"Yet Not Alone": Milton and Communal Knowledge

Juan Manuel Cárdenas

Department of English

McGill University, Montreal

May 2023

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

This dissertation examines John Milton's representations of knowledge from the 1630s to the 1670s, a period of intellectual history in which there is significant debate about whether truth is best discovered privately or publicly, individually or collectively. I suggest that, despite Milton's self-representations as solitary genius and his reputed "self-understood, solitary nature" (Trevor 2004, 150), the poet comes to see the making of knowledge as a fundamentally participatory endeavour. Experience of sharp loss and loneliness early in his career make it impossible for Milton to retain an idealized view of solitude; "conversation" instead becomes the vehicle for knowledge and pleasure, both in short supply in the 1640s. After considering his early poetry and the debates of solitude in the mid-seventeenth century, I trace the logic of Milton's metaphors in his prose tracts, especially *Areopagitica*. Here the dynamic, transitive, and fragmentary nature of knowledge promotes communal ways of knowing over singular, monopolizing claims to understanding. The poet holds onto this more communal epistemology even as his political and religious hopes are dashed with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. In *Paradise Lost*, what was metaphor becomes ontology as participation is woven into the very fabric of Eden. Adam and Eve know the world around them not as objective observers but as intimate participants; improvement of their knowledge and their material bodies depends on their interaction with the created world in an almost metabolic representation of knowing. Rejection of such participation precipitates the Fall. It is no surprise, then, that Milton's poetic adaptation of Christ's temptation in *Paradise Regained* resists a retreat into, or endorsement of, private knowledge. Even the son of God must learn through conversation, and (alongside Milton) even he must reject the ultimate temptation of self-sufficiency. Through a series of close readings and attention to his engagement with contemporary debates, this study thus offers a more coherent and human alternative to the myth of Milton the individualist intellectual, discovering underneath it an enduring vision of communal knowledge.

Résumé

Cette thèse examine les représentations de la connaissance chez John Milton entre les années 1630 et 1670, une période de l'histoire intellectuelle au cours de laquelle la question de savoir si la vérité est mieux découverte en privé ou en public, individuellement ou collectivement, fait l'objet d'un débat important. Je suggère que, malgré les représentations que Milton se fait de lui-même en tant que génie solitaire et de sa réputation de "nature solitaire comprise par lui-même" (Trevor 2004, 150), le poète en vient à considérer l'élaboration de la connaissance comme une entreprise fondamentalement participative. L'expérience de la perte brutale et de la solitude au début de sa carrière empêche Milton de conserver une vision idéalisée de la solitude ; la "conversation" devient alors le véhicule de la connaissance et du plaisir, tous deux manquant dans les années 1640. Après avoir examiné ses premiers poèmes et les débats sur la solitude au milieu du XVIIe siècle, je retrace la logique des métaphores de Milton dans ses traités en prose, en particulier *l'Areopagitica* (1644). Ici, la nature dynamique, transitive et fragmentaire de la connaissance favorise les modes de connaissance communautaires plutôt que les prétentions singulières et monopolistiques à la compréhension. Le poète s'accroche à cette épistémologie plus communautaire même si ses espoirs politiques et religieux sont anéantis par la restauration de la monarchie en 1660. Dans *Le paradis perdu* (1667), ce qui était une métaphore devient une ontologie, la participation étant tissée dans le tissu même de l'Eden. Adam et Ève connaissent le monde qui les entoure non pas en tant qu'observateurs objectifs, mais en tant que participants intimes ; l'amélioration de leurs connaissances et de leurs corps matériels dépend de leur interaction avec le monde créé, dans une représentation presque métabolique de la connaissance. Le rejet de cette participation précipite la chute. Il n'est donc pas surprenant que l'adaptation poétique par Milton de la tentation du Christ dans *Le paradis reconquis* (1671) résiste à un repli sur la connaissance privée ou à son approbation. Même le fils de Dieu doit apprendre par la conversation, et (selon Milton) même lui doit rejeter la tentation ultime de l'autosuffisance. Grâce à une série de lectures approfondies et à l'attention

portée à son engagement dans les débats contemporains, cette étude offre une alternative plus cohérente et plus humaine au mythe de Milton l'intellectuel individualiste, découvrant en filigrane une vision durable de la connaissance commune.

Acknowledgements

This thesis represents a small triumph of conversation over what was, quite literally in 2020 and 2021, an enforced solitude. During its composition I have been privileged to learn from and enjoy the company of many friends and mentors whose efforts I could never forget or repay. Of these my deepest gratitude belongs to my supervisor Maggie Kilgour. Her generosity of mind and feeling kept me believing in this project—indeed, in our academic discipline. If I have become a better teacher, scholar, and friend, it is by her gracious and judicious example.

My time at McGill, where I also completed my masters' degree, has been marked by a level of support that I understand is quite rare in academia. I have learned much from all my professors, especially Kenneth Borris, Paul Yachnin, and Michael van Dussen. I am indebted to the English graduate program directors, committees, and administrators who have supported my work. The Department's confidence helped me to secure competitive funding and travel grants that made it possible to do my research and then share it. I gladly acknowledge the patronage of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which funded the majority of my PhD and a research trip to Oxford, Cambridge, and the British Library. While at Oxford, I had the pleasure of getting to know Noël Sugimura, a fierce wit and warm host supervisor. I am grateful for our conversations and her scholarly guidance.

My thought and happiness would each be diminished without the energizing intellectual friendships of Shaun Ross, Namratha Rao, and John Allaster, each of whom also read portions of my work. My pedagogy (and social life) has been enriched through a long friendship with Catherine Nygren, now my colleague at Champlain College. I strive to be worthy of your loyalty.

Milton for a time languished for want of companiable friendship, and in this, I have been endlessly more fortunate. Words alone will not bear sufficient thanks to my wife Shirley, sharer of my joys and sufferings, for indulging my curiosity and ambition this long. You teach me so much

about what it is to be human. My last words of gratitude go to my mother Nora, father Manuel, sister Christel, and brother David. Together you represent the sacrifice and opportunity that every act of learning entails. I dedicate this thesis to you.

Introductory Literature Review: The State of Knowledge in Milton Studies

> All true opinions are living, and show their life by being capable of nourishment; therefore of change. But their change is that of a tree—not of a cloud.
>
> —John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* V (1860)

When John Milton declares in the opening of *Paradise Lost* his intention to sing about "the fruit / Of that forbidden tree," wordplay gives his poem a dual subject: the *consequences* of eating forbidden fruit, and *knowledge*, the purported effect of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (1.1–2, emphasis added). Already in the first two lines, the epic narrator highlights the ethical dimension of knowing, continuing Milton's longstanding interest in the circumstances leading to the acquisition of knowledge. This study traces that interest from his earlier works in prose and rhyme and examines its expression in his major poetry. The picture it paints is not a straight line—nor can it be with a writer as dynamic as Milton, who lived through a time of great change and found himself changing with it. Nevertheless, the poet returned often to images of knowledge's own dynamism (a streaming fountain of truth, a flowery new crop of knowledge) and of epistemological community, from the merchants of knowledge in *Reason of Church Government* to the builders of the temple of truth in *Areopagitica* and the first couple in *Paradise Lost*, who know with and through nature. It will be my task in the following chapters to adduce from these particulars Milton's burgeoning sense of communal knowledge. Before then, I heed the author's (and McGill Graduate Faculty's) call to gather the pieces of knowledge already available.

Appropriately for a scholarly tradition marked by an esurient curiosity, the community of Milton scholars have often plucked the fruit of knowledge as a topic of study. Their studies have typically explored knowledge profitably but incidentally as part of a broader focus: Milton and

science, or Milton and philosophy, or education, hermeneutics—even conscience.[1] A few others have dealt more extensively with Miltonic knowledge as part of an effort to organize his thought (for example, according to Ramist logic).[2] These scholars wrote during a critical moment that, in emphasizing the identification and categorization of historical sources for Milton's thinking on specific kinds of knowledge, obliquely resembled the efforts of early modern thinkers themselves. Howard Schultz took on *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge* (1955). Lee A. Jacobus in *Sudden Apprehension* (1974) details exactly what his subtitle indicates*: Aspects of Knowledge in Paradise Lost*. Others, less assured, have latched onto aspects of knowledge in articles rather than books.[3] In these direct treatments of Milton's epistemology, the roles and attitudes of the knower are secondary to the kind of knowledge in question, with the consequence that previous scholarship has largely explored the various forms of knowledge rather than how it is acquired.

A few come up more frequently. The critical focus over the past fifty years has been on three such forms: self-knowledge, natural knowledge, and divine knowledge. Given the poet's interests and preoccupations, these in turn suggest a useful organization scheme. Jacobus in the only book-

---

[1] Some usual suspects spring to mind: studies on science, for example, by Kester Svendsen, Karen L. Edwards, Harinder S. Marjara, Catherine Gimelli Martin, and John Rogers; on philosophy by William Kerrigan, Stephen M. Fallon, and N. K. Sugimura; on education by Thomas Festa and Angelica Duran; on hermeneutics by Dayton Haskin, Phillip J. Donnelly, and David Ainsworth; and recently, Abraham Stoll on conscience. I will discuss some of these in detail in this introduction and others in the remainder of the argument.

[2] Lee A. Jacobus in *Sudden Apprehension: Aspects of Knowledge in Paradise Lost* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), discussed below, includes nearly 20 pages of charts, mostly on logic. Discussions of Milton's Ramism include Kathleen M. Swaim, *Before and After the Fall: Contrasting Modes in Paradise Lost* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986); Emma Annette Wilson, "The Art of Reasoning Well: Ramist Logic at Work in *Paradise Lost*," *Review of English Studies* 61, no. 248 (2010): 55–71; and Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, "The Logical Poetics of *Paradise Regained*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2013): 35–58.

[3] Howard Schultz, *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1955). Notable articles include Albert W. Fields, "Milton and Self-Knowledge," *PMLA* 83, no. 2 (1968): 392–399 and Robert L. Entzminger, "Epistemology and the Tutelary Word in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 10 (1977): 93–109.

length treatment of Milton's epistemology in fact suggests that the poet would agree with Francis Bacon's analogous tripartite separation of knowledge,[4] presented thus in *De Augmentis Scientarum*:

> The object of philosophy is threefold—God, Nature, and Man; as there are likewise three kinds of ray—direct, refracted, and reflected. For nature strikes the understanding with a ray direct; God, by reason of the unequal medium (viz. his creatures), with a ray refracted; man, as shown and exhibited to himself, with a ray reflected. Philosophy may therefore be conveniently divided into three branches of knowledge: knowledge of God, knowledge of Nature, and knowledge of Man, or Humanity.[5]

Taking a cue from Bacon, Jacobus then goes on to discuss aspects of Miltonic knowledge using roughly the same schema, taking "knowledge of man" to be self-knowledge, a major theme indeed. Milton had certainly read *The Advancement of Learning* and probably *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, but he would not have needed it to think along these terms, which are convenient here primarily because the majority of past scholarship falls easily within these three sub-branches. Keeping in mind that Milton himself did not explicitly endorse this division and that similarities with Bacon in general can be overstated,[6] we may nevertheless use it to take stock of previous arguments about his epistemology before returning to the root of my argument.

---

[4] Jacobus, *Sudden Apprehension*, 46.

[5] Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. and trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longman, 1861–1879), 4:337. In context, "knowledge of God" for Bacon refers not to theology proper, for he has already separated "Philosophy" from "Divinity" (4:336). He means instead natural theology, to which he gives hardly any attention. Milton, however, does, as Katherine Calloway reminds us in "'His Footsteps Trace': The Natural Theology of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 55 (2014): 53–85.

[6] In her otherwise convincing essay on Milton's compatibility with important aspects of the new science, Catherine Gimelli Martin, "'What If the Sun Be Centre to the World?': Milton's Epistemology, Cosmology, and Paradise of Fools Reconsidered," *Modern Philology* 99, no. 2 (2001): 231, wonders whether he is "the most Baconian poet of the seventeenth century." William Poole, "Milton and Science: A Caveat," *Milton Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2004): 18–34, convincingly rescues Milton from that "dubious honour" (18).

Self-knowledge

The first book of modern criticism on this topic was dedicated not to an overview of Milton and knowledge, but rather to what its author takes to be Milton's understandable if regrettable participation in an early modern culture of anti-curiosity or anti-intellectualism. Schultz's learned study of *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge* outlines the many sources of the "traditions of sobriety," which warned sternly against intellectual overreach or speculation of the kind that Schultz believes earns Adam a chastisement from Raphael (*PL* 8.167–78). Ancient skeptics and philosophers, medieval philosophers and theologians, renaissance humanists and early modern preachers: all contributed to the ubiquitous seventeenth-century outcry against "the bifurcated sin of dubious speculation (curiosity) on the one hand and corrupted learning (vain philosophy) on the other."[7] Significantly, Schultz draws attention to the role of *self*-knowledge in such discourse from Pyrrho on. Advocates like Seneca compared self-knowledge favourably to the paradoxical philosophy of Zeno, and "Socrates, the inventor of the ethical science of self-knowledge," would cement the contrast between that most important of studies and speculative star-knowledge.[8] For Schultz, the relevance of this dichotomy to Raphael's belief that "heaven is for thee too high / To know what passes there" and that Adam should "Think only what concerns thee and thy being" (8.172–74)—that is, knowledge of himself—is self-apparent.

Expanding on Schultz's delineation of theories of self-knowledge influencing Milton, Albert W. Fields observes that "by the seventeenth century, the *nosce teipsum* tradition represented a complexity of concepts, often contradictory."[9] Thus, for example, Milton and his contemporaries

[7] Schultz, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 3.
[8] Ibid., 5.
[9] Fields, "Self-Knowledge," 393.

could see in Aristotle's ideals of the contemplative man and the magnanimous man two competing versions of self-knowledge; the latter is improved by a self-examination that requires him to first examine others. Fields articulates Milton's enduring interest in the topic, from *Prolusion 7* to *Paradise Regained*, though he cannot in his eight-page article draw detailed conclusions about any changes in Milton's thinking, nor can he make interpretative claims beyond the broader conclusion that the poet's morally reputable characters work variously to know themselves aright, whereas Satan is incapable in his irrationality to come to a proper understanding of himself. Fields's Milton is at length a distinguished representative of a century "absorbed by the problem of self-knowledge," but a representative who, unlike Hobbes, believes the practice can lead to moral and personal growth through the gradual discovery of individuality.[10]

In Jacobus's chapter in *Sudden Apprehension* on "Self-Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*: Conscience and Contemplation," we find a third survey of Milton's epistemology comparing the poet's writings with the many discourses on the topic, this time primarily the theological discourses by Augustine, Calvin, Pierre Charron, and even Bacon. But while the critical impulse to historicize continues, Jacobus also attempts to fulfill a promise made earlier in the book to consider "the process of knowledge, the means of obtaining it, the value of it once it is obtained" in *Paradise Lost* alongside "the kinds of knowledge which are most significantly treated in the poem."[11] He does this by evaluating in some detail the awakening scenes of Adam and Eve, giving us at last some close readings of self-knowledge in action. The first man, in Jacobus's reading, seems the prototype of the standard Christian approach, in which self-knowledge is intimately wrapped up with knowledge of God through contemplation. Adam demonstrates that he is indeed "endued / With sanctity of

[10] Ibid., 399. For Hobbes, people are similar enough that to observe oneself is to know others; assuming a person can get past his or her own lies and depravities, they will find their "own springs of action to be self-interest and fear" (Fields, 393).
[11] Jacobus, *Sudden Apprehension*, 7.

reason[….] self-knowing" (*PL* 7.507–8; 7.510) when "his first impulses toward knowing himself drew him toward heaven," in contrast with the Satanic delusion of self-creation.[12] This reading is naturally convincing, as it must be when that scene is juxtaposed with Calvin's thoughts on the matter: "no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves" (qtd. in Jacobus, 23), just as Adam "limb by limb / Surveyed" himself, recognizing soon enough the existence of "some great maker [….] From whom I have that thus I move and live" (*PL* 8.267–68; 8.278; 8.281). The first moments of Adam's life are then a dramatization of the roundly endorsed progression of knowledge from self to God.

Yet this cannot be the whole story for someone like Milton, who (as Fields observed) is interested in the gradual discovery of individuality, moral growth rather than static uprightness. There is of course a sense in which Adam is endued with "sudden apprehension"—Jacobus there takes his title—but that knowledge is of the nature of the animals rather than of the first human or his God (*PL* 8.354). Jacobus outlines the initial process of the basic self-understanding easily grasped by Adam.[13] That is still far from a description of the process of knowledge, and indeed if we leave it there, the acquisition of self-knowledge in Milton's poem would appear to be perfunctory. This appears to be Jacobus's assumption, concerned as he is that "the situation with Eve is by no means as clear. […] One would normally expect that Eve, like Adam, would be created fully self-knowing, but this is not unquestionably the case."[14] But it is unquestionably not the case that *either* human is

---

[12] Ibid., 32.

[13] Critics may be a little too enthusiastic in praising Adam for understanding that he was created. In Christian tradition, only "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1). Calvin continues in the partial quote provided above, "it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone." (Eve's initial silence on this matter might equally be taken as disinclination to jump to conclusions.) Moreover, it is not until Adam has discerned his need for a partner that God affirms Adam's capacity for self-knowledge (8.437–39).

[14] Jacobus, *Sudden Apprehension*, 33.

created fully self-knowing, as indicated by the Son's rebuke of Adam in the judgement scene of Book 10. Adam's fall demonstrates an ignorance both of Eve's gifts and his government, which was his "part / And person, hadst thou known thyself aright" (8.155–56). Instead, both birth narratives serve to illustrate first that knowledge for Milton is a process in human and angel alike, and secondly that any attempt to know oneself apart from social discourse is doomed to dissatisfaction at best (Adam) and disassociation from self at worst (Satan and Eve). Any route towards self-knowledge that does not first and finally lead away from the self will lead eventually to solipsism.

Maggie Kilgour anticipates this argument in her 2005 article, "'Thy perfect image viewing': Poetic Creation and Ovid's Narcissus in *Paradise Lost*," where she treats the problem of self-knowledge through its Ovidian inflection in the character of Narcissus.[15] When Tiresias in *Metamorphoses* prophesies that the boy will live to a ripe old age "so long as he never knows himself" (3.347–48), he adumbrates a kind of self-knowledge that in Ovid's hands becomes "a paradoxical and even tragic goal, a dismembering rather than unifying experience."[16] Milton, however, metamorphoses Ovid by showing both the perversion of self-knowledge as well as its productivity, changing the sterile end and ending of the story in his portrayal of the paradisal couple. Like Jacobus, Kilgour underscores the importance of the subject in both awakening scenes, reading them as two revisions of Narcissus, or else the same myth split into two parts. But unlike Jacobus, Kilgour shows how in both scenes, self-knowledge is dynamic; "the characters are not static but evolving; their relations to each other are in flux as both deepen in self-knowledge and knowledge of each other." At the heart of this interchange is the Aristotelian subtext which Fields mentions but does not pick up, for according to Aristotle, "self-knowledge involves others or, more specifically, an

[15] Maggie Kilgour, "'Thy perfect image viewing': Poetic Creation and Ovid's Narcissus in *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 307–339.
[16] Ibid., 324.

intimate other, who serves as a kind of moral mirror."[17] Kilgour's sustained attention to the process of knowledge and its social contingency marks a shift in this subsection of Milton criticism, even as she affirms the historicist work of previous scholars.

Finally, Abraham's Stoll's extended treatment of *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* (2017) discusses from another perspective what it might mean to know oneself in a seventeenth-century society increasingly skeptical of antinomian self-determination.[18] A chapter on "Milton's Expansive Conscience" fruitfully considers the poet's careful balancing of both the casuistic and antinomian streams of conscience theory,[19] but perhaps the most interesting part of the book for Milton's epistemology comes instead from Stoll's deliberation on William Perkins's treatise *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596). Perkins takes as his starting point the very word "conscience," launching into an etymological explanation of the process as "knowing with" someone: "*Scire,* to know, is of one man alone by himselfe: and *conscire* is, when two at the least know some one secret thing."[20] Initially he rules out the possibility of knowing with anybody except God, such that conscience is the gift of God; the only kind of knowledge conscience offers is thus self-knowledge with God, bringing us back again to the dynamic Jacobus described.[21] But even Perkins the puritan preacher quickly moves on from knowing with God to knowing with oneself—an incipient self-reflexivity

---

[17] Ibid., 337, 332–33. See, e.g., Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 2.15 and *Eudemian Ethics* 7.12.
[18] Abraham Stoll, *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[19] Stoll accepts Camille Wells Slights's definition of casuistry as the process by which "the self-conscious turning back of the mind on itself is united with a focus on specific, practical action" (*The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981], xiv). The antinomian stream of conscience as described by Stoll (e.g., 123–26) involves the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who testifies to a person's salvation and the rightness of their moral action; as recognized by its critics, it seems also to lead quickly to political sovereignty.
[20] William Perkins, *A discourse of conscience wherein is set downe the nature, properties, and differences thereof: as also the way to get and keepe good conscience* ([Cambridge], 1596), 5.
[21] Indeed, the title of Jacobus's chapter itself draws attention to "Conscience and Contemplation" as venues of self-knowledge.

precipitated by what Stoll identifies as a "destructured" conscience typical of Protestantism. This kind of conscience functions like second-order self-reflection, thought about one's thought, and so seems a movement towards self-consciousness.[22] Says Perkins: "The minde thinks a thought, now conscience goes beyond the minde, and knows what the minde thinks: so as if a man would go about to hide his sinnefull thoughts from God, his conscience as an other person within him, shall discover all."[23] Conscience would appear here to be supremely productive, the basis not only of self-knowledge but of all sorts of critical thinking.

At the same time, however, such a conscience contains the seeds of alienation. There is a reason why Perkins had to write a prior treatise on conscience titled *A Case of Conscience: the greatest that euer was; how a man may know whether he be the child of God or no* (1592), one of the more popular of an established subgenre of manuals aimed at consoling despairing consciences.[24] The Protestant (and especially Calvinist) conscience, lacking the moral structure of synderesis and the assurance it offers, can just as quickly lose the second party which an individual is supposed "know with." As Stoll puts it, "The question 'knowing with whom?' does not yield the answer 'oneself' with ease. When conscience becomes *knowing with* oneself, the faculty risks slipping into solipsism."[25] This is true of some of the keenest cases of conscience in *Paradise Lost*, though Stoll does not explore them beyond recognizing Calvinistic despair in the fallen Adam and Satan. Nor does Stoll consider the implications of the fact that Adam, but not Satan, is able to move beyond his despair. Whereas Satan

---

[22] Stoll, *Conscience*, 79–81.
[23] Perkins, *Discourse of Conscience*, 7.
[24] See, e.g., Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe & Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 246: "if any further evidence is required that the Calvinists commanded a wide audience, one need only consider the astonishingly popular and numerous manuals which, having rubbed salt into the 'wounded conscience', then offered to satisfy the sufferer of his election or reprobation." Sanders lists nine popular manuals, a few of which ran through more than a dozen editions.
[25] Stoll, *Conscience*, 81.

in his speech in Mt. Niphates has only himself to answer to, Adam is forced out of his "evil conscience" by a persistent Eve (*PL* 10.849). It would thus appear that Milton, unlike Perkins, does believe that two humans can share "con-science," even in their fallen state.[26]

As suggested by the above survey of recent studies by Kilgour and Stoll, scholars have detected the threat of solipsism lurking in self-knowledge. Not far from that lies the possibility of an alternative, mutually-constituted knowledge. The latter is rarely more than an undercurrent in the scholarship, but it emerges in contiguous topics. So, for example, when Stoll speaks of Protestant conscience as involving "shared knowledge… in a dynamic present tense," "not a static or complete insight, but specifically knowledge which is in the process of being shared and worked out as an ongoing experience,"[27] he comes close to describing a dynamic of knowledge for Milton more generally. To be sure, Milton does use *conscience* expansively in *Paradise Lost* as Stoll describes, both in its modern sense as well as "consciousness," and with casuistic and antinomian logic accompanying it. But the *con-scientia* of Perkins's definition does not lag far behind in Milton, who feels more comfortable about shared will, knowledge, and soul than might be expected for so individualistic a poet.[28] After all, Eve and Adam are twice "unanimous" or one-souled (*PL* 4.736; 12.603), as are the angels celebrating festivals of joy and love before the war in heaven (6.95). Adam speaks of "participat[ing] / All rational delight" (8.390–91). And of course, Milton's final eschatological vision is cosmic unity, when "God shall be all in all" (3.341; cf. 6.732).

---

[26] In conversation with Eve, Adam moves in short order from bewailing his "conscience" (10.842), recognizing their "contempt" and "contumacy" (10.1018; 10.1027), and landing on a plan to "confess" with "contrite" hearts (10.1088; 10.1091). Significantly, it is not Eve's solution which moves him. Rather, she prompts in him a "calling to mind" of God's judgement, as Adam revises Eve's "Let us seek Death" with "let us seek / Some safer resolution" (10.1001; 10.1028–29).

[27] Stoll, *Conscience*, 8–9.

[28] Even that word, *individual*, is used in *Paradise Lost* to mean "indivisible" or "inseparable," just as the angels are "United as one individual soul" (*PL* 5.610), rather than something like "single" or "distinctive." To be individual in this sense is to require multiplicity.

Knowledge of nature

As it turns out, the poet is comfortable too with a unity of knowledge, despite its various branches. In his earliest moments Adam surveys his surroundings, seeing first the ample sky, then a stunning panoply of "Hill, dale, and shady woods, and sunny plains, / And liquid lapse of murmuring streams" (8.262–63) before turning to peruse himself in his first act of self-knowledge. This order and movement from without to within is significant, as critics of the past thirty years have begun to recognize. In this they are only taking Adam at his word. His conversation with Raphael in Book 5 about the scale of nature—specifically the monist-materialist movement of energy from vital spirits in plants to intellectual spirits which "give both life and sense" to humans and angels (5.485)—has always nourished scholarship relating to Milton's ontology, another contiguous topic clearly relevant to discussions of his epistemology. Yet crucially, Adam understands the conversation to be not primarily about ontology, but knowledge:

> Well hast thou taught the way that might direct
> Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set
> From center to circumference, whereon
> In contemplation of created things
> By steps we may ascend to God. (5.508–12)

Raphael's ontological musings come unprompted. His human friend had in fact tried to steer the occasion of "this great conference to know / Of things above his world" (5.454–55); the angel succeeds only in convincing Adam to start by knowing of things from his world. (Eve needs no such prompting.) Milton here presents an alternative route to knowing God, separate from the more

traditional, Neoplatonic injunction to return into oneself.[29] But as I hope will be clear, if not from Raphael's speech then from this critical assessment so far, it is difficult and even undesirable to split the threads of knowledge in Milton: knowledge of self is related to knowledge of God; knowledge of God is related to knowledge of nature; and knowledge of nature is related to knowledge of self.

Such epistemological homology has not always been appreciated by Milton's modern readers, who are sometimes disturbed by the analogical thinking typical of philosophy and science before the Enlightenment. The early modern dynamic is deftly stated by intellectual historian Lawrence M. Principe: "Every thinker of the period… was confident of the intimate connections among human beings, God, and the natural world, and consequently of the interconnections between theological and scientific truths."[30] Fortunately, criticism on Milton and natural knowledge has developed alongside the historiography of "the Scientific Revolution." Kester Svendsen in *Milton and Science* (1956) followed his predecessors in emphasizing the teleology of Milton's worldview and decrying a supposed conservatism in scientific matters for his depiction of a strictly Ptolemaic universe, that unseemly holdout of medieval thought. A multiverse of studies since has shown Milton's cosmology to be far more sophisticated.[31] More important than the specifics of cosmology,

---

[29] See my third chapter. Saint Augustine takes a middle ground by calling for solitary contemplation while still leaving room for the created order to point humans back to God. *Confessions* X.vi.9 records a conversation between Augustine and creation that anticipates (and perhaps prompts) Adam's questioning of nature in Book 8 shortly after his birth: "And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: 'It is not I.' I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession (Job 28: 12 f.). I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: 'We are not your God, look beyond us'" (*Confessions*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 183).

[30] Lawrence M. Principe, *The Scientific Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36.

[31] Kester Svendsen, *Milton and Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). The most recent and encompassing study is by Dennis Danielson, *Paradise Lost and the Cosmological Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). An intellectual historian in his own right, Danielson rejects "the persistent progressivist binary that portrays individual characters on the stage of history as playing roles that are either backward looking or forward looking," alongside the ancestor-chasing that often accompanies studies of Milton and science (xviii).

however, is Harinder S. Marjara's response to Svendsen, *Contemplation of Created Things* (1992), reminding us that "if Milton's attitude to science was determined by a teleological, theocentric, and moral view of nature, it was not because he was stuck in the backwaters of medieval science. Such an attitude was widespread among scientists and intellectuals of his time and remained so for several decades, even centuries, after him."[32] The hallmark of scholarship in this field, outside Milton studies especially, is a recognition of continuity in scientific knowledge throughout the "Revolution,"[33] as well as of the affinity between discourses of literature and science in the early modern period.[34] To acknowledge these insights when reading Milton's poetry is not to try to make him a scientist or stick another feather in his crowded cap. It is to conceive of natural knowledge as the poet himself would have: creative, incremental, and deeply invested in the human.

Marjara amply refutes any contention that Milton was ignorant of the scientific knowledge of his contemporaries, especially in astronomy. Nevertheless, in Marjara's final analysis, the poet's cosmology emerges as essentially Aristotelian, and the book's methodology emerges as essentially encyclopedic, compiling assiduously "the knowledge and speculation Milton may have known concerning the visible universe"[35] without considering at length the meaning of natural knowledge for Adam and Eve or how they might go about collecting it. Stephen M. Fallon and John Rogers, by

---

[32] Harinder S. Marjara, *Contemplation of Created Things: Science in Paradise Lost* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 8.

