end of the decade, his poetic translation of Psalm 88 recorded in verse the same sentiment he had written in his letter to Dati: "Lover and friend thou hast remov'd / And sever'd from me far. / They fly me now whom I have lov'd, / And as in darkness are" (Ps. 88:18). That darkness and loss of loved ones became reality when Milton lost his sight, two consecutive wives, and his only son over the next decade. He would again lose close friends in the crushing political defeat of the

[11] Among them were Mary Powell's parents, siblings, and nephews. Lewalski recognizes his dilemma: "Milton rose to need and family responsibility, but must have felt considerable ambivalence about extending hospitality to the feckless father-in-law who had defaulted both on the interest he owed Milton from the 1627 bond and on Mary's dowry, and to the mother-in-law who, Mary reportedly claimed, had incited her to desert Milton" (2003: 207).

Restoration, so that when writing *Paradise Lost* the poet finds himself "In darkness, and with dangers compast round, / And solitude" (7.27-8).[12]

It should nevertheless be noted that Milton seems to have resisted imagining himself utterly alone for too long. The lines just quoted are followed by a qualification: "yet not alone, while thou / Visitest my slumbers nightly" (7.28-9). The muse Urania has not deserted him, and by extension, neither has poetry. As early as *The Reason of Church Government* Milton conceived of himself as "a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him"—like a security blanket of verse (*CPW* 1: 808). Even the description of his aloneness in *Paradise Lost* is paradoxical; Milton is "compast round" with dangers and solitude as if they themselves are his company, and even "with" is a preposition of togetherness, as Burrow notes in his lecture. Though he is "from the chearful ways of men / Cut off," Milton says that the insubstantial "ever-during dark / *Surrounds* me" (3.45-7, italics added). Indeed, the righteous man is never quite alone, for "he surrounds himself with his own integrity" (*CPW* 4: 791). Grammatically and poetically, absolute solitude appears unthinkable for Milton.

Despite his clear emphasis on solitude of various kinds, only recently have a few essays began to address the topic. These discussions, however, have been limited by their scope and have not been able to trace larger patterns among Milton's works, leading them at times to make unwarranted or myopic conclusions on the subject. Trevor's chapter "Solitary Milton" in *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (2004), for example, argues convincingly for Milton's "self-understood, solitary nature" throughout his life (150). Trevor makes an excellent case for the poet's disposition in the early poems and prose, but he neglects to consider the

[12] Lewalski notes that in the period following the Restoration, Milton would have heard news of several of his republican friends being publicly executed or assassinated on the streets (2003: 399-401). Milton himself went into hiding for three months following Charles II's return.

possibility that Milton's views towards solitude changed or fluctuated. Making the assumption that the life alone was always the poet's ideal, Trevor hypothesizes that "Milton esteems chastity so highly because copulation [and therefore marriage] represents the most extreme threat to his solitariness," and that "divorce is even more highly valued because it signifies the reacquisition of solitariness after it has been erroneously forfeited" (175, 177). (One wonders, then, why Trevor's Milton would recommend that anyone marry in the first place.) His insistence that solitude is Milton's ideal compels him to omit the poet's own insistence in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*—a text that Trevor addresses in some detail—that "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18, *KJV*). That verse is the basis of Milton's argument in *The Doctrine* and is repeated almost verbatim in *Paradise Lost* 8.445. Moreover, if we reduce what solitude means to Milton to simply the state of being unaccompanied, we ignore his argument that a bad marriage can serve to "increase that same God-forbidd'n lonelines" (*CPW* 2: 247). And, of course, a strictly optimistic conception of solitude cannot account for Milton's denouncement of "the evill of solitary life" throughout his divorce tracts (*CPW* 2: 235).

Thomax H. Luxon attempts to solve the problem of Milton's mixed praise of solitude in *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship*, arguing that although solitude is indeed a divine state, man suffers a "constitutive lack," or need for another (120). According to him, solitude is not bad in itself, but is harmful in practice for Adam, who is apparently not fit to be alone. For Luxon, however, this inability to enjoy the state of being alone amounts to a problem—a moral, if not ontological, deficiency. Like Trevor, he points to Milton's early writings on the ideal of solitude and then faults Adam for needing a wife. Conversely, he praises Milton's Samson for casting away Delilah and reclaiming his solitude (164). Such an excessive valourization of solitude, however, results in the devaluation of marriage into a mere bandage for

the greater problem of man's inability to enjoy solitude: his "single imperfection." God-instituted matrimony becomes little more than a necessary evil. Friendship, too, is devalued in such a conception of solitude, prompting Luxon to infer that "God could not be Adam's proper friend for, according to both Milton and classical doctrine, gods enjoy solitude and need no friends" (163). But surely this conclusion rings false; Milton's God is a social one, and even he complains at one point that he is "Not pleased, thus entertained with solitude" (*PL* 10.105). The issue, then, is not quite so clean-cut.

"This Outworne Comparison, Between a Solitarie and an Active Life"

Mary Beth Long does *Paradise Lost* more justice by considering Milton's engagement with the ongoing cultural conversation about solitude (Long 101). Already in the sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Of Solitarinesse" could refer to the "this outworne comparison, between a solitarie and an active life" (188, trans. Florio). By the seventeenth century, the dialogue about solitude reached new levels. Long gestures towards the public debate, contemporaneous with the publication of *Paradise Lost*, between pamphleteers George Mackenzie and John Evelyn, who argued for and against the acceptability of the life alone. According to Mackenzie and his supporters, solitude is a benefit for those who are morally and aesthetically suited to appreciate it, whereas John Evelyn would argue that solitude is merely a socially acceptable method of being lazy or selfish (Long 101, 109).[13] The roots of such discussions, however, go much further back, with proponents on either side in classical, religious, and even scientific domains, as the historian Steven Shapin has demonstrated. The idea that truth is best found in solitude, for example, is ancient and has Biblical and classical

[13] For more on this debate, see *Public and Private Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Mackenzie-Evelyn Debate*, ed. Brian Vickers.

precedent; Milton's examples of Hesiod and Prometheus in *Prolusion 7* attest to the idea that special knowledge can be gained in solitude. Even Aristotle, for whom perpetual solitude is "a very terrible thing because the whole of life and voluntary association is with friends" (*Eudemian Ethics* 520-1), acknowledged that the contemplative life is best achieved away from the hindrances of money and power—precisely the opportunity afforded by solitude. Diogenes and the Cynics took that principle to the extreme, but Cicero and the Stoics raised a moral objection, contending that "the entirely sequestered contemplative life was culpably egoistical; society must stand before self and the pleasures of privately seeking truth" (Shapin 196). According to Brian Vickers, this critical view of leisure and solitude persists in Roman culture, as evidenced by the writings of Cicero, Sallust, Livy, and others (1-37; 107-54).

The debate would continue into the next millennium. Not long after Roman antiquity's distrust of *otium*, Roman Christianity would once again legitimize solitude for religious purposes. Relative seclusion in cloisters and monasteries was acceptable and even commended by the Church as a divinely sanctioned withdrawal from society. Though not everyone desired such a life, it was acknowledged to be one of the most spiritually authentic modes of being—"that good part" Mary chose over the busyness of Martha (Luke 10:42, *JKV*).[14] After all, the purpose of the solitary life was the contemplation of God, which, according to medieval writers such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, was the best and most virtuous existence (chapter 8). Moreover, because these religious institutions constituted the major intellectual sites of the early Christian and medieval periods, the association between solitude and knowledge continued (Shapin 197). Attitudes seemed to shift once again in late medieval and Renaissance perceptions of the retired life, returning, as in many things, to the mixed feelings held by classical antiquity.

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[14] St. Jerome is the primary model here. For more discussion of solitude in the early medieval period, see George Duby's *Solitude: Eleventh to Thirteenth Century*.

Protestant skepticism about the monastic life no doubt played a role in troubling the debate between active and contemplative lives, as Francis Bacon's criticism of "gross and solitary monks" suggests (127), and solitude's validity as a source of moral and intellectual enhancement was permanently undermined.

Nevertheless, the well-known association between scholars and solitude persisted into the seventeenth century, and the very best scholars were still thought to work in private. Natural philosopher Robert Boyle, for example, made his work public and accessible, but "throughout his life [he] also portrayed himself as a solitary and his philosophical work as taking place in seclusion from the civic world" (Shapin 202). Similarly, the eccentric Isaac Newton was famous among his contemporaries and early biographers for his disavowal of public spaces. He refers to his groundbreaking works on optics as "my poore and solitary endeavours," and in an almost Miltonic gesture, he refuses to "expos[e] [his] discourses to a prejudic't & censorious multitude (by wch many truths have been bafled & lost)" (Letter to Oldenburg, qtd. in Shapin 206). Milton did not go so far as to avoid print correspondence—indeed, he never seems to have turned down an opportunity to oppose a detractor—but the patently elitist disdain for the "multitude" is unmistakably Miltonic. The poet similarly regrets publishing his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in English, wishing in 1654 "that I had not written it in the vernacular, for then I would not have met with vernacular readers, who are usually ignorant of their own good, and laugh at the misfortunes of others" (*CPW* 4: 610). His venture away from the "calme and pleasing solitarynes" of relative obscurity, as predicted, leads to the "hoars disputes" he so wishes to avoid in the public life.

It is in the context of this public division about the utility and morality of solitude that Milton writes his finest poetry. The debate in fact gains traction during his lifetime, as writers

attempted to delineate the specific circumstances in which solitude was warranted or beneficial. Something of an early consensus emerged regarding the necessity of the communal work of scholars in the making of knowledge. In 1605, Bacon's landmark *Advancement of Learning* censured individual modes of scientific scholarship. Far from producing the truest or most reliable knowledge, solitary musings were unacceptable because they lacked verification by others; in order to correct one another's mistakes and deliberation, philosophers must be partake in social interaction and contribute to civil society. Shapin remarks that Bacon "specifically criticized so-called 'voluntaries' – that is, anyone who asserted himself to be his own master, whether in knowledge or in political action" (201). This is of course precisely the kind of accusation that might be levied at Milton, who, as noted above, often styled himself as a solitary observer in his prose tracts, unwilling to admit an argument on the basis of authority. The threat of censure for seclusion was even stronger for a gentleman, "whose retirement from active public concerns and rejection of his 'calling' were typically read as licenses to idleness, trivial pursuits, and debauch" (Shapin 199). Certainly such accusations could be levied towards cavalier poets such as Sir John Suckling. The courtier, Member of Parliament, and essayist Sir William Cornwallis sums up the argument against the cloistered life especially for a young man: "a life in the stre[n]gth of minde and body, commits sacriledge to sequester it selfe from the world, for he robbes [from] his country [which] is his mother."

As a bourgeois but not aristocratic young man, however, Milton is mostly able to avoid censure, as he does during his seven-year retirement in the country after his Cambridge education while pursuing independent reading. And yet even during that time it is obvious that Milton is acutely aware of the ambivalence surrounding solitude. Writing in 1633 to a friend from Cambridge, he feels the need to defend himself from accusations of too much private love

of learning. Evidently the friend has admonished him not to waste too much time "dream[ing] away my Yeares in the armes of studious retirement like Endymion"—the very same figure whom he had celebrated in *Prolusion 7* two years earlier. In response, Milton either agrees or pretends to agree that an extended period of seclusion is fruitless: in such an "unprofitable sin of curiosity… a man cutts himselfe off from all action & becomes the most helplesse, pusilanimous, & unweapon'd creature in the [world]" (*CPW* 1: 319). Not only is the secluded man not help*ful*—"obscure, & unserviceable to mankind," as Milton describes himself in the same letter—but also help*less*, open to criticism and attack. Besides the practical considerations of being unemployed, there are also moral indictments of being timid or pusillanimous, literally small-souled. Milton partially deflects this criticism by suggesting that, "although some[what] suspicious of my selfe," he is taking his time only so that he can better use his talents, whatever they may be (*CPW* 1: 320). He can, however, provide no answer to the accusation of his retirement and withdrawal from all action. As we shall see, the poet becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that he should spend too much more time alone.

Having provided some of the historical background for the ambivalence of solitude and Milton's stake in it, in the following essays I shall explore Milton's initial attitude to solitude with respect to his poetic forebears (chapter 2), and how that attitude seems to shift during the 1630s and early 1640s with his prose tracts and minor poetry (chapter 3). I will then turn my attention in the last two chapters to *Paradise Lost*, an epic in which every major character is self-consciously alone or not alone, tracing the attendant anxieties and ecstasies that the solitary space provides for Eden's humans (chapter 4) and Heaven's gods (chapter 5). At once alone yet not alone because of his muse, this early modern poet of singularity undertakes his "uncouth errand sole," exposing the limits of the subjective imagination (*PL* 2.827).

The Happy Men: *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, and Seventeenth-Century Solitude

Seventeenth-century England witnessed a dramatic change in the discourse of solitude reflected in some of the period's most influential poetry. What Elizabethans more often than not referred to as "solitariness," with its pejorative associations of self-love, unsociability, and solipsism, became the object of dozens of poems as divine "solitude" (Dillon 20-25).[1] Despite the continuing philosophical and scientific skepticism towards solitaries previously mentioned, in poetry the theme of solitude blossomed, bursting into print especially from the 1630s onwards. In this chapter I shall discuss John Milton's contribution to the prevalent theme of solitude in seventeenth-century poetry through his publication of the companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. I trace the origins of the "solitary man" motif and describe Milton's influential adaptation of it in the companion poems, arguing that the organizing principle of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* is an implicit debate about the pleasures of the social life and the solitary, contemplative life. The parallel structures and imagistic language of the two poems make it clear that the primary opposition is not day or night, light or shade, auditory or visual, but alone and not alone. Milton, drawing on the familiar "happy man" motif, introduces into English one of the first—if not the first—explicit celebrations of the neo-Stoic solitary, contrasting him with the happy man of country life. Though L'Allegro by virtue of his name is the happy man, Il Penseroso at this point of Milton's career represents the happier man capable of dissolving into ecstasy, delving into philosophy, and, implicitly, designing new poetic worlds.[2]

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[1] As Herbert Wright observed, "the need for a new vocabulary to convey this inclination [towards solitude] reveals itself in the creation of fresh meanings for words" such as "retirement," "recess," "recluse," and "sequestered" (22).

[2] Milton revisits the question of happiness and solitude in *Paradise Lost*, but by then he seems to have a changed perspective. See chapter 4.