[33] Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), famously begins by informing us that "There was no such thing as the Scientific Revolution, and this is a book about it" (1). A longer and more documented example of the same basic argument is H. Floris Cohen, *How Modern Science Came into the World: Four Civilizations, One 17th-Century Breakthrough* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

[34] Studies examining the interrelated logic and discourses of science and literature include Andrew Barnaby and Lisa J. Schnell, *Literate Experience: The Work of Knowing in Seventeenth-Century English Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[35] Diane K. McColley, "Milton and Nature: Greener Readings," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 62, no. 3/4 (1999): 429.

contrast, follow Raphael's advice and think only what concerns humans and their being—a pretty enormous field of inquiry, as it turns out.[36] In searching out the consequences of what they call Milton's animist materialism and vitalism, respectively, Fallon finds philosophical consistency in Milton's depiction of the universe, from shrub to cherub, whereas Rogers finds (with some disappointment) that Milton's subversive philosophical and political beliefs have dampened since the 1640s, though they still mark *Paradise Lost*. These are excellent studies, deeply informed by the reality that Milton's thoughts about natural philosophy have bearing on, or even proceed from, other commitments: free will in Fallon's reading, and egalitarian agency in Rogers's. They thus embody more closely Milton's own commitment to the fundamental relatedness of all things, materially and conceptually.

Fallon's *Milton Among the Philosophers* (1991) stakes its argument on this very idea: that Milton, as a defendant of free will in mid-seventeenth century Europe, himself had little choice but to contest questions of natural philosophy. Early in his career, the poet may have been content with the received philosophy and science of his day, congruent as it was with the theological prerogatives most important to him. But "with the rise of mechanism in natural philosophy, questions we regard as the province of ethics and theology inevitably arose, questions concerning freedom of the will, moral responsibility, and the immortality of the soul."[37] The key philosophers in Fallon's study are René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, both of whom espouse a mechanical philosophy that minimizes or eliminates spiritual substance in the created universe, explaining change instead mostly through physical, mechanical motions.[38] Hobbes is the subtler beast of this field. His mechanist

---

[36] Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
[37] Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers*, 19.
[38] As a corollary, in mechanism created things are known by their Material and Efficient Causes—what they are made of and how they came to be the way they are. This seems reasonable enough to

materialism essentially secularizes Calvin, distinguishing only "between God as the immediate author of our actions and God as the first cause of our actions" to avoid making him the author of sin. This simply will not do for Milton, who, as Fallon argues, comes to adopt a version of animist materialism: "where Hobbes assimilated mind to matter and explained mental events mechanically, Milton assimilated matter to current notions of mind and moved toward the position that all corporeal substance is animate, self-active, and free."[39] Reason is but choosing according to Milton, and this ontology allows not only humans to be rational, but also the rest of creation, including animals, whom both Descartes and Hobbes relegate to automata.

By contrast, Milton's animals "also know, / And reason not contemptibly," and even the plants seem responsive to Eve's presence; "they at her coming sprung / And touched by her fair tendance gladlier grew" (*PL* 8.373–74; 8.46–47). This is an important clue for the poet's epistemology in *Paradise Lost*, though Fallon is not at liberty to explore that topic in his book, which has enough to deal with in comparing Milton with Descartes, Hobbes, the Cambridge Platonists, and Anne Conway, and which opens up questions considered in chapter three of the present study. *Milton Among the Philosophers* demonstrates how the poet's natural science and philosophical assumptions reject determinism as a logical outcome of Cartesian and Hobbesian mechanism. But those assumptions also lead to a rejection of another logical outcome of the philosophers' science: epistemological solipsism. As with Stoll's destructured Protestant conscience, the process of knowledge in the philosophy of Descartes and Hobbes threatens to be cut off from external reality,

---

adherents of modern science, but the extirpation of Formal Cause left natural philosophers of the Aristotelian tradition reeling, and the banishment of Final Cause from the realm of science was still shocking decades after Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*.

[39] Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers*, 37, 81.

located only in the mind of the knower.[40] Descartes's knower can at least know that he is because he thinks; Hobbes's solipsist is unconscious even of that.[41] The gulf between these solipsists and Milton's Adam, not to mention his animals or plants, is enormous. In *Paradise Lost* the first humans are expected to learn about *and* from the rest of the creation, because all participate in the materialist animist world order, with its origin in God. Perhaps the most understated ramification of Fallon's argument, then, is that Milton's ontology itself guarantees a more inclusive epistemology.

True though this might be, Rogers does not fail to notice that ants and angels are not equal agents in *Paradise Lost*, arguing rather that the animist materialism described by Fallon does not find full expression in the poem. *Matter of Revolution* (1996) considers Milton among a broader and more eclectic group of writers united by a mid-century vitalist logic that promoted individual agency and a decentralized organization of power. Rogers proposes that the science of vitalism provided "a theoretical justification for the more collective mode of political agency and the more inclusive vision of political organization that were among the unquestionable products of the English Revolution."[42] Milton in this reading abandons the most radical of such impulses in his late poetry and prose, but not altogether. The competing versions of the creation account in *Paradise Lost*, for example, manifest the competing impulses of his vitalist egalitarianism and political resignation to the need for a centralized authority. Nowhere is this more clear (or visceral) than in Chaos's "black

---

[40] Fallon argues that Satan and his devils become Hobbesian empiricists (e.g., 216–219), which would suggest an outward turn. Yet all rational creatures are expected to appeal to external evidence in *Paradise Lost*, as I'll suggest in chapter three.

[41] Hobbes, in his Second Objection to Descartes's *Meditations*, admits the validity of the *cogito* (a person who thinks would exist), but not that a person who thinks would be conscious of his existence. Rather, he would experience his thoughts as a series of perceptions without knowledge of his own agency: "it is quite impossible for him to think that he *is* thinking or to know that he is knowing. For then an infinite chain of questions would arise. How do you know that you know that you know…?" (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91], 2:122).

[42] Rogers, *Matter of Revolution*, 14.

tartareous cold infernal dregs / Adverse to life" (*PL* 7.238–39), which Rogers clearly believes are themselves the philosophical dregs of a residual spirit-matter dualism. At stake are the consistency of Milton's poem, his final position on one of the most important scientific issues of the day, and his commitment to liberalism.

Yet Rogers's study is significant not only for its explication of the political resonances of natural knowledge for Milton, but because the same vitalist logic which Rogers says promotes a "collective" political agency and "inclusive" vision of political organization might be reasonably extended to the realm of knowledge. Again, if reason is but choosing, then authority to know is related to authority to choose—a conclusion suggested by Rogers's analysis of the famous experiment Gabriel Harvey describes in *De generatione animalium* (1651). As King Charles reaches into the chest cavity of one of his subjects and finds indeed that "the *Heart* is deprived of the *Sense* of *Feeling*," he confirms Harvey's earlier conclusion that the heart is but the warehouse of self-moving, self-organized blood. Given the political symmetry of king and heart in the early modern period, this acknowledgement is tantamount to a resignation of authority. Even as the royalist Harvey gives final authority to the king to certify his science, he is asking him to enact a kind of peer review; both political and epistemological agency are here collective and inclusive. Though Rogers does not make this point explicit, the conclusion should not be totally surprising. If Truth, like blood and political authority, is decentralized, as Milton argues in *Areopagitica* with reference to the myth of Osiris, then collectivity and inclusivity are crucial elements of Milton's epistemology, too. The ingenuity of Rogers's argument is to show how, regardless of one's stated ideology, a person may find themselves an adherent of a less explicit ideology, thought pattern, or impulse—making unlikely bedfellows of people as different as Milton and Harvey, Marvell and Winstanley. Similarly, we may wonder how Milton the individualist may espouse a communal epistemology, even if not always explicitly.

Two final studies on Milton and natural knowledge have a claim on this discussion. Both examine the topic directly, and in their own way pick up on questions of experimentation and his method of understanding nature. The most successful of any book on this topic generally remains Karen L. Edwards's *Milton and the Natural World: Science and Poetry in Paradise Lost* (1999). Among the most ambitious is Angelica Duran's *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution* (2007).[43] By the time these books were published, the questions posed by scholars were not, "did Milton know the science of his day?" or, "did he approve of the pursuit of natural knowledge?", but rather, "how does Milton represent his scientific learning?" and "what bearing does it have on his larger aims in *Paradise Lost*?" Edwards starts with particulars and moves towards generalization about Milton's notions of experimentation and the natural world, whereas Duran begins with general notions about "the scientific revolution" and finds particulars in Milton's representations of learning more broadly. Bacon, whom both critics cite as an important influence on the poet, would probably advocate the former approach as more conducive to knowledge about Milton. He would probably be right.

Edwards's primary subject is natural history as presented in *Paradise Lost*, a topic almost entirely neglected by previous inquiries into the poet's relation to early modern science. Yet equally important is her methodology in the book, which emulates the methodology of natural history by adducing many examples of Milton's selective adaptation of the folklore of fauna and flora in order to discern his broader principles of natural philosophy. Marjara showed Milton's concordance with the analogical and teleological attitudes of many leading natural philosophers in the seventeenth century. Edwards more specifically argues that the role of *experiment* and *experience* in the epic meet the dictates of such luminaries of the new science as Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and Robert

[43] Karen L. Edwards, *Milton and the Natural World: Science and Poetry in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Angelica Duran, *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007).

Hooke. (She is careful not to assert any direct influence on Milton from these figures; their attitudes are merely sympathetic.) Readers of *Paradise Lost* are here placed alongside Adam and Eve, who are themselves readers of the Book of Nature and who also must learn to become better readers. If this sounds a lot like the reader-response theory of Stanley Fish, Edwards fires back, deflating the latter's reading of Milton's supposed antipathy towards "experience" and "empirical science"[44] and defining more positive kinds of tests for the first humans and readers. The problem is not that Eve relied too much on her experience of nature, as Fish suggests; the problem is that she does not rely on it enough to be suitably cautious towards the claims of the "snake." The proper balance of open-mindedness and skepticism, so important to men like Boyle and to the project of natural history, gives way instead to gullibility—a willingness to take Satan's word instead of making trial of it.[45]

Edwards's Milton is not so captious as Fish's. The poet is not tempting or testing us, but rather encouraging us to read experimentally, just as the poet writes experimentally. Edwards indeed posits a natural sympathy between scientific experimentalism and poetry in their imaginative possibilities: "experimentalism in the mid-seventeenth century tends to open areas of uncertainty rather than to establish certainties; more precisely, it opens up areas of *scientific* uncertainty which are *poetically* liberating."[46] As old interpretive structures about nature were knocked down and new ones provisionally raised, the epistemological uncertainty of the era left room for a playful irresolution where no domineering narrator can tut-tut or point the finger at Adam and Eve or their fallen onlookers. More than that, though, a key feature of the new science was its acceptance of uncertainty not just as necessary but as productive. To modify a popular Reformed motto: *scientia semper reformanda est*. Pretense of absolute knowledge is replaced with cautious openness to the

---

[44] Stanley Fish, *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 250.
[45] Edwards, *Milton and the Natural World*, 34.
[46] Ibid., 10.

possibility of correction, and more generally, a recuperation of the status of provisional knowledge formerly and frequently disparaged as mere "opinion." Milton's sanguine perspective on the epistemological status of opinion, which was traditionally and unfavourably compared with knowledge, is key. In arguing, for example, that "opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making" (*CPW* 2:554),[47] Milton puts himself in the camp of Boyle and opposite Hobbes. This epistemological context bears significantly on more recent discussions of Milton and uncertainty;[48] Edwards pointed us in the right direction already twenty years ago by reminding us that reader and poet must work together experimentally to create meaning. Indeterminacy is a feature, not a bug, of his poetics and natural philosophy.

The consonance of poetry and natural philosophy is the starting place of Angelica Duran's suggestive 2007 study, which aims to explore Milton's place within "the growth of knowledge and activities associated with the English Scientific Revolution [that] developed in a medium of dynamic exchange between various disciplines."[49] Several of the book's claims have been justly contested: the extent of Milton's biographical connections to giants of the English "scientific revolution"; the status of figures from his early poetry as examples of an older model of isolated natural philosophers who give way in his mature writings to figures representing a "new model army of Judeo-Christian, scientifically minded intellectuals" like the archangel teachers of *Paradise Lost*;[50] and the general relationship between the poet's ideas and those of figures from the Royal Society, many of whom

---

[47] *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe and Maurice Kelly, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82). Citations of Milton's prose will refer to this edition. If *OED* 1d is correct and this is the first idiomatic usage of "in the making," then Milton has chosen the word very carefully, indeed.

[48] For example, Peter C. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton: Paradise Lost and the Poetics of Incertitude* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and *The New Milton Criticism*, ed. Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[49] Duran, *Milton and the Scientific Revolution*, 2.

[50] Ibid., 22.

were writing after Milton's death. Duran's commitment to an occasionally whiggish thesis leads to interpretive overextension, and in turn led to a harsh but salutary corrective review article by intellectual historian Mordechai Feingold.[51] But she detects genuine and important movements in Milton's works and his responses to the methods of the new science—observation, experimentation, and collaboration—that Edwards had already begun to explore. Besides her focus on the neglected patterns of education in Milton's poem with reference to *Of Education*, Duran pays needful attention to the revaluation of solitary learning in Milton's epistemology in favour of something more social, which she tries to place squarely within the tradition of scientific "collaboration." I take a different approach in the second and third chapters of this dissertation, focusing instead on Milton's figurative representation of collaborative knowledge and its ontological expression. Nevertheless, *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution* makes the kinds of assertions that open up rather than shut down fruitful inquiry into Milton and knowledge.

Knowledge of God and "Truth"

A similarly inquisitive spirit characterizes Milton's approach to religious knowledge. A comprehensive review of the final category of studies dealing with Milton's beliefs about the knowledge of God can only be more exhausting than exhaustive, since understanding and explaining (and justifying) divinity formed the greatest part of the poet's life work. If "the end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him," as Milton believed, even knowledge of self and nature are encompassed within divine knowledge (*CPW* 2:366–67). It should not then be surprising that there are continuities in Milton's epistemology across bodies of knowledge, from scientific to religious. Duran's emphasis

[51] Mordechai Feingold, review of *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution*, by Angelica Duran, *Milton Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (October 2008): 222–229. Duran responds to the review in the same issue.

on the importance of collaboration in Milton's thought, for example, applies also to acquiring knowledge of God, which Milton often just calls "Truth." Thus his grand vision in *Areopagitica* for "true knowledge" involves "men of rare abilities, and more then common industry not only to look back and revise what hath bin taught heretofore, but to gain furder and goe on, some new enlighten'd steps in the discovery of truth" (2:566). Put thus, Milton adapts Bacon's language of natural philosophy and applies it to theological understanding.[52] He acknowledges the occasionally confrontational and controversial nature of such discovery, but more often the effort is collaborative. Let truth and falsehood grapple; we ourselves are to be "wise and faithfull labourers" ready to "unite into one generall and brotherly search after Truth" (2:554).

Phillip J. Donnelly acknowledges this amicable and communal effort in a brief but important section of *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning* (2009): "The entire argument of *Areopagitica* presumes that people are able to learn truth from one another that they could not discover alone. This point would not need stating, except that Milton is typically characterized as the advocate of a solipsistic 'church of one.'"[53] Donnelly does not go into detail about how (religious) knowledge itself is transferred or created, but his larger argument describing Miltonic "reason" as the "the poetic gift of peaceful difference… a capacity for faithful otherness… that is simultaneously creative (poetic) and freely

---

[52] In *Areopagitica* Milton explicitly cites an old pamphlet by "the Viscount St. Albans" on religious controversy (2: 542*n*), but he clearly has the scientific writings in mind, too. The cited passage follows an earlier one arguing that "The light which we have gain'd, was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge" (2:550). Compare Bacon: "Neither is it possible to *discover the more remote*, and deeper parts of any science [i.e., knowledge], if you stand but upon the level of the same science, and ascend not to a higher science" (3:292, emphasis added). Milton seems again to echo *The Advancement of Learning* when describing "the free and ingenuous sort of such [authors] as evidently were born to study, and love lerning for it self, not for lucre, or any other end, but the service of God and truth… those whose publisht labours advance the good of mankind" (2:531), against those Bacon says desire learning and knowledge "most times for lucre and profession; and seldom sincerely to give a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men" or "for the glory of the Creator" (Bacon, 3:294).

[53] Phillip J. Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning: Narrative and Protestant Toleration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

self-donative (gift)" is a welcome point of entry.[54] At the broadest level, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning* advocates the neglected truth that reason and other tools of knowledge are not for Milton value-neutral. Certainly, reason is not coercive, nor does it function as "predictive calculation for the purpose of controlling objects in the world"—part of a mathematical determination like Hobbes's definition of reason as "nothing but Reckoning (that is, Adding and Substracting)." Instead, Donnelly argues, "the faculty of reason is the divine image by which humans participate in knowledge, love, and genuine delight."[55] The heterogenous definitions of reason just cited show how difficult it is to pin down the relationship between ethics and cognition in Milton. In attempting to provide a theoretical framework for Miltonic reason, Donnelly devises new terms for the competing functions of reason in different contexts—"discursive"; "Christo-poetic"; "ethico-cognitive"—which do not always make things simpler and which might have seemed alien to Milton. Yet the insight that the pursuit of truth has intrinsically something to do with ethical considerations like peace or love, and that this epistemological approach has a theological basis, is simply understudied in our scholarship.

Given the philosophical distance of modern readers, this is understandable. Such an approach may indeed have seemed distant even for Milton's original audience, for whom the exigencies of war and religious turmoil made the public discovery of truth an almost impossibly political project. With that in mind, most scholarly treatments of religious knowledge have instead elucidated the historical context in which the poet was writing.[56] Dayton Haskin, for example, notes how even English Protestants already committed to the supremacy of the Bible for religious belief

---

[54] Ibid., 3.
[55] Ibid., 11, 43, 29,
[56] See, e.g., Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) and David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and to the hermeneutic principles of charity may come to vehement disagreement: "every preacher, indeed every reader, has a personal idea of what 'the general tenour of the scripture' is. What one person thinks may be extracted from the 'plain places' in 'the Bible only' may seem to another to involve an imposition of alien doctrines and categories."[57] Yet as Haskin also notes, reading scripture in a personal manner was an imperative. Besides revealing spiritual truths, such reading crucially helped to affirm one's salvation, and for many believers, private reading was the source of "experimental knowledge"—a formative encounter with scripture that "assimilated the events and circumstances of contemporary life, both private and public, with those found in biblical stories."[58] Despite its deeply personal origins, such knowledge clearly commands public action, as someone like Hobbes understood. His solution was to deny its epistemological validity: "men, vehemently in love with their own new opinions… gave those their opinions also that reverenced name of Conscience… and so pretend to know they are true, when they know at most but that they think so" (*Lev*. I.7).[59] If, in religion as in politics, individualism and dissension lead only to atomization and confrontation, as Hobbes believed, then interpretational authority must never rest ultimately with a private individual, nor can religious knowledge ever be communal.[60] For him, the only solution is a paradoxical public individual: the monarch.

By contrast, Milton in *Areopagitica* is optimistic about the prospect of integrating private inspiration into a larger, peaceable recollection on the part of "the sad friends of Truth" (*CPW*

---

[57] Dayton Haskin, *Milton's Burden of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 79.
[58] Ibid., 17.
[59] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[60] His positions on religious tolerance and authoritative interpretation are complex. To start, Hobbes seriously doubts (on philosophical grounds) the possibility of religious knowledge beyond a kind of natural religion (e.g., *De Cive* XV.9). Christian authority he gives initially to the Church (*Elements of Law*; *De Cive*), but by the time of *Leviathan* he argued it should rest only with the civil sovereign. To his mind, this provided Independents a kind of delivery from ecclesiastical power.

2:549). Yet as Stoll points out, Milton's confidence that private knowledge can be made public—that "all these individual prophets will be able to come together in shared discourse"—requires him to provide an answer for a longstanding problem.[61] Stoll sees Milton as evoking prophecy to show how the process of scriptural interpretation involves not only reason, but inspiration, which can then be transformed "into the kind of rational and communicable discourse that can take part in a public scene of conscience."[62] This solution seems plausible, if hopeful on Milton's part. Yet why not? His source provides substantial precedent. Milton's description of collective knowledge begins with a rationalistic pursuit of knowledge, initially secular and privileged: "there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas"; "others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement" (*CPW* 2:554). But he moves quickly to reveal a religious impetus: "What wants there to such a towardly and pregnant soile, but wise and faithfull labourers, to make a knowing people, a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies." Milton, it seems, has a peculiarly religious basis for insisting on a communal ideal for knowledge.

Here he draws on the story from Numbers 11:24–30, in which two young men, different in age and social status from the seventy elders at the tabernacle, begin to prophesy. Milton is at his most hopeful when he declares that "now the time seems come, wherein Moses the great Prophet may sit in heav'n, rejoycing to see that memorable and glorious wish of his fulfill'd, when not only our sev'nty Elders, but all the Lords people are become Prophets" (2:555–56). He would find support for this sentiment in such favourite Protestant passages as Joel 2:28–29: "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in

[61] Stoll, *Conscience*, 171; see also 132–159.
[62] Ibid., 178.

those days will I pour out my spirit" (KJV). God seems to require a less fit audience than Milton typically does. Yet even if Milton does not frequently ascribe spiritual knowledge to the poor, female, or young, it does not escape him that the entirety of revelation is not given to one man or one class of man.[63] Few sometimes may know when thousands err, as the angel Abdiel says in *Paradise Lost*, but it is a knowing *people* that Milton is ultimately after—one partaking in "*the unity of Spirit*" which both dispenses knowledge and demands its peaceable communication (2:565).

Milton gives us much reason to wonder how much of his optimism survives in later political prose like *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659). Yet words like "communication" and its synonym "participation" seem to me to offer a clue about elements of Milton's epistemology that persist into his later work, even if his faith in a knowing nation is diminished. In *Paradise Lost* especially, both words, elsewhere rare in his lexicon, appear almost exclusively where knowledge is concerned. Raphael tells Adam that some divine knowledge is as yet beyond bounds,

> To none communicable in earth or heaven:
> Enough is left besides to search and know.
> But knowledge is as food, and needs no less
> Her temperance over appetite. (7.124–27)

The conjunction of shared food and knowledge continues also in the mouth of Satan, who speaks of "knowledge both of good and evil" as the good "communicated" by the fruit (9.752; 9.754–55; cf. 9.716–17). Again, in the middle of a discussion on discursive and intuitive reason, Raphael teases that in time "men / With angels may participate, and find / No inconvenient diet" (5.493–95). Adam in his first conversation with God locates his dissatisfaction in a lack of fellowship "fit to

[63] See *Of Reformation*, where Milton says the scriptures call to themselves "to be instructed, not only the *wise*, and *learned*, but the *simple*, the *poor*, the *babes*, foretelling an extraordinary effusion of *Gods* Spirit upon every age, and sexe" (*CPW* 1:566).

participate / All rational delight" (8.390–91). Finally, a fallen Eve wonders whether she should "give [Adam] to partake / Full happiness with me, or rather not, / But keep the odds of knowledge in my power / Without copartner?" (9.818–21). As it turns out, this last scenario of knowledge uncommunicated, sickening into a muddy pool of selfishness, represents for Milton the greatest ignorance and trespass.

No religious impetus would have been necessary for Milton to have conceived of knowledge communally; something approaching a constructivist epistemology is evident in the writings of Aquinas, Bacon, Hobbes, and others, well in advance of Giambattista Vico, as Robert C. Miner has shown.[64] Yet the spiritual resonance of words like "partake" and "communicate" cannot have escaped the poet. An epistemological tradition describing divine participation was available to Christians since at least Irenaeus and Augustine,[65] and could be found, for example, in the writings of Richard Hooker, who argued that "All thinges are therefore pertakers of God, they are his ofspringe, his influence is in them, and the personall wisdome of God is for that verie cause said to excell in nimbleness or agilitie, to pearce into all intellectual pure and subtile spirites, to goe through all, and to reach unto everie thinge which is."[66] In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where participation in God is material as well as spiritual, such penetrating wisdom would be even more far-reaching, with knowledge extending far beyond a single, solitary tree. Nevertheless, the ethical demands of

---

[64] Robert C. Miner, *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[65] Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 1–51, provides an overview of the Christian doctrine of participation or *koinonia*. John P. Kenney, "Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 289, argues that even Augustine conceived of meditation on scripture as a "participation in the inner intellection of God" which is "paradoxically, denominated in social as well as individual terms."

[66] Richard Hooker, *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, Volumes I and II: Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Preface and Books I–V*, ed. Georges Edelen and W. Speed Hill (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), 2:236.

participation similarly require us to go beyond consumption. Because the knowledge we participate in is ultimately God's, it is governed by a standard of creative generosity. There can be no hoarding; there must be "knowledge in the making" (*CPW* 2:554). As a poet or maker, Milton in his works provides an epistemological model in which we ourselves are invited to participate.

This study represents a step in that direction. Throughout this survey I have drawn special attention to Milton's aversion towards solipsistic cognition and to the space he creates for communal knowledge, not only in matters of religion, but also in natural science and even self-knowledge. Critical assessments have sometimes felt the contours of that knowledge, but shied away from gaining further or going on, perhaps hesitating in the face of what Donnelly identifies as Milton's "self-presentation as a solitary prophet," one which is easily "misconstrued to imply a quasi-Cartesian individualism."[67] The old caricature is showing cracks. It is time discard the image altogether.

In its place we can find an author who still believes fiercely in the necessity of coming to know things for oneself, but who does not make individual knowledge an end in itself. Milton famously claimed that "A man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie" (*CPW* 2:543). From this it is clear that truth is not the same thing as knowledge; for the former to become the latter, it must be believed by someone, and for the right reasons.[68] Knowledge requires knowers and communication, so we risk imprecision if not absurdity when, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, we speak of knowledge detached from agents of understanding. A sensitive account of Miltonic knowledge must therefore pay attention to

---

[67] Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning*, 45.

[68] Despite the paradoxical framing, Milton here articulates a fairly orthodox epistemology. The most enduring theory of knowledge since at least the Enlightenment requires that truth (correspondence to reality) be both justified and believed before it is called knowledge.

the role of knowers in the epistemological process, rather than only to objects or categories of knowledge. In the prose, that means examining the author's attitudes and assumptions about who is positioned to know and how; in the poetry, it means attending carefully to the symbolic networks of knowledge-making as characters work, eat, and converse—together or alone. Building on the work of "faithfull labourers" before me (2:554), I hope to do just that.

"The Better to Converse with Solitude": Solitary and Communal Knowledge, 1631–1643

Twenty-two years old and unimpressed by his university experience to date, John Milton began to debate with himself the best way to gain knowledge. He ponders that question over the next few years in works like "Prolusion 7," poems like "Il Penseroso," and epistolary correspondence with his confidants. The following decade, he publishes several treatises with an evolving range of answers. Yet Milton's chief consideration—whether the most valuable kinds of knowledge are to be gained privately or communally—persists into his last years. Although he would not have been alone in asking this question in the seventeenth century, Milton is among its keenest and most committed inquirers, and he responds throughout his life to debates about the value of solitude for making knowledge. The speaker of an early poem revels in sequestered study, taking for his muse the daughter of "solitary Saturn," a "pensive nun, devout and pure" ("Il Penseroso" 24; 31). His final poem forty years later follows a "glorious eremite" as he "one day forth walked alone, the spirit leading / And his deep thoughts, the better to converse / With solitude" (*Paradise Regained* 1.8; 1.189–91).[1] Add to these figures Milton's own construction of himself as a solitary genius, and it is easy to see how readers have often accepted a centuries-old view of Milton as "the most isolated English poet of any significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."[2] It is a short leap from there to conclude that he privileged a solitary epistemology throughout his life.

Such a leap portends an unfortunate fall. For starters, a closer look forestalls any straightforward conclusion that these and similar figures are utterly alone: "Il Penseroso" ends with a proposition to live with Melancholy, and Jesus no sooner sets out than he is met by Satan. Even Milton's curated self-image as enlightened solitary is more rhetorical than historical; despite his

[1] These and other citations of the shorter poetry refer to John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2007).
[2] Richard Helgerson, *Self-crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 233.

reputation, Milton relished and relied upon a stimulating intellectual and social milieu for much of his life, as Stephen B. Dobranski has demonstrated.[3] But the more regrettable consequence of an over-easy acceptance of Milton's faith in private knowledge is that it occludes the very real anxieties about learning, truth, and companionship that shaped his epistemology—just as they would anyone else's. In turn, what we think about Milton's epistemology shapes our broader understanding of him as an author. For much of his afterlife, critical emphasis on his supposed solitary epistemology has made him a prototype of the modern subject, knowing the world in isolation by virtue of a failed or successful self-sufficiency. Maybe that is even what Milton at some points in his life wanted us to think. We need not therefore conclude that he held the same view throughout his lifetime, or that his self-characterization—often in specifically polemical contexts—is the best record of his thought. Nor should we allow that self-characterization to eclipse competing impulses in his poetry and prose that reveal a more open, self-aware author than has generally been acknowledged.

Milton's commitment to an individualistic epistemology in fact wavers in the 1630s and 1640s in response to the exigencies of loss and life that force him to rethink a callow valorization of solitude. This chapter considers works from this period to trace a shift in his epistemological assumptions, arguing that conversation rather than solitude becomes the primary locus of

---

[3] Stephen B. Dobranski, "Milton's Social Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–24. Many examples could be drawn from Milton's own writings, but biographers old and new have for the most part accepted the poet's self-characterization even as they acknowledge his professional and personal sociability. Thomas Newton, for example, remarked in 1749 upon the supposed paucity of Milton's references to his contemporaries in a discussion of his "original genius," and yet he describes regular visits even in later years from friends who would be entertained with singing and organ music. William Riley Parker's influential biography begins with a preface reminding us that "most of Milton's poetry is distinctly social in tone," but nevertheless proceeds to describe an essentially reclusive scholar (*Milton: A Biography*, ed. Gordon Campbell, 2nd ed., 2 vols. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 1:vii). Christopher Hill's corrective portrayal of Milton as a frequent bar-hopper need not be too exaggerated for us to agree that the poet was "more sociable and clubbable than is often thought" (*Milton and the English Revolution* [London: Faber, 1977], 9, 97–99).

knowledge-making for him. Whereas early on, contemplation and study provide sufficient "conversation" for solitary knowing, by the 1640s his experience of solitude as loneliness prompts Milton to replace internal conversation with external conversation—in marriage and in public life. This becomes the basis for a subtle but influential change in his thinking about how knowledge operates communally. By mapping Milton's engagement with popular ideas about the place of knowledge, this account of Milton's early epistemology challenges the caricature of the isolated poet, who in fact is isolated only in that he moves against the literary and philosophical currents of his time, at length denouncing "the evill of solitary life" in the divorce tracts just as the English poetry of retirement took flight and Cartesian philosophy designated the individual as unit of knowledge.