The Happy Man: Before Milton

As described in the Introduction, attitudes towards withdrawal and solitude have been mixed since antiquity, though Roman Christianity accommodated religious withdrawal for the purposes of contemplation. After the Reformation, the eradication of the monastic system in England in the sixteenth century meant that the exception to the rule no longer existed; a person who excluded himself from public and social life could be criticized of denying his nature and neglecting his fellow countrymen. Such attitudes persisted in the literature of Elizabethan England and into the beginning of the new century, though not for much longer. Thus, in his *Characters*, Sir Thomas Overbury (1581-1613) describes "A Melancholy Man," condemning him as "one that nature made sociable because she made him man, and a crazed disposition hath altered" (221). Less than fifty years later, however, Katherine Philips writes to

> welcome dearest solitude,
> My great felicity;
> Though some are pleased to call thee rude,
> Thou art not so, but we. ("A Country Life" 29-32)

What is unnatural or crazed is no longer unsociability, but rather the person who maligns solitude; in Philips' conception, Overbury would be the "rude" one. Similarly, in her 1656 autobiography poet and philosopher Margaret Cavendish unashamedly describes herself as "addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth" (*A True Relation* 91).[3] The implication, of course,

[3] It is hard to believe that Cavendish could be writing of contemplation, conversation, solitariness, society, and "melancholy rather than mirth" and not be thinking of Milton's companion poems, which explicitly address all these things in detail.

is that Cavendish has always been that way—born with that solitary bent held in such suspicion only a generation earlier. Her implicit association of contemplation with solitariness and melancholy, and conversation with society and mirth, is no longer rare in the 1650s. Neither is poetry describing the pleasures of solitude, and though towards the end of the previous century retirement had been almost universally condemned, by the mid-seventeenth century it had gained moral respectability as well as desirability (Dillon 24). What precipitated such a marked social reassessment of a longstanding debate?

The answer given by Janette Dillon in her study *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man* is sociopolitical: the "growing fashion for solitude is indicative not simply of changing preferences but of a changing morality, which valued the private good above the public good" (23). In this conception, the desire to be alone is symptomatic of, not merely conducive to, a shift towards the primacy of the individual, and the rejection of social bonds derives from "a wish to be refined from within rather than external context" (29). Though suggestive, such a sweeping summary of the early modern move towards individualism calls for qualification; after all, the period of greatest interest in solitude was during the 1640s and 1650s, and that interest was exhibited especially by Royalist sympathizers who wanted nothing more than to return a communal ethical system centered on the monarch. Moreover, it is not as though no individualistic impulse already existed in late sixteenth-century England, or as though around the year 1640 the people of England decided to begin defining themselves from the inside out. Another factor must also have been in play.

As Maren-Sofie Røstvig points out, it is probably no coincidence that poetry celebrating a rural life away from politics experienced a resurgence during the disorientation and instability of the civil war and interregnum, coincidentally the heyday of individualistic Puritanism (23).

Royalist poets such as Edward Benlowes, Henry Vaughan, Charles Cotton, Katherine Philips, and Abraham Cowley certainly produced much poetry in praise of solitude and the retired life. Nevertheless, parliamentarians did, too, and as I will demonstrate shortly, the trend began before the civil war. In any case, not all Royalists approved of retirement: John Evelyn, in *Public Employment, and an active Life… preferred to Solitude* criticized the "truculent *Champions* of the *Fift-Monarchy*" of being "the highest affected with *Solitude*… whilst they breathe nothing save ruine and destruction" (37-38). Not only does this Royalist writer disdain solitude, but he accuses the extreme Puritan sect comprising much of Cromwell's army of being among the greatest lovers of solitude in a series of historical evildoers who do the same. (The list includes, among others, Catholic monks, the unfaithful Israelite king Jeroboam, and the Gun-Powder Plot conspirators.) Thus, although Royalists are well represented in the literature of solitude, the impulse went well beyond escapist politics and incipient individualistic desire in the seventeenth century.

Indeed, there is a classical tradition that better maps onto the seventeenth-century publication patterns of poetry praising the country and the life removed. In her seminal study *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphosis of a Classical Ideal*, Røstvig traces the increasing influence of the *beatus ille* tradition as it takes hold of the early seventeenth-century and beyond. The most influential works for this tradition are Horace's second Epode, whose first words provide the tradition's name, as well as book two of Virgil's *Georgics* and Martial's Epigram X, 47. These classical texts variously described the Happy Man as one who lives in the country (Horace), lives the life of a philosophically-inclined farmer (Virgil), or owns an estate removed from too much business (Martial). They were frequently translated and adapted by both major and minor seventeenth-century poets, often altered to suit the particular points the translator

wished to make.[4] Shortly after the 1630s, original English poems began to appear in the *beatus ille* mode, perhaps the most famous of which is Andrew Marvell's "The Garden"—coincidentally also a poem discussing solitude. The country house poems so important to the literature of this era find their inspiration in the *beatus ille* tradition, and the fact that such a variety of notable poets were writing in this vein should prompt us to consider it closely.

An example of this tradition in action illustrates the peculiar turns that marked the seventeenth-century shift towards solitude. Ben Jonson's poem "The Praises of a Country" is a direct and faithful translation of Horace's second epode, with the Latin text opposite it in the 1616 folio. It undoubtedly set a precedent for future translations of Horace's work, which became popular only after Jonson's version was published in the epigrams of the 1616 folio. Nevertheless, subsequent poets took increasing liberties with this and other Happy Man sources, so that Abraham Cowley's version decades later conveniently omits the final lines of Horace's text, which reveal the entirety of the preceding lines to have been spoken by the usurer Alfinius. This ending, as any educated sixteenth-century reader would have known, puts the whole rural panegyric in doubt (Vickers 148). Are we to disregard the praise of rural life as the musings of an immoral man, or do we accept them at face value and judge the speaker for failing to live up to the ideals he expresses? Cowley apparently found it unnecessary or counterproductive to include the surprise ending, and without it his poem amounts to an unqualified praise of country life. Moreover, as suggested by his accompanying translations of "happy man" texts, the rural pleasures of an idyllic landscape, home-grown food, and "a chaste and clean, though homely

[4] Horace's epode was translated or adapted by, among others, Ben Jonson, John Beaumont, John Ashmore, Thomas Randolph, Henry Rider, Richard Fanshawe, John Harington, and John Dryden (Røstvig 71-2). Parts of Virgil's *Georgics* II were adapted by Jonson, Phineus Fletcher, Ashmore, and Abraham Cowley. Finally, Martial's epigram was adapted by Jonson, Ashmore, Randolph, Mildmay Fane, Charles Cotton, Thomas Heyrick, and Cowley.

wife" (line 46) were supplemented by the pleasures of solitary contemplation.[5] Somewhere in between Jonson and Cowley, then, poetry in praise of the country life had taken on a distinctive turn toward the solitary, prioritizing especially the contemplative aspects of such a life.

It seems reasonable to me to suggest that the *beatus ille* tradition provided poets not just with an opportunity to celebrate the life removed, but also the opportunity to reassert the exception which had previously exonerated solitude: religious contemplation. After all, though Horace's happy man was not primarily occupied with business or many thoughts beyond his own rural work, Virgil's happy man is conspicuously curious. Dryden's 1697 translation puts it thus:

> [L]ead me to some solitary place,
> And cover my retreat from human race.
> Happy the man who studying Nature's Laws,
> Through known Effects can trace the secret cause.
> His mind possessing in a quiet state,
> Fearless of fortune, and resigned to fate!
> And happy too is he, who decks the bowers
> Of sylvans, and adores the rural powers. (*Georgics* 2.698-703)

Such is the man described by William Drummond's 1623 poem "The Praise of a Solitarie Life." The title also recalls his good friend Ben Jonson's title in praise of the country life, but here Drummond seems to be more influenced by Virgil than Horace: "Thrice happy he, who by some shadie Grove, / Farre from the clamorous World, doth live his owne, / Though solitarie, who is

[5] Cowley's translation is found at the end of his essay "Of Agriculture," alongside translations of parts of *Georgics* II, Horace's Satire II.6 and Epistle I.10, and a translation into English of his own Latin poem, "The Garden."

not alone, / But doth converse with that Eternall Love" (1-4). As in many works concerning solitude, here conversation with oneself or solitude implies knowledge and contemplation.

Such a happy man, too, is Milton's Il Penseroso, who seeks "The spirit of *Plato* to unfold / What Worlds, or what vast Regions hold / The immortal mind" (89-91). The setting of this philosophizing "in som high lonely Towr" perfectly matches the rural withdrawal imagined by Virgil (86).[6] Nevertheless, one key difference is the (re)introduction of religious contemplation for its own pleasures. Milton's happy man is interested in the causes of natural things, but his contemplation is also distinctively supernatural. With the help of Melancholy, much study, and the right external conditions, he hopes his experience will eventually lead him to "somthing like Prophetic strain" (174). He therefore "walk[s] the studious Cloysters pale" and desires to spend his weary age in "the peacefull hermitage, / The Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell" (156; 168-9). Critics have often wondered about the specifically Catholic imagery employed here, but the diction makes sense if Milton intended to evoke the previously accepted tradition of religious solitude in the eleventh to fifteenth centuries in order to justify a new religious solitude for its own pleasures. It is worth emphasizing the novelty of his endeavour: when Milton composed *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* in 1631 (or 1629), no early modern English poem celebrating an explicit union of the happy man motif with religious solitude had been published. The minor Catholic poet William Habington, as Røstvig notes, does "add the joys of [religious] solitude… to the list of virtues typical of a retired rural existence" in his 1634 *Castara* (73), but it seems unlikely that Milton at Cambridge would have read Habington's manuscript years before its publication—if it even existed at the time. And even if Milton was not the first to publish, it says

[6] Compare also Il Penseroso's "arched walks of twilight groves, / And shadows brown that *Sylvan* loves, / Of Pine, or monumental Oake" (133-5).

something of the young poet's preoccupation with solitude that he would so emphasize its pleasures and contemplative advantages when few, if any, were doing so in English poetry.

Milton did not of course invent the idea of the (religious) solitary as a happy man. Before it finds its way into poetry, the motif finds expression in a number of early seventeenth-century prose character sketches of melancholy men. Thomas Overbury's negative sketch has already been discussed, but the ones that follow him, perhaps influenced by Robert Burton's magisterial *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), are more generous in their evaluations. John Earle's "Contemplative Man" (1628) already has several of the defining features of Milton's happy man. He does not seek company, because he "finds discourse enough with himself, and his own thoughts are his excellent playfellows" (*Microcosmography* 72). (We shall return to the prevalent concept of solitude as discourse or conversation in the following chapters.) Significantly, this contemplative man's self-discourse has a religious purpose, as he "knits his observations together, and makes a ladder of them all to climb to God" (72). The skepticism previously surrounding eremitic practices is here suspended. The description of his locale is interesting, too; like Milton's pensive man living in a "high lonely Towr" (*IP* 86), Earle's contemplative man "looks upon man from a high tower, and sees him trulier at this distance" (72). His judgement, therefore, is better for his being removed, and solitude is revealed to be beneficial for knowing the nature not only of oneself, but of humanity generally.

Milton's Happy Men

What this sketch and Wye Saltonstall's character of "A melancholy Man" (1631) lack is the infusion of joy into their thinking men—they are contemplative, but not "happy." It seems to have been very important to Milton to incorporate both elements, portraying in *Il Penseroso* the ecstatic delights of solitary contemplation. Røstvig rightly suggests that both companion poems

"present pictures of the joys of life, the chief difference being that *L'Allegro* depicts the happy man of a rural gentleman-farmer… while *Il Penseroso* transforms him into a solitary Serene Contemplator" (100). These texts do not fit into her Happy Man categories as neatly as Røstvig would have it—L'Allegro is neither gentleman nor farmer, for example—but we might use the distinction to argue that Milton's companion poems bridge the celebration of the rural life before the 1640s (*L'Allegro*) and the celebration of solitude itself in the 1650s and beyond (*Il Penseroso*). We have already touched on how Il Penseroso seems to extend the traditional category of contemplative man with his specifically religious proclivities, embodying an idealized melancholy solitary. L'Allegro represents the more recognizable side of the bridge as he hearkens back to the *beatus ille* tradition by name and theme. Thus, just as Jonson's happy man "in the bending vale beholds afar / The lowing herds there grazing" ("Praises of the Country Life" 13-14), L'Allegro remarks how

> Streit mine eye hath caught new pleasures
> Whilst the Lantskip round it measures,
> Russet Lawns, and Fallows Gray,
> Where the nibling flocks do stray. (*L'Allegro* 69-72)

These mesmerizing lines recall the image of the Horatian happy man peering over his wandering herd ("*prospectat errantis greges*"), here retaining the detail of the "stray[ing]" sheep which Jonson's translation omits. In Horace's original, however, the man watches "in a secluded valley" (273; "*in reducta valle*"); there is no mention of that seclusion in either *L'Allegro* or Jonson's translation.[7] It is a peculiarity of Milton's poem that even the most unsuspecting of figures are coupled and very few are alone. Accordingly, in the lines immediately following

[7] Non-poetic translations and Latin quotations are from the new Loeb Classical Library translation by Niall Rudd.

L'Allegro sees "Mountains on whose barren brest / The labouring clouds do often rest" — the suggestiveness of which is compounded by the pun on "labouring" (73-74). Such images reinforce the notion, to be argued further, that the distinctive feature of *L'Allegro* is its emphasis on sociability.

The opposing emphases of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* should not be underestimated. Røstvig's schema, though instructive, overplays the similarity and compatibility of the poems and neglects to consider their antithetical perspectives, especially with respect to solitude. Clearly poems like Jonson's "The Praises of a Country Life" form part of the *beatus ille* tradition, but they also form part of a larger, "long-standing philosophical-rhetorical tradition… juxtaposing town and country, society against solitude, the active and the contemplative lives. This was above all a tradition of debate" (Vickers 148). If this is so, then Milton's companion poems may be more accurately seen as a poetic representation of the debate, with each titular figure championing his side. The poet is here interested, as in so many of his works, in choice: which is the happier man? After all, Il Penseroso is not Il Triste; he pursues happiness through the "pleasures *Melancholy* give[s]," doing whatever he can to attain "extasies" (174; 165). Unlike L'Allegro, he does not banish his opposite's muse, for it is not Mirth that he takes issue with but "vain deluding joyes"—the insubstantial and temporary amusements that dreams and fancies produce (1).

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso vie for happiness in their own ways, then, but the defining antithesis of those modes of enjoyment is sociability versus solitariness, or society versus solitude.[8] Because these are represented by the figures of Mirth and Melancholy, their

[8] In his essay "Notes on Milton's Early Development," A.S.P. Woodhouse gestures toward this conclusion when he describes the poems as "setting forth rival conceptions of a life of pleasure, the one active and social, the other contemplative and solitary" (85), but he does so only

associations feature strongly in the poems and have often been taken to be the primary oppositions. Scholars have thus variously proposed the primary opposition to be day and night (E. M. W. Tillyard), carefreeness and pensiveness (D. C. Dorian), light and darkness (Cleanth Brooks), and youth and maturity (L. L. Martz), among others (*Variorum* 241-69). The most convincing, however, remains J. B. Leishman, perhaps because as his essay's title suggests, he reads "'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' in Their Relation to Seventeenth-Century Poetry." Leishman observes that "while L'Allegro's pleasures, though far from boisterous, nearly all have some admixture or suggestion of human society… the pleasures described in Il Penseroso are more solitary, more introspective, more purely the pleasures of reverie and of solitary contemplation and imagination" (9). I would go further and suggest that not only are the pleasures thus characterized, but also the muses, the characters, and the specific imagery marshaled in the poems' beatific descriptions. A close reading of the poems reveals that their points of departure are almost always organized around the distinctive social or solitary elements of their titular figures and muses.