"A calme and pleasing solitarynes fed with cherful and confident thoughts"

Milton himself lays the groundwork for critics convinced of his individualistic epistemology by linking the independence provided by solitude to his creative and academic prowess. As a young man in 1631, he speaks in praise of the intellectual affordances of "a cultured and liberal leisure," away from the annoyances of university exercises (*erudite et liberali otio*; *CPW* 1:289). Towards the end of his studious retirement in Hammersmith and Horton, he thanks his father for financially supporting a retreat to a "deep seclusion" (*secessibus altis*) in pursuit of a cultivated mind (*excultam… ditescere mentem*; "Ad Patrem" 73–74). Critics like Douglas Trevor are convinced of Milton's "self-understood, solitary nature" from a reading of these early works.[4] Nor would one need to rely on

[4] Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 150. As Blair Worden has remarked, this portrait "has proved triumphantly enduring. No major writer has been taken so largely at his own and his disciples' estimation" (*Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 39).

autobiographical remarks to get this impression.[5] Behind the many willing and unwilling solitary characters throughout his oeuvre—not only Il Penseroso and Jesus, but the Lady, the "uncouth swain," Damon, Satan, Adam, Samson, almost his God—it is Milton himself whom you see, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge could have told us. In fact, it is their very aloneness that has prompted many readers to identify these characters with the author from whose head they sprung. Thus, although Dr. Johnson says that "Both Mirth and Melancholy are solitary, silent inhabitants of the breast," Trevor believes that "'Il Penseroso' reflects more of Milton's naturally withdrawn, studious self than does 'L'Allegro.'"[6] And this is but part of a long tradition in which Il Penseroso's more pronounced solitariness has aligned him with Milton. D. C. Dorian argued that "L'Allegro is a self-portrait of a Milton who *might have been*; Il Penseroso, of essentially the Milton who *was to be*," while Don Cameron Allen claimed that the reason "Il Penseroso" "gains in power" is that in it, "the poet lives to himself… it is a much more solitary and, hence, a more personal poem."[7] So entrenched is a consensus around Milton's dispositional solitude that its presence in his characters readily serves as a litmus test of sublime egotism.

What this consensus forgets is that "the author, J. M.," as he refers to himself on the title page of several prose works, is a character, too.[8] Sometimes this is obvious, as in the quasi-epic description of his role in the debate with respected protestant scholar Claudius Salmasius: "When he

---

[5] E.g., Christopher Koester, "Solitude and Difference in Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 57 (2016): 155: "From the melancholic speaker of *Il Penseroso* to the solitary narrator of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's literary personas frequently emphasize their own physical, mental, and spiritual apartness. […] the same can be said about most of Milton's major characters."

[6] Trevor, *Poetics of Melancholy*, 158.

[7] See the discussion in A. S. P. Woodhouse and George Bush, eds., *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton. Volume Two: The Minor English Poems*, gen. ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), which cites Johnson (242), Dorian (245), and Allen (257).

[8] "The author" appears for the first time on the 1644 edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, again in major tracts like *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1650), and a final time in *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660).

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" (*CPW* 4.1:556; cf. 607). He would reprise this role 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" (4.2:698–99). At other times, Milton's performed singularity is more subdued, as when he proclaims himself "the sole advocate of a discount'nanc't truth" in the address to parliament in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (2:224). Ironically, the epithet appears only in the second edition of *DDD* in 1644, by which time he knew that the reformer Paul Fagius, for example, "was of the same opinion touching divorce" (2:434–35). Such instances have the ring of formal rhetoric, and so are usually taken with a grain of salt. Yet other well-known claims of Milton's professed solitariness, only marginally more rhetorical, are frequently taken at face value. So the "calme and pleasing solitarynes" he supposedly gives up for a "troubl'd sea of noises and hoars disputes" in the antiprelatical tracts provides a launching point to establish his independence and self-sufficiency as a writer and author (1:822). This, despite the fact that those treatises which helped to establish Milton's singular persona were themselves "clearly produced through a social process."[9] In the first book in which he is publicly identified as author, then, he successfully styles himself a reluctant contributor—an informed, solitary outsider divinely appointed to comment on the matter.

The facts of his life do not generally support such an image of a reclusive scholar, nor do they suggest that he particularly enjoyed those times in his life when he was much removed from society. His reputation to the contrary may be based in part on a historical misunderstanding. The

[9] Stephen B. Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 73. The book discusses his collaborative practices of authorship, especially in the publication of the 1645 poems, but a chapter on "The Myth of the Solitary Genius" shows how even by then Milton has crafted a singular authorial persona.

thesis of a blissfully solitary Milton rests upon the transformative period of his "studious retirement" from 1632 until about 1638 (*CPW* 1:319), during which he remedied what he thought was an inadequate educational curriculum pursued over seven years at Cambridge. He famously recalls this period years later in the *Defensio Secunda* (1654):

> At my father's country place, whither he had retired to spend his declining years, I devoted myself entirely to the study of Greek and Latin writers, completely at leisure, not, however, without sometimes exchanging the country for the city, either to purchase books or to become acquainted with some new discovery in mathematics or music, in which I then took the keenest pleasure. (*CPW* 4.1:613–14)

His studies in philosophy, literature, history secular and sacred, theology, ethics, and math and music during this time are well-documented.[10] But a longstanding belief that most of this learned leisure took place at Horton, a bucolic village offering Milton the separation and inspiration needed for this crucial part of his life, turned out to be plainly wrong. We learned as recently as the twentieth century that in fact he was at Horton only from around May 1636 until May 1638; for almost five years before that he lived in Hammersmith, a suburban outpost just eight miles outside the City of London.[11] From there he could easily make the frequent trips into town mentioned above and enjoy the company of some learned friends.[12] This was a removal, to be sure, but hardly the solitary, pastoral escape some have imagined for him.

---

[10] James Holly Hanford, "The Chronology of Milton's Private Studies," *PMLA* 36, no. 2 (1921): 251–314, remains an authoritative article. See also William Poole, "The Genres of Milton's Commonplace Book," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 367–81.

[11] For an overview, see Edward Jones, "'Ere Half My Days': Milton's Life, 1608–1640," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, 14–19 and Jones, "'Filling in a blank in the canvas': Milton, Horton, and the Kedermister Library," *Review of English Studies* 53, no. 209 (2002): 35–41.

[12] In the section immediately preceding the passage quoted above, Milton takes care to establish his popularity at Cambridge. Note that he claims only to leave behind *most* of his learned friends:

Nor, it seems, was Horton. William Riley Parker, the first major biographer writing with rectified knowledge of Milton's shorter stay there, still concludes that this latter residence was "a place of tireless and purposeful study."[13] This must be the case, given the steady progress recorded in the *Commonplace Book*. Yet such progress would not have come in the midst of a literary loneliness of the kind that nineteenth-century readers expected of a great poet.[14] The poetic productivity of the early 1630s formerly attributed to serene Horton indeed belongs to Hammersmith. Conversely, Edward Jones points out that the challenges biographers like David Masson had attributed to Hammersmith were in fact true of Horton—plague scares and family sickness and legal issues foremost among them. Such circumstances "pose an undeniable challenge to descriptions and depictions of Milton walking through fields, sitting on the banks of the Colne, and writing poetry under trees."[15] Yes, Horton yields us the gorgeous flowers of *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*. What unites these two poems, though, as I will discuss below, is unease about solitude itself. And in what was very possibly his final letter to his dear friend Charles Diodati, Milton expressed, not a desire for more isolation, but the "companionship" that a move to the city might afford, away from the "obscurity and cramped quarters" of his rural retirement (*CPW* 1:327).

"*plerosque socios a quibus eram haud mediocriter cultus, reliqui*"; Latin text cited from *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank A. Patterson, 18 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38), 8:120.

[13] Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, 2:798.

[14] The tradition begins in the eighteenth century, as explored by John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). Solitude is nearly synonymous with poetic creativity from Wordsworth onwards; he of course wanders lonely as a cloud, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude" recounts the life of a poet: "He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude."

[15] Jones, "'Ere Half My Days,'" 20. Cf. Jones, "Kedermister," 31–32. In addition to Kedermister Library, while at Horton Milton may have made use of resources at Eton College and perhaps the personal library of one of its most famous Fellows, John Hales; see William Poole, "'The Armes of Studious Retirement'? Milton's Scholarship, 1632–1641," in *Young Milton: The Emerging Author, 1620–1642*, ed. Edward Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–47.

By contrasting Milton's performed singularity with his relative sociability, I do not mean to suggest he is always trying to trick us, or that we must read him suspiciously. It is perfectly understandable that in an effort to prove his independence and self-sufficiency he would emphasize his genuinely perceived sense of isolation, positive or negative. Indeed, Milton seems to have felt alone for much of his later life, regardless of whether he actually was so physically. He makes that very 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 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 [*in perpetua fere solitudine*]. (*CPW* 2:762–63)

Ten years after the letter to Diodati, Milton still associates solitude, here bearing the negative connotation not afforded by the English word, with claustrophobia. Yet, paradoxically, the physical presence of those unfit companions—unnamed, but almost certainly referring to Mary Powell's parents, siblings, and nephews[16]—serves only to emphasize his isolation by their unfitness, as he had argued in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* several years earlier (*CPW* 2:247).

Fit companionship, snatched away by death and distance, must have seemed to him increasingly elusive as the years went by. Milton's college mate Edward King drowned in 1637, and

---

[16] Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 207, notes how "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."

Diodati, Milton's "oldest, and perhaps only, truly intimate friend" died the following year.[17] These deaths, not the enjoyment of rural pleasures, were the occasions for *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*. If he looked instead to romance, he would have found no more encouragement. The alienation Milton surely felt in the early 1640s as his wife deserted him for the first three years of their marriage left a decidedly personal mark evident in the divorce tracts, where he pines publicly and pitiably for suitable friendship. At the end of the decade, a poetic translation of Psalm 88 records in verse the sentiment he had expressed to Dati: "Lover and friend thou hast removed / And severed from me far. / They *fly me now* whom I have loved, / 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 Restoration, so that, writing *Paradise Lost*, the poet finds himself "In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude" (7.27–28).

I sketch here the trajectory of Milton's self-presentation for two reasons. First, it registers his changing experience of solitude, virtually ignored by criticism thus far. The "lofty solitude" the author celebrates in *Prolusion 7* (*CPW* 1:289) becomes the cause of his lament in the Argument of *Epitaphium Damonis*, then a "god-forbidd'n lonelines" in the divorce tracts (2:247) and the "almost perpetual solitude" just cited. No wonder God and Adam debate the topic in *Paradise Lost*, and the latter concludes that solitude is only "*sometimes*… best society" (9.249, emphasis added). Second, and more importantly, this rather more ambiguous perspective impairs the argument that a solitary Milton promoted a solitary epistemology. Clearly, solitude experienced as independence and self-sufficiency informs a very different attitude towards knowledge than solitude experienced as loneliness. The former describes the philosophy and methodology of Descartes, not Milton, who

[17] Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 109.

never seems to want to picture complete aloneness, even in moments of purported solitude. If anything, an epistemology that recognizes the danger and undesirability of loneliness would crave intellectual company and reject the solitary pursuit of knowledge; this, I argue, is the movement which we see in the early 1640s, and which we see negatively dramatized when Eve eats the forbidden fruit and wonders if she should "keep the odds of knowledge in my power / Without copartner" (*PL* 9.820–21).

The importance of getting Milton's perspective right on this issue becomes clear when the alternatives play out. In most cases, critics have followed early statements in praise of solitude to establish Milton's view of it as favourable and uncomplicated. Unfortunately, they have also extended that view to later works which, as suggested above, do not easily accommodate an anodyne solitude. Trevor, for example, makes an excellent case for the poet's positive disposition towards solitude in the early poems. But the assumption that nothing has changed by the time of the divorce tracts leads him to claim that "Milton esteems chastity so highly because copulation [and therefore marriage] represents the most extreme threat to his solitariness"; "divorce is even more highly valued because it signifies the reacquisition of solitariness after it has been erroneously forfeited."[18] Such sentiments are expressly against the poet's distressed insistence in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* that "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18, KJV). Similar assumptions underlie arguments by Thomas H. Luxon, who acknowledges the darker potential of solitude for Milton, yet lionizes it at the expense of marriage and humanity: the issue is not with solitude, a divine state, but with humans, who suffer from "single imperfection," an intrinsic inability to enjoy solitude.[19] The consequences of such a reading, however, are jarring. God-ordained marriage, which

[18] Trevor, *Poetics of Melancholy*, 175, 177.
[19] Thomas H. Luxon, *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 120.

Milton defines productively as "the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman" (2:235), becomes little more than a necessary evil, a bandage for the greater problem of man's "constitutive lack." Contending as they do with his plainly stated beliefs, such conclusions discredit the operating assumption that solitude remains an unequivocal good for the poet.

"This outworne comparison, between a solitarie and an active life"

In fact, few of Milton's contemporaries would have held such a straightforward position. His ambivalent views on solitude and its relevance to his epistemology are most evident when situated within the changing seventeenth-century arguments for and against the solitary life and its intellectual affordances.[20] The strokes I paint here are necessarily broad, yet without them it is not possible to appreciate what Milton is doing when, in the early 1630s, amid continuing suspicion against the solitary life, he praises contemplation; or when in the 1640s and 1650s he reverses course just as popular opinion (especially in literature) grows sympathetic; or when in the 1660s, at the height of discussions about its epistemological value, he imagines a debate on solitude between Adam and God, and then between Adam and Eve, not long before she is seduced into eating from the tree of knowledge. Along these lines Mary Beth Long has admirably foregrounded the public debate about the ethics of solitude in her reading of *Paradise Lost* book 9. Yet similar perspective has not been brought to bear on the earlier periods of Milton's career. As a result, neither his boldness

[20] So far as I can tell, only Mary Beth Long, "Contextualizing Eve's and Milton's Solitudes in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2003): 100–115 and Wendy Olmsted, *The Imperfect Friend: Emotion and Rhetoric in Sidney, Milton, and their Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) have considered at some length the early modern discourse in which he was participating; both emerge with a sensitive reading of *Paradise Lost* wise to the dangers of solitude frequently cited by its opponents. In this section I draw on "'Solitude Sometimes is Best Society': Milton, Conversation, and Solitude" (master's thesis, McGill University, 2014), esp. 11–14 and 66–72, in which I address the topic in more detail than is possible or necessary here.

in the early works nor the skepticism in works that follow have informed assessments of his epistemology as it responded to ongoing developments during this vital period of intellectual history.

The debate is ancient; already in the sixteenth century Michel de Montaigne in his essay "Of Solitarinesse" could refer to "this outworne comparison, between a solitarie and an active life."[21] Yet the discussion erupted especially in the seventeenth century, as has been recognized by scholarship outside Milton studies.[22] For example, Aristotle's maxim that a man alone must be either a beast or a god is variously cited and expounded throughout Milton's lifetime. Robert Burton is typical of earlier seventeenth-century commentators in emphasizing the dangers of solitude when, as Wendy Olmsted observes, he revises Aristotle to suggest that "the solitary may not just meet devils," as sixteenth-century writers had warned, but even "*become* 'Divels alone,' for 'a man alone is either a Saint or a Divell.'" Loss of humanity may attend what is at first a pleasing fit of solitary melancholy, as "feare, sorrow, suspition… discontent, care, and wearinesse of life" strike without warning.[23] Nor is the risk limited to individuals. The basis for Aristotle's god–beast dichotomy was that to be human is to be social; Cicero and the Stoics seized upon this as part of an ethical critique that solitude, unnatural and unproductive, threatens and robs society.[24] This critique was potent especially in England, where no divinely sanctioned withdrawal from society for the purposes of religious contemplation was tenable after the Reformation. A person who excluded himself from public and social life opened himself to accusations of denying his nature and neglecting his fellow

---

[21] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio, ed. J. I. M. Stewart (New York: Modern Library, 1933), 188.
[22] See, for example, Janette Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The active and the contemplative life in Renaissance humanism," in *Arbeit, Musse, Meditation : Betrachtungen zur vita activa und vita contemplative*, ed. Brian Vickers (Zürich: Verlag der Fachvereine, 1985), 133–152; and Brian Vickers, "Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of Otium," *Renaissance Studies* 4, no. 1 (1990): 1–37 and no. 2 (1990): 107–154.
[23] Olmsted, *The Imperfect Friend*, 177, citing Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kissling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 243.
[24] See, e.g., Cicero, *De Officiis* I.ix and I.xliii-iv.

countrymen; so it is that in his *Characters*, published in 1614, Sir Thomas Overbury describes "A Melancholy Man," condemning him as "one that nature made sociable because she made him man, and a crazed disposition hath altered."[25]

Forty years later, however, the popular disposition had altered decidedly in favour of solitude. Henry Vaughan thus writes in the dedication of *Flores Solitudinis* (1654) that "we live in an age, which hath made this very Proposition (though suspected of Melancholie), mightie pleasing, and even meane witts begin to like it."[26] In her 1656 autobiography, noble wit, poet, and philosopher Margaret Cavendish describes herself unapologetically as "being addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth"[27]—oppositions that might sound familiar to readers of Milton's companion poems. Indeed, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" anticipate by some twenty years a mid-century explosion of poetry in praise of solitude and retirement that builds upon themes central to the *beatus ille* tradition.[28] With roots in classical poetry, this genre celebrated the life alone, free from urban cares and vices. Yet where an earlier poem like Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" imagined a halcyon estate of social harmony, later writers were fascinated instead by the individual experience possible in removal from society. Katherine Philips distills her age's attraction to such a life in suitably short and subdued lines: "'Twas here the Poets were inspir'd / Here taught the multitude." Against the imputations of

---

[25] Thomas Overbury, *Characters: Together with Poems, News, Edicts, and Paradoxes Based on the Eleventh Edition of A Wife Now the Widow of Sir Thomas Overbury*, ed. Donald Beecher (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 2003), 221.
[26] Henry Vaughan, *The Works in Verse and Prose of Henry Vaughan, Silurist*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 4 vols. (Lancashire, England: [Printed for private circulation,] 1871), 4:12.
[27] Margaret Cavendish, "A True Relation of the Birth, Breeding, and Life, of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle," in *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by 17th Century Englishwomen*, ed. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox (London: Routledge, 1989), 91.
[28] The classic study remains Maren-Sofie Røstvig, *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal*, 2nd ed. (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). Encomia to solitude were produced by major figures like Jonson, Milton, Cavendish, Philips, Cowley, and Marvell, alongside popular poets like Edward Benlowes, Richard Vaughan, and Charles Cotton.

an earlier generation, she then writes to "wellcome dearest solitude / My great felicity; / Though some are pleas'd to call thee rude, / Thou art not so, but we."[29]

Leisured retirement had proponents throughout English elite society in the 1640s and 1650s; because it was the de-facto reality of many Royalists throughout the English Civil War and Interregnum, crown sympathizers like Philips and Vaughan were among its strongest supporters. Even the *Eikon Basilike* (1649) promised to give a portrait of the king "*In His Solitudes*." Nevertheless, given the diversity of opinions among those who stood on either side of the War, politics cannot account completely for the change. Royalists indeed stood at both ends of perhaps the most public debate about the ethics of solitude, conducted in a series of pamphlets contemporaneous with the publication of *Paradise Lost*. Sir George Mackenzie's *A Moral Essay, Preferring Solitude to Publick Employment* (1665) enumerates the glories of solitude and takes aim against the capricious vicissitudes of public life and the vapidity of "ordinary conversation" among men, who often do little more than "talk of the weather, or some such pitifull subject."[30] In response, John Evelyn delivers the usual attacks against the futility of solitude, but now he too must go on the defensive, arguing that it is the active life which "has discover'd new Worlds, planted the Gospel, encreases Knowledge, cultivates Arts, relieves the afflicted," and without which "the whole Vniverse it self had been still but a rude and indigested Cäos."[31] At issue here are the same ethical considerations of duty probed by earlier generations. This time, however, solitude's advantage for

---

[29] "A Countrey Life," in Katherine Philips, *The Collected Works of Katherine Philips: The Matchless Orinda*, ed. Patrick Thomas, 3 vols. (Stump Cross, England: Stump Cross Books, 1990), 1:160. I cite Philips here because she precedes and perhaps inspires the more famous sentiments in Cowley and then Marvell, as Elizabeth Scott-Baumann argues in *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry, and Culture 1640–1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81–110. Note also Marvell's repetition of Philips's end-rhymes: "Society is all but *rude* / To this delicious *solitude*" ("The Garden" 15–16; *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. ed. [London: Pearson Longman, 2007]).
[30] George Mackenzie and John Evelyn, *Public and Private Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Mackenzie-Evelyn Debate*, ed. Brian Vickers (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1986), 72.
[31] Ibid., 251.

the good life must be taken very seriously. Above all, the debate is marked by rhetoric championing either individual or society: personal growth or public growth, private purity or social justice.[32]

The logic underpinning the revaluation of solitude – "*my* great felicity," to use Philips's phrase – informs also the larger tension between individual and society in the seventeenth century. The supposed rupture between the two in early modern England is of course a historical commonplace; whatever the historical reality, the sense of alienation expressed by figures like Hamlet and lamented by writers like John Donne early in the century bespeak a self-awareness of the difficulty of participating in society as it has traditionally existed.[33] Other voices, however, seem instead to celebrate this focus on the individual, and it is to these that Janette Dillon refers when she argues that "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." As seventeenth-century English society came increasingly to value individual fulfilment and self-definition, "such retirement had gained moral respectability as well as desirability, and was no longer condemned as selfish, but admired in terms similar to the medieval praise of the contemplative life."[34] This involved an ethical defense premised on the moral and intellectual advantages of such a life: just as religious solitaries could avoid the pollution of the world and dedicate themselves to a higher knowledge, these secular solitaries adopted positions of moral probity and enlightenment. When Milton wrote about his own studious retirement the *Defensio Secunda* in 1654, it is this type of authority that he wished to invoke, even if in limited fashion.

---

[32] Cf. Long, "Contextualizing," 101.

[33] These are peculiarly English iterations of a longstanding sentiment, of course. The classic discussion of the roots of individualism is Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). It seems telling that Petrarch, who described himself as a citizen of no place and everywhere a stranger, was also the author of the first humanist paean to solitude (*De Vita Solitaria*, written ca. 1346–66).

[34] Dillon, *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*, 23, 24.

Aristotle himself had acknowledged that the contemplative life, and so the philosophical life, is best achieved away from the hindrances of money and power—precisely the opportunity afforded by solitude. The corrupting potential of society, so contrary to the independence that knowledge is thought to require, made solitude a haven of direct access to privileged sources of truth. This proved a robust and recurrent defense for proponents of solitude against potent and periodic accusations of selfishness. After the venerable religious contemplation of the Middle Ages fell out of favour in the late Renaissance, "the attraction of the contemplative life in the sixteenth century is widely represented by a secularised and less absolute type of solitary than the medieval hermit: the scholar."[35] By the mid-seventeenth century, it was not awkward scholars but intellectuals, real and pretended, who extolled the private life. Cavendish, for example, presents herself in terms similar to the longstanding caricature of the melancholic man because that caricature and the desire for solitude more generally "increasingly became associated with great intellect through its links with the pursuits of writing and study."[36] This set a rhetorical precedent in literature and in science that continued for centuries after Milton.

All this makes it hard to remember that the broad intellectual consensus among scholars actually moved in the seventeenth century away from solitary knowing and towards the communal knowledge-making championed by the Royal Society. Not that such a movement was straightforward or easy; intellectual historian Steven Shapin instead finds an extended back and forth between those who argue that the scholar produces the best knowledge in solitude and those who

---

[35] Ibid., 11.

[36] Ibid., 31. Overbury's Melancholy Man indeed exhibits many features which came to stand also for the scholar: "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." With this we might compare the scholarly stereotype that Milton grudgingly acknowledges in *Prolusion 7*: "hard to please, lacking in courtesy, odd in manner, and seldom gifted with the gracious address that wins men's hearts" (*CPW* 1:295).

saw it as a hindrance to scientific learning.[37] We might not be surprised that Evelyn, a founding member of the Royal Society, took the positions he did against Mackenzie. But the reason he had to make the argument at all was because of the stubborn trope of the lone scholar, which Francis Bacon first tried to stamp out in 1605, but which survived long after him. Not just in England but "in early modern Europe the public display of carelessness, unkemptness, distractedness, and social solecism came to count as emblematic of authentically scholarly status." Bacon countered that the intellectual life need not deprive one of manners and so was appropriate for gentlemen to engage in. He further argued that "it was not true that a *correctly conceived* philosophy was a solitary activity - the making of knowledge was profoundly social."[38] Because individuals are often blinded by their idols, others are needed for correction. Because no one person can collect facts summing up the entirety of natural history, the enterprise of induction must itself be collective. It took some time, but the English virtuosi of the 1660s onwards took up the charge. For these insights, Abraham Cowley in his ode "To the Royal Society" extols Bacon as the emancipator of philosophy, "a mighty man" who "like Moses, led us forth at last" from the wilderness of ignorance.[39]

Given the skepticism of Bacon's philosophical method towards intellectual solitaries, the irony of Cowley's celebration of him as a lone hero should not be lost on us. But the fact remains that even Bacon occasionally engaged in the rhetoric of solitude, as in his (third-person voice) prefatory announcement in *De Augmentis*: "although he was well aware how solitary an enterprise it is, and how hard a thing to win faith and credit for, nevertheless he was resolved not to abandon

---

[37] Steven Shapin, "'The Mind Is Its Own Place': Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-Century England," *Science in Context* 4, no. 1 (1990): 191–218.
[38] Ibid., 200, 201.
[39] Cited from Abraham Cowley, *Abraham Cowley: Poetry & Prose: With Thomas Sprat's Life and Observations by Dryden, Addison, Johnson and others*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949).

either it or himself."[40] Bacon is one example of many showing that one can believe in and endorse a collaborative model of knowledge while presenting themselves otherwise. Shapin observes that despite their practices to the contrary, such rhetoric continued to be expressed by the Royal Society's foremost champions. Robert Boyle, advocate and paragon of public science, throughout his life "portrayed himself as a solitary and his philosophical work as taking place in seclusion from the civic world."[41] Isaac Newton, famous among his contemporaries and early biographers for his dislike of public spaces and discourse, is even more extreme. He refers to his ground-breaking 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)." This, despite his more generous and better-known concession that "If I have seen further it is by standing on the sholders of Giants."[42] That posture of an elevated vantage point seems to require a degree of separation, even though the broader ethos of the new science emphasizes collectivity; the raised individual is an individual, yet clearly one dependent on others. And Cowley, hoping to have it both ways in his 1668 apologetic essay "Of Solitude," feels compelled to modify Aristotle yet once more: "Cogitation is the thing which distinguishes the Solitude of a God from a wild Beast."[43]

"The better to converse with solitude": 1626–1634

[40] As translated in Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longman, 1861–79), 4:8.
[41] Shapin, "The Mind Is Its Own Place," 202.
[42] Isaac Newton, *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton: 1661-1675, Volume 1*, ed. H. W. Turnbull (London: Published for the Royal Society at the University Press, 1959), 109 (letter to Henry Oldenburg), 416 (letter to Robert Hooke).
[43] Cowley, *Poetry & Prose*, 79.

As is clear from this brief overview of the debates surrounding solitude, early modern writers held complex and sometimes paradoxical opinions on the subject. The same is true of the author of *Paradise Lost*. If both Bacon and Descartes, with their competing visions of knowledge-making, can adopt the posture of separation and independence afforded by the rhetoric of solitude, clearly Milton's use of it does not mean that he endorsed a singular epistemology. In the early works I will turn to now, the poet does not much use the word "knowledge" or even "truth." Yet he is everywhere concerned with the conditions of knowing—that is, of learning, of acquiring knowledge. What we find is that even earlier in Milton's career, when he more readily assumes a solitary disposition, his focus is in fact on "conversation," a dynamic word which could refer to "interchange of thoughts and words" (*OED* 7), but which most commonly referred to the exact opposite of solitude: shared presence, "living together" (*OED* 1 and 2)—even "sexual intercourse or intimacy" (*OED* 3).[44] No doubt Milton depends on this ambiguity when he advocates for "the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evill of solitary life" in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (*CPW* 2: 235). There, it is clear that intellectual company is the *sine qua non* of marital happiness. It is important, however, that conversation from the beginning is also the fundamental place of knowledge for Milton. Learning is the result of heightened presence, not absence—of people and ideas in proximity rather than at a remove. Each time he combines the discourses of conversation and solitude, then, he brings together two putative opposites, reveling in a paradox he finds productive.

[44] Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 57, recognizes conversation as "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." See also James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 205, and John Leonard, *The Value of Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 51–54.

It could seem arbitrary to fixate on words like "conversation" and "solitude" in this manner, were it not that Milton's thought is frequently organized around key words and ideas (as promoted by the practice of keeping a commonplace book),[45] or that any thoughtful writer touching these subjects must have been aware of their nuance and baggage, as previously suggested. We can be sure that Milton in particular was throughout his life attuned to the sprawling and slippery lexicon of aloneness, with "solitude," "solitariness," "loneliness," "retirement," and certainly "leisure" (Latin *otium*) all registering different attitudes and subjective experiences. So in one moment of *Paradise Lost* Adam can admit—not especially convincingly—that "solitude sometimes is best society," before howling later in Book 9, "Oh might I here / In solitude live savage" (*PL* 9.249; 9.1084–85). Milton is also one of the first English poets known to use the adjective *lonely*. The *OED*'s first record of the word is in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (ca. 1608), but Milton wields it as early as "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" ("the lonely mountains," line 181) and as late as *Paradise Lost* 11.290–91: "Thy going is not lonely, with thee goes / Thy husband."[46] The transition implied by these two examples, from a relatively neutral statement of geographical barrenness to the implied subjectivity of "lonely" as experienced solitude, shows the semantic freight Milton musters with such dexterity, and his increasing anxiety about being alone.

The polemical context of solitude further suggests that the poet's evocation of rhetoric for or against it is strategic. Edward Jones finds that Milton's recollection of the Horton period in the *Second Defence* is carefully crafted to ward off the negative connotations of leisure (*otium*), frequently associated with solitude. This is certainly the case, and in fact Milton's sensitivity to the issue begins earlier, if remarks about his own *otium* are any guide. As Brian Vickers argues in his comprehensive

[45] Paul Hammond's helpful book, *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), rests on the conviction that such an approach is profitable. Among those terms are "alone" and "knowledge and wisdom."
[46] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "lonely," accessed May 1, 2019.

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*."[47] Milton uses that pejorative meaning in "Ad Joannem Rousium," where he bemoans the *degener otium* (corrupt sloth) the English have had to atone for (28). In other poetic instances he always qualifies it with a salutary adjective, as if anticipating objections: *otia grata* ("Elegia Prima" 18); *iucunda… otia* ("Ad Patrem" 75); *beatum… otium aeternum* ("Ad Salsillum" 34). In so doing, Milton anticipates and alleviates the default posture of suspicion.

The dynamic holds for Milton's self-representations as solitary genius long before the antiprelatical tracts, in which his supposed solitariness is both justified and qualified: justified because it designates a mental space dedicated to inspiration and learning, and qualified because it turns out that this solitude is no solitude at all, but rather an opportunity for conversation. His July 1628 letter to Alexander Gill is a case in point. Milton's praise of his correspondent is conventional enough as part of the classical epistle, but he strikingly frames his own situation as one of intellectual aloneness in the absence of his friend:

> whenever I remember your almost constant conversations [*assidua pene colloquia*] with me (which even in Athens itself, nay in the very Academy, I long for and need), I think immediately, not without sorry, of how much benefit my absence has cheated me—me who never left you without a visible increase and growth of knowledge, quite as if I had been to some market of learning. [….] And so, finding almost no intellectual companion here, I

[47] Jones, "Kedermister," 32; Vickers, "Ambivalence of Otium," 144. The leisure represented by the word is frequently regarded as a vice in Roman writings. Those who seem to have advocated for 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, "Ambivalence of Otium," 19). 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.

> should longingly look straight to London, did I not consider retiring into a deeply literary leisure [*in otium alte literarium recedere cogitarem*] during this summer vacation and hiding as it were in the cloisters of the Muses. (*CPW* 1:314)

Critics who take this as evidence of Milton's reclusiveness must note that his first choice for improved knowledge is learned company, and learned talk in particular. The language of intellectual exchange—*emporium quoddam Eruditionis*—will reappear in *Reason of Church-Government*. Learned retreat is then an alternative; being already alone, and lacking already conversation, it makes sense for him to enter the kind of aloneness which at least may provide him the company of the muses. According to this logic, his literary *otium* is only partially self-imposed, and only partially solitary.

Indeed, for all the talk of his supposed reclusiveness, Milton never seems capable of imagining utter solitude. Shortly after the summer of 1631, when he likely wrote "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," Milton expands upon the value of literary leisure in *Prolusion 7* (ca. 1631), a school exercise arguing for the superiority of learning over ignorance. Yet even this most sanguine portrayal of a youthful and jubilant solitude is couched in the language of conversation and community. In the speech, Milton discusses the methods, individual and social, through which that learning is best acquired, beginning 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."[48] He takes experience for his guide in a passage which seems to echo the idealized retreat in the letter to Gill:

> 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

[48] Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, 45.

> and woodland solitudes, felt that I had enjoyed a season of growth in a life of seclusion. (*CPW* 1: 289)

The *Complete Prose Works* translation here embellishes the great favour (*summam... gratiam*) Milton boasts he has enjoyed from the Muses, perhaps encouraged by the erotic diction of "secrets" and "delight"; "intercourse" seems rather less passive than the cloistered hiding of the letter to Gill. Yet other examples of solitary inspiration in *Prolusion 7* also emphasize active sociability. He thus takes "a cultured and liberal leisure… 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" (*CPW* 1:289). But of course, such pleasurable and productive solitude is no sooner identified than it is qualified in these instances. Hesiod in his holy sleep becomes a great poet by virtue of his own intercourse with the Muses in Helicon; Prometheus' withdrawal is guided by Mercury; and the shepherd Endymion is nightly visited by the moon goddess Diana, just as Milton will later claim to be visited "nightly" by his Muse Urania, again in solitude (*PL* 7.28–29). These men are all alone, yet not alone, and this paradox of conversational solitude is a key source of knowledge—poetic, prophetic, philosophical.

Such sentiments illustrate an adage whose currency Cowley acknowledges later in the century: "*Nunquam minus solus, quam cum solus*, is now become a very vulgar saying."[49] Milton's early writings include but go beyond the traditional belief that solitude provides an opportunity to dwell with one's own thoughts, so that solitude is its own companionship. A few examples can be found before the mid-century vogue for retirement. In Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (all versions), Pyrocles, disguised as an Amazonian warrior named Zelmane, rebuffs Basilius's concern for "her" solitary

[49] Cowley, *Poetry & Prose*, 77, citing Cicero citing Scipio: "never less alone than when alone."

state: "They are never alone… that are accompanied with noble thoughts."[50] John Earle's *Microcosmographie* (1628) includes a sketch of a "Contemplative Man" who does not seek company, since he "finds discourse enough with himself, and his own thoughts are his excellent playfellows."[51] Probably the closest to Milton is William Drummond's 1623 sonnet "The Praise of a Solitarie Life," itself a contrast with Ben Jonson's more sociable "The Praises of a Country Life": "Thrice happy he, who by some shadie Grove, / Farre from the clamorous World, doth live his owne, / Though *solitarie*, who is not alone, / But doth *converse* with that Eternall Love" (1-4, emphasis added).[52] Whatever "that eternall love" may be, such a man is at the beatific nexus of the Virgilian happy man: solitary, in a natural landscape, and philosophically inclined towards contemplation and self-knowledge.

Milton is at times plainly attracted to this vision of life; such a happy man is Il Penseroso, who seeks "the spirit of Plato to unfold / What worlds, or what vast regions hold / The immortal mind" ("IP" 89-91). Yet Milton tends to conceive of even intellectual solitude socially: not only self-discourse, as with Earle's Contemplative Man and his thoughts, but genuine conversation in the sense of "consorting or having dealings with others" (*OED* 2). The companion poems themselves resist neat categorization into sociable or solitary, blissful ignorance or serious erudition, and

---

[50] Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: The Old Arcadia (First Edition)*, ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 35. This may serve as a comic antecedent to Milton's Lady, a "lonely traveller" in earnest who is also singing in the woods before being interrupted by an unwanted guest (*A Mask*, 199). Basilius's skeptical response is typically Elizabethan: "But those thoughts… canot in this your lonelines neither warrant you from suspition in others, nor defend you from melancholy in your selfe." When Musidorus and Pyrocles explicitly debate the issue, Pyrocles says, "my solitariness perchance is the nurse of these contemplations" (14–15), perhaps the most immediate antecedent to the Elder Brother's claim that "Wisdom's self / Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude, / Where with her best nurse Contemplation / She plumes her feathers" (*A Mask* 374–77).
[51] John Earle, *Microcosmography: Or, a Piece of the World Discovered in Essays and Characters*, ed. Harold Osborne (London: University Tutorial Press, 1933), 72.
[52] William Drummond, *Drummond of Hawthornden: Poems and Prose*, ed. Robert H. Macdonald (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976).

contemplation and conversation. Accordingly, it is surprising to find Samuel Johnson, seconded by Don Cameron Allen, claiming that "[b]oth Mirth and Melancholy are solitary, silent inhabitants of the breast that neither receive nor transmit communication," and that "no mention is therefore made of a philosophical friend, or pleasant companion."[53] This is, as Dr. Johnson might say, demonstrably false. Mirth, a middle child with "two sister Graces more," has besides her sisters "Jest and youthful Jollity" and "the mountain nymph, sweet Liberty," with whom L'Allegro means to form a ménage-à-trois ("L'A" 15, 26, 36). Even Melancholy, supposed paragon of solitude and wellspring of knowledge, joins "Peace, and Quiet, / Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet" in companionship with "the cherub Contemplation" ("IP" 45-46, 54). As in *Prolusion 7*, the discourse of solitude is qualified by increasingly crowded company. The allegory also reinforces the paradoxes we have come to expect in this domain. Milton's invented motherhood of Melancholy makes her the daughter of Vesta and Vesta's father, "solitary Saturn," so that, as Casey Finch and Peter Bowen note, an incestuous union is the ironic, "originary moment of the goddess of solitude."[54] Still, the poet avoids the determinism of total recursion. 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. Il Penseroso's muse is thus an only child and yet her own half-sister; she is alone, yet not alone, especially when joined by her friends and her new devotee.

I cited earlier Margaret Cavendish's description of herself as "addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than

[53] Woodhouse and Bush, *Variorum Commentary: Minor English Poems*, 242.
[54] Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, "The Solitary Companionship of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*," *Milton Studies* 26 (1990): 7.

mirth." Milton, who has otherwise been justly accused of unpacking his heart like a whore,[55] simply refuses to delineate himself in this binary fashion. Cavendish's choice of words is instructive. She not only alludes to the companion poems, but anticipates Satan's claim in *Paradise Regained* that Jesus was from his childhood "*addicted more* / *To contemplation* and profound dispute" (4.213–14; emphasis added). Yet even in Satan's attempted pigeonholing of Jesus as a hermit, Milton does not disassociate contemplation from conversation—in this case, the theological discussions that the boy Jesus had with the rabbis of the synagogue (4.215–21; cf. Luke 2:41–50). Readers of "Il Penseroso" and *A Mask* will know to expect this "contemplation *and*," since in both poems Contemplation is allegorized as part of a broader process of knowledge: in the former, lifting up the "fiery-wheeled throne" of prophecy for "retired Leisure," Melancholy, and her crew (49–54); in the latter, nursing "Wisdom's self" with "sweet retired solitude" (375–80). There's no need to deny the plain tenor of these extended metaphors—solitude constitutes a psychological space free of distraction where specialized understanding may be formed—but it would seem rather crude to ignore what its crowded vehicle says about how Milton believes understanding takes place.

Prolusion 7 itself progresses from a discussion of the pleasures of Neoplatonic contemplation (*CPW* 1:291) to a discussion of the necessity and pleasure of conversation. "But the chief part of human happiness," Milton declares, "is derived from the society of one's fellows and the formation of friendships" (1:295). The phrase marks a surprising turn if one reads the treatise as a prescription for solitary study. If, however, we understand his epistemology as fundamentally concerned with conversation, the shift is only one of audience. That is indeed how Milton frames the scenario: a scholar may be socially awkward because practice has made it easier for him "to converse with gods than with men" (*Deos alloqui quam homines*; 1:295). In admitting this stereotype of the melancholy

[55] Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self Representation and Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), ix.

man, he would seem to pit learnedness against sociability. After some initial defensiveness, though, Milton speaks earnestly and movingly when imagining "those conversations of learned and wise men [*illis doctorum & gravissimorum hominum colloquiis*], such as those 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). As an orator he must choose a well-known example, but it cannot be coincidence that he moves from indulging platonic philosophy, itself insular, to the social conditions of its creation and expression. Il Penseroso is content to "Be seen" by an unnamed spectator "in some high lonely tower" where he can "unsphere / The spirit of Plato" (86–89); but Milton at length idealizes the actual conversations of Socrates and Phaedrus, proposing them as a model for pleasurable learning. The close of *Prolusion 7* is then a return to Milton's original conversational ideal, and a precursor of his later obsession with "conversation" in the divorce tracts.

From solitude to loneliness: the late 1630s

Sometime before Milton turns to write about marriage, solitude as a site of conversational knowledge ceases to be so attractive—despite or because of the poet's relative seclusion after his university years. It seems to me that personal factors contribute to his shifting perspective. Glossing the above passage on the delightful talks held under Socrates' plane tree, the *Complete Prose Works* editors remark that "the reader inevitably thinks of the friendship between Milton and Charles Diodati" (1:295*n*). Rightly so: the poet's earliest and best friend held many qualities of the ideal conversation partner. A promising scholar in his own right, the playful and accomplished Diodati provided Milton with a character contrast and a formidable reference point, as "Elegia Sexta" shows. The nature of the relationship we know only from their epistolary correspondence, John often writing in Latin and Charles in Greek, and from the poems Milton dedicated to his friend. Thomas Luxon is certainly right to remind us that this was a friendship performed and modeled after classical

friendship doctrine, and interrupted by distance. It does not follow, however, that "this was a friendship not so much enjoyed as performed on paper."[56] Put aside for a moment Milton's own rejection of such a stance in the final extant letter to Diodati ("I do not wish true friendship to be weighed by Letters and Salutations" [1:326]); in some sense, the friendship was always performed on paper—was always, that is, a literary one. A central function of Milton's and Diodati's early correspondence appears to be to share poetry for critique. The "Nativity Ode" was one such piece, and probably also some of the Italian sonnets were written with Diodati in mind.[57] More to the point, the binary of a friendship enjoyed and a friendship performed is unnecessary, not least because ritual performance (of character types, of heavy-handed literary and historical allusion) serve to promote the pleasure and intimacy in this friendship, as Cedric C. Brown points out.[58] None of their correspondence fails to indulge this youthful jollity—the quips and cranks and wanton wiles, nods and becks and wreathed smiles written for a knowing reader.

Learned and charitable, Charles provided that fit audience though few Milton yearned for in later life. But even the written correspondence with Diodati indicates a preference for "conversation" as shared presence, especially in the final two letters of 1637. In Milton's university years Diodati expressed a fairly vehement desire to spend time together in person: "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). Milton is that "noble soul skilled in conversation" which Diodati says he lacks in the country; having everything else desirable, he wants "to add to these a good

---

[56] Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 82.
[57] Cedric C. Brown, *Friendship and its Discourses in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 73–74.
[58] Ibid., 70–73. Stylized discourse and form need not take away from the warmth of their relation, but rather act as "something that promotes rather than obstructs intimacy" (Ronald A. Sharp, *Friendship and Literature: Spirit and Form* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986], 9).

companion, learned and initiate" (1:337). Distance probably made such exchange difficult after graduation. What we know of Diodati's life suggests that he was hard to reach in the 1630s; he moved to Geneva for about a year to study theology, but then decided instead to shadow his father's itinerant medical practice, appearing to take up his own practice only the year before he died.[59] By that time it is Milton who yearns for better contact—not just in writing, but in person: "what I really complain of is that you, although you promised that you would visit us whenever you left the city, did not keep your promises" (1:324). Like a stilted lover, he plays up his jealousy, asking sarcastically whether in the north there are "any fairly learned people [*erudituli*; lit. little-learned-people] with whom you can associate pleasantly and with whom you can talk, as we have been used to talking?" (1:324). There must not have been enough of that, since sincerity closes out the letter, betraying now some desperation: "Would that you could be as much my rustic neighbor as you are my urban one… I wish I could say more, both about myself and about my studies, but I should prefer to do it in person" (1:324). Further conversation is almost obsessively the subject of their epistolary conversation, to the curious end that we rarely learn what Milton or Diodati are thinking. Reading between the lines, though, it is possible to see that by 1637, John protests absence a little more strongly, leading Brown to wonder whether "Milton's need for Diodati's friendship may have been stronger than Diodati's need for Milton's."[60]

The timeline fits. Idealizing solitude was easy enough while Milton stayed in the cramped quarters of Christ's, Cambridge, where a boom in enrolment had made college living intolerably crowded.[61] After that, the proximity of Hammersmith permitted access to London's intellectual

---

[59] Gordon Campbell, "Diodati, Charles (1609/10–1638), friend of John Milton," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7679.
[60] Brown, *Friendship and its Discourses*, 77.
[61] Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.

circles. His 1636 move to Horton, however, obliged him to leave behind his network of friends, "from university poets and academics and from Alexander Gil and perhaps others still living in the city."[62] A heavy workload may have distracted him for some time, but a rural year spent with family in 1637 appears to have taken its toll on the twenty-nine-year-old. His mother was sick and his father aging. He learned in August that former classmate Edward King had drowned—a reminder that the preparatory work he was undertaking might be all in vain if he too is dead ere his prime (no small fear, given plague flares), and was costing him time spent with friends, besides. It is in this context that Milton writes to Diodati, in the final letter we have between them, what he is 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 [*obcscure, & anguste sum*]. (*CPW* 1:327)

More literally, Milton wants to move back to the city so that he can again live among a number of companions (*inter aliquot sodales*).[63] This is a fairly drastic change for the author of *Prolusion 7*. Shady walks notwithstanding, he now appears to be perfectly content with the prospect of what must have been a frenzied urban dwelling in central London. There is no lively criticism of the city noise, as in *Ad Patrem*, nor any gratitude for the opportunity to be led "into this deep seclusion… to walk by Phoebus' side, happy to be his companion, amidst the leisurely delights of the Aonian spring" (74–76). The solitary conversation of the god of poetry indeed now seems insufficiently pleasing.

---

[62] Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134.

[63] This proposed change would not mean he would stop his studies. Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 149, note that many young men staying at the Inns of Court undertook such independent education in subjects other than law.

A year after King's death, and not even a year after the 1637 letters conveying a strong desire for company, the death of Charles Diodati in August 1638 completes the movement from Milton's positive experience of qualified solitude to that of horrified loneliness. The Argument of *Epitaphium Damonis* tells plainly the focus of the poem: "he laments himself and his loneliness in this poem [*suamque solitudinem hoc carmine deplorat*]."[64] 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." The uncouth swain bewails his friend, but Thyrsis laments loneliness itself. Indeed, there is no mention in *Lycidas* of "solitude," "loneliness," or even "alone"; nor is he alone in his grief in that poem.[65] In the *Epitaph*, however, the crushing blow of Damon's loss affects only Thyrsis, as shepherds and nymphs continue their idyllic songs, perplexed and unaware of the calamity (69–91). This sense of utter disconnection is the product of loss of companionship and conversation, represented in the poem by frustrated communication and mute audiences, with only the mute reader overhearing them all. Mopsus and the curious nymphs speak right past the "deaf" Thyrsis, asking him questions he does not answer (73–77; 82–84). In turn, Thyrsis talks to a dead Damon who never can answer, and he repeats seventeen times the same refrain to his hungry lambs. The shepherd's one act of defiance is to mourn aloud his friend, but he fears the proverbial loss of voice if the wolf sees him first (27). And it is no final solution, in any case. Say Damon will not go unwept; "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). "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* [*dulcibus alloquiis*]?" (43; 45–47, emphasis added).

---

[64] The translation here is from John Milton, *The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski and Estelle Haan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[65] D.C. Dorian, *The English Diodatis* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1950), 177–78 notes that Lycidas at least has fellow mourners.

Such a loss of fit conversation colours every experience, so that delightful things are no longer pleasing to him. The same *solitudo* of *Prolusion 7* has become the "loneliness" of the *Epitaph*'s argument. Thyrsis remembers the charming recitations of the dewy moon, once "happy, though in solitude" (*tum laet[us]…dum solus*; 140–41). The reader perhaps remembers Endymion's nightly meetings with the moon. Yet the same imagery, metaphors, and conditions in this poem evoke an opposite reaction. When Thyrsis laments how "in solitude [*solus*] I wander now through fields, in solitude [*solus*] 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 much of his earlier poetry, including "Il Penseroso." 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* 77–79). But, like "the Bear" and Cassiopeia, that star has always been there, and Il Penseroso was able to find a surer pleasure under it than the sociable L'Allegro or the shepherds he observes ("IP" 87; 19–21). Milton can no longer inhabit that mindspace. Perhaps it never existed. The contemplative man's ideal, it seems, is exactly that: an ideal increasingly unsustainable with "the perpetual sense of loss" of a bereft companion and suitable conversation partner (*ED* 111). The pleasure is gone, the conversation gone, and so too a favourite site of philosophical and poetic knowledge.[66]

Milton ends the poem with a hopeful, if affected, vision of Damon's "immortal marriage rites" in which the pleasures enjoyed temporarily by the two men are replaced by the eternal and ecstatic song and dance of heaven (217–19). As with Philip Sidney's Astrophil, however, Milton's desire seems to cry out for food. He has been frustrated so far. The Argument says that the poet

[66] The situation is repeated with Adam, who can "taste / No pleasure, though in pleasure, solitary" (*PL* 8.401–2).

"*animi causâ profectus peregrè*": he traveled abroad for his pleasure, with a pun also on "to develop his mind."[67] Mention of his new Italian friends and accomplishments in the *Epitaph* suggests this venture was not truly a failure, but the misfortune of losing his closest intellectual companion while seeking additional ones must have been particularly distressing. Scholars may debate to what extent he truly befriended Diodati or the Italians Dati and Francini—Luxon objects that Charles and John did not ever literally share a flock or lie concealed while a farmer snores[68]—but that is almost beside the point, because for Milton this friendship was the one that counted. *Pace* Raphael, the sociable spirit sent on God's orders to spend the day with Adam, the poet does not ever again imagine male homosocial bonds in an excited, idealized way. It does not then seem to me a coincidence that over the following years Milton turned his attention away from both male friendship and solitude as sources of knowledge. Instead, conversation as stimulating intellectual activity, as presence, as pleasure, will eventually be displaced into earthly marriage, which can more truly anticipate the ecstatic rites Milton hopes Diodati is enjoying without him.

Knowledge as pleasure in the divorce tracts

It is unnecessary to spend much time demonstrating this displacement except to examine a suggestive corollary: if Milton associates the acquisition of knowledge with conversation, and conversation with marriage, does it follow that he expects marriage to be intellectually productive? Relatedly, if by the 1640s solitude is hardly tenable as site of conversation, in what capacity can it yield knowledge? Such questions hinge, once again, on the meanings and associations of "conversation," especially in the divorce tracts. This much was recognized even by the anonymous

[67] Stella P. Revard's Blackwell edition translates it thus; John Carey's Longman and Lewalski and Haan's Oxford editions give the traditional rendering.
[68] Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 86.

responder who penned *An Answer to a Book, Intituled, The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*.[69] He calls out Milton for equivocation: "if you would once tell what you mean by conversation," readers would be able to assess the tract's claim that it is the necessary condition for marriage.[70] John Leonard agrees; "*The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* never elaborates on 'conversation'. Does Milton want small talk, a real intellectual exchange, or both?"[71] They are of course right about his silence. Having traced the poet's usage of the term to this point, however, we are strongly positioned to evaluate its usage in the tract.

The first thing to note is there is no room in the divorce tracts for a paradoxically solitary conversation that is intellectually productive, as there was in the early 1630s. To read *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is to learn at once that its author despises what he now calls "our lonelines," "the evil of solitary life," "the loneliest single life," and "an unkindly solitarines" (2:229; 235; 246; 247). The word "loneliness" and its variants appear more than a dozen times in the treatise, and "solitariness" almost as often, but never more forcefully than when he describes an unfit marriage, which must prove "a perpetuall nullity of love and contentment, a *solitude*, a dead vacation of all acceptable *conversation*" (2:331, emphasis added). The only appearance of the word in the second edition here explicitly contrasts solitude with conversation, associating it not with presence (as before), but absence: "nullity," "vacation."[72] So important is this to Milton that he distends the biblical text to fit his emotional convictions. First he pushes the roots of institution of marriage

---

[69] *An Answer*… is reproduced in Sarah J. Van den Berg and W. Scott Howard, eds., *The Divorce Tracts of John Milton: Texts and Contexts* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010).
[70] Ibid., 417.
[71] Leonard, *The Value of Milton*, 51.
[72] The first edition of August 1643 has "solitude" in three additional places where the second edition of November 1644 has "solitarines." At the very least this proves that Milton is picking his words carefully on this topic, as argued earlier. The substitution may suggest an opening for a positive "solitude" (allowing "solitariness" to take the brunt of his anger), or else the author may simply want to avoid the political valence the word held in the 1640s.

from Gen. 2:24 (cited by Christ) back to Gen. 2:18 ("It is not good that the man should be alone"). Then he refocuses the issue from the man's perspective: it is not good (*for the man!*) that the man should be alone. Last and most importantly, he transposes the external, objective condition of solitude (being alone) to the internal, subjective experience of solitariness ("loneliness"). These specifications made, he is free to suggest that the solution to the problem is "a meet and happy conversation," a "prevention of lonelinesse to the mind and spirit of man" (2:246).

Milton chooses his words very carefully, even if he allows ambiguity. Leonard observes that "the word [conversation] runs like a refrain through Milton's divorce pamphlets, usually accompanied by a modifier like 'cheerful', 'pleasing', or 'intimate'."[73] True. But it is accompanied by the twin harmonies of pleasure and intellect, modified also by words like 'apt' and 'understanding.' In the sentence just cited, a meet and happy conversation prevents loneliness to the mind *and* spirit of man—avoiding mental aloneness as well as emotional. Milton's anonymous respondent is understandably perplexed by his opponent's vision of marriage. Are we to "count no woman to due conversation accessible… except she can speak Hebrew, Greek, Latine, & French, and dispute against the Canon law as well as you?"[74] The treatise is indeed ruthless in setting a minimum standard, disparaging unfit partners as "an image of earth and fleam" (2:254). And it is graphic in its description of unconversing sex, pushing the logic of vacuity and absence to its extremity as he imagines what is in effect a horror of necrophilia, "two carkasses chain'd unnaturally together; or as may happ'n, a living soule bound to a dead corps" (2:326). Milton does not reject carnal knowledge *per se*, but outside the context of other kinds of pleasurable knowledge, it cannot but be repulsive: this "fleshly accustoming without the souls union and commixture of intellectual delight… is rather a soiling then a fulfilling of mariage-rites" (*CPW* 2:339).

---

[73] Leonard, *The Value of Milton*, 51.
[74] *An Answer*, in *The Divorce Tracts*, 418.

We may understand Milton's argument better here if we resist the urge to read him suspiciously. Many critics have followed the Answerer in taking the very personal tone of the tract—"Milton himself in his shame and isolation stands naked before us in the very phrases he thought he had so carefully chosen to hide behind"[75]—and assuming that he is arguing in bad faith, to justify the ways of Milton to man. This assumption dissipates when we consider the sheer impracticality of the endeavour. Gregory Chaplin notes that Milton's decision to argue for divorce premised on unfit conversation is far from strategic, given the ready and easy alternative (already common in Protestant Europe) of arguing for divorce on the grounds of desertion.[76] The author instead frames his case as an advancement of learning, or rather a recovery of knowledge: "restord to the good of both sexes… wherein also many places of Scripture, have recover'd their long-lost meaning," as the 1643 title page declares. What is essentially new is Milton's breathtaking elevation of conversation within marriage, and concomitantly the role of the wife as "an intimate and speaking help, a ready and reviving associate in marriage" (2:251). He wants a marriage in which union is physical, spiritual, and intellectual, and "conversation" to match. Is it so difficult to believe that Milton thought wives capable of it?

For a society which expected "intellectual delight" to take place chiefly among men, this was indeed a strange point, and new. Most writers, influenced by the classical friendship tradition, simply cannot imagine a relationship that combines the intellectual and sexual senses of conversation. Michel de Montaigne casually considers and 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

[75] Annabel Patterson, "Milton, Marriage, Divorce," in *A New Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 312.
[76] Gregory Chaplin, "'One Flesh, One Heart, One Soul': Renaissance Friendship and Miltonic Marriage," *Modern Philology* 99, no. 2 (2001): 271.

> 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")[77]

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, unlike classical male friendship, 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; he means not merely pleasurable sex or intellectual discourse, but both united.

The real mistake of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is to elevate one at the expense of the other, and to draw such a sharp rhetorical division between the two when his logic demands otherwise. Leonard is a sympathetic and careful reader: say "[Milton] wants a complete conversation: mind, soul, and body. That wish is good, but in his anxiety to forestall the charge of libertinism, he affects a lofty disdain for sex and so excites suspicion where he meant to allay it. Then he brings in brothels and neighbours' beds (what demon possessed him to do that?) and seems to confirm his adversary's suspicions."[78] Actually, it is no demon but Milton's own beliefs and desires working against his rhetoric. The tract sometimes implies that physical desire and intellectual desire are utterly separate things. The one you can put off with labour, exercise, and diet. The other "more inbred desire of joyning to it self in conjugall fellowship a fit conversing soul (which desire is properly call'd

---

[77] Montaigne, *Essayes*, 147.
[78] Leonard, *The Value of Milton*, 54.

love) *is stronger then death*, as the Spouse of Christ thought, *many waters cannot quench it, neither can the flouds drown it*" (2:251). Yet, given the naked eroticism of Song of Solomon, even this example strangely resists the distinction between material and spiritual. The more fundamental assumption of the treatise is that physical and intellectual desire ought to be united, so his apparent division in this case is simply an inconsistency. When in a moment of exasperation Milton imagines a conversation-starved husband going to his neighbour's bed, he is in fact being consistent again—the natural state of things is for the one kind of conversation to lead to the other, and for the suppression of one pleasure to find an outlet elsewhere. Milton's convictions are simply reasserting themselves.

Yet a postulation of the unstoppable current of desire and ideas still leaves open the scenario in which a woman provides merely a delightful break. We return then to the question of whether conversation with wives is meant to be small-talk or serious inquiry. *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*'s emphasis on understanding and its exasperation regarding "a minde to all other due conversation inacessible" suggests the latter, but Milton runs into trouble again in *Tetrachordon* in a passage promoting the benefits of specifically female companionship. Dismissing as a "crabbed opinion" 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," Milton retorts 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? In *DDD* it is a comforting and refreshing conversation, but in *Tetrachordon* Milton adds that it can be rest or "delightfull intermissions" from continuous study (2:597). Another man might conceivably provide such a break, but "most unlike resemblance cannot but please best and be pleas'd in the aptitude of that variety." Difference, not sameness, is the golden standard.[79]

[79] For the implications of this argument in *Paradise Lost*, see Koester, "Solitude and Difference," esp. 157–58. I discuss the epistemological relevance of difference in the next chapter.