L'Allegro and *Il Penseroso* each begin with a ten-line prelude of identical meter and *abbacddeec* rhyme scheme in which the characters banish what they see as the worst elements of "loathed Melancholy" and "vain deluding joyes" respectively. L'Allegro contemptuously dismisses Melancholy as having been born in a Stygian cave "forlorn" (*L'A* 3) — with the suggestion of "deserted; left alone, desolate" (*OED* 4) — before telling her to "Find out som *uncouth* cell" to ever dwell in, again with the implication of "solitary; desolate" (*L'A* 5, emphasis added; *OED* 5). The characterization therefore begins immediately: Melancholy, as described by

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passingly, since his focus is on disproving Tillyard's thesis that the first *Prolusion* suggested the pattern of the poems. The argument to follow shows why and how this is the case, and why Milton seems to side with Il Penseroso at this point of his career.

L'Allegro, is solitary in origin and destiny. As mentioned earlier, Il Penseroso does not banish Mirth, but his first few lines, too, are revealing. In his dismissal of insubstantial joys, Il Penseroso's language betrays a revulsion towards multitudes. For him, such joys are the "brood" of folly, and he hates "all" their toys or fancies, which take on "thick and numberless" shapes like the motes that "people" the sunbeams (*IP* 2; 4; 7-8). The combined effect of such descriptions and their pejorative tone toward the plural is to portray Il Penseroso as someone who is bothered by the mere multiplicity of people or objects. Before either Mirth is introduced by L'Allegro or Melancholy by Il Penseroso, we can already infer that Melancholy is solitary and Il Penseroso dislikes company.

Given this introduction, it is surprising to find that Samuel Johnson, seconded by D. C. Allen 4-5, claims that "[b]oth Mirth and Melancholy are solitary, silent inhabitants of the breast that neither receive nor transmit communication; no mention is therefore made of a philosophical friend, or pleasant companion" (Johnson 97).[9] This is demonstrably false, or at least only superficially true, for Mirth is surely no solitary and we hear about several of her companions. The first thing the reader learns about Milton's Mirth is that she is a middle child who has "two sister Graces more" (*L'A* 15) — Aglaea (Brightness) and Thalia (Bloom). She is therefore necessarily born into companionship, even if her mother Venus and father Bacchus are absentee parents. By contrast, Melancholy's genealogy in *Il Penseroso* all but assures she is an only child; Milton's invented motherhood has her be the daughter of Vesta and Vesta's father, "solitary *Saturn*" (*IP* 22-25). One could argue, as Finch and Bowen do, that such an incestuous union is

[9] Even if Mirth and Melancholy do not get along, Casey Finch and Peter Bowen argue that the two poems are themselves "solitary companions" whose meanings "are derived not from either poem but precisely from their relation to one another" (4). Finch and Bowen also take issue with Dr. Johnson's summation, arguing that "there is little in the companion poems that is not an instance, in one form or another, of the desire to share and to merge" (5). As suggested by my reading here, this conclusion is rather overstated in the case of *Il Penseroso*.

ironic as the "originary moment of the goddess of solitude" (7). Viewed another way, however, it makes perfect sense, for what could be more solitary, self-reflexive, or self-contained than a genealogy in which mother doubles as sister and father doubles as grandfather? Asexual generation would create a replica of the parent, but Melancholy's mother Vesta has just enough of her own mother Opis ("plenty") to separate Melancholy from being wholly another Saturn.[10] Il Penseroso's muse is paradoxically an only child and yet her own half-sister.

Following the genealogies in each poem, L'Allegro and Il Penseroso each request that their muses be accompanied by those things that typify delight for them (*L'Allegro* 25-36, *Il Penseroso* 45-55). Thus, the happy man invites Mirth to "bring with thee / Jest and youthful Jollity" alongside Laughter (*L'A* 26; 32). (Could Dr. Johnson reasonably ask for a more "pleasant companion" than this?) For her part, Melancholy is asked to "joyn with thee calm Peace, and Quiet, / Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet" (*IP* 45-6), along with "retired leasure" and finally "Contemplation" and "mute Silence" (49; 54-5). In some sense, then, Melancholy has companions, but ironically these things are available only when companions are forsaken in solitude. "Peace and quiet" looks forward to Milton's decision in *The Reason of Church Government* to leave "a calme and pleasing solitarynes" and its accompanying "quiet and still air"—the two are clearly connected for him (*CPW* 1: 821). As we have seen, Contemplation is also very tied up with solitude, so if Melancholy's only other friends are retired Leisure and Silence, she is hardly a socialite.

Mirth's companions, however, are more gregarious. The sheer physicality of their description makes their presence palpable. The "Nods, and Becks, and Wreathed Smiles," we are

[10] Bizarrely enough, in some mythologies Opis is the sister of Saturn, making Vesta herself the daughter of an incestuous relationship. In such a scenario Melancholy would be even more than three-quarters Saturn.

told, "hang on *Hebe*'s cheek, / And love to live in dimple sleek" (*L'A* 28-30), while Laughter himself is ever "holding both his sides" (32). The greatest intimation of physicality is also the most palpable and desirable:

> [In] thy right hand lead with thee,
> The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty;
> And if I give thee honour due,
> Mirth, admit me of thy crue
> To live with her, and live with thee,
> In unreproved pleasures free. (*L'Allegro* 35-40)

This is a genuine companion complete with detail of the "right hand" with which she grasps Mirth. L'Allegro cannot help but intervene in his excitement, asking only 37 lines into the poem to live with Mirth and Liberty in a veritable *ménage à trois*. There is no corresponding request in *Il Penseroso*; that happy man is able to wait until line 175 to ask to live with Melancholy.

Such a disjunction is an example of what I mean when I say that the organizing principle of the poems is their participation in the debate of solitude. Most parts of each poem have a corresponding section in the other, and frequently the focalizing point is whether the activity, or description, or image, is social or not. Thus, as above, the preludes correspond and differ in their attitude towards solitary places and plurality of persons or things (*L'A* 1-10, *IP* 1-10), and the genealogies that follow make it clear that Mirth and Melancholy were born into different social circumstances (*L'A* 11-24, *IP* 11-30). There are, however, occasional disjunctions in which one of the poems has no readily recognizable counterpart, as when L'Allegro intervenes to ask Mirth to admit him into her crew. The first occurrence of such a disjunction in *Il Penseroso* is in lines 30-36, when the poem digresses between the story of Melancholy's birth and the description of

her gait, which is signaled by the invitation "Com, but keep thy wonted gate" (*IP* 37), and which doubtless corresponds to *L'Allegro*'s "Com, and trip it as ye go / On the light fantastick toe" (*L'A* 33-4). Before Melancholy's gait is a physical sketch the likes of which are not found in *L'Allegro*: "All in a robe of darkest grain, / Flowing with majestick train, / And sable stole of *Cipres* Lawn, / Over thy decent shoulders drawn" (*IP* 33-6). Her clothes are pitch black, we learn, and "with a sad Leaden downward cast" she "fix[es]" her eyes "on the earth as fast" (43-44). Though this may seem like an inconsequential detail, in fact it immediately connects her to a character like Wye Saltonstall's "melancholy Man," who walks "commonly in black… with a looke fixt on the ground" (*Picturæ Loquentes* 8). This man's only company is his mind, which even when he looks down "is then soaring in some high contemplation" (8). Through these kinds of disjunctions with no counterpart in the opposing poem, Milton is able to draw attention to the peculiarities of each character and his muse.

There are several other examples of disjunction in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*: the "high lonely Towr" episode mentioned earlier (*IP* 85-92); the seasonal merrymaking of the "Bells" and dancing youths and maids (*L'A* 89-100); L'Allegro's account of the "Towred Cities" with its bustle of knights and ladies and marriages of such ladies and knights in "pomp, and feast, and revelry" (117-130). But the longest and perhaps most significant is the final segment of *Il Penseroso*, a 24-line postlude—complete with a "pealing Organ" and "full-voic'd Quire"—that accounts for most of the difference in length from *L'Allegro* (151-74). Whereas *L'Allegro* ends promptly after the retelling of Orpheus' story after line 150, *Il Penseroso*'s version of the story ends at line 120. That poem extends until line 174, though lines 121-138 with its descriptions of the Il Penseroso's rural haunts and his resting place might very loosely be said to correspond to the towered cities of *L'Allegro*. Nevertheless, his musical indulgence and (prophetic?) look

forward has no counterpart, thereby giving Il Penseroso the last word and prompting some critics to regard *Il Penseroso* as Milton's preferred vision and ultimate choice.[11] Allen says that because "the poet lives to himself," the latter poem, being the more solitary poem, is also "a more personal poem" (10). But this conclusion is anachronistic, for Milton in the summer of 1631 was not yet in retirement—these are therefore not "the poems of a solitary man" (5). Instead, it seems to me that Milton here weighs his decision between social indulgence and creative solitude, in this way considering the nature of his poetic future.

Il Penseroso, too, has to make that decision. Woken up near the covert brook by "sweet musick breath[ing] / Above, about, or underneath" him, the temptation is perhaps to stay there and enjoy its enervating lull (*IP* 151-2). In *L'Allegro*, music's "lincked sweetness" and "melting voice" are sufficient to overturn death (*L'A* 139-50); not so in *Il Penseroso*. Surely the music inspires—literally "breathe[s]"—but for Il Penseroso inspiration is not enough. The music, though "Sent by som spirit to mortals good," must be supplemented by solitude and hard work: "*But* let my due feet never fail, / To walk the studious Cloysters pale" (*IP* 153-6, emphasis added). He has to catch himself with a "but" that dictates the remaining course of his life. And perhaps this is the better way, in the end, to truly engage with art and not just absorb it. L'Allegro never actually joins the songs or dances he describes, but only hears or watches from afar. By committing himself to the peaceful hermitage and solitary cell, however, Il Penseroso may "at last" contribute his own prophetic "strain" or melody (*OED* III). He first endures a time of creative solitude in order to "dissolve into extasies" — not merely spectate them (*IP* 165). As evidenced by his six subsequent years of studious retirement, Milton, it seems, "choose[s] to live" with Melancholy alongside Il Penseroso.

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[11] Cf. Allen 3-23; D. C. Dorian 175-82; E. R. Gregory (529-38); Leslie Brisman (226-40); and Stella Revard (338-50).

"The Apt and Cheerfull Conversation" of Man with Himself:
From Solitude to Loneliness, 1631-1640

If Milton seems at the end of his companion poems to side with Il Penseroso, that solitary affinity is strained over the next decade and a half as the poet leaves Cambridge, spends six years in "studious retirement" (*CPW* 1: 319), loses his best friend, and begins an unpropitious marriage with Mary Powell. His solitary disposition is challenged as he increasingly places an emphasis on "conversation," with the richness of nuance which that word formerly entailed, until Milton advocates in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* "the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evill of solitary life" (2: 235). No longer described as a pleasurable and productive retreat from society, solitude transforms into loneliness, an intolerable moral and social illness requiring the "remedy" of marriage to cure it (2: 236).

Accompanying this enormous shift in values is a change in the fulfillment of conversation, "a term and concept central to Milton's attacks on the canon laws regarding divorce and to his efforts to redefine marriage in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*" (Luxon 57). James Grantham Turner observes that in the seventeenth century "'conversation' was not only a general term for social intercourse but also a legal and colloquial term for copulation" (205).[1] But as we have seen and shall further see, the language of conversation is also frequently used in the discourse of solitude, especially vis-à-vis contemplation and study. It is important, then, to consider the way that Milton conceives of "conversation" before the divorce tracts. I will here demonstrate the way that solitude provides the original locus for conversation in the

[1] "Sexual intercourse or intimacy" (*OED 3*). The contemporary sense, "interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk" is the *OED*'s 7th definition and appears to have been rare until the seventeenth century. Luxon concludes that Milton must have therefore chosen the word "carefully, weighing its ambiguities and range of both denotation and connotation" (58). The word in its variable forms appears fourteen times in *The Doctrine and Discipline* alone.

writings of the early 1630s, and how that locus moves in the next season of Milton's life away from solitude to male friendship and ultimately to marital companionship as the appropriate forum for a "meet and happy conversation" which is both rational and refreshing (2: 246). This transition marks an awareness of the social impact of solitude, felt keenly by Milton as his relationships disintegrate, and presents a new phase in his conception of relationship. The poet's newly internalized ambivalence toward the solitary life deeply informs this period's prose letters and writings and frames his thinking about self-sufficiency in the major poetry.

"Nunquam Minus Solus Quam Cum Solus"

The blueprints for the transition are mapped out in Milton's *Prolusion 7*, composed shortly after the summer of 1631 when he likely wrote *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. In this last year at Cambridge, Milton is called upon to argue for the superiority of learning over ignorance. However, his argument encompasses not only the benefits of learning, but also the methods, individual and social, through which that learning is best acquired. The most important element, it turns out, is private conversation with the Muses, though towards the conclusion he extends the conversation to a few capable friends. Milton begins by insisting on "the importance of leisure, self-directed study, solitude, and pleasure for the 'development and wellbeing of the mind' and the growth of a poet" (Lewalski 2003: 45), providing his own experience as testimony:

> I can myself call to witness the woods and rivers and the beloved village elms, under whose shade I enjoyed in the summer just passed (if I may tell the secrets of goddesses) such sweet intercourse with the Muses, as I still remember with delight. There I too, amid rural scenes and woodland solitudes, felt that I had enjoyed a season of growth in a life of seclusion. (*CPW* 1: 289)

Those rural scenes and woodland solitudes come as no surprise for readers familiar with *Il Penseroso*'s "arched walks of twilight groves / And shadows brown that *Sylvan* loves" (133-4). Milton's fondness of the natural landscape is matched only by his emphasis on the sweet "solitude" and "seclusion" he experiences; though he could surely have enjoyed beautiful scenery not far from Cambridge or London, he opts instead for the country, away from the city and its inhabitants. And yet Milton is not utterly alone, for he enjoys a "*sweet intercourse* with the Muses" even in this supposed seclusion. The Latin phrase in question ("*musis gratiam*") implies only "favour," but given the surrounding erotic diction of "secrets" and "delights," the translation is justified. Similarly, Milton mentions in an earlier letter to Alexander Gill that he is considering "retiring into a deeply Literary leisure during this summer vacation and hiding as it were in the Cloisters of the Muses" (*CPW* 1: 314).[2] The context here is important: he chooses a summer of literary leisure alone because he finds "almost no intellectual companions" at Cambridge (1: 314). By implication, literary leisure amidst the cloister of the Muses will provide that necessary companionship. Retreat away from people and cities, according to a young Milton, provides a seclusion which is not really a seclusion at all, but a chance to engage with the Muses and improve one's mind even apart from society.