This answer understandably rubs some critics the wrong way. For Luxon, Milton's response only confirms the 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."[80] This seems a damning indictment at first, but context suggests otherwise. Why would Milton need to make the argument that a woman is a fit conversation partner when he has in fact already been arguing that a woman is the ideal conversation partner? 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). 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.

More than just the conviction that women are up to the task, Milton's divorce tracts rely on the epistemological conviction that intellect and pleasure are biconditional: intellect if-and-only-if pleasure, pleasure if-and-only-if intellect, summed up in that term "intellectual delight." We saw this already in *Epitaphium Damonis* and will see it again in Adam's debate with God in *Paradise Lost*, Book 8. An analogue appears in the English word *knowledge*, which unlike Latin *scientia* refers to sexual

[80] Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 110.

intercourse as well as understood statement of fact; "Adam knew his wife" (Gen. 4:1). Indeed, even in the antiprelatical tracts preceding *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* Milton placed an increasing and unusual emphasis on enjoyment as proof of knowledge. For example, *Of Reformation* strikes at Catholicism from the usual angles, but more uniquely, it criticizes papist doctrine for its origin in fear:

> the superstitious man by his own good will is an Atheist; but being scarr'd from thence by the pangs, and gripes of a boyling conscience, all in a pudder shuffles up to himselfe such a *God*, and such a *worship* as is most agreeable to remedy his feare, which feare of his, as also is his hope, fixt onely upon the *Flesh*, renders likewise the whole faculty of his apprehension, carnall (1:522).

Those used to distinguishing between emotion and reason might be surprised to find Milton aware of their interdependence. The frightened man comes to false knowledge of God precisely because he is frightened. Fear, as opposed to joy, creates problems for his understanding or "apprehension"— a nice pun. Worse still, when such people read scripture, they do so "through their own guiltinesse with a Servile feare," so that "*Gods* behests [are] by them not understood, nor worthily receav'd." This principle obliquely anticipates what critics, after Paul Ricoeur, have taken to calling the hermeneutics of suspicion.[81] By contrast, the mark of true knowledge is the pleasure of its production and the joy of its effects. Milton recounts proudly "how the bright and blissful *Reformation*" sparked a renewal of knowledge; only then were "the *Schooles* opened, [and] *Divine* and *Humane Learning* rak't out of the *embers* of *forgotten Tongues*" (1:524–25). In the very next sentence, the big-picture union of delight and knowledge is personalized to give an account of the treatise's origin:

[81] This connection might itself be suspicious, were it not that Milton in *DDD* expounds his hermeneutics of charity: "the way to get a sure undoubted knowledge of things is to hold that for truth which accords most with charity" (2:340).

"The pleasing pursuit of these thoughts hath oft-times led mee into a serious question and debatement..." Pleasing thoughts lead to serious questions, which are nonetheless to be enjoyed as part of the agreeable labour that constitutes acceptable knowledge-making.

Milton had framed the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* just so. His preoccupation with conversation extends beyond subject matter; he seems eager, even desperate, to actually have a conversation about divorce *with* someone. While still trying to promote an image of his originality (he is the "sole advocate of a discountenanced truth"), Milton responds to previous writers on marriage—at one point citing entire paragraphs—showing where they have found truth and where they fall still short of it.[82] The treatise itself is evidence that he views even this singular document as existing within a broader communication: "I shall conceave it nothing above my duty either for the difficulty or the censure that may passe thereon, to communicate such thoughts as I also have had, and do offer them now in this generall labour of reformation" (2:239). These are not the words of a solitary Milton who abjures the thoughts of others—who argues at times even that contrariety of tempers and ideas form the basis for undiscovered knowledge, as we will see in *Reason of Church Government* and *Areopagitica*. Instead, the second edition of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* reveals a Milton palpably upset that no one has taken up his offer of laborious and pleasurable discussion—a public manifestation of the domestic deficiency he decries so poignantly in the work. As in his early married life, he has been left talking to himself.

[82] See esp. *CPW* 2:344: "But I shall first recite what hath bin already yielded by others in favour of this opinion." Milton deigns to quote from them at length, despite complaining about people who cite too much. Among his interlocuters are moderns like Perkins, Grotius, Rivetus, Kimchi and Ben Gerson, and Selden; ancients include Jerome and Origen.

"The Sad Friends of Truth": Knowledge and Metaphor in Milton's Early Prose

In the early 1640s Milton was not, like René Descartes, publishing metaphysical treatises concerned with the origins and nature of knowledge. Yet Milton's incipient epistemology, grounded in more than a decade of broad study and sprouting in the fertile religious and political controversies of the day, takes discernible shape in the prose works of his "left hand" (*CPW* 1:808). Perhaps because these controversies boiled down to authority—who gets to say what is true, and why—it is also in the early 1640s that Milton most explicitly writes of knowledge. In fact, the year 1644 marks an inflection point of his epistemological thought; even besides *Areopagitica*, published in November, major revisions in the second edition of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in February and the publication of *Of Education* in June reveal a writer preoccupied with the pursuit of "a diffuse and various knowledge of divine and human things" (2:230). The writings of this period outline the necessity of difference to knowledge, its fundamentally transitive nature, and its ethical quality—all key tenets of Miltonic epistemology. These in turn promote effectively communal ways of knowing over and against singular, monopolizing claims to understanding. The culmination of this account is *Areopagitica*'s ardent vision of a nation of prophets and writers "unite[d] into one generall and brotherly search after truth" (2:554). The collaborative endeavour Milton imagines in the treatise, far from the naïve indiscretion of a fundamentally individualistic thinker, is the natural consequence of his movement away from the lionized solitude and self-sufficiency described in the previous chapter.

Twenty-first century scholarship appears more ready to grant Milton's earnestness in this regard. Stephen B. Dobranski, considering political context alongside the author's principled case against licensing, advises that "if we are looking for consistency in Milton's words and deeds, it may lie not in an idealized notion of a free press but in an ongoing commitment to the social process of pursuing knowledge that he describes in *Areopagitica*." Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler indeed finds a nascent critical tradition presenting "a Milton for whom the whole enterprise of knowledge-making

was a collaborative process."[1] These more recent accounts have the advantage of historicity—our poet was not, as we have seen, living a solitary, poor life, nor would the material realities of London's printing trade encourage such a life. Yet the skepticism of many critics is understandable. Read in isolation, the author's most famous tract admits ambiguity about the nature of truth and who gets to participate in its acquisition—enough so that readers have long wondered whether Milton's argument is one designed merely to support his own contributions to public knowledge.[2] Convenient, they say, that a man who a year earlier had advocated for legalized divorce should want to promote the interests of learned English protestants with potentially controversial opinions; suspicious, too, that this same Mr. John Milton should be found granting government licenses just five years later. But if we look also at his preceding publications, we find that *Areopagitica* is in fact the centrepiece of a sustained consideration on the nature of knowledge. Although Milton's immediate target in the treatise is licensing, the broader argument develops epistemological tropes he had tested earlier on, as well as patterns of thought still evident in his late major poetry. The grand gestures about the vitality and dynamism of truth are thus more than political expediency; they are "the pretious life-blood of a master spirit" embalming a confidence in collective epistemology (*CPW* 2:493).

"More shapes then one"

Although Milton's interest in these matters predates the antiprelatical and divorce tracts, evidence for it swells leading up to the publication of *Areopagitica*. Exemplary are the differences between the

---

[1] Stephen B. Dobranski, "Principle and Politics in Milton's *Areopagitica*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 201. Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, "Early Political Prose," in *A New Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 292. See a broader argument in Dobranski, *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[2] For a synopsis of such suspicion, see James Rovira, "Gathering the Scattered Body of Milton's *Areopagitica*," *Renascence* vol. 57, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 87–102.

first edition of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, published August 1643, and the second edition of 1 February 1644. Only the latter includes the address "To the Parlament of England, with the Assembly," an epistle which inaugurates an *annus mirabilis* of epistemological inquiry for the poet. He begins not, as in the first edition, with the preface on the human tendency to inflict suffering upon oneself, but with the great suffering that failure of understanding has wrought. The language of epistemology abounds as Milton decries the instruction of personified Custom, whose

> method is so glib and easie, in some manner like to that vision of *Ezekiel*, rowling up her sudden book of implicit knowledge, for him that will, to take and swallow down at pleasure; which proving but of bad nourishment in the concoction, as it was heedlesse in the devouring, puffs up unhealthily, a certaine big face of pretended learning… that swoln visage of counterfeit knowledge. (*CPW* 2:222–23)

The allusion to the prophet Ezekiel's eating of the scroll (Ezekiel 2:8–3:3) concedes the attractiveness of a contained, convenient, hypostasized knowledge one might pack for lunch. Milton will revisit the concept of commodified truth in *Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost*. Yet the allusion to the apostle Paul's warning that "knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth" (1 Cor. 8:1) insists that such impersonal and objectified knowledge is hollow without love—thereby underlining a connection between ethics and reason that Milton affirms throughout his life. Decades before Raphael's more famous pronouncement that "knowledge is as food" (*PL* 7.126), and in anticipation of *Areopagitica*'s comparison between books and meats (*CPW* 2:512), Milton thus denounces any consumeristic, objectified understanding that involves no real digestion or personal interaction.

The "Allegory" (2:223) grows denser when Custom "accorporat[es] her selfe with error… a blind and Serpentine body without a head," and together "with the numerous and vulgar train of their followers, make it their chiefe designe to envie and cry-down the industry of free reasoning, under the terms of humour, and innovation" (2:224). It is impossible here to ignore an allusion to

Edmund Spenser's Error, a grisly snake monster (herself glutted with books) who enfolds her opponents in falseness: "God helpe the man so wrapt in *Errours* endlesse traine" (*Faerie Queene* I.i.18).[3] Both authors take aim at the received—rather, enforced—wisdom they see stemming from religious custom, but Milton repurposes the image. Spenser's maternal monster spews offspring who ultimately eat her headless corpse. In her place, Milton imagines a maternal Truth with her own endless train of knowledge, rejecting the scenario in which "the womb of teeming Truth were to be clos'd up" (2:224). Knowledge takes labour and *is* labour, a reproductive metaphor that (conceivably out of place in a treatise for divorce), requires more than one individual. Nor is it recognized until others come along and declare truth to be truth—"till Time the Midwife rather then the mother of Truth, have washt and salted the Infant, declar'd her legitimat, and Churcht the father of his young Minerva" (2:225).[4] This frantic pace of mixed metaphors, in which Jupiter himself must be "churched" or purified in prayer, serves to emphasize the dynamism of knowledge: truth is a fertile mother and a newborn daughter; it has a single divine origin, yet it is legitimized in communal human ritual. It cannot be represented by a single metaphor. Even in Milton's style of argument, "Truth… may have more shapes then one" (2:563).

Here as elsewhere, epistemological claims are made figuratively, rarely propositionally. That a poet employs poetic devices in his prose is unsurprising, but Milton's facility with figurative language serves a dual purpose in his discussions of knowledge. First, it enables him to move beyond defining knowledge syllogistically and therefore dichotomously (it is this *or* it is that). Postulates may contradict where metaphors only overlap; the bright countenance of truth is beheld in his prose from one metaphorical perspective, then another, each instance affording some new description of

---

[3] Citation is from Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, rev. 2nd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007).

[4] "The image grotesquely mingles classical myth (the coming forth of Minerva from the brain of Jupiter) with the Anglican service of thanksgiving for women after childbirth," as the *Complete Prose Works* editors explain (2:225*n*).

its qualities. Secondly, a figurative approach invites readers to do the necessary work of understanding in accordance with his active ideal of knowledge. For Milton, the objective veracity of the matter is not more important than how the conclusion is reached: "a man may be a heretick in the truth; and if he beleeve things only because his Pastor sayes so, or the Assembly so determins, without knowing other reason, though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds, becomes his heresie" (2:543). Milton asks his readers to exercise reason in his descriptions of truth itself, thus underscoring the active process of knowing. There is still a place for the Pastor and maybe even for the Assembly, but the very risk of misunderstanding is what allows for anything other than heresy to exist. So too Milton risks being misunderstood when he layers metaphors and images of truth, even as their presence catalyzes truth's transformation into knowledge.

At times, his visual vocabulary supplements or even supplants the more straightforward epistemological claims. Take for example the criticism of Ezekiel's "sudden book of implicit knowledge." Milton appears in this case to be dismissing the medieval ecclesiastical notion of *fides implicita*, wherein belief in religious matters is received in deference to church teaching (*OED* 3a; cf. "implicit faith" in *Areopagitica*, *CPW* 2:543). It is a mechanical "knowledge" which removes the knower from the knowledge; belief is automatic, guaranteed by dependence on authority. It is, in other words, heretical truth. Nevertheless, the criticism is qualified because Milton understands all knowledge to be "implicit" according to the original and literal definition: "entangled, entwined, folded or twisted together" (*OED* 1a, citing *PL* 7.323–24: "the humble shrub / And bush with frizzled hair implicit"). It must be unraveled, just as food needs to be chewed and digested rather than "swallow[ed] down" or "devour[ed]" (2:222).[5] This more conceptual representation of twisty

[5] The poet is curious about edible knowledge also in *Reason of Church Government*: "Yea that mysterious book of Revelation which the great Evangelist was bid to eat, as it had been some eye-brightning electuary of knowledge, and foresight, though it were sweet in his mouth, and in the learning, it was bitter in his belly" (1:803).

knowledge persists beyond *DDD*. When in *Areopagitica* he says that "the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill… that those confused seeds which were impos'd on Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt," Milton is indeed describing implicit knowledge (2:514). Such valuable knowledge requires us to play the role of Psyche's compassionate ants, untangling right from wrong.

The passages again underscore the author's suspicion against "easie" understanding and his fundamental belief that understanding takes work, is labour.[6] To be sure, another author could have made that point more plainly. But that would be to lose the network of metaphors across *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and *Areopagitica* suggesting that knowledge has to do with the judicious mixing and unmixing of ideas—and, accordingly, that plasticity is crucial to knowledge-making. The divorce tract complains of intellectual frigidity as well as marital; "abject and hard'n'd thoughts" and "deafe rigor" (2:339; 2:253) contrast the "compliable mind" of a fit marriage partner (2:327). (Compliable itself suggests "able to be folded," sharing with "implicit" the Latin root *plicare*.) Through allusion Milton also untangles the epistemological subtext of Apuleius's poem. The difficulty of the task reinforces a key dynamic of the original story: Psyche, avatar of curiosity in *The Golden Asse*, can meet Venus's demands only with the help of others.[7] Knowledge is an "incessant labour" (*CPW* 2:541), but with the right company not an impossible one. The choice of helper is significant here. The industrious bee, gathering and digesting to create the honey of new knowledge, was commonly credited with intellectual achievement; the ant, conventionally domestic, was said only to collect. But in Apuleius's story ants perform the sorting (classification, interpretation) that in Milton's recounting

---

[6] This conviction is central to *Paradise Lost*. Part of the poet's critique of our first mother in the Fall narrative is that Satan's words, "replete with guile / Into her heart too easy entrance won" (9.733–34); Eve is mistaken to think that any fruit could have "virtue to make wise" by itself (9.778).

[7] Collaborators include Jupiter's royal eagle, a river, a tower, and then Cupid himself. The god of desire descends to awaken his stupefied lover and helps her complete his mother's challenge in a passage frequently allegorized as the working of Christian grace.

is moral knowledge.[8] The surprising substitution of the monarchic bee with the collaborative ant, termed in *Paradise Lost* the "Pattern of just equality" (7.487), is a symbolic representation of his instinct that everyone can gain in knowledge and know truth, not just learned elites.[9]

The rhetorical stance of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* requires this opening up of knowledge through new contributors and diverse ideas. Milton is making a singular, or at least marginal, argument for divorce that flies in the face of canon law. Strategically, he needs to convince his intended audience of political and religious authorities that a layperson can contribute new knowledge. The treatise thus argues from the Protestant position that knowledge itself must continually be reformed, and that all willing and competent believers have that same privilege and duty "to search continually after truth" (2:226)—not in isolation for the sake of private revelation, but as part of a broader reformation project. So, although Milton warns that "many truths now of reverend esteem and credit, had their birth and beginning once from singular and private thoughts; while the most of men were otherwise possest" (2:241), he also emphasizes the importance of including different kinds of people in the quest:

> men of what liberall profession soever, of eminent spirit and breeding joyn'd with a diffuse and various knowledge of divine and human things… able to shew us the waies of the

---

[8] For the convention, see, e.g., Francis Bacon's *Cogitata et Visa*, in *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon: An Essay on its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts*, trans. Benjamin Farrington (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 97; for a discussion, see G. W. Pigman III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1980): 1–32. Baconian empiricism employed the language of classical rhetoric, calling for invention (finding and collecting relevant facts) and judgement (organizing and interpreting them to make knowledge). Milton, who cites Bacon several times in *Areopagitica*, appears to echo these principles when he says, "I cannot set so light by all the *invention*, the art, the wit, the grave and solid *judgement* which is in England, as that it can be comprehended in any twenty capacities how good soever" (2:535, emphasis added).

[9] Milton like others of his day considered the differences between formic and apian societies, but he seems partial to "the organized and productive communal activity attributed to the ant," as Karen Edwards details in her excellent compendium, "Milton's Reformed Animals: An Early Modern Bestiary," *Milton Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2005): 190–194. His belief in the ant's intellectual capacity is suggested by his transferal of Virgil's epithet *ingentis animos angusto in pectore versant* ("in small room large heart enclosed") from the bee to his "parsimonious emmet" (*Georgics* 4.83; *PL* 7.485–86).

> Lord… with divine insight and benignity measur'd out to the proportion of each mind and spirit, each temper and disposition, created so different each from other, and yet by the skill of wise conducting, all to become uniform in vertue. (2:230)

Milton is not our contemporary, and this is no egalitarian position. The most exculpatory argument for his later exclusion of Catholics is that their commitment to *fides implicita* itself excludes them. Nevertheless, the passage is a direct appeal for diversity of experience, understanding, and character. Milton wants his unique contributions to be recognized as part of a broader enterprise, one which embraces and requires difference as part of the divine plan. And so in this address to the parliament, the author tests what will become the epistemic thesis of *Areopagitica*: that the path to increased knowledge is the committed reunion of variously distributed minds and temperaments, "created so different from each other."

This is perhaps surprising coming from a writer so apparently confident in his own conclusions and quick to point out his singularity. Yet we do not have to imagine Milton as a full-throated pluralist to accept his emphasis on difference. Most obviously, his artistic bias against similarity and for variety underscores a creative philosophy that renders Eden luxuriant. That word "various" appears 29 times in *Paradise Lost*, and its synonyms just as often. Satan enters a profuse, variegated paradise in which "Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue / Appeared, with gay enamelled colours mixed" (*PL* 4.148–49). In Heaven, "light and darkness in perpetual round / Lodge and dislodge by turns" for no other reason than "grateful vicissitude" (6.6–8). Creatures earthly and celestial revel in "variety without end" (7.542), and even God enjoys prayer "duly paid / In various style" (5.145–46). Difference is its own good and leads to change, another distinctive feature of Milton's epic universe. Things can progress in paradise and heaven because the poet can imagine differentiation positively. While many medieval and renaissance representations of divinity

and perfection promote stasis,[10] Milton promotes dynamism and (shorn of its ghastly technocratic valence) innovation. Conversely, fear of change and charges against novelty are hallmarks of Satan. The incensed angel is horrified by "new laws… new minds… new counsels… new commands," as John Creaser points out.[11] Compare this to Milton's warm evocation in *Areopagitica* of "new notions," "new invention," "new light" (CPW 2:554, 557, 558). *New* is not for him a dirty word, because his view of innovation allows for positive change or differentiation. Instinctively, Milton is afraid more of stagnation than flux.

This maxim holds for the poet's political and epistemological views, and his prioritization of difference extends to people and ideas. Difference underscores Milton's most aspirational political philosophy, which is invigorated by the conviction that various and shared virtue is most productive. As early as *Of Reformation* (1641) he had imagined an ideal political body that eschewed homogeneity. Such sameness is not only impossible—"things simply pure are inconsistent in the masse of nature, nor are the elements or humors in Mans Body exactly homogeneall"—but also undesirable, even in government: "hence the best founded Commonwealths, and least barbarous have aym'd at a certaine mixture and temperament" (*CPW* 1:599). This is variety for the sake of effectiveness. Difference is crucial, too, for religious understanding. Building as many others had on the Pauline argument for the importance of all the members of Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12), Milton in his first antiprelatical tract advances the position that the scriptures in their plainness call "not only the *wise*, and *learned*, but the *simple*, the *poor*, the *babes*" to learn from them (*CPW* 1:566)—a broader community of interpreters even than that imagined in *DDD*. And this is apparently by design, for

---

[10] Thomas Aquinas is succinct: "that which is at rest and that which is moved are like perfect and imperfect" (*De Veritate* Q.15, Art.1, II: 274), as found in *Truth: translated from the definitive Leonine text*, trans. James V. McGlynn, 3 vols. (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1953).

[11] John Creaser, "'Fear of change': Closed Minds and Open Forms in Milton," *Milton Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2008): 162. A recently fallen Adam mimics Satan's angry bias: "Oh why did God, / Creator wise, that peopled highest heaven / With spirits masculine, create at last / This *novelty* on earth"? (*PL* 10.888–91, emphasis added).

despite scriptural plainness, "the extraordinary effusion of God's spirit upon every age and sex" itself allows the project to succeed, "attributing to all men—and requiring from them—the ability of searching, trying, examining all things, and by the spirit discerning that which is good."[12] Paradoxically, religious knowledge is conspicuous and yet requires almost empirical perspicuity. It is as if God himself has enforced a logic of communal epistemology.

The analogue between human body and political body, transfigured in *Areopagitica* into the scattered body of Truth, proves instructive. John Rogers has already demonstrated the analogical potential of Milton's peculiar ontology and the "assumed systemic homologies between nature and polity" in the early modern period.[13] The vitalism or animist materialism that enjoyed an intellectual heyday in the mid-seventeenth century finds a surprising counterpart in emerging political theories of self-governance and organization. If spirit and matter are everywhere linked, and the material universe is not (as mechanical philosophers would have us believe) merely inert and passive, then all things are to some extent imbued with agency.[14] Neither must there be a single, centralized authority which exerts incontrovertible influence over all things, setting into motion some inexorable cascade of political or spiritual dominos. The latter is anathema to the vitalist Milton, who rejects both the determinist logic of mechanical materialism and its political analogue—made most forcefully by Thomas Hobbes—that individuals like atoms collide meaninglessly and dangerously when there is no single governing agent. Yet the governing logic of what Rogers calls "a more collective mode of political agency and the more inclusive vision of political organization" may be said to apply also to

---

[12] The context of the tract requires him to make a religious argument, but the author will adapt this argument in *Areopagitica*, where "Milton widens the freedom to read the Bible to include the freedom to read any text" (Jason P. Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994]), 115.

[13] John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), xi.

[14] See, for example, *Matter of Revolution* 3–9.

its religious-epistemological counterpart.[15] When, in a passage in *Of Reformation* that Rogers does not cite, Milton bemoans the loss of a time when "the spirit of unity and meekness inspire[d] and animate[d] every joint and sinew of the mystical body" towards understanding, he provides an early religious precursor to his ontological and political vitalism. The capacity to know is neither singular nor centralized. Epistemological authority cannot be concentrated within the few, precisely because knowledge is distributed heterogeneously across God's people.[16]

Milton surely believes that each person—uniquely inspired and differently equipped—ought to make their own judgement. But that is only the beginning of knowledge. Ten years after *Areopagitica*, Milton himself claims in *Defensio Secunda* that he had tried in the earlier pamphlet to show "that the judgment of truth and falsehood, what should be printed and what suppressed, ought not to be in the hands of a *few* men" (*CPW* 4.ii:626; emphasis added). The animated members of the mystical body must communicate good to the general body rather than be content with their own vitality. This is the premise of the Tale of the Wen in *Of Reformation*, where we find another dramatization of a more inclusive, decentralized authority. Milton rethinks the Fable of Belly almost entirely to make the case that it is wrong for a small group of people (the prelates) or a single person (the wen) to arrogate religious knowledge for themselves.[17] The issue is rank hypocrisy: the wen claims to promote higher philosophical knowledge for the body when its only connection to the body is in fact parasitical. Confronted by the "wise and learned Philosopher" (1:583) commissioned

---

[15] Ibid., 14.

[16] Joanna Picciotto has shown how the fellows of the Royal Society, in a similar rhetorical move, "sought to reconstruct and represent the knowledge proper to the social body as a whole." Where "the old metaphor of the body politic… presented social distinction (the differentiation of the head from the hands) as the basis of social cohesion," the Society's aim of representation "required its members to engage in behaviors that subverted traditional justifications for social difference"; see Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 131, and 129–166 more generally.

[17] For other versions of the story, see Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 111–137, esp. 128–130.

by the bodily council, the wen defends itself using the vocabulary of scholarly solitude: "so oft as the soule would retire out of the head from over the steaming vapours of the lower parts to Divine Contemplation, with him shee found the purest, and quietest retreat, as being most remote from soile, and disturbance" (1:583-84). Retirement, contemplation, retreat: these are the things valourized by the Milton of the 1630s for the making of knowledge, now put into the mouth of a prelate-wen whose proximity to the head is meaningless. Intellectually, the "swolne Tumor" is nothing "but a bottle of vitious and harden'd excrements," a physical manifestation of the "hard'n'd thoughts" of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1:584; cf. 2:339). It is inaccessible to the rest of the body, useless despite its boasted contribution to knowledge. In threatening to cut off the wen entirely, the Philosopher promises only to enact physically what is already the case intellectually.

"A streaming fountain"

We return then to Milton's distaste for confined knowledge, equipped now with a broader vision of how knowledge requires difference and variety, and so eschews sameness and singularity. Already the figurative language in these works pre-empts a second tenet of Miltonic epistemology, that knowledge requires a kind of motion or transfer: "Truth is compar'd in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick'n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition" (2:543). We do well once again to consider the careful imagery of these explicit epistemological statements, given Milton's unusual attention to the physicality of his metaphors.[18] It is not only that his imagination allows him to craft vivid representations of physical things, though I am always stunned by the nearly cinematic and literally telescopic description of

[18] Stephen B. Dobranski contends, *pace* F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, that Milton is a remarkably visual thinker; see *Milton's Visual Imagination: Imagery in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially the first chapter. "Visual" in this reading includes all of the senses, which combine for the auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory *tour de force* that is Milton's Eden.

"the broad circumference" of Satan's shield, which "Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views / At evening from the top of Fesole" (*PL* 1.286–89). Nor is it just that he enjoys a poet's repertoire of metaphors even in his prose writings. Instead, his very understanding of immaterial things is often developed by physical analogue. In *Of Reformation*, Milton compares "the transparent streams of divine Truth" with "the foul weeds, and muddy waters" concealing those who oppose reformation (1:569). We might take this simply to be a precursor of the more famous statement in *Areopagitica*. But combine it with less direct discussions of understanding and it starts to look like Milton conceives of truth as if it really were some rich liquid. Thus, we must promote "the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge," while resisting the lure of both "a dull ease and cessation of our knowledge" and a doctrinal conformity like "a stanch and solid peece of frame-work, as any January could freeze together" (2:554, 545). The implied object of these descriptions is a potable fluid, naturally kinetic, yet one capable of being dammed up or frozen solid (*stanch*, here an adjective, means "impervious to water" [*OED* 1a]). Milton highlights water's physical rather than spiritual associations not because he wants to make an idol of truth, but because he is registering an abstract concept concretely.[19]

At least in the above examples, the parts of metaphor work in the usual direction: the tenor (truth) determines the vehicle (moving liquid). At other times the influence appears to work in reverse. So, for example, Milton argues plainly that truth, once stopped, stops being truth, "sick'n[s] into a muddy pool of conformity," "turns herself into all shapes, except her own" (2:543, 563).[20] Yet

[19] Similarly, when he considers loss of fancy in "On Shakespeare," Milton fears that Shakespeare's greatness could "make us marble with too much conceiving" (14). For a recent discussion on the potential disempowerment of such petrification, see Ross Lerner, "Weak Milton," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 57, no. 1 (2017): 111–134.

[20] A possible exception is the knowledge gained through books. In nearly alchemical fashion, books "preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them" (2:492). Yet the extraction is not knowledge, nor the books themselves. A reader must still sublimate the substance, so to speak.

the vehicle takes on a life of its own when the author imagines what happens to that blocked liquid substance. The motif of blockage and unexpected re-assertion is indeed frequent in Milton. A positive version appears in the invocation of Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*—"wisdom at one entrance quite shut out" finds an alternative impression by shining inward (3.50)—but things are usually less inspiring. *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* argues for divorce as an emotional relief valve that prevents theological corrosion: "Let us not… stop every vent and cranny of permissive liberty: lest nature wanting those needful pores, and breathing-places which God hath not debarr'd our weaknes, either suddenly break out into some wide rupture of open vice and frantic heresy" (*CPW* 2:354). Emotional suppression leads to worse intellectual outcomes (heresy) than the open pores of marital liberty. In fact, the rational faculty can also be affected by frustrated physical desire. Observing the sexual stringency of "that sort of men who follow *Anabaptism, Famelism, Antinomianism,* and other *fanatick* dreams," Milton finds it perfectly reasonable to wonder

> whether all this proceed not partly, if not chiefly, from the restraint of some lawfull liberty, which ought to be giv'n men, and is deny'd them. As by Physick we learn in menstruous bodies, where natures current hath been stopt, that the suffocation and upward forcing of some lower part, affects the head and inward sense with dotage and idle fancies. (2:278–79)

The cause of bad sects, apparently, is bad sex; of idle fancy, idling fancy. Milton begins quite explicitly with the image of "natures current… stopt" and moves backwards to explain theological error. The principle remains the same: free movement (of ideas, bodies, humours) is necessary for the progression of knowledge.[21]

This fact helps to explain the poet's tendency to describe truth as if it were material—much to the chagrin of critics who rightly conclude that for Milton "knowledge and faith are not

---

[21] Several years earlier, *Of Reformation* employed a motif of bodily health and illness. Milton's sometimes conflicting imagery in the prose is the subject of Lana Cable's *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton's Iconoclasm and the Rhetoric of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

possessions which one can claim and cling to."[22] Stanley Fish in *How Milton Works* recites image after image of kinetic truth in *Areopagitica* and convincingly draws "the lesson that knowledge and truth are not measurable or containable entities, properties of this or that object." Yet, perhaps reading Milton's metaphors a little too literally (while chiding us for the same), Fish concludes further that the prevailing image "is of a truth that is always running ahead of any attempt to apprehend it, a truth that repeatedly slips away from one's grasp, spills out of one's formulations, and escapes the nets that for a moment promise to catch it."[23] Such truth is more like the mirage of an oasis than the streaming fountain Milton and the Bible liken it to—such a search more the labour of Sisyphus than Isis. Grant it that "we have not yet found them all"; we have found some, and "are to send our thanks and vows to heav'n louder then most of Nations, for that great measure of truth which we enjoy" (2:549; 2:548). I can imagine a Milton who cups truth with open hands, but not one who "hold[s] the truth guiltily" (2:547), and certainly not one who thinks himself empty-handed.