Such sentiments in *Prolusion 7* illustrate a well-known adage. Abraham Cowley begins his essay "Of Solitude" by remarking how "*Nunquam minus solus, quam cum solus* [Never less alone than when alone], is now become a very vulgar [i.e., common] saying" (129). The idea that solitude is its own companionship is an ancient one, as Cowley's citation of Cicero makes clear, but the phrase's resiliency suggests that early moderns found it relevant to their own time. Indeed, for many seventeenth-century writers, solitude is no solitude in that it provides a unique

[2] The Columbia edition translates it "the bowers of the Muses," further accenting the erotic nature of such a retreat (12: 13).

opportunity for intercourse with the Muses, self-reflection or self-conversation, conversation with dead or absent writers through study, and conversation with God through solitary contemplation. These activities are most often described in terms of conversation in the general sense of "consorting or having dealings with others; living together" (*OED* 2); but they frequently also carry the modern sense of "dialogue." Milton refers to several examples in *Prolusion* 7 either explicitly or by allusion. Lamenting the loss of concentrated study because of "constant interruptions" such as the very exercise he is presenting, he claims conversely that

> [N]othing better promote[s] the development and well-being of the mind… than a cultured and liberal leisure. This I believe to be the meaning of Hesiod's holy sleep and Endymion's nightly meetings with the moon; this was the significance of Prometheus' withdrawal, under the guidance of Mercury, to the lofty solitude of the Caucasus, where at last he became the wisest of gods and men. (1: 289)

Though couched in the rhetoric of solitude, these figures are solitary only with respect to other humans: Hesiod becomes a great poet by his own intercourse with the Muses in Helicon; the shepherd Endymion is nightly visited by the moon goddess Diana—as Milton will later claim to be visited "nightly" by his Muse Urania (*PL* 7.28-9); and Prometheus' withdrawal with Mercury is one under guidance. (Milton, however, neglects to mention the dark corollary of his story, Prometheus' subsequent imprisonment in the solitary Caucasus.) These men are all alone, yet not alone, and Milton indicates that solitude away from interruptions and other men is a key source of inspiration, poetic, prophetic, and philosophical.

He is certainly in good company, metaphorically and literarily, for if such sentiments about the creative potential of solitude were not popular among English poets in 1631, they became so shortly afterward. In perhaps her best-known poem, "The Country Life," Katherine

Philips says "'Twas here the Poets were inspir'd / Here taught the multitude," before expressly "welcom[ing] dearest solitude / My great Felicity" (9-10; 29-30). She does not explain why the country life is suitable for poetic inspiration, except perhaps that there is less political strife and ambition. (If the city was less tumultuous but equally populated, would the country still be the best condition for literary creativity?) The poet Henry Vaughan in his dedication of *Floris Solitudinis* tells Sir Charles Egerton that "we live in an age, which hath made this very Proposition [of solitude] (though suspected of Melancholie), mightie pleasing, and even meane witts begin to like it" (4: 12). That "age," of course, was one of civil war and its concomitant social and political upheaval, and such statements say more about the political situation than the personal experience of being alone. Although writing during the same period of strife as the preceding two poets, Charles Cotton focuses more on what solitude provides rather than what it evades:

> O Solitude, the soul's best friend,
> That man acquainted with himself dost make,
> And all his Maker's wonders to intend;
> With thee I here converse at will,
> And would be glad to do so still;
> For it is thou alone that keep'st the soul awake. ("The Retirement" 22-27)

A man who chooses to *converse* with solitude—as indeed Cotton does here, using the second-person address in a brief apostrophe—thus gains a better knowledge of himself, a greater appreciation of the created universe, and a vitality of soul which presumably makes the previous two more desirable. (Notice, too, how the language of "friendship" corresponds with the idea that solitude is not utter solitariness but itself a kind of companion.) Since according to Milton "a

thorough knowledge of all the arts and sciences" and of oneself are prerequisites for writing great poetry or even orations, conversation with solitude thus conceived is of inestimable value (*CPW* 1: 289-90).

I must stress the currency of the language of "conversation" in reference to solitude: although Cotton's poem is one of the most direct expressions of the relation, it is not the only one. In the previous chapter I drew attention to William Drummond's 1623 "The Praise of a Solitarie Life." This *beatus ille* sonnet makes a rhetorical gesture similar to that of Cotton's poem, explaining that the person who lives in a shady grove away from the clamorous noises of the world, "Though solitarie, yet is not alone, / But doth *converse* with that Eternall Love" (3-4, emphasis added). Who or what is that eternal love? Drummond gives no further indications, and there are no religious connotations elsewhere in the poem. Grammatically, "that Eternall Love" might refer back to the "shadie Grove" of the first line, but it seems more likely that a new subject is being invoked: the poem's namesake, solitary life itself. Another example in prose is John Earle's Contemplative Man, who is not keen on conversation with friends because he "finds discourse enough with himself, and his own thoughts are his excellent playfellows" (*Microcosmography* 72). The Contemplative Man runs the risk of seeming unsociable, but Earle seems satisfied with the answer that self-discourse is a valid alternative. Finally, Milton himself makes an explicit connection between solitude and conversation, albeit later in life, as he tells in *Paradise Regained* the story of how Jesus "One day walk'd alone" to the desert, "the better to *converse* / With solitude" (1.189-91, emphasis added). Jesus' objective, we are told, is to be "far from track of men," in "dark shades" for the express purpose of pursuing "His holy Meditations" (191; 194-5). He converses with solitude, but to converse with solitude is also to engage the "multitude of thoughts" one already harbours (196).

Solitude, then, constitutes a psychological space free of distraction in which isolation is never absolute. On the contrary, this space is conducive to an alternative conversation with oneself, the Muses, the authors whose works one studies,[3] and finally with God, either directly through prayer or indirectly through meditations. Milton gestures towards the last kind of conversation in *Prolusion 7* when he says that "this eternal life, as almost everyone admits, is to be found in contemplation alone" (*CPW* 1: 291). But, as Milton admits, "the Cherub Contemplation" is to be found in the melancholic solitude of *Il Penseroso*, making contemplative solitude a priority not just for those who wish to learn but religious devotees generally (54). The poet makes the connection more explicit a few years later in *A Mask* (1634) when the Elder Brother declares that "Wisdoms self / Oft seeks to sweet retired Solitude, /Where with her best nurse Contemplation / She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings" (375-8).[4] As a guarantee of the safety of their sister, alone in the forest, the argument is dubious, but as an affirmation of the natural association between Wisdom, Solitude, and Contemplation the statement rings true.[5] Retired solitude is the ideal fledging ground because Wisdom's wings "in the various bussle of resort [society] / Were all to ruffl'd, and somtimes impair'd" (379-80). Even if not a direct participant, solitude can facilitate a conversation with contemplation, just as the leisure Milton advocates in *Prolusion 7* solicits intercourse between the poet and the Muses.

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[3] Indeed, to read a good book is to enter conversation with "the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, embalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life" (*CPW* 2: 493)

[4] Cp. Milton's familiar letter to Diodati during his extended study in the countryside: "You ask what I am thinking of? So help me God, an immortality of fame. What am I doing? Growing my wings and practicing flight" (*CPW* 1: 327).

[5] As Douglas Trevor (160) points out, both brothers agree on the contemplative power of solitude: "Tis most true / That musing meditation most affects / The Pensive secrecy of desert cell" (385-8). Yet may there not be some irony at play that attenuates the young boys' (high-pitched) claims about philosophy and wisdom? Their sister, after all, is most certainly not as safe as the Elder brother expects.

The Elder Brother's case—indeed, Milton's case—is necessarily rhetorical, because as Brian Vickers argues in his comprehensive essay on leisure and idleness in the Renaissance, "[a]ny writer wishing to use *otium* in the seventeenth century in a positive sense… would have had to work hard to remove its pejorative meaning, or to cancel out its ambivalence into some innocuous synonym for *quies*" (144). This is especially true for Milton, who is writing in Latin and uses the actual word in his letter to Gill ("*otium alte Literarium*") and the prolusion ("*erudito et liberali otio*").[6] *Otium*, after all, is frequently regarded as a vice in Roman writings. Those who seem to have advocated it (Cicero, Ovid, Seneca) did so in full knowledge of its associations with idleness and took "great pains to defend themselves from any suspicion of indulgence in ease and sloth" (Vickers 19).[7] The same association holds for Italian epic and English Renaissance poetry, where leisure is never too far from ease, and ease never too far from sloth. Accordingly, Milton takes care to justify why he will take up a deeply literary leisure over the summer—he has no intellectual companions at Cambridge—or why a cultured and liberal leisure is best for the growing mind—because it provides tranquility away from "these constant interruptions," "this turmoil and agitation," "these disturbances" (*CPW* 1:289-90). Solitary leisure, he insists, is a source of not *desidia* (sloth) but *quies*, the absence of noise.

In a later poem Milton acknowledges his fortune in having had the opportunity to study "far away from the din of the city" (emphasizing once again the lack of noise), where he instead spent several years in "deep retreats amid the leisurely delights of the Aonian bank… walk[ing] by Phoebus' side—his happy companion" (*Ad Patrem* 197). In this one sentence Milton sums up

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[6] Quotations in Latin are from the Columbia *Works of John Milton*.

[7] In one sense, Ovid is the exception here. Fully aware of otium's negative associations, he claims it as the necessary condition for writing poetry: *carmina secessum scribentis et otia quaerunt*, poetry requires the writer to be in privacy and ease (*Tristia* 1.1.39; qtd. in Vickers 1990: 21).

his ideal of scholarly *otium*: a quiet removal from excessive socialization into a seclusion which involves not utter solitariness but companionship with those muses or deities who can help him grow as a poet and scholar. He thus justifies his *otium* much like Cicero "justified his inactivity in public life by the fruits of his *otium*" (Vickers 10), but there is nevertheless a discrepancy in the accepted order of things. Milton himself says in *Prolusion 7* that "some of the greatest men of ancient Rome, after performing many noble deeds and winning great glory by their exploits, turned from the strife and turmoil of ambition to the study of literature as into a port and welcome refuge" (*CPW* 1: 294). *After* performing many noble deeds: those great men did not begin with otium. Milton's career follows the opposite trajectory as he decides to spend time preparing himself in private and only later demonstrate the fruit of his labour in public life. Undoubtedly aware of the suspicion surrounding *otium*, he justifies the reversal by summoning an entourage of classical figures like Hesiod and Prometheus whom he appoints as models for his leisurely predisposition. In so doing, he circumvents the accusations of *otium* while enjoining and enjoying the benefits of solitary conversation.

"Those Conversations of Learned and Wise Men"

The glories of learned leisure notwithstanding, even at this early stage Milton recognizes the value of conversation with others, albeit with a very specific demographic. "But the chief part of human happiness," Milton suddenly declares, "is derived from the society of one's fellows and the formation of friendships" (1: 295). The phrase marks a surprising turn, given that he has spent the first half of the prolusion praising the retired solitude to which he and the great men of Rome have committed themselves. Was L'Allegro the happier man after all? Not quite, since the fellowship here envisioned is one modelled on Plato's academy, in which "the pleasures of conversation are pleasures shared between men" (Luxon 12), and educated men in

particular. This is clear from the stereotype of the scholar that Milton grudgingly acknowledges: "hard to please, lacking in courtesy, odd in manner, and seldom gifted with the gracious address that wins men's hearts" (*CPW* 1: 295).[8] Nevertheless, such faults ought to be forgiven, since it should be obvious that "a man who is almost entirely absorbed and immersed in study finds it much easier to converse with gods than with men [*esse Deos alloqui quam homines*]… because he habitually associates with the gods but is unaccustomed to human affairs" (295). It is difficult not to detect some defensiveness in these lines; certainly during his early undergraduate years Milton was not among the most gregarious of students, and it would appear that it is only towards the end of his tenure at Cambridge that he became well liked, perhaps in part because of his excellence in these prolusions (Lewalski 2003: 29). Regardless, it is worth observing Milton's juxtaposition of the differences between conversing with gods in study—a well-known aspect of conversing with solitude, as demonstrated above—and conversing with like-minded men. Cultivate the mind with deep retreats along Phoebus' side, he implies, but do not neglect to cultivate friendships with Phoebus' other companions.

The reason a man ought to do this—and, at this point of Milton's life, it is men he has in mind—is not primarily because he will best attain learning through conversation with others. At least, he never claims that. While Robert Burton warns of the dangers of too much solitary contemplation, "which dries the braine and extinguisheth naturall heat" (*Anatomy of Melancholy* 1: 303), Milton is less concerned with the amount of study than with its pleasurableness. Solitary study must be supplemented with conversation with friends. (He will make a similar argument in

[8] We might compare this to Sir Thomas Overbury's unflattering character of "A Melancholy Man": "Impleasing to all, as all to him… Speak to him; he hears with his eyes, ears follow his mind, and that is not at leisure" (221). According to Steven Shapin, "in early modern Europe the public display of carelessness, unkemptness, distractedness, and social solecism came to count as emblematic of authentically scholarly status" (200).

Tetrachordon, but there the interlocutor is a woman.) Indeed, if truly learned men can overcome the social awkwardness typical of them, the "worthy and congenial friendship" they form is the best kind of relationship, "[f]or what can we imagine more delightful and happy than those conversations of learned and wise men?" (*CPW* 1: 295). Intercourse with the Muses, one is tempted to answer, but Milton gives no thought to this now. Instead, he marvels at "those [conversations] which the divine Plato is said often to have held in the shade of that famous plane-tree, conversations which all mankind might well have flocked to hear in spell-bound silence" (1: 295). By alluding to the *Phaedrus* he confirms the classical nature of his ideal, which as Thomas Luxon demonstrates, is steeped in male homosocial (and even pederastic) relations (1-18; 77-79). Whereas before Il Penseroso would be content to "unsphear / The spirit of *Plato*" in solitary study (*IP* 88-9), Milton now idealizes the actual conversations between Socrates and Phaedrus.