The simpler explanation is that a poet's conception of knowledge as truth-in-motion prompts him to form distinct metaphors, despite resisting its reification. Even metaphors for kinetic entities require physical vehicles. It is with this in mind that we ought to read Milton's freewheeling use of commercial metaphors. Even in those examples which come closest to commodifying knowledge, the emphasis is on currency as movement rather than currency as value-holder. At times they do invite paradox. On the one hand, Milton argues that "Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopoliz'd and traded in by tickets and statutes, and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the Land" (2:535–36). He imagines nothing so odious as the "dividuall movable" of impersonal religion, a "traffick so entangl'd, and of so many

---

[22] David Ainsworth, *Milton and the Spiritual Reader: Reading and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18.
[23] Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 211, 204. Ezekiel's book of implicit knowledge easily confirms the first half of Fish's argument.

piddling accounts" that many a businessman would love to offload onto their pastor (2:554). On the other hand, he speaks of each person's need to manage "his allotted parcels [of] certain pretious truths" (*Reason of Church Government*; 1:801), and even before its mighty battle with Falsehood in *Areopagitica*, "our richest Marchandize, Truth" is at the mercy of a commercial blockade (2:548). Regardless of whether these conflicting statements stem from a merchant-class guilt, they are above all the ready metaphors borne of a "lifelong familiarity with business."[24] In all cases, their immediate contexts are not about whether truth can be bought—simply not a serious question for Milton—but whether and how it can be communicated.

Precisely because truth is by nature transitive, communicable, it cannot be shored up. The second book of *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642) begins with probably his most direct consideration of knowledge to that point. What kind of thing is it, and is it true that "knowledge, yet which is the best and lightsomest possession of the mind, were as the common saying is, no burden"? No, quite the contrary. The person who seeks after it,

> remembring also that God even to a strictnesse requires the improvement of these his entrusted gifts, cannot but sustain a sorer burden of mind, and more pressing then any supportable toil, or waight, which the body can labour under; how and in what manner he shall dispose and employ those summes of knowledge and illumination, which God hath sent him into this world to trade with. (*CPW* 1:801)

This responsibility seems at odds with Milton's general insistence, discussed previously, that the hallmark of knowledge is pleasure. More immediately, it seems at odds with the initial description of knowledge as a lightsome possession of the mind. Yet there is no real contradiction. His point is that valuable knowledge is weighty and glorious and must be discharged—indeed, not just discharged,

---

[24] Nicholas von Maltzahn, "John Milton: The Later Life (1641–1674)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29.

but circulated, moving from one person to another. The burden comes from hoarding the fruit of knowledge, which weighs down merchants of truth like the overburdened trees of paradise.[25] The struggle to bear fruit is a pleasurable one, as is the discharge, and as is indeed its collection, a labour that (again as in paradise) ought to be done together.

The distinctly Protestant anxiety associated with the Parable of the Talents takes a surprising turn here as Milton considers whether he has deployed his own knowledge appropriately. He admits to being perhaps "too inquisitive, or suspitious of my self and mine own doings," eager to do his part with "those few talents which God at that present had lent me" (1:804). His sense of duty, however, goes beyond an expectation that he will make much of his master's gifts (Matthew 24:14–20). Rather than focusing on personal piety and productivity, as expected in the usual formulation of the Protestant work ethic, Milton fears failing to do his part for others. His chiding conscience plays prosecutor: "Timorous and ingratefull, the Church of God is now again at the foot of her insulting enemies… when time was, thou couldst not find a syllable of all that thou hadst read, or studied, to utter in her behalf. Yet *ease and leasure* was given thee for thy *retired* thoughts out of the sweat of other men." Or, if the endeavour succeeds without him, "thou dost impudently to make a thrifty purchase of boldnesse to thy selfe out of the painfull merits of other men" (1:804–05, emphasis added).[26] Milton knows the sacrifices of others made his erudition possible. Here more than elsewhere, the debt immense of gratitude prompts a desire to give back—to circulate that learning which, lodged

---

[25] Notice again the diction of liquidity (cf. "dispensers" below). In later life, made to wait for dictation of his epic poem, Milton reportedly complained to his amanuensis that "*he wanted to be milked*" (biographer Cyriack Skinner, in *The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire [London: Constable and Company, 1932], 33).

[26] Such second-person self-questioning anticipates a certain devil on Mount Niphates. Moreover, cheap purchase of boldness anticipates Satan's fear that another devil by volunteering to journey might "win[ ] cheap the high repute / Which he through hazard huge must earn" (*PL* 2.472–73). For Brooke Conti, these reflections indicate that "his focus is less upon the [church's] fate than his own" ("'That Really Too Anxious Protestation': Crisis and Autobiography in Milton's Prose," *Milton Studies* 45 [2006]: 155). While I do not doubt Milton's self-regard, it is compatible with a deeply felt obligation towards others.

with him useless, is death to hide. If earlier in his life he makes provisions for the mind, to gratify its desires through academic *otium* and private study, now he pursues intellectual *negotium* as part of an active economy of knowledge.

That economy, however, is not a straightforward "marketplace of ideas" as we have come to think of it. Milton in *Areopagitica* is vehement in his opposition to intellectual monopolies and government regulation of belief (2:535–36), and he is confident in the power of truth to prevail without need of "policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings" (2:563). His remarks have sometimes been used to make him a believer in the marketplace theory of free speech. Yet as John Durham Peters argues, such a case is ahistorical and unsatisfying: "If we mean that Milton argues that reading and writing should take place in an unrestricted, open-ended, and voluntary space, fair enough."[27] The author has no time for the stoppage of knowledge or the use of force in reason, for reason is but choosing. But that is still a far cry from anything resembling laissez-fair economics. For starters, *Areopagitica* does not make a case for unregulated dissemination of books or speech, as many critics have observed. More fundamentally, though, Milton's envisioned enterprise is not value-free. It makes moral assumptions and demands of its participants—like that weighing on the author to trade knowledge and put off "a calme and pleasing solitarynes" for the sake of others and the furtherance of truth (1:821). This collaborative goal blunts any notion of a hyper-competitive marketplace of ideas and sets the ethical conditions of engagement: "a little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and som grain of charity… to joyn, and unite into one generall and brotherly search after Truth" (2:554). His fundamentally ethical imperative thus calls for "conscious collaboration instead of [Adam] Smith's unorchestrated private enterprise."[28]

---

[27] John Durham Peters, *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 71. Much of the chapter on Milton aims to dismantle such an argument.
[28] Ibid., 71.

The market metaphor breaks down altogether when Milton insists that each person's allotted parcels of precious truth must be "put off at any cheap rate, yea for nothing to them that will" (1:802)—not the shrewdest business strategy! Godly stewards of knowledge are not like "the great Merchants of this world" who extort or sell counterfeits to "abuse the people, like poor Indians with beads and glass"; instead, they are "selected heralds of peace, and dispensers of treasure inestimable without price to them that have no pence" (1:802). This is *free* trade of a different sort. And unlike the physical goods trafficked by early modern colonists or the privatized doctrine sold by English prelates, the person with knowledge does not lose any by giving it away; truth is increased for everyone under the conviction that "those summes of knowledge and illumination" will yield further sums. The circulation of knowledge, an epistemological current, creates a network of learning bound by an ethical obligation between knowers that would not allow its participants to take advantage of others like the worldly merchants do the "Indians."[29] To stop the flow of truth by selfish hoarding is to exchange it for a muddy pool of conformity. To wield it merely as an instrument of market power is to risk the fate of the moneychangers recorded just a few chapters before the Parable of the Talents: cast out of the temple by that same Master, not for stealing from him but for stealing from his people (Matt. 21:12–13). In light of these differences, we would do well to excise the reputational wen of Milton as bourgeois subject.

"The sad friends of Truth"

Such attention to the ethics of knowledge is hardly unique, but it serves as a reminder that John Milton does not divorce morality from epistemology. It is again anachronistic to imagine he would. I

[29] In this respect the closer parallel may be a gift economy, which demands reciprocity of all participants, ascribes a kind of agency to the gift communicated, and at its best solidifies relationships within the community. These elements are described in Marcel Mauss's influential 1925 *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, newly translated by Jane I. Guyer, ed., *The Gift: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016).

discussed in the introduction the profound interrelatedness of religious, natural, and self-knowledge in early modern philosophy, borne of a broader belief in the interrelatedness of all things. More specifically, Milton's epistemological commitments are shaped by religious ones—a dynamic represented in the most famous phrase of his treatise *Of Education*: "the end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him" (*CPW* 2:366–67). This knowledge has a *telos* of love and its origin in a God who is love. Post-enlightenment readers might be appalled by the apparent intrusion of religion and morality into serious thought; early modern writers did not uniformly value such detachment. Indeed, they found in Christian metaphysics a coherent basis for further study. Even a supremely skeptical Descartes in *Discourse on the Method* (1637) must pin his philosophy on a benevolent God who would not deceive us.[30] For Milton, love (or "charity") enables knowledge rather more intimately than that. Not only is the knowability of God, the universe, and oneself dependent on the loving disposition of God, but charity establishes the means and test of true understanding: "the way to get a sure undoubted knowledge of things, is to hold that for truth, which accords most with charity" (2:340). And while knowledge is in this way bound to charity, charity in turn expands our capacity to know.

Areopagitica is the zenith of Milton's vision for an expansive and generous epistemology, in which truth builds and is built rather than divides and is divided. The point would hardly need stating were it not that the treatise employs two figurative schemas of how knowledge operates, one collaborative, the other combative. The poet is known more for the latter: truth and falsehood grappling; un-cloistered virtue sallying forth and seeing her adversary; purification by contrary trial (*CPW* 2:561; 2:515). All support and are supported by his cultivated reputation as rugged individual

[30] Part 4; expanded in Meditation 3 in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). His god is not, however, the personal deity of scripture or Milton. See John Cottingham, "The Role of God in Descartes's Philosophy," in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. J. Broughton and J. Carriero (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 288–301, and Nicholas Jolley, "God," in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, ed. Lawrence Nolan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 335–344.

and fervent independent. Yet running alongside the stream of combative metaphors—growing up with it almost inseparably—is a less heralded countercurrent of collaboration. The group of "wise and faithfull labourers" ready to harvest a "flowry crop of knowledge" (2:554; 2:558), the "considerat builders, more wise in spirituall architecture" (2:555), and most poignantly the "sad friends of Truth" who defy the violence done her through a careful search for her scattered body: all serve the greater and arguably more difficult task of progressive discovery in a world where knowledge is not zero-sum. Though these approaches seem themselves at times to be in endless competition, the broader context of Milton's epistemology favours the collaborative endeavor. The ethical imperative of *Areopagitica* belongs to the latter schema, as do its axiological convictions about the vitality and rhetorical function of "knowledge in the making." And while some conflict is inevitable, even that can be folded into a brotherly pursuit of truth rather than the pyrrhic victory of a violent conformity.

I am of course not the first to pair the contrasting metaphors, if not in these exact terms. As previously mentioned, critics have wrestled with the internal tensions of the treatise, especially those concerning the representation of truth. Blair Hoxby and Stanley Fish agree that its figurations are irreconcilable and that Milton knows as much: for the former, Milton's method "creates the illusion of a free marketplace of ideas operating within *Areopagitica* itself"; for the latter, the very fact of truth's inconstancy is evidence that truth cannot be grasped, and the wise reader will know the task to be impossible.[31] Others have defined the issue more precisely. John D. Schaeffer describes "a very sticky problem: Milton presents two different ideas of truth: incremental-consensual and adversarial." Yet he too dismisses the idea that the two are compatible, remarking almost casually that one cannot escape this dilemma "by positing a consensual truth emerging… out of the constant

[31] Blair Hoxby, *Mammon's Music: Literature and Economics in the Age of Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 42; Fish, *How Milton Works*, 210–212.

arguments and controversies of every period," since that "would imply a sort of humanist skepticism that does not fit what we know about Milton."[32] This is to assert a point rather than argue it; even Thomas O. Sloane, whom Schaeffer cites for support, finds that discursive forms are instruments of knowledge for the poet.[33] In *Areopagitica* especially Milton describes a provisional truth which must continually be reformed, and which cannot be confirmed alone. This is the case regardless of whether truth appears through "musing, searching, revolving new notions" (which might perhaps be done privately) or through "much arguing, much writing, many opinions" (*CPW* 2:554). In other words, the act of knowing in this world involves contest *and* consensus; the very fact that we have not found all pieces of truth means we ought to hold our parts with humble conviction, joining them together whenever possible.

The epistemological models of competition and collaboration both assume more than one participant in pursuit of knowledge. They each require difference. Yet difference may be either violent or peaceful, and the immediate context of *Areopagitica* makes it clear why Milton prefers the latter. Michael Wilding finds that the mutilations of Alexander Leighton, William Prynne, and other Puritans, fresh in the minds of a 1644 audience, left a mark on *Areopagitica* in its declamations against murdered books and beleaguered truth.[34] Most striking is the parable of Osiris, which sets the tone for the entire final section of the treatise and forms its epistemological core:

---

[32] John D. Schaeffer, "Metonymies We Read By: Rhetoric, Truth and the Eucharist in Milton's *Areopagitica*," *Milton Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2000): 84.

[33] Thomas O. Sloane, *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 211. Sloane, whose understanding of Milton runs fundamentally counter to mine, finds that by the mid-seventeenth century English authors have abandoned "humanist rhetoric," none more so than Milton, who "never conceives of rhetoric as a mode of thought" (233).

[34] Michael Wilding, "Milton's *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects," *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–38, esp. 10–13. Dobranski, "Principles and Politics," 198, notes astutely that even this violence has analogues in printing; "thus the description of 'gathering up limb by limb' truth's 'dissever'd peeces' evokes the procedure called gathering by which books were assembled piece by piece after the printed sheets were dried and piled in stacks."

> Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *AEgyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangled body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortall feature of lovelines and perfection. (2:549)

Thomas N. Corns remarks upon the physicality of this description, with hewed limbs and joints and members made to stand for what are supposedly intellectual abstractions.[35] We shall return to it. The spilling of precious life-blood, the devilish whipping of St. Jerome in a Lenten dream, and the implied abortion of an envious Juno sitting cross-legged to stifle the issue of the brain—a callback, perhaps, to "the womb of teeming truth" in *DDD*—these furnish counterparts to the bloodier and more literal suppression of people and ideas (*CPW* 2:493, 510, 505). Violence haunts the progression of knowledge, threatening death where life should be found.

So what to make of the "recurrent imagery of battle, seige, and other such military reference" used to describe the state of truth in the world?[36] According to John X. Evans, "[t]here can be little doubt that Milton designed every one of the martial images to remind his audience of the 'armatura mystica christiana' of St Paul" in Ephesians 6.[37] If so, the images participate in a

---

[35] Thomas N. Corns, *The Development of Milton's Prose Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 91–92.
[36] Wilding, "Liberty for the Sects," 13.
[37] John X. Evans, "Imagery as Argument in Milton's *Areopagitica*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8, no. 2 (1966): 200–201.

tradition whose very source emphasizes active defense and peace over violence and confrontation. The apostle asserts that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood" and require only such spiritual armour as the shoes of "the gospel of peace" (Eph. 6.12; 15).[38] But peacekeeping does not mean laxness: Milton really does hate an "unexercis'd and unbreathed" virtue, for "our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise as well as our limbs and complexion" (*CPW* 2:515; 543). There is plenty of evidence he means this literally—that physical activity aids cognition—but what follows is a memorable metaphor of an intellectual race. Though frequently and intelligibly cited as evidence of the agonistic milieu of metaphors in the treatise, the "adversary" introduced is in fact a race participant, not a deadly foe. Neither spiritual defense nor intellectual contest are intrinsically violent.

When Milton does avail himself of specifically martial metaphors to describe the competitive progression of knowledge, he finds mixed success. In fact, he has a strange habit of invoking military imagery only to turn it into something else. The other such "adversary" passage makes knowledge central:

> When a man hath bin labouring the hardest labour in the deep mines of knowledge, hath furnisht out his findings in all their equipage, drawn forth his reasons as it were a battel raung'd, scatter'd and defeated all objections in his way, calls his adversary into the plain, offers him the advantage of wind and sun, if he please; only that he may try the matter by dint of argument; for his opponents then to sculk, to lay ambushments, to keep a narrow bridge of licensing where the challenger should passe, though it be valour enough in shouldiership, is but weaknes and cowardise in the wars of Truth. For who knows not that Truth is strong next to the almighty? (2:562–63)

[38] The epistle is clearly on Milton's mind; he quotes verbatim Paul's message just a few chapters back about "endeavouring to keep the unity of the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3; cited in *CPW* 2:560), references "every wind of doctrine" at 2:561, and discusses Eph. 5 at length in writing *Tetrachordon* (1645). The phrase "Peace and love" forms a pentatonic hippie chorus in *DDD* book 1.

This is a bathetic metaphorical collapse. The passage begins with a familiar figure of physical labour identified with mental labour—but the image is of a miner, not a soldier. Very well, he nevertheless braces for battle, tactically ranging his reasons at the fierce battle line, the scene set with wind and sun. Still no battle ensues—not even one tried by "dint of argument." Milton ends by undermining the comparison altogether (what is "valour enough in shouldiership, is but weaknes and cowardise in the wars of Truth") and revealing that, actually, it is *Truth* who does the fighting, not the labourer. Tempting as it is to imagine a solitary warrior defeating his enemy, David felling Goliath, poetic abstraction prevents even the attempt. It is as if the author cannot sustain an image of armed conflict in the wars of truth.

This last point may account for some of the inconsistency critics like Fish observe when scrutinizing knowledge in the treatise. In a passage just prior, Milton says that it is not any individual, but Truth herself who wins the tussle: "Let *her* and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter?" (2:561; emphasis added). So perhaps we should not be surprised to see the labourer of knowledge disappear in the later passage. But at other times, Truth does appear vulnerable. Imagining her under assault even in London, Milton remarks that "the shop of warre hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleaguer'd Truth, then there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and idea's" (2:554). Physical violence is replaced or even rebuffed by intellectual conflict—heads and pens overcoming helmets and swords. Once again the analogy to war serves to confirm war's inferiority. The knowledge worker, hammering away ignorance and falsehood, fashions an active and peaceable defence of truth no less effective than any feat of arms. Yet if Truth really is "strong next to the Almighty," then it is not her safety that is fragile, but our access to her—our attainment of knowledge. Brotherly division itself beleaguers truth and must be defended against as if it were the encroaching army of ignorance.

Readers of *Colasterion* (1645) and *Defensio Secunda* (1654) will know that pens and heads sitting by their studious lamps are also capable of writerly violence. Milton knows it, too, and the vast Typhoean rage he unleashes in some later works tends to undermine his argument and credibility. The polemicist's occasional hypocrisy, however, does not define his epistemology. He is sensitive, as just mentioned, to the fragility of human access to truth and the damage that can be done in the wars of truth. Despite his sensitivity also to the simmering violence of political and religious debates, Milton evidently still believed that an impassioned argument for toleration of "those neighboring differences, or rather indifferences" might keep the English people united (2:565). I have been suggesting that *Areopagitica* is the culmination of a period of epistemological thought. By grouping the treatise instead with the political tracts of the years to come, critics may be rather less inclined to acknowledge the good-faith arguments of 1644, when compromise still seemed possible. To wit, scholars have adduced the importance of *concordia discors*, unity in conflict, to Milton's antiprelatical and divorce tracts.[39] Why then not here? He has been developing arguments and figurative structures that allow him to believe that conflict can yield nonviolent benefit—indeed, that some opposition serves knowledge. The key provision is that competition itself can be constructive, not destructive. Moreover, the arena of truth must be governed by the more binding commitment people have to one another. "The bond of peace" must be maintained if we are to avoid tearing up the body of Osiris once again and starting all over (2:565).

The cohesive role ascribed to charity in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is the clearest precursor to *Areopagitica*'s bond of peace. Milton's searing critique in the tract reproves a hermeneutics that divides and constricts scriptural truth, and which has the same effect on people.

---

[39] "[J]ust as Thomas Kranidas identified the concept of *concordia discors* as the operating principle in the antiepiscopal tracts, so Lana Cable demonstrates that the emergence of unity and order out of apparent conflict and contradiction is the dominant paradigm underlying Milton's argument in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*"; J. Martin Evans, ed. *John Milton: Twentieth-Century Perspectives: Volume 3: Prose* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xi. See Purvis Boyette's essay in the same collection.

He thus rails against "the leaden daggers of your literall decrees," the narrow biblical literalism of "your unhelpfull surgery" which "mangle[s]" God's truth into many small pieces without a guiding principle to rearrange them (2:333). Not only that, but hermeneutic violence in this case also works to curtail marital liberty without the least concern for those suffering husbands and wives: "it is incredible how cold, how dull, and farre from all fellow feeling we are" (2:226). Against this divisive and prescriptive type of reading Milton presents quite an opposite task. Because "Christ gives no full comments or continu'd discourses," but rather "speaks oft in Monosyllables, like a maister, scattering the heavnly grain of his doctrine like a pearle heer and there," scriptural knowledge requires "a skilfull and laborious gatherer; who must compare the words he finds, with other precepts, with the end of every ordinance, and with the general *analogy* of Evangelick doctrine" (2:338). As we see later in *Areopagitica*, truth is spread out, distributed; understanding means carefully examining and collating the different parts of scripture rather than splicing them further. Where potential conflict exists, it is subject to "that authentick precept of sovran charity" which expands truth even as it debars legalism; without it, "wee never leave subtilizing and casuisting till wee have straitn'd and par'd that liberal path into a razors edge to walk on between a precipice of unnecessary mischief on either side" (2:343). In Milton's epistemology, it is the narrow way, not the broad, that leads to destruction.

It is true that Milton "seems to align himself fairly plainly on the side of reason in matters of religion."[40] In *De Doctrina Christiana* especially he applies reason vigorously to the scriptures; the very genre of systematic theology requires a kind of textual assemblage that looks awfully close to the textual splicing he critiques in *DDD*.[41] Yet despite his rigour, Milton never loses sight of the fact that

---

[40] Lee A. Jacobus, *Sudden Apprehension: Aspects of Knowledge in Paradise Lost* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 21.

[41] For the role of systematic theologies in Milton's time, see William Poole, *Milton and the Making of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 89–91.

the tree of knowledge grows fast by the tree of life—that the fruit of true knowledge brings life, not death. As such, the job of the godly interpreter is to collate texts with the usual tools of responsible exegesis, but then to weigh them according to conscience and ensure a charitable outcome. The rigid application of logic does not have final authority: "on the evidence of scripture itself, all things are eventually to be referred to the Spirit and the unwritten word," for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life (*CPW* 6:590; 2 Cor. 3:6).[42] All things are to be judged by the rule of charity, such that reason is used to unite the gospel, whose message also ought to unite people with divergent opinions. The key difference between Milton's proposed engagement with scripture and that of his interlocutors is not then fundamentally methodological, but axiological.[43]

Such a conclusion belies a view of Milton the rigid Ramist for whom logic delimits knowledge. *That* Milton follows the dichotomous force of reason wherever it must go; truth is accessible not primarily by means of spiritual or natural experience, but by an instrumentalist rationality that takes someone from point A to B in quick succession. Thomas O. Sloane, while eventually conceding that "Milton was no precise Ramist," still aligns him with a purported Ramist certainty and "that almost skeletal coldness whereby words are framed into true statements, and then arranged methodically." Despite the space that lies between Milton and the Ramists – and Miltonists have carved much space in recent years – "he does share with them an epistemological belief that knowledge is *impersonal* and that the persuasive form of its truthfulness lies in its proper framing, configuration, of *form*."[44] Whatever Milton that is, it is not the rhetorical author of any of the earlier

---

[42] For Poole, this is tantamount to saying that "biblical text, if found repugnant to the inner conscience, may be safely ignored" (102). I'll not wade here into Milton's creeping antinomianism; I argue only that he prefers a wide and uncertain knowledge to a narrow and cruel certainty.

[43] In other words, it is more concerned with how questions of value affect learning and knowledge. Axiology has traditionally been grouped with epistemology and ontology as unspoken principles of research methods. Scholars now recognize that epistemology itself is shaped by axiology; for an influential account, see John Herron and Peter Reason, "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm," *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (September 1997): 274–294.

[44] Sloane, *The End of Humanist Rhetoric*, 222, 220. Italics in the original.

prose and poetry, who absolutely does reason through discourse and controversy, as Brian Vickers protests.[45] Nor is it the poet of *Paradise Lost*, who otherwise might as well have written another treatise instead of a poem justifying the ways of God to men. But most importantly, it is not the Milton of *Areopagitica*, for whom a man is a heretic in the truth precisely when knowledge is impersonal, who insists that knowledge abounds in love, and who demands we "hear with meeknes" or "convince" those we disagree with (*CPW* 2:550).

There is another departure from Ramism, however, which is more fundamental. While the strictest versions of Ramist method define knowledge in the abstract and its acquisition as a matter of private cognition, knowledge for Milton acknowledges—indeed, requires—intersubjectivity. Far from some disembodied concept, it is always understood *by* someone. Thus, in *Areopagitica* Milton claims that "Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making" (2:554). Knowledge involves argument and is therefore rhetorical. Perhaps this is why the curriculum in *Of Education* teaches logic as part of rhetoric—and this only after students have studied ethics ("opinion in *good* men…"). If Ramism entails "a separation of the processes of thinking from other rhetorical instruments,"[46] then even Milton's formal treatise on logic, *Artis logicae plenior institutio*, is not a strictly Ramist text. As Phillip J. Donnelly has demonstrated, Milton in his art of logic deviates from his sources in ways that foreground the importance of rhetoric to logic.[47] Reason, like choosing, is personal rather than impersonal. Logic exists alongside rhetoric precisely because Milton refuses to erase either the speaker or hearer of an argument, making one or the other a passive object. He

---

[45] Brian Vickers, review of *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric*, *Renaissance Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1988): 528.
[46] Sloane, *The End of Humanist Rhetoric*, 217. This definition is likely too severe even for Ramists; see Vickers, review, 527.
[47] Phillip J. Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27–48, esp. 30.

refuses also to define reason as "coercive certainty,"[48] an instrumental logic wielded like Death's mace petrific to fix and freeze truth or force opponents into a straitjacket of belief. As a corollary, he can hold out hope that *new* knowledge can be made that is not already contained in some syllogism.[49]

We can return to the less technical ground of *Areopagitica* confident of the same principle because it makes intuitive sense that Milton is against strict necessity and for persuasion. The premise of the speech is that people can change their minds: about licensing, about how we may be able "to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge" (2:550). The problem with violent forms of competition is that they separate people and ideas, eliminating the possibility of any later collaboration. In all the talk of combat in the treatise, Milton refuses anything like deadly force that prevents eventual reunion. The closest he comes to compulsion is in the context of an envisaged nation of scholars:

> others as fast reading, trying all things, *assenting to the force of reason and convincement*. What could a man require more from a Nation so pliant and so prone to seek after knowledge. What wants there to such a towardly and pregnant soile, but wise and faithfull labourers, to make a knowing people, a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies. (2:554; emphasis added)

The phrase, of course, is paradoxical: can one ever assent to force? Knowledge itself draws us by "convincement" and without compulsion. *Pliant* and *prone*, here used positively, reinforce Milton's

---

[48] Ibid., vii. Donnelly's sometimes complex argument begins and ends with the sound conviction that modernity's use of reason is axiologically distinct from what should be expected from a Christian poet.

[49] Milton's art of logic is, of course, *ad Petri Rami methodum concinnata*, as its full title suggests. But the dichotomies and syllogisms of Ramist logic he reserves "for teaching knowledge already attained," rather than as guarantors of new truth (Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 2003], 208). Donnelly agrees: "*Artis Logicae* demonstrates that Milton values Ramist 'method' primarily for its pedagogical effectiveness in helping to organize a known body of material for teaching, rather than for its claims as a universal method for investigating all reality" (44).

opposition to epistemological rigidity; given the agricultural context, they also evoke the phototrophic crops that so captured his imagination years later: "as when a field / Of Ceres ripe for harvest waving bends / Her bearded grove of ears" (*PL* 4.980–82).[50] The sun draws the grains as Truth does her sad friends—plural now, compared to the single "skilfull and laborious gatherer" of *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (2:338). Accordingly, the unity of Milton's knowing people, activated by the force of reason and convincement, cannot be compared to "the forc't and outward union of cold, and neutrall, and inwardly divided minds" (*CPW* 2:551).

The distinction is crucial. According to Milton, the religious majority in his day are making a perverse call for unity in order to proscribe knowledge. The problem is that this unity does not accommodate difference, which they call division, and it stifles the advancement of learning. So he flips the script: "they are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those dissever'd peeces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth" (2:550). He does so by doubling down on their preferred terminology of "schismaticks and sectaries" and appropriating the imagery of violence. The severed pieces of truth are *not* caused by sects, which are parts of a unified whole; in fact, some intellectual division and even opposition is a necessary part of a grander structure. To oppose such division would be "as if, while the Temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrationall men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built" (2:555). This is an astonishing reversal: the enemies of Truth "hewd her lovely form," but now her friends "hew" the mighty cedars ushering in the presence of her master; the martyrs of truth who were themselves cut and

[50] Gabriel's angels, too, are faithful labourers. The episode is another example of Milton's tendency to disrupt scenes of violence in debates of truth.

quartered now are as the materials used to build the house of God. That is to say, some conflict is not violent, but constructive, and some division enables a greater unity.