"In this connection," the *Complete Prose Works* editors write, "the reader inevitably thinks of the friendship between Milton and Charles Diodati" (1: 295*n*), and rightly so: the poet's earliest and best friend held many qualities of the ideal conversation partner, and Milton knew it. Towards the end of his studious period of relative seclusion, Milton seems to place increasing emphasis on conversation not with books but with companions. A gifted student, Diodati entered Oxford at a young age and started his career while Milton was still finishing and supplementing his studies at St. Paul's and Cambridge. There was no one in Milton's life more delightful to converse with, and they maintained a classical epistolary relationship for several years, with John writing in Latin and Charles responding in Greek. Though highly stylized and somewhat contrived, these letters nevertheless emphasize the two young men's genuine affection for one another. Curiously, in the precious few records we have of their correspondence, they seem to

talk most about talking—about their correspondence itself. We rarely learn what Milton or Diodati are doing or thinking, since they prefer to save their actual points of discussion for in-person meetings (1: 324). So, in the first of two extant letters to Diodati, Milton complains that his friend "did not keep [his] promises" to visit whenever near the country, and asks whether there are "in those parts any fairly learned people with whom you can associate pleasantly and with whom you can talk, as we have been used to talking?" (324). This second quote is revealing, for it indicates that Milton conceived of their relationship primarily as one of conversation, and particularly "learned" conversation. Perhaps, too, the question is not completely disinterested, and he is worried that Diodati has found a new conversation partner to replace Milton—thus the slowness of correspondence.

Diodati's prompt response (now lost) must have reassured him, for in his second letter Milton seems ready to forgive all faults. Insisting that the slowness of letters did not cool his affection for Diodati, Milton explains, "I do not wish true friendship to be weighed by Letters and Salutations…. Your worth writes to me instead and inscribes real letters on my inmost consciousness" (326). Luxon apparently misses this point when he argues that "this was a friendship not so much enjoyed as performed on paper" (82). Although we do not have much evidence that Milton and Diodati saw each other regularly after St. Paul's, it is clear that what time they did spend together was very meaningful for them and they desired to speak quite often. For his part, Diodati treasured Milton's conversation, exclaiming in a different letter, "so much do I desire your company that in my longing I dream of and all but prophesy fair weather and calm, and everything golden for tomorrow, so that we may enjoy our fill of philosophical and learned conversation" (*CPW* 1: 336). This would be a rather exaggerated expression even for someone roleplaying a classical literary friendship. For Diodati, Milton represented that "noble

soul skilled in conversation" which he lacked in the country; having everything else, he still wanted "to add to these a good companion, learned and initiate" with whom he could share these pleasures (1: 337). It can hardly be coincidental that almost every description of each other is in reference to their learned conversation. Instead, it would appear that Diodati and Milton "fill[ed]" the role of learned interlocutor for each other, and that the basis of their friendship was the type of conversation Milton describes in *Prolusion 7* (1: 336).

When he finally does describe his plans to Diodati, Milton betrays a changed attitude from his previous love of solitude:

> I shall now tell you seriously what I am planning: to move into some one of the Inns of Court, wherever there is a pleasant and shady walk; for that dwelling will be more satisfactory, both for companionship, if I wish to remain at home, and as a more suitable headquarters, if I choose to venture forth. Where I am now, as you know, I live in obscurity and cramped quarters. (1: 327)

Douglas Trevor is therefore incorrect in his assertion that "Milton never links an urban environment with a scholarly life" (156). The Inns of Court, located in central London, would be abuzz every day with hundreds of barristers and students, among them Milton's brother Christopher. Shady walks notwithstanding, he now appears to be perfectly content with the prospect of a city dwelling. This is perhaps surprising given the lively criticism of the "din of the city" in *Ad Patrem*, and more surprising than that is his criticism of the "cramped quarters" of his retired abode—a far cry from the "laurel groves in a sacred wood, and the shades of Parnassus" Milton praises in the aforementioned poem (196, 193). Something has changed as the poet now emphasizes not *otium* or *solitudo*, but companionship.

If the 1637 letters reveal a shift away from solitary conversation to the happy conversation of learned and wise men, then the death of Charles Diodati in 1638 helps to trigger the shift in Milton's conception of solitude to that of loneliness. The Argument to *Epitaphium Damonis* plainly tells the focus of the poem: "he laments himself and his loneliness [*suamque solitudinem*] in this poem." Compare this to the corresponding preface to *Lycidas*, Milton's other elegy for a dead friend: "In this Monody the Author bewails a learned Friend." In this latter poem he laments his friend, but in the *Epitaphium* he laments his loneliness itself. Indeed, there is no mention in *Lycidas* of "solitude," "loneliness," or even "alone." The argument of *Epitaphium* is entirely appropriate, for Milton's/Thyrsis' emphasis is the loss of companionship and conversation. Damon will surely not go unwept, "but what, I ask, is to become of me? What loyal companion will cling close to my side as often you used to?" (*ED* 37-9). In a series of questions, the speaker imaginatively works out the implications of the loss of such a companion: "Who will be accustomed to laying the day to sleep *by conversation and by song*?"; "Who will teach me to sooth gnawing anxieties, who will teach me to beguile night's length with *sweet conversation*?" (43; 45-7, emphasis added). It does not matter that Charles and John probably did not ever literally share a flock or lie concealed while the farmer snored, as Luxon (channelling Dr. Johnson) objects (86); the loss of that friendship and especially that conversation, however fabulous, causes Milton to realize the fragility of happiness. After all, a true companion is rare, for "it is difficult for each of us to find from the thousands even one mutually suited individual" (108). If contentment can no longer be guaranteed in solitude, then the people with whom one converses in that general sense become that much more important.

But *Epitaphium Damonis* does not only witness the loss of manly conversation. Equally important is the loss of the pleasures of solitude itself as the same *solitudo* translated "solitude"

in *Prolusion 7* becomes the "loneliness" in the argument of the *Epitaphium*. When Thyrsis laments how "in solitude I wander now through fields, in solitude through pastures, and in valleys wherever the branching shadows are closely packed" (58-9), it is in contrast to the solitary pastures and tree shades he enjoys in so much of his earlier poetry, especially *Il Penseroso*. The same imagery and same condition evoke an opposite reaction. Milton even revisits the issue of saturnine melancholy. Whereas previously "solitary *Saturn*" was a figure of respected authority (*IP* 24), now he is a threat to happiness: "What ill-tempered melancholy is tormenting you? Either love is destroying you or a malicious star is bewitching you—Saturn's star has often been an ill-omen for shepherds" (*ED* 77-9). But, like "the *Bear*" and Cassiopeia, that star has always been there, and Il Penseroso was still able to find more pleasure under it than the sociable L'Allegro or the shepherds he observes (*IP* 87; 19-21). The difference is that Milton now finds himself in the shepherd ranks of Thyrsis and Damon, moved there from the melancholic solitude of Il Penseroso. The contemplative man's ideal, it turns out, is exactly that: an ideal that seems increasingly unsustainable as "the perpetual sense of loss" of a bereft companion and suitable conversation partner. As I shall explore in the next chapter, the evil of solitary life can be eradicated by a new interlocutor, and though the *Epitaphium*'s Thyrsis may not retain his Damon, there can be a Corydon to *L'Allegro*'s Thyrsis (83).[9]

[9] For the argument that Milton's marital ideal develops out of his friendship with Charles Diodati, see Gregory Chaplin, "One Flesh, One Heart, One Soul: Renaissance Friendship and Miltonic Marriage."

"Individual Solace Dear": The Solitary Companionship of Adam and Eve

Milton's fixation on apt and cheerful conversation runs from the writings of the 1630s through his divorce tracts and into *Paradise Lost*, a poem whose four middle books consist of a conversation between man and angel.[1] Not surprisingly, the discourse of solitude continues to accompany such discussions, both in Milton's insistence that the purpose of marriage is the conversation "of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evill of solitary life," and in his representation of human marriage and solitude in Eden (*CPW* 2: 235). Though the poet has flirted with the answer in his earlier works, in *Paradise Lost* Milton finally poses the question explicitly through the mouth of Adam: "In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (8.365-7). Equally important for the marital relationship is Adam's related query, phrased in similar terms: "Among unequals what societie/ Can sort, what harmonie or true delight?" (8.383-4).

In this chapter I will consider the changing status of solitude in Milton's divorce tracts, along with the implications of his arguments on women's capacity for conversation. I will then examine how he revisits the earlier question of the relation between happiness and solitude in Adam's Book 8 birth narrative, a scene which outlines the nature of Edenic solitude and society. I argue that, contrary to the crabbed opinion of some recent critics, the first humans' need for one another does not constitute a flaw but rather an integral part of their design: as "sole partner[s]" of one entity composed of "one Flesh, one Heart, one Soule," Adam and Eve form a singularity

[1] Stephen M. Fallon notes that the epic narrator is silent for more than a thousand lines, or a tenth of the epic, when Adam asks Raphael to explain how sin could have arisen in heaven (2014: 11). Besides Books 5 to 8, Books 2 to 3 are largely comprised of conversations between divine and demonic figures, and Books 9 to 10 of conversations between humans.

that may be described as a solitary companionship, thereby accounting for the poet's frequent, oxymoronic portrayal of Adam and Eve as alone together (4.411; 8.499). [2]

"The Evill of Solitary Life" in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*

Before Milton begins imagining solitary companionship, however, he first becomes disenchanted with the *solitudo* he seemed to treasure so much in *Il Penseroso* and *Prolusion 7*. He eventually began to displace solitary conversation with learned conversation between men, as suggested in the previous chapter, but one could argue that the transition to a desire for marital conversation begins fairly early on, too. Milton could convince himself that the fruits of solitary study are worth the wait when writing *Prolusion 7* in 1631-2, but by the time of his 1633 "Letter to a Friend," he seems less sure. He still claims (rather defensively) that the motivation for his delay in choosing a career is a "sacred reverence & religious advisement how best to undergoe[,] not taking thought of beeing late so it give advantage to be more fit" (*CPW* 1: 320). It is better to wait until I am ready and be thought tardy, he suggests, than to fly prematurely and prove useless. Nevertheless, the tone of the letter betrays its author's uncertainty, as does the inked mess of crossed out phrases and replaced words on the manuscript (1: 318*n*). At once justifying his "tardie moving," he admits to being "something suspicio[us] of my selfe" and of his "certaine belatednesse" (1: 319-20). He is similarly ambivalent about his "studious retirement": although he supposedly refuses to "streine for any set apologie" (1: 319), he systematically outlines the inadequacy of the love of learning as motivation, whether it stems from a good, bad, or natural disposition. As part of this apologia, he presents a counterpoint to the excuse that some people are by nature more solitary:

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[2] I borrow the phrase "Solitary Companionship" from Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, who gesture towards Adam and Eve's "oxymoronic condition of shared solitude" as an analogy for the relation of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (5).

> [I]f it be… thought an naturall pronenesse there is against y^{t} a much more potent inclination inbred w^{ch} about this tyme of a mans life sollicits most, the desire of house & family of his owne to w^{ch} nothing is esteemed more helpefull then the early entring into credible employment, & nothing more hindering then this affected solitarinesse.

The motivation of solitary proneness "could not have held out thus Long against so strong an opposition on the other side of every kind" (1: 319), and the motivation of starting a family is one of those oppositions. In 1633 Milton would have been twenty-four, turning twenty-five—just the time to be thinking about settling down with a wife. But to do that, he knows he needs credible employment, and his "affected solitarinesse" will do him no favours in that regard. Already solitariness is seen in opposition to the natural call of marriage.

Ten years later, Milton published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. He would now vehemently decry "the evill of solitary life" as a "God-forbidd'n lonelines which will in time draw on with it a generall discomfort and dejection of minde, not beseeming either Christian profession or morall conversation, unprofitable and dangerous to the Commonwealth" (2: 235, 247). It is, according to Milton, a personal illness that affects the individual's mind—and therefore injures his aptitude for conversation—as well as a national security risk. Yet the fear of loneliness that everywhere pervades *Doctrine and Discipline* is a distinctly personal one, and for all his talk of hypothetical men suffering from "an unkindly solitarines" (2: 251), it is clear that "Milton himself in his shame and isolation stands naked before us in the very phrases he had so carefully chosen to hide behind" (Patterson 283). Solitary life is itself undesirable, then, but what about life with an unsuitable partner from whom one cannot cleave? In such a scenario,

> the solitarines of man, which God had namely and principally order'd to prevent by mariage, hath no remedy, but lies under a worse condition then the loneliest single life…. here the continuall sight of his deluded thoughts without cure, must needs be to him,

> especially if his complexion incline him to melancholy, a daily trouble and paine of losse in some degree like that which Reprobates feel. (2: 246-7)

If previously solitude was a divine state which "promoted the development and well-being of the mind," solitariness now has a destructive potential that afflicts the mind and perhaps one's soul, if one is given to melancholy, itself no longer a thing to be celebrated (1: 289). The diction of disease here ("remedy," "condition," "cure," "complexion") is typical of that used in the rest of the treatise. Given this fact, it is surprising that Douglas Trevor in his study of melancholy in early modern England does not address this negative aspect of solitude in his long chapter, "Solitary Milton." Indeed, in his eagerness to assert "the poet's high estimation of solitariness and the melancholy that peacefully… bubbles up from such a state" (160), Trevor skips over *Epitaphium Damonis*, Milton's second letter to Diodati, and parts of the divorce tracts, even though he discusses works composed concurrently with these writings (*Elegy 6*, *A Mask*, *Lycidas*, *Ad Patrem*, and the anti-prelatical tracts). Indeed, in one of his rare comments on the *Doctrine and Discipline*, he says that for Milton, "divorce is even more highly valued [than chastity] because it signifies the reacquisition of solitariness after it has been erroneously forfeited" (177)—a reading which ignores the operating premise of the work: solitariness is not good in the first place.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of solitude or solitariness or loneliness (Milton uses the words interchangeably in *Doctrine and Discipline*) to his theory of marriage. The crux of his argument for companionate marriage is Genesis 2:18, a verse which in Milton's usage waxes repetitive (*CPW* 2: 245; 246, 251, 597, among others). To know what marriage is, he argues, we ought to look at its institution, which he takes to be God's remark in the crucial second chapter of Genesis: "*It is not good,* saith he, *that man should be alone; I will make a help meet for him*. From which words so plain, lesse cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned

Interpreter, then that in Gods intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of mariage" (2: 245-6). It is because man is alone, Milton says, that woman was created and marriage instituted in the first place.[3] By inference, we can assume that marriage was not primarily created for procreation or to satisfy any inordinate sexual desire, but rather for companionship; the spousal relationship should thus be one of friendship. This much is commonplace in early modern Protestant marriage theory (see Turner, Patterson, and Suzuki). What is distinctive, however, is Milton's emphasis on "conversation," for despite his assertion, it does *not* obviously follow from God's statement that "a meet and happy conversation" is the purpose of marriage. If by "conversation" he means only sociability generally, his argument would not be at all novel, but the word also contains the modern sense of discussion: Milton has in mind "an intimate and *speaking* help, a ready and reviving associate in marriage: whereof who misses by chancing on a *mute* and spiritles mate, remains more alone then before" (2: 251, emphasis added). A proper marriage partner is one to whom one speaks, who speaks in return, and reasons not contemptibly.