As I suggested earlier, Milton often thinks through abstract concepts concretely. The construction metaphor reinforces the necessity of difference without letting up on the reality of conflict. Actually, he had experimented with this very figure in *The Reason of Church Government*. In a precursor to *Areopagitica*'s purification by contrary trial, he envisions the process by which all things are made, natural or artificial:

> For if we look but on the nature of elementall and mixt things, we know they cannot suffer any change of one kind, or quality into another without the struggl of contrarieties. And in things artificiall, seldome any elegance is wrought without a superfluous wast and refuse in the transaction. No Marble statue can be politely carv'd, no fair edifice built without almost as much rubbish and sweeping. (1:796)

"The struggle of contrarieties" is morally neutral, given its creative potential. Here as elsewhere, struggle is not primarily about winning or destroying one's opponent. Instead, Milton is concerned with change—making something new, whether it happens at atomic or edificial scale. A leap from natural phenomenon to human craft in sculpture and architecture suggests that for him this is something like a fundamental principle. Yet the immediate polemical context is the same as that of *Areopagitica*—an argument for toleration of sects—and in this instance, the argument is at their expense. Their faulty beliefs are by-products, debris to be swept away when the true artwork is revealed. Consider now the rest of the temple metaphor in the later work:

> And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world; neither can every peece of the building be of one form, nay rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportionall arises the goodly and gracefull symmetry

> that commends the pile and structure. Let us therefore be more considerat builders, more wise in spirituall architecture, when great reformation is expected. (2:555)

This is the Milton of excessive and unruly blank verse, concerned less with neat grammar and a steady march of iambs than the thrilling beauty of an excessive and unruly universe. Obviously, the sects are no longer byproducts but foundational "peeces" of the divine cathedral. He refuses to rob them of their artfulness, despite dissimilitude—or rather because of it. Implicit here is an argument that contiguous knowledge is just as "perfect" as continual. Things do not have to fit just right for them to be beautiful or true. In the hands of wise and considerate builders, they will be.

"Knowledge in the making"

The temple of God and the body of Truth are united through broader epistemological movements of division, gathering, and reconstitution. But they are also layered metaphorically through verbal echo, with significant consequences for how knowledge work is also a kind of art-work. The passages are linked by repetition of "form," "peece[s]," and "perfection," all underscored by decisive attention to the aesthetic qualities of body ("most glorious to look on… immortall feature of lovelines") and temple ("laid artfully together… goodly and gracefull symmetry"). The work of knowing is parallel to the work of artistry—an affinity increasingly recognized by scholars of early modern science and literature.[51] Milton gets at this earlier when he speaks of rhetorical "knowledge in the making," a phrase which emphasizes how "human knowing is an active making, or *poesis*."[52] The figurative pair dramatically closes the gap between human and divine knowing: in the allegory of Osiris, Christ himself moulds and shapes the parts of Truth, though we participate in their

[51] See, e.g., Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.
[52] Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning*, 36.

collection; in the temple, we are both the pieces and the considerate builders. "Poetic" knowledge is dignified by the act of God, and then bestowed onto us as his co-labourers.

The figure of Truth itself works to unite poet, creator, and knowledge. When "Truth indeed came once into this world with her divine Master," she does so nearly tautologically, given Christ's claim to be the Way, *the Truth*, and the Light (Jn. 14:6), and the gospel of John's identification of Christ with the *logos* through whom all things are made (Jn. 1:1-18).[53] Truth resembles him also in her graphic execution. Yet in her dismemberment and consequent melancholy, she is closest to Orpheus, paragon of poets. The myth, as we know, haunted and excited Milton's imagination, and the parallels to Christ exist independently of Truth as mediator.[54] His ghostly presence here is nevertheless an attempted restitution through an alternative ending. If traditionally Orphic poetry as rhetoric fails to dissuade violence and cheat death, here it is allied to truth, whose "feature" is "immortal." Orpheus falls victim to barbarous dissonance; in this version, he will be brought together, "every joint and member." He loses his wife, but in his search for Eurydice, like the women at the empty grave, he is a sad friend of Truth who will live to see the resurrection of "our martyr'd Saint" (*CPW* 2:550).[55] In a sense, Milton's most hopeful revision is to reassert the power of convincement—to reject the premise that Orpheus must die every time, being so bold as to make re-membering conditional on the power of persuasion. This new Great Commission is an escalation of the stakes for knowledge, and consequently, for the necessity of working together.

The myth of Osiris alluded to by Milton itself captures the Orphic trifecta of knowledge, violence, and persuasion. Ernest Sirluck notes that the story as related in Plutarch's *Moralia* makes its

---

[53] Milton's "omnific Word" (*PL* 7.217) creates through speech—not *ex nihilo* but by arranging the vast abyss of chaos through language. His *Logos* thus retains the combined Johannine senses of "discourse," "reason," and "word."
[54] Rachel Falconer, *Orpheus Dis(re)membered: Milton and the Myth of the Poet-Hero* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 3–6 provides a concise overview of past discussions.
[55] Ibid., 19–20.

epistemological potential explicit (*CPW* 2:549*n*); the first-century scholar actively encourages an allegorical reading of the tale, starting off with an invented etymology of "Isis" from *oîda*, know, and making her search "the search for truth."[56] Even a casual reader of Plutarch's telling could have made the connection. But Milton is a more-than-casual reader who makes more-than-casual connections. At the centre of the myth is a deadly competition between two brothers, Osiris and Typhon, for the love of Isis their sister. Yet the more fundamental competition is between the brutality of Typhon, who breaks out of his mother's womb prematurely with a blow (355f), and the peaceful progress of Osiris, who at the start of his reign works "to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living" (356b). As it turns out, Osiris is an Orpheus figure even in life: "he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms, but most of the peoples he won over to his way by the charm of his persuasive discourse combined with song and all manner of music" (356b).[57] This is the Orphic ideal of moving and improving through art. Violence (Typhon) is weaker than rational and artistic discourse, and less attractive in the pursuit of knowledge (Isis). Plutarch's story thus dramatizes the ethical basis of Milton's epistemological enterprise.

Of course, the story Milton recounts takes place in the dismal in-between, after Osiris's campaign of reasoned advancement but before his eventual recollection. Having trapped Osiris in a chest, quite in contradiction of *Areopagitica*'s injunction against confining truth, "The *Aegyptian*

---

[56] Plutarch, *Moralia: Volume V*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 306 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 9, or 351e. Subsequent citations refer to this edition. Plutarch's record of the story differs from major Egyptian versions of the myth which Milton may or may not have had access to; it sure seems to be the version the poet has in mind (e.g., using the Greek name "Typhon" as opposed to the Egyptian "Set").

[57] According to Diodorus of Sicily, "Osiris was not warlike, nor did he have to organize pitched battles or engagements, since every people received him as a god because of his benefactions" (I.18.5). Nevertheless, in Diodorus he comes prepared with an army—a detail Plutarch feels free to omit. Cited from Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History: Volume 1*, trans. C. H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library 279 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

Typhon with his conspirators" hews his brother's body to pieces and scatters them to the four winds (*Moralia* 356c; *CPW* 2:549). The poet takes care to note that Typhon does not act alone, but in conscious conspiracy; the enemies of truth work in unison, just as in *Paradise Lost* "Devil with devil damned / Firm concord holds" (2.496–97). When Milton recalls "the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*," he means not only that the search was diligent or painstaking ("careful" *OED* 4), but that it was full of grief and care ("careful" *OED* 1). This is faithful to Plutarch, whose Isis "cut off one of her tresses and put on a garment of mourning" and "wandered everywhere at her wits' end" (*Moralia* 356e). The cumulative effect of these sorry details is to acknowledge the real loss of the event. It is no fortunate fall. As in so many origin stories of the classical world, the splintering of truth is the result of archetypal fratricide, with devastating consequences for the heirs of truth. Yet this story, at least, does not devolve into an endless cycle of accruing violence. Isis intervenes as an exemplar of peace to stop her son Horus from exacting deadly revenge on the vengeful Typhon; after some debate the crown is eventually determined by council of the gods (358de). Moreover, when Isis discovers Osiris's illegitimate son by Typhon's wife, she adopts him and he becomes Anubis, protector of all the gods (356f). Where "vast Typhœan rage" (*PL* 2.539) or the wrath of Juno might have perpetuated the division of her family, the somber wisdom of charity clears the way for resolution.

Milton could not expect his readers to supply all particulars of this intertext. Nevertheless, the story of epistemological fratricide shapes his own conception of the operation of knowledge and especially his call for "one generall and *brotherly* search after Truth" (2:554, emphasis added). The grisly image of a severed body captures the pathos of the present scenario, where destructive conflict has overshadowed constructive competition or outright collaboration. It offers at the same time a rare hope for the artist to overcome ignorance and the grave by participating in the divine reconstitution of truth. From "her Master's" eternal perspective, the retrieval of Truth is secure; "he

shall bring together every joynt and member, and *shall* mould them into an immortall feature." Yet from our perspective, things are not so sure. Milton himself is unsure in 1644 about whether England will take up the mantle he has adorned it with. The subjunctive mood expresses at once a vibrant hope and an uncertainty: "some grain of charity *might* win all these diligences to joyn… *could* we but forgoe…" (2:554; cf. 563). It remains entirely possible that "We can grow ignorant again, brutish, formall, and slavish," or that indeed "this iron yoke of outward conformity hath left a slavish print upon our necks" (2:559; 563–64). The plural "we," rare at the beginning of the treatise, is smattered across that final section dealing with the advancement of knowledge, as if in recognition that not even the poet who fashions himself a prophet can make truth come alive by himself.

Still, Milton gives himself the monumental task of convincing others of convincement—to impress with the force of reason a rationale for abandoning force. Acknowledging at the outset some "doubt of what will be the successe" (2:486), the poet presents a figurative argument for the many shapes of truth, each informed by the variety and difference he sees as crucial to the completion of knowledge. Rather than allowing that knowledge to coexist separately—or worse, be hoarded by some individual—he insists upon a logic of circulation, like a streaming fountain or a generous economy. Knowledge itself is characterized by intimacy rather than distance, and flexibility rather than rigidity. Finally, Milton makes an essentially ethical argument for collaboration and peaceful competition in its pursuit, making his case dependent not on strict necessity, but the power of persuasion. These elements, joined in his allegory of Osiris, reflect a somber daring about the capacity of reason and rhetoric to unite rather than divide. The advancement of learning proceeds in an artistic mode of joining like to like and fashioning differences into perfection. But as in any artistic endeavour which depends on mutual understanding, the threat of violence or failure remains. The two come together before the creation account in Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, by which time Milton knows what it is to be left searching alone, as if "Dismounted, on the Aleian field I fall / Erroneous,

there to wander and forlorn" (7.19–20). He will have lost some optimism in a general search, but not the conviction that truth—even vatic truth—requires speaker and listener, "I" and "thou":

> More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
> To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,
> On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
> In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
> And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
> Visitst my slumbers nightly, or when morn
> Purples the east: still govern thou my song,
> Urania, and fit audience find, though few. (7.24–31)

Having tried other forms of discourse and failed, in *Paradise Lost* Milton tries once again to reconstitute an audience of fellow labourers who may form a remnant of the friends of truth. Knowledge of self, nature, and God are yet within reach, even if it is not so simple as plucking and eating. In turning to verse, the poet leans deeper into the tentativeness of language to discover truth and change minds. It is a final, hopeful call to prove that he is "yet not alone," and knowledge is still in the making.

"This Great Conference to Know": Participatory Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*

John Dryden in his 1674 stage adaptation of Milton's epic makes explicit the epistemological questions that *Paradise Lost* raises only indirectly, giving them pride of place in the opening two scenes of *The State of Innocence*. In the first, Dryden's devils discuss man, the newer but inferior of God's creations. The problem with humans, according to Lucifer, is their captive soul, which, "pent in Flesh," impairs or impedes intellection: "We see what is; to Man Truth must be brought / By Sence, and drawn by a long Chain of thought" (I.1.149; 50–51). So Vinton A. Dearing detects in these lines "Locke's epistemology, perhaps, but also Milton's" (103*n*).[1] Subtlety is in even shorter supply in the second scene when, as William Kerrigan has pointed out, Adam "awakens a professional philosopher"[2]:

> What am I? or from whence? For that I am
> I know, because I think; but whence I came,
> Or how this Frame of mine began to be,
> What other Being can disclose to me?
> I move, I see; I speak, discourse, and know,
> Though now I am, I was not always so. (*State of Innocence* II.1.1–6)

[1] Citations are from John Dryden, *The State of Innocence, and Fall of Man*, in *The Works of John Dryden, Volume 12: Plays: Amboyna; The State of Innocence; Aureng-Zebe*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1695) was of course published after Dryden's play; Nicholas von Maltzahn more judiciously sees Hobbes in this "mechanist reaction to Milton's natural poetics" ("Dryden's Milton and the Theatre of Imagination," in *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Paul Hammond and David Hopkins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 33).

[2] William Kerrigan, "Milton's Place in Intellectual History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 265.

The play cannot be accused of capturing Milton's philosophy or the wonder of human intellection; indeed, that was not Dryden's goal.[3] Milton's Adam and Eve do awake with a nascent desire for knowledge, the latter "much wondering where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how" (*PL* 4.451–52), but thankfully, such "unexperienced thought" (4.457) does not lead to a rehearsal of the *cogito, ergo sum* as above. Nevertheless, the play shows that early readers of *Paradise Lost* recognized the poem's engagement with questions of knowing then in flux, and especially the debate about solitary knowledge discussed in the first chapter, whether the advancement of learning is best achieved alone or communally. Dryden's Raphael instructs Adam to "live happy, in thyself alone… To study Nature will thy time employ" (II.i.43, 45). Milton's Abdiel says "few sometimes may know, when thousands err" (*PL* 6.148). Should we therefore extend the logic of singularity and look to the lone individual for the truest and safest understanding?

In *Paradise Lost*, the answer must be no. The self-styled poet of singularity cannot in the end imagine a paradise of solitary contemplation—unlike Dryden, or Marvell.[4] Instead, Milton's epic enacts his ideal of communal knowledge through a series of conversations between poet and muse, God and human, woman and man. Even as he declares his ambition to justify the ways of God to men, the epic narrator admits epistemological insufficiency and pleads for divine aid: "Instruct me, for thou knowst; thou from the first/ Wast present" (*PL* 1.19–20). This commonplace of epic is transformed in later, more intimate invocations beyond an appeal to empiricism.[5] Milton's muse is friend as well as witness; hers are visitations, not apparitions. The clearest indication comes in Book

---

[3] For Diana Treviño Benet, the play was "Dryden's effort to throw Milton, prematurely, into the new mausoleum of literary history" ("The Genius of Every Age: Milton and Dryden," *Milton Studies* 57 [2016]: 266).

[4] Cp. Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," especially lines 41–48 and 57–64.

[5] Epic ambition assumes singularity, but also vital dependence. Thus Homer: "Tell me now, you Muses… / For you, who are goddesses, are there, and you know all things, / and we have heard only the rumour of it and know nothing" (*The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Richmond Lattimore [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971], 2.484–86).

7. Finding himself "In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude," his speaker is "yet not alone, while thou / Visitst my slumbers nightly" (7.27–29). It is that familiar second-person address of "I" and "Thou" that affords the poet escape and insight. Epistemologically threatened by "wisdom at one entrance quite shut out," he appeals to one who "with eternal wisdom didst converse" (3.50; 7.9). Knowledge for the speaker is thus presented as the fruit of conversation, not solitude, just as it was in the earlier poetry and prose.

Operating now within narrative, Milton can dramatize knowledge in the making. In this chapter, I will show how Adam and Eve's progressive understanding of themselves and the world around them happens through dialogue and shared presence—that is, through *conversation* (OED 7; OED 1). The ontology of *Paradise Lost* means that knowledge of God, nature, and self are linked, and the first humans are expected to learn through careful interaction with each other and the world around them—not in isolation, or by eating a magical fruit. Within the logic of a dynamic universe full of change and exchange, knowledge is not contained in a tree or an individual; instead, it is communicated and distributed throughout the entire scale of nature. The conditions for increasing in knowledge are thus similar to those of ontological improvement described by the angel Raphael: gradual, mutual engagement with creatures above and below, figured most often through the metaphor of eating. Crucially, the progression of such knowledge requires a recognition of difference—I am not you—alongside a willingness to share or "participate" in a greater body. This intimate and interpersonal ethic of knowing is the only alternative to the sterile and solipsistic knowledge of Satan, who is defined by sameness even as he makes himself radically "other." By indulging an envious zero-sum mentality towards knowledge, Satan exhibits the worst excesses of empiricist and rationalist philosophers, and excludes himself from the community of knowers until Eve and Adam fall with him into ignorance.

Conversational knowledge

The juxtaposition of Satan and Adam at the start of Dryden's play crystallizes a subtler contrast in *Paradise Lost* between competing modes of discovery. Although the first man and first devil never meet, they spend a good deal of their energies learning about each other and their worlds. The archfiend frames his journey to Paradise not just as the pursuit of revenge, but knowledge: "To search with wandering quest a place foretold…. this or aught / Than this more secret now designed, I haste / To know" (2.830; 2.837–39). We see Eden first through his eyes, in his nearly scientific mission "to learn / What creatures there inhabit, of what mould, / Or substance, how endued, and what their power," "to mark what of their state he more might learn," "with narrow search… [to] walk round /This garden, and no corner leave unspied (2.354–56; 4.400; 4.528–29). Alongside this pseudo-Baconian inquiry of knowledge for power's sake, Milton presents its pursuit for pleasure's sake in the human couple. Despite Eve's obvious capacity for "the fruit / Of that forbidden tree," (1.1–2), the epistemological contrast is most apparent in Adam. His discussion with Raphael in books 5–8 contains nearly all of the poem's explicit queries of knowledge. No less than Eve, he is paragon of innocent curiosity in Eden. And significantly, as the primary interlocutor in a discussion of things "human knowledge could not reach" with Raphael (7.75), he is our surrogate in Milton's quest to justify the ways of God to men. Indeed, Joanna Picciotto has argued that seventeenth-century thinkers more broadly converted "the original subject of innocence, Adam, into a specifically intellectual exemplar"; in *Paradise Lost* he is archetype of the public individual capable of knowledge.[6] He stands in for us as he does for Eve. It thus makes sense that Adam's experiences foreground a human alternative to Satan's epistemology of alienation.

---

[6] Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1; for the public Adam, see 471ff. and *passim*. The collaborative ethic Picciotto sees in Eden is fundamentally compatible with my understanding of the operation of knowledge in the poem, though I am rather less convinced that Eve fails to participate in this collective enterprise.

Although the comparison is suggested initially by circumstance—devil and man each wake to new surroundings, look up, then around, and resolve to learn more—the link is established by verbal echoes in key discussions surrounding knowledge. The two figures are continually seeking information from others. So, struck by a "desire to know…. how this world / Of heaven and earth conspicuous first began" (7.61–63), Adam inquires of Raphael

> if unforbid thou mayst unfold
> What we, not to explore the secrets ask
> Of his eternal empire, but the more
> To magnify his works, the more we know. (7.94–97)

This rationale, meant to ward off accusations of curiosity, is the same used by Satan dressed as fake cherub in Book 3. Hearing Satan's profession of good intent, Uriel accepts "thy *desire which tends to know* / *The works of God*, thereby *to glorify* / The great work-master" (3.694–96, emphasis added).[7] A darker and closer precedent is Satan's entreaty to the figures of Chaos and Night en route to Earth: "I come no spy, / With purpose *to explore* or to disturb / *The secrets of your realm*" (2.970–72). These echoes raise the spectre of Adam as intellectual intruder or speculator; indeed, with advice that could have been given to Satan, Raphael tells Adam to "Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there / Live, in what state, condition or degree" (8.175–76). Yet while Satan's exploits are rightly met with suspicion by critics and other characters,[8] Adam's innocent will to knowledge is rarely in doubt.

---

[7] For a discussion of changing Renaissance attitudes to curiosity, see Lorraine Daston, "Curiosity in Early Modern Science," *Word & Image* 11, no. 4 (1995): 391–404. Howard Schultz, *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1955), provides a terrific history of *curiositas* and vain philosophy but not a very generous reading of Raphael, whose instructions are based on Adam's present capacity for knowledge, which may of course change over time.

[8] E.g., David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 254, identifying Satan as pirate.

The difference is not their objective of knowledge, or even the tone or sincerity of their speech, important though those are.[9] Rather, it is their social context and motivation. Satan speaks to Uriel and Chaos as passing tourist-intruder, looking to extract information and move on to his target. Adam meets with Raphael "as friend with friend/ Convers[ing]"—spending the day together, eating and chatting. The angel comes for Adam's sake, yes, but he is "pleased with thy words no less than thou with mine" (5.229–30; 8.248). Significantly, while God, Adam, Eve, Raphael, and Wisdom are all said to "converse," Satan never does, because the sense of the word operative in *Paradise Lost* is often that of mutual presence, to "keep company" (*OED* 2). He is constantly moving, never belonging, never settling, placeless. Such motion also coincides with his isolation, a consequence of his demand that "this enterprise, / None shall partake with me" (2.465–66). Paul Hammond observes that "The narrative of *Paradise Lost* begins with Satanic solitude";[10] by ensuring that he undertakes "This uncouth errand sole" (*PL* 2.827), the devil cements his role as prototypical solitary knower for the rest of the poem.[11] Yet such knowledge is untenable, so this great explorer is twice forced into the awkward position of asking for directions. In his bid to secure a truce with Chaos and Night, he partially admits his insufficiency: "Alone, and without guide, half lost," he requires them to "direct my course" (2.975, 2.980). Arriving in our solar system, he again must defer to another's knowledge, but not before providing a reason why he comes "Alone thus wandering" (3.667). This might seem an extraneous detail, were it not that Uriel acknowledges the cherub's

---

[9] "Nothing could be further in tone and mood from the graceful amplification of Adam's bold humility," according to John Leonard, "Language and Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 138. For C. S. Lewis, no one "who takes the poem seriously will doubt whether, in real life, Adam or Satan would be the better company. Observe their conversation" (*A Preface to Paradise Lost* [1942; reis., London: Oxford University Press, 1961], 101).

[10] Paul Hammond, *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

[11] When the word "alone" is used in the sense of isolation in the first four books, it describes Satan ten out of thirteen times. Frequently the word appears in contexts of knowing or learning, as in the Argument to book 2: "their doubt who should be sent on this difficult search: Satan their chief undertakes alone the voyage" (2.*argument*).

rationale for leaving his "empyreal mansion thus alone" (3.699), or that, Satan undisguised, the question will be posed to him by Gabriel: "But wherefore thou alone?" (4.917). Stripped of connection to place or person, Satan's "conversation" amounts to disguised interrogation or, in the case of Chaos and Night, promise of mutual interest which he nevertheless betrays.[12]

This lack of "conversation" or belonging portends a fundamentally epistemological problem. Satan is hurled from heaven headlong to bottomless perdition, "there to dwell" (1.45, 47), but instead of dwelling there, he journeys in quick succession through chaos, the edge of this pendant world, Earth and its Paradise, and then back to Hell. As Stephen M. Fallon first suggested,[13] Satan excuses his dislocation by indulging a Cartesian fantasy: "What matter where, if I still be the same?" (1.256). The matter, so to speak, is one of grave error, ontological then epistemological. First, Milton's universe rejects the strict mind-body dualism of Cartesian philosophy. "The mind is its own place," Satan declares, "and in itself /Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (1.254–55). But of course, despite thinking himself a native of heaven, the devil cannot think himself back to heaven. He does not really believe what he says, or else he would not have left hell at all. Second, the fantasy Satan selectively indulges comes at great cost to his ability to know the world or himself. If the mind is own place, it is abstracted from all other places and persons. It can sustain no relation with them. Thus, when he calls, "thou profoundest hell / Receive thy new possessor" (1.251–52), he is being philosophically inconsistent but morally consistent: with no tie to Hell, he can lay no claim to it; because he has no relation to it, he can treat it as poorly as he wants, as indeed he does when the devils open "a spacious wound" into its side (1.689).

His metaphysics open an even greater gap between subject and object, threatening solipsism, a prison of knowing. Descartes' contemporaries understood all too well that the separation of mind

---

[12] Instead of expanding their territory, in *PL* 10.231–33 hell-flame now encroaches "far into chaos," and "disparted chaos" rages against the bridge newly built by Sin and Death (10.415–18).
[13] Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 203–206.

from body created a gulf also between one person's mind and everyone else's; *I* think, but that doesn't mean *you* are. All that prevents the Cartesian subject from collapsing into solipsism is a delicate argument about the existence and benevolence of a God who would not let our senses deceive us. Milton does not present us with a Cartesian skeptic unwilling to trust his senses—Satan has in fact been accused of exactly the opposite[14]—but in his inability to move beyond the prison of his mind, he realizes the worst solipsistic nightmare: "within him hell / He brings, and round about him, nor from hell / One step more than from himself can fly / By change of place" (4.20–23). Ken Hiltner puts it well: "Satan has indeed separated himself from all place – but the placeless state he occupies is Hell itself."[15] As a result, for much of the poem, despite his many speeches, he is left conversing only with himself.

If the devil comes to stand for solitary inquiry, Adam and Eve serve as Milton's exemplars of communal knowing. This has especially to do with their middle place in a dynamic scale of nature and their reliance on discourse for knowledge in both directions of that scale, up and down. For Milton, "God all-seeing" is the very definition of omniscience and perfect intellection, seeing across time and outside of it (10.6; 3.78). He speaks, but he does so for pleasure, as in Book 8, or for the sake of his angels.[16] Following theological tradition, these angels in turn possess "intuitive" knowledge, supposed to be instant and private as vision, as Latin *intueri*, "to look upon," suggests (*OED*, s.v.). Dryden's Lucifer accordingly brags about their ability to just "see what is," while human reason "must issue by discourse" (*Innocence* I.1.148–49). In *Paradise Lost*, however, intuitive

---

[14] See, e.g., Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers*, 216ff.

[15] Ken Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22. Hiltner is especially attuned to the moral consequences of Satan's subjectivist position: "Once the rift between subject and object is opened, every-*thing* other than the Self is seen as just that – a thing to have and possess."

[16] Thomas N. Corns, *Regaining Paradise Lost* (London: Longman, 1994), 16, 17: "Characteristically, in conversation, we try not to tell people what they already know, nor, except rhetorically, do we ask questions when we know the answers." But because angels are not omniscient, God speaks with the Son in precisely this manner "for the edification and understanding of the inhabitants of heaven."

knowledge is different from discursive only "in degree, of kind the same" (5.490). Just as God's omniscience includes intuition, the angelic intuition includes discourse, real discussion[17]—witness the heavenly counsels, the debate between Abdiel and Satan, and discussions between Uriel and Gabriel, Gabriel and Satan.[18] Humans, by design, learn mostly by discourse with God, with angels, with each other. However, they also come to know through their human version of literal "intuition": physically going to look upon something, "In contemplation of *created things*" (5.511, emphasis added). Adam and Eve ascend intellectually by conversing in both ontological directions. And no wonder, for Earth's created things attain knowledge after their own kind. "The parsimonious emmet" is "provident / Of future" (7.485–86), while flocking birds "more wise / In common, ranged in figure wedge their way, / Intelligent of seasons" (7.425–27). In a massive departure from Cartesian mechanism, God himself asserts the existence of animal "language and their ways[;] they also know, / And reason not contemptibly" (8.373–74).[19] Just as Cartesian dualism separates knower from thing known, Milton's animist monism unites all creatures within a spectrum of mutual knowing.

In a universe premised on ontological change and exchange, the first humans uniquely represent the necessity of "conversation" in its full array of signification: mutual presence, dialogue, and even physical intimacy. Nowhere is this clearer than Book 8, where natural discursiveness and ontological interconnectedness form the basis of the first human intelligence. Adam, recently dust, is born into a living masterwork of concatenated sustenance:

---

[17] See Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 312: In Milton, "angelic speech is not a metaphor…they speak to man, and to each other, and when they do, their converse is not simply a turning towards illumination, but material sociability."
[18] The link between intuition and discourse is so fluid, in fact, that at no point does an angel explicitly intuit knowledge, and yet at one point a human is given "sudden apprehension" (8.354). Perhaps Raphael's awkward prognostication of risible human astronomy counts as intuition (8.77–86), or his apparent knowledge of human cannons in describing heavenly ones (6.501–06).
[19] Absence of language and reason are the precisely the foundation of Descartes' argument that animals are machines in *Discourse on the Method*, Part V.

As new waked from soundest sleep

Soft on the flowery herb I found me laid

In balmy sweat, which with his beams the sun

Soon dried, and on the reeking moisture fed. (8.253–56)

Nearness characterizes his first acts of intellection, not distance: Adam *feels* the soft grassy bed beneath him before he gazes at the sky above him, as Timothy M. Harrison has recently observed.[20] Yet even at a distance, the sun with its rays forms a proximal, symbiotic relationship with the first man. It lends him physical orientation and enables his vision, while Adam's balmy sweat and reeking moisture feed the sun in turn, which with its light nourishes the flowery herb upon which he rests.[21]

Thus far, Adam is passive, acted upon, as reflected in his careful syntax: "As new waked… I found me laid" (8.253–54). But this natural receptivity is part of a give-and-take, the same shown in conversation with Raphael when the angel finished the story of creation: "Adam stood fixed to hear" until, "*as new waked*," he is able to reply (8.4, emphasis added). So now, under the light of his hungry unabashed orb, Milton's first man "gazed a while the ample sky, till raised / By quick instinctive motion up I sprung" (8.258–59), enacting what Moloch only claims for the devils, "that in our proper motion we ascend" (2.75). When round he throws his grateful eyes, he sees not "darkness visible," but a gorgeous landscape teeming with creatures "that lived, and moved, and walked, or flew"; "all things smiled" (1.63; 8.264–65). This first act of wondering observation is quite literally intuitive. Yet as a second act of affective knowledge, it shares with the former the intimacy of mutual knowing, registered in "the near identity between Adam's emotional response and the

[20] Timothy M. Harrison, *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 45. Harrison's is an excellent reading of Adam's felt or "affective orientation towards knowledge" and his "embodied feeling" overall (47).