"A Peculiar Comfort in the Maried State"

Such an idealization of marital conversation is almost unprecedented. David Masson thus calls Milton's argument for divorce based on conversation "one of the boldest that had ever been submitted to the reading of England" (3: 48), and Gregory Chaplin observes that Milton's decision to argue for divorce premised on failed conversation was unpractical, given the ready and easy alternative, already common in Protestant Europe, of arguing for divorce on the grounds of desertion (271). Yet the poet is resolute in postulating a marital relationship founded on intimate, consequential dialogue. In this he is peculiar. As Thomas Luxon makes clear, early

[3] For a sociological discussion of marriage as Milton's cure for loneliness, see David Aers and Bobe Hodge, "'Rational Burning': Milton on Sex and Marriage."

moderns largely acknowledged the desirability of inspiring conversation; it is just that they expected to find that in the learned conversation between men (see previous chapter and Luxon 1-21). The reason for this is that most writers, influenced by the classical friendship tradition, simply cannot imagine a relationship that merges both the intellectual and sexual senses of conversation. Michel de Montaigne, for example, briefly considers but dismisses the possibility:

> Seeing (to speake truely) that the ordinary sufficiency of women, cannot answer this conference and communication, the nurse of this sacred bond: nor seeme their mindes strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable. And truly, if without that, such a genuine and voluntarie acquaintance might be contracted, where not only mindes had this entire jovissance, but also bodies, a share of the alliance, and where man might wholy be engaged: It is certaine, that friendship would thereby be more compleat and full: But this sexe could never yet by any example attaine unto it, and is by ancient schooles rejected thence. ("Of Friendship" 147, trans. John Florio)

It is not that the idea is undesirable; it is simply just not possible because of a supposed limitation on the woman's part. Milton is a veritable feminist saint compared to such misogyny, for his marriage theory implies not just that there exists "any [one] example attaine unto it," but that *most* women should be capable of such conversation given a fit husband. Marriage is a special relationship precisely because it integrates the various senses of "conversation." Any accusation of Milton's evasiveness in using the term is therefore misguided, for he means not one or the other definition but both at once.

In arguing this I depart from critics who see an inconsistency in Milton's theory of marriage and his application of it in *Paradise Lost*. Luxon, for example, agrees that in the poet's reading of Genesis 2:18, God "meant that the first man, and every man thereafter, needed a soulmate, a conversation" (57) — so far so good. But he then says that, given the tradition and

language of classical friendship which Milton draws upon, man would have "needed another self" who was capable of that conversation—in other words, another man (57). Similarly, in his commentary on Adam's Book 8 creation scene, Trevor argues that, given God's promise of "thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self" (*PL* 8.450), "one might be forgiven at this point for expecting a male gift for Adam" (Trevor 186). Both conclude that what Adam received was emphatically not what he was promised. But Adam does not need "another self" in the sense of a clone; he needs another self who is precisely *another* self, not *his* self—someone who is "like" him but not him. The solution to man's loneliness is not the apt and cheerful conversation of man with man, but of "man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life."

As Luxon and Trevor both know, Milton makes an argument for the benefits of specifically female companionship in *Tetrachordon*. Though aware of Augustine's argument that "manly friendship in all other regards had bin a more becomming solace for *Adam*, then to spend so many secret years in an empty world with one woman,"[4] Milton nevertheless rejects this "crabbed opinion," retorting that "there is a peculiar comfort in the maried state besides the genial bed, which no other society affords" (2: 596). What is that peculiar comfort? Milton says in *Doctrine and Discipline* that it is a comforting and refreshing conversation, but here in *Tetrachordon* he adds that it can be rest or "delightfull intermissions" from continuous study (597). A man might conceivably provide some delightful intermission, but "most unlike resemblance cannot but please best and be pleas'd in the aptitude of that variety" (597). This answer rubs some critics the wrong way, however. For Luxon, his response only confirms the

[4] Milton here refers to Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*, probably to passages such as IX iii.5, v. 9, and vii.13. Wondering what Eve could have been made for if not procreation, he ventures, "We could say that it was for solace, in case solitude were to grow boring. But how much more suitable for living together and talking together are two men friends, equally matched, than a man and a woman!" For a discussion of Augustine's early opinion see Turner 98ff.

incapacity of Eve as a suitable conversation partner: "Milton scorns [Augustine's argument] as nonsense, but he fails to make the argument we might well have expected — that a woman is as fit a conversation partner as a man…. Instead, Milton argues that men need a break now and then from the intensity of homosocial conversation" (110). Are women merely a "harmless pastime?"

At first consideration, Luxon's indictment seems damning, but context here suggests otherwise. Why would Milton need to make the argument that a woman is as fit a conversation partner as a man when in fact he has already been arguing that a woman is the ideal conversation partner—God's solution to man's loneliness? The loneliness Adam experiences is not an utter lack of anyone to talk to; as Milton says just pages earlier, "*Adam* had the company of God himself, and Angels to convers with," and "God could have created him out of the same mould a thousand friends and brother *Adams* to have bin his consorts, yet for all this till *Eve* was giv'n him, God reckn'd him alone" (2: 595). In any case, Milton does make the argument that woman is a fit conversation partner—that is the very premise of his divorce tracts! As he writes in the lines following those quoted by Luxon, "God is no deceitfull giver, to bestow that [i.e., marriage to a woman] on us for a remedy of lonelines, which if it bring not a sociable minde as well as a conjunctive body, leavs us no lesse alone than before" (2: 598). It does not have to be, as Montaigne would have it, a choice between fit conversation and delightful intermission. For Milton, woman's "peculiar comfort" is that she provides both rational discourse and pleasurable pastime, and not just one or the other.

As it turns out, Milton revisits Eve's capacity for conversation in *Paradise Lost* in a scenario perfectly suited to determine the nature of her conversation with Adam. The poet sets up at the beginning of Book 8 what could very easily be considered an old boys' club of the sort that makes some readers nervous: Adam and his male archangel friend "Raphael, the sociable Spirit"

"entring on studious thoughts abstruse" (5.221; 8.40)—specifically, a conversation about the seeming geocentric universe. Milton, as if to provoke our outrage, has Eve get up at just that moment and leave to go tend her flowers while the "men" start talking about astronomy. Just as we begin to form those accusations, however, the narrator intrudes:

> Yet went she not, as not with such discourse
> Delighted, or not capable her eare
> Of what was high: such pleasure she reserv'd,
> *Adam* relating, she sole Auditress;
> Her Husband the Relater she preferr'd
> Before the Angel, and of him to ask
> Chose rather; hee, she knew would intermix
> Gratefull digressions, and solve high dispute
> With conjugal Caresses. (8.48-56)

Luxon reads this too, but he quotes starting only at "Her husband the Relater she preferr'd," ignoring the crucial preceding four lines and allowing him to conclude that "the kind of conversation she prefers is more bodily than that Adam enjoys with either God or the archangel" (119). Of course Eve enjoys bodily conversation with Adam—he enjoys it too, according to 9.235-41—but the narrator makes it clear that "such discourse / Delighted" her as well. To suggest that Eve's preferred conversation is "more bodily" is to belie Milton's emphasis on her capacity for "high" thoughts. There is no need to oppose the two, and in fact, as Montaigne himself argued, it is preferable that Eve should enjoy both kinds of intercourse with her husband. It is moreover worth noting that Eve prefers to be Adam's "*sole* Auditress": she likes speaking with Adam alone, as she did in Book 4, asking a related question to that posed by Adam to Raphael (4.657-9, emphasis added). Eve knows what she likes and she pursues it in whatever way is pleasing, because conversation in Eden is not only about knowledge, but pleasure.[5]

[5] Notice, too, that here it is the woman who desires "gratefull digressions," not the man, as in *Tetrachordon*. Would we call Adam's conversation "bodily" if the poem said he pursued them?

Edenic Solitude: The Creation of Adam and Eve

This brings us full circle to the questions with which we began our investigation of Milton's works: is the solitary life a happy one? Who can enjoy solitude? What does it mean to be alone? In early texts such as *Il Penseroso* and *Prolusion 7*, the answer seems to be that solitude is indeed an ideal state that allows for poetic and spiritual growth. In *Paradise Lost*, however, the answer is much more complex. Milton teases out some preliminary answers in a fairly lengthy Book 8 episode which, for the purposes of this study, we must now attend to fairly closely. Perhaps not coincidentally, Adam's creation scene, Milton's most extended discussion of solitude, is itself occasioned by the first man's "[d]esire with [Raphael] still longer to converse" (8.252). As we quickly learn, this impulse towards conversation is one of the defining characteristics of the human. It is especially true of Adam, who upon his first awakening stands up, and round about him sees "Hill, Dale, and shadie Woods, and sunnie Plaines" (8.262). Indeed, he sees this landscape before even examining his own body, and finding that he can speak and readily name his surrounding, he immediately starts addressing what he sees: "Ye Hills and Dales, ye Rivers, Woods, and Plaines" (8.275). Adam thus exhibits his predilection for conversation before he even meets anyone.

He calls, but "when answer none return'd," he sits himself down on a shady bank of flowers (8.285-6). We might at this point expect him to wander about and enjoy the "delicious solitude" of the rural landscape, as does Andrew Marvell's speaker in "The Garden" (16), but already Milton's man has a different perspective.[6] Taken into the garden proper by a divine

[6] Marvell's poem contrasts fruitfully with Adam's creation narrative. Where Marvell's idyllic speaker revels in "that happy garden-state / While man there walked without a mate" (57-8), Milton's Adam knows almost immediately that something is missing, and "wil[l] taste / No pleasure, though in pleasure, solitarie" (8.401-2). Marvell's poem is thus very much in line with late seventeenth-century love of solitude, while Milton now appears to be disenchanted with it.

apparition, he begins to do what he does naturally, and speaks with the "Presence Divine" (8.314). This first conversation with God covers a lot of ground: Adam learns who God is, who he himself is, and what his role in Paradise will be. He is warned against eating the fruit of knowledge, and subsequently he uses his intuitive knowledge to name each bird and beast—all this within less than fifty lines of verse (8.316-62). The conversation nevertheless continues for another one hundred and fifty lines in a playful exercise of Socratic teaching, as God prompts Adam to discover the nature of his solitude and his fundamental need for companionship (8.363-51). This conversation, I believe, holds the key for interpreting Edenic solitude.

Speaking to a God he only just met about a world he was that day born into, Adam manages to express some discontent: "but with mee / I see not who partakes. In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (8.364-7). The question seems peculiar, since only about a hundred lines earlier Adam rejoices in his vitality and says that he feels "happier than I know" (8.282). (The initial high of life, it appears, does not last long while alone; even as he names the animals, Adam admits that he "found not what me thought I wanted still," and this seems to be the very motivation for addressing God in the first place [8.355].) The Vision, "As with a smile more bright'nd," in mock outrage points out—as Milton did in *Tetrachordon* 2: 595—that Adam is in fact not alone: he has plenty of "various living creatures" round about him to play with (8.368-70). Dismissing Adam's plaint as misguided, God with a sense of finality instructs him to find pastime with the animals. But Adam is a prudent and persistent interlocutor even from birth. Crucially, he is aware of the disjunction between the other creatures and himself, and from this disjunction he argues that they cannot properly be considered his society: "Among unequals what societie / Can sort, what harmonie or true delight? / Which must be mutual, in proportion due /Giv'n and receiv'd" (8.383-6). The

question has large implications about Milton's conception of solitude, for it implies that it is not the mere presence of other beings that constitutes company. Society must be "mutual," not in "disparitie" (8.386), though to what extent some inequality is allowed is not clear. The other implication, contested by some critics, is that Adam's eventual mate must not be an "unequal," for he certainly does find harmony and delight with her. Thus, as Turner puts it, in "the central moment from which grew Milton's entire conception of marriage… the relationship imagined by man and approved by God is described in egalitarian terms" (283).

Turner (283-4) and Luxon (119-20) would argue that despite Milton's theory of society and solitude here, Eve is in fact not an equal, and so the poet's theory clashes irrevocably with reality. But this seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse. Eve's inequality ("though both / Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd" [4.295-6]) is not nearly as heavily foregrounded as her capacity for "rational delight" (8.391). Neither does Milton dedicate an entire 250-line episode to discussing her supposed inferiority. What we do see is Milton tirelessly insisting in his divorce tracts, and here again in *Paradise Lost*, that women provide the fit partnership that men were created to need; and if fit society cannot be had among unequals, then in some sense Eve must be an equal.[7] That is, if Milton in one place says Eve is unequal, but in many others emphasizes her fitness and (implicitly) her equality, it seems to me that the more reasonable course of action is to interpret the passages suggesting her inferiority in light of the more abundant passages that require her equivalence—some of which, indeed, reveal her to be sharper than her spouse. Certainly Adam does not appear bothered by any supposed inequality until after the Fall. Whenever we see the pair enjoying one another's conversation, we are therefore in some sense being told by Milton's theory of society and solitude that Eve is categorically equal.

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[7] Wendy Olmsted (191) suggests that where Adam seems to requesting an equal in the sense of parity, God gives him an "equal" partner in the sense of "adequately fit or qualified" (*OED* 3b).

Milton's God playfully contests Adam's premise that solitude cannot please without parity of conversation, objecting that He himself is happy, though "alone / From all Eternitie, for none I know / Second to mee or like, equal much less" (8.405-7). It truly is a powerful counterpoint, because if Adam's theory is correct and God is alone without equal, then God should not be happy—which, despite some moments of grumbling in Book 3, he certainly is. Adam, however, brilliantly argues that the rules are different for God than men:

> Thou in thy self art perfet, and in thee
> Is no deficience found; not so is Man,
> But in degree, the cause of his desire
> By conversation with his like to help,
> Or solace his defects. No need that thou
> Shouldst propagat, already infinite
> And through all numbers absolute, though One. (8.415-21)

The key here is that "perfect" does not primarily mean superlatively excellent or free from flaws, but rather "complete," as in the classical Latin *perfectus*, the adjective of the past participle of *perficere*, to complete (*OED*, *s.v.* "perfect"). This is in fact Milton's typical usage; speaking of companionship in *Doctrine and Discipline*, he remarks how "if it were needfull before the fall, when man was much *more perfect in himself*, how much more is it needfull now" (*CPW* 2:251, emphasis added). The echo in Adam's speech is unmistakable. Man, unlike God, is not self-completing; indeed, he was never meant to be.

Neither is Man all-containing, "already infinite /And through all numbers absolute." In the above passage, Adam draws attention to the three purposes of marriage in Milton's preferred order: first, to quench the "desire/ [of] conversation with his like"; second, to "solace his defects"

(to be discussed shortly); and lastly, to "propagat." It is this last one he has in mind when he says that "man by number is to manifest / His single imperfection, and beget / Like of his like, his Image multipli'd" (*PL* 8.422-4). Alastair Fowler in his edition of *Paradise Lost* glosses "single imperfection" as "creaturely singleness" or "absence of peers" (451*n*), and Luxon describes it as loneliness, man's constitutive lack, the tell-tale sign of his humanity (95-121). But the context of "beget[ting] / Like of his like" suggests procreation, not solitude; Adam merely means that, unlike God, he cannot propagate or create or "raise" (*PL* 8.430) other creatures by himself. The divine is singular and complete in himself; Man is singular but incomplete in himself. He is dependent on someone else for procreation, for solace, and for conversation.

To God's delight, Adam realizes without being told that he is "In unitie defective, which requires / Collateral love, and deerest amitie" (8.425-6). Indeed, this was the goal of the entire conversation, for as God says, "I, ere thou spak'st / Knew it not good for Man to be alone" (8.444-5). But "defective" here cannot have an overly pejorative sense, or else Adam would be telling God to His face that He made him poorly. Instead, defective unity seems to imply that Adam knows he is not yet united or whole.[8] God concurs, and promises to bring him "Thy likeness, thy fit help, they other self, / Thy wish exactly to thy hearts desire" (8.450-1). As I have argued above, this does not for Milton mean another Adam, but an "other" Adam. Eve truly becomes his "Collateral love," for she comes from his side; as Adam soon declares, she is "Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self / Before me" (8.495-6). The nature of this union is somewhat elusive, because for Milton, Eve is not Adam—she is "like" him. Yet in some sense, too, they are not quite themselves except in relation to one another. As Jean H. Hagstrum puts it,

[8] It is interesting that Milton would have Adam use that word of himself, because as Turner shows, in the received tradition it was Eve who was described as a defect (103). Picking up on this language, after the Fall, Adam harshly calls her "this fair defect / Of Nature" (10.891-2).

the companionship's "most endearing qualities arise from its union of contraries of total individuality and total mutuality" (28).[9] I would suggest, however, that in Milton's conception, they are closer to an individual: *individuus*, undivided, inseparable.[10]

It is not surprising that "the rich and complex ideal of the divorce tracts—a companionship that is amorous, relaxing, spirited, cheerful, comforting—is fully realized in the Edenic happiness of Adam and Eve" (Hagstrum 8). What is surprising, however, is the way that the language of solitude, so affiliated with misery in those same divorce tracts, becomes once again associated with this Edenic happiness. It would be much tidier simply to say that once Adam and Eve are together there is no more talk of solitude, but this is not so in *Paradise Lost*. Instead, solitude correlates with happiness within a paradoxical solitary companionship that emphasizes their singularity. From beginning to end, a large network of puns and descriptions associate the couple with solitude: God sees from afar our two first parents "reaping immortal fruits of joy and love.… In blissful solitude" (3.67-9); the narrator first describes them as a "Fair couple, linkt in happie nuptual League, / Alone" (4.339-40); Adam speaks to his "Sole partner and sole part of all these joyes" and "Sole Eve, Associate sole" (4.441; 9.227) as Eve herself addresses the "Sole in whom my thoughts find all repose" (5.28); and of course, the last lines of *Paradise Lost* depict Adam and Eve as "they hand in hand with wandring steps and slow, / Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way" (12.649). These are but a few examples of the way that Milton transforms, almost phonetically, the *solus* of solitude into the *solatium* of comfort. Given their special individuality, however, this makes perfect sense. Not just the angels, but Adam and Eve too may be described as "United in one individual Soule / For ever happie" (5.610-11). As

[9] See also Lewalski 1974: "the basic human predicament" involves reconciling autonomy with "the need for the other, the inescapable bonds of human interdependence" (10).
[10] In this Milton seems to agree with John Calvin, who considered Adam "only a half-person (*dimidium*) without his counterpart" (Turner 105).

one soul and flesh, they are sole even when together, uniquely demonstrating what it means to be an “individual solace dear” (4.486).

"A Man Alone is Either a Saint or a Devil": Satanic Loneliness and Divine Solitude

> These men are Divels alone, as the saying is, *homo solus aut Deus, aut Dæmon:* a man alone is either a Saint or a Divell, *mens ejus aut languescit, aut tumescit*, and *væ soli* in this sense, woe be to him that is so alone.
>
> — Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

If Milton imagines a blissful, paradoxical union of solitude and society in the first humans, then in the first devil he illustrates vividly the evils of solitary life. It is Satan, not Adam, not Eve, not even God, who is most frequently depicted as alone in *Paradise Lost*, and it is his solitude that, relative to the other characters, most defines his emotional circumstances. In this last essay I shall consider Milton's foremost solitary figure in his tortured singularity as depicted in the epic and as contextualized by contemporary writings on the dangers of solitude. I argue that Milton makes his final case against solitude in Satan, a creature whose fallen solitariness marks an inability to converse either with others or himself: speaking with his supposed friends, he can voice only rhetoric, and his conversation with himself by way of soliloquy lapses into solipsism. This inability to converse or cogitate highlights his self-deficiency and drives him deep into a self-isolation that impels him into further evil. By contrast, God is said to dwell in solitude and self-sufficiency, but the poet seems incapable of depicting him as such. All the inhabitants of heaven, it seems, are "[u]nited in one individual Soule / For ever happie" (5.610-11). God knew it was not good that the man should be alone; Milton seems to think that it is not good that the gods should be alone, either.

In a poem filled with the language of aloneness, Satan stands out in his solitariness. Though we are introduced to him in the company of devils and take our leave of him under the same circumstances, during the majority of the narrative we see him by himself, coming into contact with others only when necessary to complete his enterprise. Happiness or blessedness correlates with society, as we have seen, so it ought not be surprising that nearly everyone in

heaven and on earth has a companion. In *Paradise Lost*, however, even those who live under the earth live sociably. The apostate angels spend their time together in Hell racing, sparring, singing, philosophizing, and exploring (2.521-628). At the gates of Hell, Sin "sat / Alone but long [she] sat not" before being joined by Death (2.777-8). And even Chaos, patriarch of the hoary deep, dwells with "Sable-vested *Night*, eldest of things, / The Consort of his Reign" (2.962-3). Indeed, in his description of these three episodes the narrator draws attention to Satan's unique status as lonely individual in contrast to the other powers of darkness. Milton describes how the demons try to distract themselves in lines 251-268, but the very next line makes it clear that Satan enjoys no such preoccupations: "Mean while the Adversary of God and Man…. Explores his solitary flight" (2.629, 632). He arrives at Hell's gate where he meets Sin and Death for a surprise family reunion, but this too is short-lived. In his attempt to convince them to let him pass, Satan himself emphasizes the solitary nature of his journey away from the demons:

> From them I go
> This uncouth errand sole, and one for all
> My self expose, with lonely steps to tread
> Th' unfounded deep. (2.826-9)

This passage contains one of just two instances of the word "lonely" in the poem. We have noted how words such as "sole" come to be associated with Adam and Eve, but early on in the epic the language of solitariness belongs almost exclusively to Satan. Within the first four Books of *Paradise Lost*, for example, when the word "alone" is used in the sense of isolation, it is with

reference to Satan ten out of thirteen times.[1] One such instance occurs in his speech before Chaos and his "consort," Night. This time, Satan says he wanders the darksome desert "Alone, and without guide, half lost" (2.975). Misery (and evil, apparently) loves company, but the archfiend is the exception; he seems almost to revel in his solitariness, wearing it like a badge of honour in his conversations with Sin, Chaos, Uriel (3.667), and Gabriel (4.935). This extended emphasis on his being alone leads us to identify Satan with solitude quite early in the poem.

"Solitude [Only] Somtimes is Best Societie"

Although solitude in the seventeenth century had acquired an ambiguous moral state, the moral overtones of Satan's solitariness are not immediately clear. As we have seen, being alone is not always an indictment of character; in Milton's earlier work, at least, there exist some productive solitudes which allow for conversation with oneself, the Muses, past writers, and even God (see chapter 3). Moreover, Satan in the first few books may simply appear to be joining an established literary tradition of solitary heroes. James Freeman points out that "Milton's training in literature accustomed him to follow the exploits of singular heroes" — classical epics, after all, "dealt with the wrath of Achilles or the wanderings of one versatile fighter or the battles of a divinely led survivor of Troy" (55). Nevertheless, in Milton's epic there is little direct praise of the solitary life. The closest such statement is Adam's (proto-Ciceronian) epigram during his disagreement with Eve about whether they should split up for the day's work:

> But if much converse perhaps
> Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield.
> For solitude somtimes is best societie,

[1] The remaining three instances actually serve by contrast to highlight his solitude. One is Sin's description of herself "alone" before Death is born, and the remaining two are examples of Eve and Adam's joint solitude: they are "linkt in happie nuptial League, / Alone" as they walk "hand in hand alone" (4.339, 689).

> And short retirement urges sweet returne. (9.247-50)

Forgetting for a moment that the phrase is immediately followed by a further objection, Adam here seems to be softening his earlier stance that no one—save God—can be happy in solitude. He also intuits the idea that solitude is not really the utter absence of society because solitude is itself best society. Nevertheless, rather than a commendation of time alone, Adam's sentiment is more an extension of Milton's celebration of variety and moderation (Olmsted 200). His epigram is also laden with qualifiers. As a conditional, the statement's relevance depends on whether Eve really is "satiate[d]" with much converse—an idea foreign to the voraciously talkative Adam and, formerly, Eve ("With thee conversing I forget all time" [4.639]). Even so, Adam will "yield" (implying that he would rather not) to a "short" absence because solitude "somtimes" (not always) is best society. The benefit of solitude, to his mind, is not the time spent alone but the increased pleasure to be gained upon reuniting, much like Adam and Eve do just enough work "to recommend coole *Zephyr*" (4.329). In that sense, he does not delight in solitude itself but rather in the delayed gratification of conversation,[2] and if that is so then solitude still occupies uncertain territory in the poem without any explicitly positive representation.

Though it is not obvious when, if only "somtimes," solitude is best society, Adam does say earlier for whom it can be thus, explaining to God that He is "Best with thy self accompanied" and so can enjoy it (8.428). Adam's judgement is corroborated by early modern discussions of solitude, for, as Abraham Cowley puts it, "Solitude can be well fitted and sit right, but upon a very few persons" (393). Cowley himself expounds the qualifications of such a person in his essay "Of Solitude." Drawing on Michel de Montaigne, he argues that the ideal solitary must be satisfied within himself and have no intemperate desire for external things; he

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[2] Mary Beth Long traces Adam's hesitation about solitude back to his creation scene (102-4).

must eradicate all lusts, "for how is it possible for a Man to enjoy himself while his Affections are tyed to things without Himself?" (393-4). In fact, an excess of passions is dangerous in solitude, since those passions may "strip and bind, or murder us when they catch us alone" (393). But in keeping with Milton's lack of enthusiasm for a fugitive and cloistered virtue, Cowley specifies that naivety should not be the source of a solitary man's placidity: he "must have enough knowledge of the World to see the vanity of it, and enough Virtue to despise Vanity" (393). In short, solitude is for those people—wherever they are!—who are already emotionally balanced and are satisfied within themselves. To this emotional equanimity Cowley adds an intellectual rigour reminiscent of Virgil's happy man, demanding also that the solitary man "learn the Art and get the Habit of Thinking; for… Cogitation is the thing which distinguishes the Solitude of a God from a wild Beast" (394). We will return to this pregnant formulation shortly, but for now it is sufficient to note how comprehensive the criteria for solitude seem to be.

Equally important to Cowley's and his contemporaries' conception of solitude is its psychological topos. In his essay on the subject ("Of Solitarinesse" in John Florio's 1603 translation), Montaigne writes that to benefit from solitude, "it is not enough, for a man to have sequestred himselfe from the concourse of people: it is not sufficient to shift place, a man must also sever himselfe from the popular conditions, that are in us. A man must sequester and recover himselfe from himselfe" (190). It is because solitude is a psychological space as well as a condition that we must purge the mind of its lusts. For better or worse, to be solitary is not only to be absent from others, but also to be left to one's thoughts. In this framework it is therefore perfectly possible to be alone in the midst of a crowd, or far from lonely even if one is physically

removed from all other persons.[3] Francis Bacon summarizes the first of these points when he quotes the Latin adage, *magna civitas, magna solitudo* ("A great city is a great solitude," 391), and we have already come across its converse, *nunquam minus solus cum solus*—a common saying by the time Cowley was writing. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton adopts this conception of solitude as a space of heightened psychological confrontation with one's thoughts (Olmsted 181). Indeed, the same logic underpins one of the poem's most famous lines as Satan declares that "The Mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (1.254-5), and though his declaration gives comfort while in hell, those notes will change to tragic in the vast psychological desert he finds himself in when removed from his fellow demons.

In our exploration of the ambivalence of solitude thus far, we have focused mostly on the public pressure and accusations against retirement and solitariness, considering in less detail the arguments about the personal detriments of solitariness. Nevertheless, seventeenth-century objections to solitude encompassed not only its status as a social or public ill, but also the toll it can take on an unfit individual. As Wendy Olmsted argues, these representations of solitude "reveal the importance of the deep thoughts that can inform the solitary, [but they] may also lead to despair" (176).[4] Although *Epitaphium Damonis* registers the pain of loss associated with loneliness and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* addresses the personal consequences of an unkindly solitariness, neither of these texts gives the same kind of sustained representation possible in *Paradise Lost*. Solitude is an ostensibly beatific, but frequently destructive, force in

[3] The first of these recalls Milton's complaint in his 1647 letter to Dati, discussed in p. 7-8 above, that despite the many relatives then living with him, he is "forced to live in almost perpetual solitude" (*CPW* 2: 762-3).

[4] I am here indebted to Olmsted's brief but useful survey of seventeenth-century writings on solitude and despair in *The Imperfect Friend*, 176-182.

the poem, and key early modern remarks about the dangers of solitude help elucidate Milton's emphasis on the devil's being alone.

For the earlier writers, the dangers associated with an unfit solitude are severe. Robert Burton is especially skeptical of "voluntary solitarinesse," which although at first may greatly please, "in a moment" can lead to "feare, sorrow, suspition… discontent, care, and wearinesse of life" (243). These unfortunate individuals fall subject to something like demonic oppression. Burton grants that some holy men might be capable of a contemplative solitude, but the majority of men find only "a destructive solitarinesse" which degenerates them into beasts or even fiends:

> These men are Divels alone, as the saying is, *homo solus aut Deus, aut Dæmon:* a man alone is either a Saint or a Divell, *mens ejus aut languescit, aut tumescit* [his mind either is weakened or swells], and *væ soli* in this sense, woe be to him that is so alone. These wretches doe frequently degenerate from men, and of sociable creatures, become beasts, monsters, inhumane, ugly to behold. (245)

The dichotomy between the solitude of a God and a devil clearly has unique relevance for *Paradise Lost*, but the principle, originating with Aristotle, enjoyed general currency. There is no middle ground here; solitude separates the emotional wheat from the chaff, so that those who are already fit find greater delight and those who are unfit progressively become more unfit. Particularly interesting is Burton's description of the languishing or swelling mind, the physicality of which recalls his earlier comment that solitary study can dry the brain. The result of this mental languishing is a regression into beastly, misanthropic, and even self-hating tendencies—clearly reminiscent of the devil witnessed in the latter half of *Paradise Lost*.

Montaigne, although he advocates time alone, takes seriously the consequences of an unqualified solitude. The reason that one needs more than sequestration to be solitary is that our

thoughts, desires, and (emotional?) illnesses follow us wherever we go. In fact, motion or the very act of trying to get away can exacerbate existing issues: "If a man doe not first discharge both himselfe and his minde from the burthen that presseth her, removing from place to place will stirre and presse her the more," just like a "sicke-man" will only feel sicker from too much motion (190). (One imagines the sickness would be especially severe in a voyage into a "wilde Abyss…. Of neither Sea, nor Shoe, nor Air, nor Fire, / But these in thir pregnant causes mixt" [*PL* 2.910-13].) A change of place, even to a less crowded and more beautiful locale, does not free us from our mental conditions, for "we carry our fetters with us: it is not an absolute libertie; we still cast backe our lookes toward that we have left behind…. Our evill is rooted in our minde: and it cannot scape from it selfe" (Montaigne 190).

Infernal Solitude and Soliloquy

Of course, these are the exact circumstances of Milton's Satan when, after a tumultuous journey through chaos, he alights on Mount Niphates at the beginning of Book 4. There,

> horror and doubt distract
> His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stirr
> The Hell within him, for within him Hell
> He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
> One step no more than from himself can fly
> By change of place. (4.18-23)

Like Montaigne's solitary man, Satan carries his fetters with him, for Hell is both his prison and his "place" in a cruel corollary of his boast that the mind is its own place. Casting his look back towards what he left behind (Montaigne 190), he "wakes the bitter memorie / Of what he was" (*PL* 24-5). He also embodies Horace's remark, repeated in Montaigne's essay, that "*In culpa est*

animus, qui se non effugit unquam," translated by Florio as "The minde in greatest fault must lie, / Which from it selfe can never flie" (Horace *Epist.* 1.14.13, qtd. in Montaigne 191). But the description is not all mental; the language of bodily illness also resurfaces in Milton's portrayal of the sick Satan. Thus the birth of his dire attempt "[n]ow rowling, boiles in his tumultuous brest," and his troubled thoughts "from the bottom stirr / the Hell within him" like some infernal indigestion (4.15-6, 19-20). Satan, encapsulating the dangers described by Cowley, Montaigne, and Burton, learns dearly the consequences of an unfit solitude.

The problem, really, is that Milton's devil has not been reading Renaissance friendship manuals or essays about the dangers of solitude. Satan's "tumultuous brest," for example, could have been avoided if only he read in Francis Bacon's essay "Of Frendship" that

> A principall *Fruit* of *Frendship*, is the Ease and Discharge of the Fulnesse and Swellings of the Heart, which Passions of all kinds doe cause and induce. We know Diseases of Stoppings, and Suffocations, are the most dangerous in the body; And it is not much otherwise in the Minde…. But no Receipt openeth the Heart, but a true *Frend*; to whom you may impart, Griefes, Joyes, Fears, Hopes, Suspicions, Counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the Heart. (81)

Cowley says that one must eradicate one's own desires, but Bacon recommends instead that those desires and emotions generally be conveyed to a trusted companion. To lack true friends with whom one can speak, he says, "is a meere, and miserable *Solitude*" (81). And yet at one point Satan did have good friends, or at least one "Companion dear" in the demon later called Beelzebub, with whom he used to converse: "Thou to me thy thoughts / Wast wont, I mine to thee was wont to impart; Both waking we were one" (5.673, 676-8). This is a tenderness and affection uncharacteristic of the Satan who later leaves Beelzebub to pursue his mission, but at this point it must not have been uncommon, or else "his next subordinate" would have been

startled by such language (5.671).[5] One can only imagine what kinds of thoughts Satan formerly shared with his companion dear, assuming there were no Griefes, Fears, or Suspicions in heaven, but here at least it seems that his impulse is to speak to his friend. He will later refer to his rebel army also as "Companions deare," (6.419), but somewhere during their nine day fall to Hell he loses his appetite for sweet talk between friends.

At least, he loses his penchant for apt and delightful conversation and passion-discharging counsel; Satan retains his ability to sweet talk, but he is never again shown confiding in someone else. When he sees "his neerest Mate" in Hell, he maintains the rhetoric of friendship, referring to Beelzebub as "he whom mutual league, / United thoughts and counsels" joined with him (1.192, 1.87) — but in fact they are no longer truly mates with united thoughts. In that first speech to Beelzebub Satan refashions the narrative of their fall as one of just rebellion against a powerful tyrant, and he vows to wage eternal war against "our" grand foe (1.121-2). Nevertheless, after this magnificent speech we learn that he is inwardly "rackt with deep despare" (1.126). Far from imparting his thoughts as in former times, Satan conceals his real "griefes" and "fears," to use Bacon's language. When he then asks about "our faithful frends, / Th' associates and copartners of our loss," it should therefore be obvious that such language is mere embellishment—after all, he will very shortly manipulate the other demons into accepting his plan (1.624-5). He has no proper "frends," not even Beelzebub, and his speech constitutes not conversation but rhetoric. Family is no different. Speaking to his "Dear Daughter" after he learns she has the key to the gates of Hell, he very conspicuously changes his conduct to

[5] Even assuming a robust heavenly friendship, "both waking we were one" seems rather peculiar; its romantic overtones recall Adam's declaration to Eve that "Our state cannot be severed; we are one" (9.958). Roy Flannagan thinks that "the adjective 'dear' adds a perverse dimension to the relationship between Satan and his companions, since the word usually suggests the normal affection between members of a family or husband and wife" (5.673*n*).

one more appropriate for a loving father-husband, and he even changes his aesthetic opinion of Death as that "execrable shape" into that of his "fair Son" (2.681; 818). This satanic mode of conversation persists for the rest of the poem.

We have seen, however, that solitude sometimes allows a person privileged access to conversation with divine figures and especially themselves. The poetic equivalent of self-conversation is soliloquy, and in *Paradise Lost* Satan has many of them. When the devil arrives on Mt. Niphates, "then alone, / As he suppos'd, all unobserv'd, unseen" (4.129-30), he has no one to speak to but himself, and only then does he unpack his heart in a way he no longer would to Beelzebub. Yet his self-conversation here quickly becomes fractured as his soliloquy ruptures into a kind of psychomachia with two speakers. Self-discourse becomes a competitive discourse between two selves as in classical friendship theory, but neither discourse gives Satan the kind of pleasure or comfort he would receive in a proper solitude or in friendship. As Anne Davidson Ferry infers, "even his solitary utterances are framed as if to persuade, since language for him has no other use or value" (54). When he consequently silences the voice of good and rationality, Satan condemns himself to a solipsism that allows him to justify any subsequent evil.

Besides the archfiend's reluctance to speak his mind to others, the remote setting on a mountaintop—the classic location for solitary contemplation—is important. Being alone, he is finally able to pause his posturing and listen to his conscience, which "wakes despair / That slumberd" (4.23-4). There is no one to impress or convince, especially not the demons, whom he will soon remember with a "dread of shame" should he fail his mission (4.82). E.M.W. Tillyard argued that Satan displays weakness at Niphates because he "lacks the support of his fellows, the soothing illusion of strength through mere numbers, and the pride of leadership" (*Studies in Milton* 58), but I would argue that only the latter of these really matters; Satan does not draw

support from his fellows because he knows "they little know" his pain or circumstances (4.86). His thoughts, fears, and passions have no friendly outlet amongst them and so, underneath the hot, "full-blazing Sun," they begin to "boile[ ] in his tumultuous brest" (4.30, 4.16).

Unfortunately, in accordance with the writings just discussed, these passions are intensified in solitude until the contraries of Satan's mixed emotions begin to clash vocally. Everything he sees is coloured by his passions, but in true melancholic fashion he takes out his anger at the sun: "O thou that with surpassing Glory crownd / Look'st from thy sole Dominion like the God / Of this new World" (4.32-4). Unable to sustain cogitation as recommended by Cowley, Satan begins to speak to a replacement Son whose beams he does not actually hate. He also displaces the language of aloneness onto God, complaining that God's "sole" dominion is an affront to him and the "Starrs," who must now "Hide thir diminisht heads" (4.34-5). The sun (*sol*) is alone (sole) in the sky, and God's solitude is one of domination. But of course Satan himself has been identified with solitude and with the sun (1.591-600). Able to converse with neither himself nor God directly, he converses instead with an object that represents both.

When the sun does not respond, Satan shifts his attention inwards for a solid twenty lines of genuine self-knowledge (4.42-57). Shortly thereafter, however, some seemingly harmless rhetorical questions begin to appear—"what burden then?" and "Yet why not?" (4.57, 4.61)—before the full-line rhetorical question that marks the entrance of a second, inner voice: "Hadst thou the same free Will and Power to stand?" (4.66). Olmsted argues that as "Satan's identity disintegrates, he becomes less and less capable of conversation, experiencing a solitude that estranges him even from himself" (147-8). If that is so, then at Mount Niphates his disintegration is complete, for here his solitude so radically estranges him from himself that his self-discourse splits into two:

> Hadst thou the same free Will and Power to stand?
> Thou hadst: whom hast thou then or what to accuse,
> But Heav'ns free Love dealt equally to All?
> Be then his Love accurst, since love or hate,
> To me alike, it deals eternal woe.
> Nay curs'd be thou; since against his thy will
> Chose freely what it now so justly rues. (4.66-72)

Qualified solitaries can attain this kind of insight without fracturing their psyche, but at the very least Satan here gains perspective as the second voice becomes the interlocutor that he has lacked.[6] Nevertheless, like Satan to the sun, it is "no frendly voice" (4.36), more condemnatory than anything else, and it serves to alienate him further from himself (4.73-8), God (4.79), and "the spirits beneath" (4.82-6). At last Satan enters into a despair that makes him sick of his own company, so that his "solitude" becomes nothing more than extended torment from his second self. If Milton in the divorce tracts imagined loneliness as a "trouble and pain of losse in som degree like that which Reprobats feel," then on Mount Niphates he dramatizes the ultimate loneliness filled with the pain of loss of an actual reprobate (*CPW* 2: 246-7).

Satan's penultimate action in the soliloquy is to quell the secondary voice. He begins once again to answer his own questions, but now with a confidence not seen earlier in the speech: "But say I could repent…. so should I purchase deare / Short intermission bought with double smart" (*PL* 4.93, 4.102-3). Many critics have pointed out that it is Satan himself who closes off these opportunities—it is he who "All hope exclude[s]" (4.106). Even where solitude affords him a second voice, he either shoots it down or internalizes it once more, so that there is

[6] There is a case to be made, however, that Satan has already come across a wise interlocutor in Abdiel. See especially *PL* 5.809-48, the terms of which correlate very closely to this soliloquy.

no outside perspective left but the one he comes in with. Solitude, in the absence of anyone at all to converse with, becomes solipsism, and armed with this singular perspective, he is able to deconstruct dualist morality: "Farewel Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" (4.109-110). This is his final sentiment in the soliloquy, and with that, descriptions of Satan alone all but cease in the poem as Milton's attention shifts to the solitary companionship of Adam and Eve in the remaining books.

Epilogue: Divine Solitude

I have noted in passing during these past two chapters that despite the difficulties posed by human and especially satanic solitude, for Milton, God is the paragon of solitude because he is in himself "perfet," without "deficience" (8.415-6). Adam and Eve were created with a "single imperfection" to be completed by each other, but as the only uncreated being, God has been "alone / From all Eternitie" (8.423; 8.405-6). In so representing God, Milton adapts the opinion of writers like Sir Thomas Browne, who argues further that

> [T]here is no such thing as solitude, nor any thing that can be said to be alone and by itself, but God, Who is His own circle, and can subsist by Himself; all others… cannot subsist without the concourse of God, and the society of that hand which doth uphold their natures. In brief, there can be nothing truly alone and by it self, which is not truly one; and such only is God. (*Religio Medici* 82)

To Browne, God's is not just the perfect solitude, but the only genuine one. There is an inherent contradiction in his logic, however, for if no human can be alone because of God, "the society of that hand," then in some sense God must not be alone; he cannot at once be society for man and solitary. At some level, I think, Milton understands this. God is "already infinite… though One" (8.420-1); he is alone and yet not alone.

Certainly, he is uniquely qualified to be alone because his self-conversation—"th' Omnific Word" (*PL* 7.217)—is creative. But perhaps this is the most surprising aspect of divine solitude in *Paradise Lost*: despite what Adam (and indeed, God) says about God being alone, Milton never represents it. Adam imagines that God is "best with [him]self accompanied" and therefore "seekst not / Social communication" (8.428-9), but that is not what we see. Far from a "discreet, aloof deity," inaccessible and reclusive (Trevor 181), Milton's God enjoys the presence of the multitude of angels. He loves the Son, and in a divine echo or prefiguration of Adam and Eve's relationship, calls him "my sole complacence" (3.276). And, not least, he delights in mankind to the extent that when the fallen Adam hides from him in the garden, he says, "I miss thee here, / Not pleas'd, thus entertaind with solitude" (10.104-5). Although he is of all beings the best equipped for solitude, the Creator is first to seek communion, until one day "God shall be all in all" and there shall be no solitude (3.341).

It seems to me that it had to be this way for John Milton, a poet whose every work assumes the presence of a God with him, inspiring his poetry and his mind to pursue things unattempted and to see things invisible to mortal sight. Though Milton often fears being left "In darkness, and with dangers compast round, / And solitude," he remains convinced he is "yet not alone" (7.27-8). The act of writing poetry is itself a conversation with the Heav'nly Muse, one that, according to his early work, is best done in solitude. As many of his fellow poets confirmed, the cultivation of the mind can indeed occur away from the din of others' thoughts: solitude sometimes is best society. But Milton seems to realize that society is the purpose and paragon of solitude, both while alone through conversation with God and the Muses, and when one returns to sweet society. Anything else becomes an unfit marriage of one with oneself, "a perpetuall nullity of love and contentment, *a solitude*, and dead vacation of all acceptable conversing"

(*CPW* 2: 331, emphasis added). Through his depiction of Satan, Milton shows that the "evill of solitary life" is not just the emotional hardship that loneliness can cause, but the evil implicit in choosing, without purpose, to be alone—to be sterile, uncreative, closed off, and solipsistic. Through his God and through his first humans, Milton provides a paradigm of unity in diversity: a consuming and consummate marriage of "grateful vicissitude" of pleasing solitude (6.8). His poetry, the life-blood of a master spirit, invites us to enter that conversation with him.

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