[21] This is in fact a continuation of the relationship Adam (earth) had with the sun, since "the sun that light imparts to all, receives / From all his alimental recompense / In humid exhalations" (5.423–25). The image is of new clay, freshly formed.

world affecting him."[22] All things smiled, and so does he; it is as if the pleasure of creation itself awakens and alerts him to his own joy, and thus himself (8.267). Only now is Adam aware of Adam and driven to self-knowledge, as Milton details: "Myself I *then* perused, and limb by limb / Surveyed" (8.267–68, emphasis added). Moving beyond speculation, he experiments with his body, "and sometimes went, and sometimes ran / With supple joints" (8.268–69), enacting *discursus* ("running off in different directions"; *OED* "discourse," s.v.). He is not now the earth, nor the sun, nor the creatures, but a separate something able to initiate exploration of his own with eye and foot.

Eye and foot and intuitive reason are insufficient, however, for a satisfactory self-understanding. Adam discovers his first ignorance shortly after discovering himself: "But who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not" (8.270–71). This is a critical juncture in the earliest intellectual history. Every response is telling. Adam the rationalist, Dryden's original Cartesian man, moves into ratiocination, which in drama is soliloquy. This takes the form of repeated question and answer by the same person, the illusion of conversation. In *The State of Innocence* as in *Paradise Lost* Adam begins by asking what he is, but he precludes an answer with the cogito. Then: "But whence I came, / Or how this Frame of mine began to be, / What other Being can disclose to me?" (II.1.2–4)? Yet, as with many a discussant at an academic conference, this is more of a comment than a question. He does not wait even a full line before he asserts his own existence: "*I* move, *I* see; *I* speak, discourse, and know, / Though now *I* am, *I* was not always so" (*Innocence* II.1.5–6; emphasis added). There was never going to be a response, because this is a deliberative question, not an open one. When he asks "what other being can disclose" his origins, the implied answer is "no one," and

[22] Harrison, *Coming To*, 46. Michael Schoenfeldt in a different context sees "a deliberate internalizing of environmental settings, which results in a robust environmental affinity among Adam, Eve, and the Garden" ("How Gardens Feel," in *Geographies of Embodiment in Early Modern England*, ed. Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020], 27). Yet Schoenfeldt also argues that "In Milton's universe, there is no fully bounded self; all humans can do is manage the inevitable environmental osmosis that both threatens and sustains them" (28).

indeed he like Descartes seems to need no one before he intuits the existence of a "Pow'r Divine," ontologically anterior and so superior: "Of thee I am; and what I am is thine!" (II.1.4; 11-12). Raphael, Dryden's stand-in for Milton's more personal God, descends almost superfluously just as this conclusion is drawn to congratulate him: "Well hast thou reason'd" (II.1.15)! And maybe he has reasoned well, in a play where solitary knowledge is privileged over communal.

In response to his lack of self-knowledge, Milton's Adam also speaks. Yet his very first words are addressed, not to some indeterminate absence, but someone in particular: "*Thou* sun" (*PL* 8.273, emphasis added). This familiar second-person singular vocative address performs the act of knowing even as it relates its conditions, for Adam's understanding requires a familiar second person like the "fair light" whose beams just lapped his sweat. He begins with what he knows—the sun, "And thou enlightened earth"—and earnestly seeks further knowledge from all that he has seen:

> Ye hills and dales, ye rivers, woods, and plains,
> And ye that live and move, fair creatures, tell,
> Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?
> Not of myself; by some great maker then,
> In goodness and in power pre-eminent;
> Tell me, how may I know him, how adore,
> From whom I have that thus I move and live,
> And feel that I am happier than I know. (8.272–82)

This at last is discursive reason: private understanding seeking an external interlocutor, operating from a position of familiarity. Adam knows instinctively the names of parts of the natural landscape (at least, "Whate'er I saw" [8.273]). He reasons *a priori* from his existence and happiness that a benevolent power has made him. Yet he does not know who that power is, nor did he witness his

creation. And thus, having identified a kinship with his audience—they "live and move," just as he "move[s] and live[s]" (8.276; 8.281)—he reaches out, expecting an answer: "tell, / Tell…. Tell me."

In a poem other than *Paradise Lost*, Adam's heartfelt inquiries might be regarded as the naïve appeals of a child to a butterfly, unscientific anthropomorphism ("all things smiled"?), or else poetic license taking the form of apostrophe. In this poem, where a creating voice fashions an alert, animate universe, no such judgement can be made.[23] Fallon again has described how "Milton borrows from conventional poetic tropes" when he talks of weeping trees and murmuring streams, yet literalizes them by enduing all creatures with varying degrees of spirit and will.[24] Were the hills and dales and rivers watching when Adam was created? The sky was watching when Adam and Eve fell and "some sad drops / Wept at completing of the mortal sin" (9.1002–3). Even after having spent much time with animals, Eve is not sure whether they are in fact mute or incapable of human sense, "for in their looks / Much reason, and in their actions oft appears" (9.558–59). It is thus entirely reasonable for Adam to expect answers of his fellow creatures about God and learn from them how to adore him. He will indeed return the favour when the entire landscape is "Made vocal by my song, and taught [God's] praise" in echoing his matins (5.204).[25]

As Karen Edwards demonstrates, by the time of that morning prayer there is real growth in Adam's knowledge of the creatures and landscape whose help he petitions at first meeting.[26] Moreover, he understands that each part of creation declares and adores God in its own way: in the

---

[23] The poem is thus an interesting case study for what Martin Buber called an "I–Thou" relationship, which emphasize mutuality and the soft erasure of subjective boundaries. Within "I–It", a subject adopts the attitude of use and experience towards the other. See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970). For Paul Hammond, a malign version of the latter attitude defines Satan's selfhood altogether (*Milton's Complex Words*, 261).
[24] Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers*, 199.
[25] Cp. Virgil, Eclogue 10.8: "*non canimus surdis, respondent omnia silvae*" (we sing to no deaf ears; the woods echo every note). Citations are from Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, ed. G. P. Goold, *LCL* 63 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[26] Karen L. Edwards, *Milton and the Natural World: Science and Poetry in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 64–66.

climb and fall of the sun, in lunar luminescence and diminution, planetary waltz, elemental mélange, misty libation, earthy satiation, airy exhalation, arboreal wave, avian descant, finny drift, faunal gait, and critterly crawl (5.170–204). They speak to and about God, Adam overhearing. But when first he wakes he cannot hear their praise, nor do they answer his initial question, "how came I thus, how here?" For Edwards, Adam answers himself ("by some great maker, then"), and in any case silence is an answer that instructs the would-be knower to "embrace a process of seeking, a practice of reading [nature]."[27] That may be so, but it is not how Adam experiences it. He asks specifically how he arrived *here*, at *this* place, and his response to silence is to quit his empiricist and discursive search: "when answer none returned, / On a green shady bank profuse of flowers / Pensive I sat me down" (8.285–87). Adam has to this point gained knowledge in reciprocity, touching and seeing and smiling. The lack of answer or correspondence is a shock—and a direct contrast to Eve, who enjoys "answering looks," even if misguided, and a voice who hears and addresses her "wondering[s]" (5.464; 5.451).[28] He turns to solitary contemplation only as a last resort, when conversation is unavailable and experience proves no guide.

Given the thrust of mid-century retirement poetry, Adam's resort—"on a green shady bank profuse of flowers / Pensive I sat me down"—is less pleasurable than might be expected and more ominous than initially appears. For Andrew Marvell, retreat from gorgeous garden into imaginative contemplation is the climax of paradise: "the mind, from pleasures less, / Withdraws into its

---

[27] Ibid., 64, 65.

[28] See Maura Josephine Smyth, "Narrating Originality in *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 53, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 145: "In not allowing him to view the one thing in his environment capable of giving him comforting looks—his face—Milton denies Adam answers." Naturally, Milton (or his God) deny Adam a friendly face only until the creation of Eve. For Seth Lobis, this non-response is a troubling moment of broken sympathy (*The Virtue of Sympathy: Magic, Philosophy, and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 133.

happiness.… Annihilating all that's made / To a green thought in a *green shade*."[29] *Paradise Lost* rewards no such withdrawal. Adam's movement toward innocent seclusion instead portends ignorance. In wandering to a "shady bank" (8.286), he ceases communication with the sun and his original earth, first fonts of wisdom. Indeed, a "shady bank, / Thick overhead with verdant roof embowered" is exactly where he, fruit-drunk, later leads Eve to romp, away from the garish eye of day (9.1037–38).[30] So too does his posture threaten ignorance. Milton has just taught us to associate moral and intellectual agency with the act of rising "by quick instinctive motion"; by sitting, Adam allows a return to passivity and, by extension, a forsaken pursuit of knowledge. (He soon thinks he is "passing to my former state / Insensible" [8.290–91].) The word "pensive" might offer some intellectual reprieve here, except, given Adam's perceived rejection, it also registers *OED* 1's sense of "gloomy, sad, melancholy."[31] And most troubling is the sum of these words, which together constitute yet another echo of evil knowledge: Sin's moment of original solitude at hell's gate, where "Pensive here I sat / Alone" (2.777–78).

Harrison is right to pursue an explanation for this odd coupling and to require that "any answer must address the word that binds Sin to Adam: 'Pensive.'" Yet we can only dismiss pensive gloom and decide that "in these passages [the word] comes closer to the more general sense: 'full of thought; meditative, reflective'" if we miss Milton's longstanding reservations towards solitary knowledge, starting from the late 1630s and continuing into *Paradise Lost*. Unfortunately, it is unlikely

---

[29] "The Garden," lines 41–42, 47–48, emphasis added. Citations are from *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. ed. (London: Pearson Longman, 2007). Marvell's shade is the bucolic *umbra* of Virgilian pastoral (e.g., *Eclogue* 9.20), but Milton's complicated usage tracks Virgil's own wariness of shade in Eclogues 1 and 10, *Georgics* 4, and *Aeneid* 6 and 12. For the latter, see Elena Theodorakopoulos, "Closure and the Book of Virgil," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 237–38.

[30] As in Book 8, the two fall asleep in the shade. Cp. also 9.1084–90, where Adam desperately wishes to be covered by the trees and "In solitude live savage" (with a pun on etymon *sylva*).

[31] This first definition is far more common in the Renaissance than it is today. It is the primary sense in Spenser, whose Una waits "In pensive plight, and sad perplexitie" (*FQ* I.viii.26). The suitor of *Amoretti* 34, meanwhile, wanders "comfortlesse, / In secret sorow and sad pensiveness" (13–14).

that Adam is happily contemplating his own happiness, "thoughtfully consider[ing] the meaning of his condition, the possible explanations behind his coming to 'feel that I am happier than I know.'"[32] Instead, this is a moment of failed conversation and frustrated knowledge—the first occasion of his undesired solitude and likely instigator of the discussion with God that follows. It is perhaps this very moment that Adam recalls just before the Fall, when he is unwilling to "forgo / [Eve's] sweet converse.… To live *again* in these wild woods forlorn" (9.908–10, emphasis added). Yet I do not say that "pensive" here precludes thinking altogether, as when Lycidas evokes the "cowslips wan that hang the pensive head" ("Lycidas" 147). This is not an either/or situation, nor is it often. In "The Passion," the speaker's "soul in holy vision sit[s] / In pensive trance, and anguish," combining the two meanings (41–42), as does the "Pensive nun" of "Il Penseroso," whose eyes are "sad leaden downward cast" (31; 43). The only other appearance of the word in *Paradise Lost* describes "the ascent of that steep savage hill / Satan had journeyed on, pensive and slow" (4.172–73): clearly not a moment of philosophical reflection, but at least ostensibly an allegorical pursuit of knowledge, as ascents often are. Considering Adam's remaining narrative and Milton's other usages, then, Adam's phrase records a moment of conversational unrest rather than contemplative repose.

This interpretation makes better sense of Sin's description, too. Her harrowing narrative informs Adam's origin story by lexical proximity, offering a hellish contrast in solitary knowledge:

> Pensive here I sat
> Alone, but long I sat not, till my womb
> Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown
> Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes. (2.777–80)

Steven Knapp finds the first line "the oddest detail in this passage, the one most difficult to reconcile with continuous allegory," because "her moment of speculative leisure endows her with an

[32] Harrison, *Coming To*, 40–41.

empirical consciousness wholly inexplicable in allegorical terms."[33] But is this a moment of speculative leisure? Knapp and Harrison themselves provide reasons why it is hard to imagine Sin the philosopher, and Occam's razor would have us simply cut the intellectual definition of *OED* 2 and leave the others: this tormented allegorical figure, born of her father's head, subject to incest and then tossed down from heaven, is "gloomy, sad, or melanchol[ic]" (*OED* 1), or else "anxious as to plans and future events; apprehensive" (*OED* 3). It is in fact her posture of sitting which supports a cognitive reading, for evil figures in *Paradise Lost* are frequently sitting in their philosophizing. So when Beelzebub calls for a champion in the demonic counsel, "all sat mute, / Pondering the danger with deep thoughts" (2.420–21), and while some devils later pass the time in song, "Others apart sat on a hill retired, / In thoughts more elevate," though in "false philosophy" (2.557–58; 2.565).[34] These subtle disputations at least "could charm / Pain for a while or anguish" (2.566–67), but Sin in her isolation finds gloom in her thought, torture in company.

The tortured abstraction of sterile, repetitive, and undifferentiated thought, Sin is a sign portentous of isolated woe, pensive aloneness that, through echo, threatens to consume Adam and the narrator of *Paradise Lost*. For she connects the conditions of the poem's composition—he "In darkness, and with dangers compassed round," she "With terrors and with clamours compassed round"—to Milton's longstanding fear that he like Adam will call out to an unresponsive audience.[35] As an Ovidian double of author and Athena, goddess of wisdom, she represents from the chest up the possibility of knowledge. Yet Maggie Kilgour also notes the dark underbelly of the allusion: a

---

[33] Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 138.

[34] The association of hellish thought with sitting is highlighted by its contrary: while the devils "all sat mute," in the corresponding moment in Book 3 "all the heavenly choir *stood* mute" (3.217, emphasis added). In a rare moment of angelic ratiocination, sharp-sighted Uriel "stand[s]" on the sun, seemingly "fixed in cogitation deep" (3.622; 3.629).

[35] Less noted is the repetition of rhythm, word ("clamour"), and rhyme ("-ound") later in the invocation, Orpheus bringing rocks "To rapture, till the savage clamour drowned" his music (7.36).

web of envy, threatening to consume artist or replace him with mere copy—the lowest form of knowledge.[36] In her fecundity Sin holds the promise of "the teeming womb of Truth," irrepressible in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (*CPW* 2:224). Yet she, with "many a scaly fold / Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed / With mortal sting," also resembles "error… a blind and serpentine body" born to Custom and prone to repeating the past (*PL* 2.651–53; *CPW* 2:223). Sin reproduces the wicked carnal knowledge of incest in perpetuity, set in motion by Satan's foul advances and repeated by Death. She cannot but recreate, so dismal similarity and repetition characterize her life and offspring: "hell hounds never ceasing," "hourly conceived / And hourly born, with sorrow infinite… That rest and intermission none I find" (2.254; 2.796–97; 2:802). Death, which might deliver finality, withholds it, knowing "His end with mine involved" (2.807). Moreover, as the child of parthenogenesis, one sole parent, Sin can generate only deformed, solipsistic knowledge. Without the possibility of difference and differentiation, her first progeny is shapeless and insubstantial—the antithesis of Descartes' "clear and distinct" ideas.[37] Finally, like Adam with the animals, she assigns a name suitable to her son's nature, but her discursiveness collapses into recursiveness: "I fled, and cried out Death; / Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed / From all her caves, and back resounded Death" (2.787–89). The echo chamber of hell, a dungeon of the mind, then traps thought and speech until they devolve into the ceaseless cries of her offspring.[38]

---

[36] See Maggie Kilgour, *Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially 272–278, and 165–213 for narcissistic self-knowledge.

[37] Death is *clear* insofar as he is conspicuous, but "shape ha[ving] none / Distinguishable" (2.667–68), he is not sufficiently *distinct* so as to avoid perceptual confusion. The most direct description of Descartes' terms is *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), translated in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), 1:207.

[38] For the importance of verbal difference in Milton, see R. A. Shoaf, *Milton, Poet of Duality: A Study of Semiosis in the Poetry and the Prose*, 2nd ed. (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1993). The poet's very wordplay in introducing Sin as sign supports Shoaf's thesis.

In Satan and Sin, Milton provides two extremities of false knowledge, the one premised on radical distance bordering on alienation, the other borne of reductive similarity. Both are fruits of solitariness, mental (Satan) and ontological (Sin). Between these extremities but far away from solitude is the knowledge of difference, which requires the conversation of mutual presence and dialogue, so important to Adam's early moments. Difference, as I have suggested in previous chapters, is the pleasurable core of Milton's epistemology and a requirement for the progression of knowledge. Yet as in his previous works, in *Paradise Lost* difference is viewed from the side of similarity; all things are pieces of a greater whole, working their way up to unity through a gradual process. Satan's failure to know comes most often by perceiving difference in razor-sharp opposition: the liberty-loving rebels against the servile ministering spirits; heaven-born powers against "a creature formed of earth…. Exalted from so base original" (9.149–50). Sin and especially her son Death fail to distinguish at all, devouring all apace: "To me, who with eternal famine pine, / Alike is hell, or Paradise, or heaven, / There best, where most with ravin I may meet" (10.597–99). In the world of the poem, however, knowledge and created things each exist within bounds, and yet can move beyond them over time. Recognition of difference itself leads to differentiation.

Although many critics have rightly understood Adam's first task as one of differentiation, Christopher Koester has recently and admirably demonstrated that Adam's early experience of solitude is crucial for his developing understanding of himself and of difference itself.[39] Our first parent, in this reading, encounters solitude *as* difference when he calls out to the creatures for explanation and receives none; "Adam is forced to confront for the first time the somewhat

[39] Christopher Koester, "Solitude and Difference in Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 57 (2016): 155–184. Having written a master's thesis on solitude and Milton in 2014, before Koester's 2015 dissertation was available, I am grateful for the new conversation his work occasions, similar and different though it is to mine. For an alternative reading of difference and identity, by way of Eve's awakening, see Marshall Grossman, *Authors Unto Themselves: Milton and the Revelation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68–90.

disconcerting fact that he is not like them." Moreover, although Adam is born different from the animals, it takes "a prolonged, rigorous, and solitary introduction to the concept of difference" to help him acquire the self-knowledge that makes him human.[40] The first of these arguments is sure, though I suspect Adam's failed conversation is more than somewhat disconcerting. The second, it seems to me, is challenged by Koester's own excellent reading of the knowledge gained "with the help of the master educator, God." For Adam does *not* gain his differential self-understanding in contemplative solitude, but in literal, waking conversation (8.309–10). The moment of pensive sitting is interrupted, as Eve's lake-gazing is interrupted, by a dream during which he is moved to Paradise only to find "Before mine eyes all real, as the dream / Had lively shadowed," and then from among the trees the appearance of "Presence divine" (8.310–14). Sin's brief pensive solitude is ended by her own literal conceptions; Adam's, by the one who conceived him and makes him to conceive his mate.

What follows is a conversation about conversation in conversation. The trick, as John Leonard points out, is for Adam to learn to distinguish between the many meanings of this word.[41] It is a conversation in that God tenderly shares Adam's presence—at one point taking him "by the hand" as Adam will do with Eve, and at another "rear[ing]" him up from bowed adoration (8.300; 8.316). It is also a conversation in that God and man exchange words and ideas—a discussion featuring real thought and movement, with each paying careful attention to what the other says. Their discussion combines the two meanings and centres, initially, around the word Adam brings up: "But with me / I see not who partakes. In *solitude* / What happiness…?" (8.364–65, emphasis added). God, perhaps gesturing at a nearby elephant, playfully challenges his definition; "what callst thou solitude"? (8.369). Through a series of questions and hypotheticals, the Presence divine draws

[40] Koester, "Solitude and Difference," 162, 163.
[41] John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 30–31.

out Adam's real desire: not just company, which he amply has, but "fellowship.… fit to participate / All rational delight"—that is, *conversation* of the type he is presently engaged in (8.389–91; *OED* 7). In short order, Adam moves beyond solitude to describe mutual society, divine sufficiency, and (most impressively) God's ability to raise his creatures into himself (8.429–432). None of this higher knowledge, higher even than that instinctive grasp of animal natures (8.438), is possible here without divine interpolation or Adam's own discursive reason. None of it happens in solitude.

Consider for a moment that God is easily able to "enlighten" the archangel Michael with instant knowledge of unrealized human history (11.113–15) and endue Adam with "sudden apprehension" of beast, fish, and fowl (8.352–54). The decision to teach Adam discursively the importance of rational discourse is then deliberate. Capacity for this uniquely personal mode of knowledge is in fact the defining feature of divine image-bearers, acknowledged as such at the end of God and Adam's conversation:

> Thus far to try thee, Adam, I was pleased,
> And find thee knowing not of beasts alone,
> Which thou hast rightly named, but of thyself,
> Expressing well the spirit within thee free,
> My image, not imparted to the brute,
> Whose fellowship therefore unmeet for thee
> Good reason was thou freely shouldst dislike. (8.437–43)

In *Areopagitica* Milton says he "who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image" (*CPW* 2:492). Yet already in this conversation God has said that animals have their own kinds of reason and language (*PL* 8.372–74); if his image is not imparted to the brute, it cannot merely refer to those things. Instead, the image of God consists in that peculiarly *discursive* reason that he and Milton are so fond of. The key phrase here is "expressing well," which praises Adam's knowledge in artistic as

well as theological terms. The first human reveals his godlikeness in his elegant repartee with his maker, one that God has clearly enjoyed (8.368; 8.398; 8.437). Raphael at the start of Book 8 is similarly pleased with Adam's discourse, praising his eloquent tongue: "for God on thee / Abundantly his gifts hath also poured / Inward and outward both, his image fair" (8.219–21). A rational, eloquent tongue is then the gift of divine image. Its purpose is not just intellection, but pleasure, which is why Adam unprompted insists on happiness—and someone with whom to "partake" or "participate" in it.

This pleasurable knowledge of shared discursive reason bridges what would be otherwise cosmic gaps in creaturely relation. Critical emphasis on the intimidating disparity between Adam and God I think understates God's inclination towards and capacity for discourse. Thomas H. Luxon finds "there can be no true friendship between the Creator and his creature, only a radical inequality that makes friendship impossible, even irrelevant." Even Koester, for whom friendship is enhanced by difference-in-likeness and who retains hope for some unspecified friendship, agrees with Luxon that "God is too different, his alterity too great for Adam to comprehend."[42] The problem for these readings is that Adam and God *are* friends in Milton's own telling, and they comprehend each other quite clearly. Thus the Miltonic narrator bemoans the loss of "talk where God or angel guest / With man, as with his friend, familiar used / To sit indulgent" (9.1–3), and, despite Luxon's claim that "gods enjoy solitude and need no friends," in Book 10 God is by his own admission "Not pleased, thus entertained with solitude" (10.105).[43] Such readings occur when we take seriously Adam's claim that human thoughts fall short of "The height and depth of [God's] eternal ways" (they do), but not his claim that God "by conversing" "Canst raise thy creature to what height thou wilt / Of union or

[42] Thomas H. Luxon, *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 165; Koester, "Solitude and Difference," again 165.
[43] Luxon, *Simple Imperfection*, 163.

communion, deified" (8.413; 8.432; 8.430–31). The former is a commonplace of Christian epistemology. The latter is a uniquely Miltonic emphasis.[44]

Understanding this dynamic is important also to understanding Milton's God, who is not austere and solitary, but concerned with his own pleasure. He is sufficiently possessed of happiness precisely because he does seek social communication, "impart[ing]" his image divine of discursive expression to angels and men and especially his Son (8.441). It makes sense that a poet who values individual expression conceives of such a God. Recognition of difference, "I" and "thou," is the foundation of dialogic conversation; Milton's God and Son are sufficiently differentiated that their verbal expression varies, and their dialogue is genuine (God is not talking to himself). Yet they share enough in common to take pleasure in the speech of the other and even adopt it. Milton wonderfully dramatizes this in the evolution of divine speech in the poem. Omniscience is in full force at the beginning of the Book 3 council of heaven when the Father prophesies how and why man will fall. This is God as most readers remember him, speaking in syllogism and rhetorical question, and prompting Alastair Fowler to conclude, "The Father speaks with the closed hand of logic, the Son with the open hand of rhetoric" (3.144*n*). And yet the Son as full expression of the Father, his omnific Word, activates God's discursive mode. As if learning from the Son, God's language becomes increasingly rhetorical.[45] He answers the Son's hyperbaton—"That be from thee far, / That far be from thee" (3.153–54)—with polyptoton and epistrophe ("To pray, repent, and

---

[44] As Philippa Earle, "'Till Body Up to Spirit Work': Maimonidean Prophecy and Monistic Sublimation in *Paradise Regained*," *Milton Studies* 62 (2020): 162, suggests, for Maimonides the limits of human intellection are considerably high. Milton's relative optimism in this respect may indeed influenced by non-Christian sources, though the doctrine of participation, as below, is another possibility.

[45] See also Samuel Fallon, "Milton's Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in *Paradise Lost*," *English Literary History* 79, no. 1 (2012): 44: "The Father's response [in Book 3] marks a new beginning with a suddenly more fluid language.… the Father is now unmistakably responsive to his particular situation, to his interlocutor, and to his wider audience. The exchange of speeches has finally become a dialogue."

bring obedience due. / To prayer, repentance, and obedience due" [3.190–91]). He is dancing to the sound of words by the time he commissions Raphael

> To respite [Adam's] day-labour with repast,
> Or with repose; and such discourse bring on
> As may advise him of his happy state,
> Happiness in his power left free to will,
> Left to his own free will, his will though free,
> Yet mutable. (5.232–37)

This is divine discourse, but discourse nonetheless. Since a perfect being does not need to correct himself mid-speech, "repose" is a happy alliterative alternative to "repast," a verbal transmutation of food into rest. In these same words God omniscient echoes Eve's earlier delighted "repose" in Adam (5.28) while prophesying the "sweet repast, or sound repose" (9.407) they will lose if they misuse their free will. Then, to finish off, a striking tripartite permutation of the words "free" and "will" registers the timelessness of his perspective even as it denies fixed fate by refusing to fix the order of these words.[46] It is this eloquence with words and capacity for discourse that is imparted to humans as image-bearers, who are "yet mutable" also to achieve higher reason with time.

God ends the conversation with Adam when the first human hits upon this last point, that by conversation creatures can be raised closer to him and become more suitable company. The hallmark of divinity is not separateness, but unity that comprehends different if lower forms of creatures and knowledge.[47] God "con-descends" to be together with his creatures in knowledge and

---

[46] Milton elsewhere notes fate "is only what is *fatum*, spoken, by some almighty power" (*CPW* 6:131).
[47] Cf. Jason P. Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 72: "higher being is not higher by virtue of any exclusion but by virtue of greater inclusiveness."

presence, and yet such "union or communion" does not obliterate or diminish their individuality.[48] Instead, it allows them to *participate* in other, higher natures through continued converse. This is at the heart of the debate between Abdiel and Satan, and a lesson that Adam and Eve both still need to learn, even if they have figured out some pieces of the puzzle. But because "knowledge is as food, and needs no less / Her temperance over appetite" (7.126–27), this second, crucial part of human education will need to wait until Raphael descends to partake lunch and rational delight.

Participatory knowledge

Adam's insight about the possibility of creatures being raised by conversation into union and communion is richly developed over the course of Books 5 to 8 to flesh out Milton's paradisal epistemology. A theory of knowledge is accommodated to the humans by the angel Raphael, not by comparing radically different things, but by stressing continuity between the nature of the world and the workings of knowledge. With "the fruit / Of that forbidden tree" as his chosen subject matter (1.1–2), it is not altogether strange for the poet to dedicate so much time to knowledge, nor that the natural world features prominently in that account. Yet Milton builds on existing models of their relation, such as the book of nature and the human as microcosm. He certainly does construct an experimentalist paradise of natural reading, thereby justifying the ways of natural philosophy to men.[49] And he does imagine the link between man and world at its most vital moment, when the ethical consequences of that analogy were most urgent.[50] But Milton comprehends both models

[48] Lobis observes the centrality of the "co-" words in this episode emphasizing togetherness: "A series of antiphonal words builds momentum toward the end of the passage, the prefix 'co-' (Latin *cum*) chiming through 'accompanied,' 'communication,' 'Communion,' 'conversing,' and 'complacence'" (*The Virtue of Sympathy*, 131–32). To this group we may add "condescension" free of its modern pejoration, appreciated by Adam at either end of Book 8 (8.9; 8.649).
[49] Edwards's *Milton and the Natural World* remains the best exploration of how Milton thought we ought to read the book of nature: experientially and experimentally.
[50] Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 187–188 and 212–220.

within an ontological system that affirms the humans' careful consideration of nature while affirming they are *part* of nature. Adam formulates it thus:

> Well hast thou taught the way that might direct
> Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set
> From centre to circumference, whereon
> In contemplation of created things
> By steps we may ascend to God. (5.508–12)

The peculiar dynamism of this *scala naturae* makes ontology central to knowledge in *Paradise Lost*. Humans are not fundamentally different from the spirits above and creatures below; they are part of a chain in flux and therefore cannot stand a-part as cool, objective readers of nature. They come to know that book diegetically, from the inside out. Moreover, Adam and Eve need not sit idly in the middle steps, but rather go from "centre to circumference," a centrifugal motion which is also elevation. Because human "bodies may at last turn all to spirit, / Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend / Ethereal," the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm can become absolute through their eventual union (5.497–99).

This is the "union or communion" intuited by Adam (8.431), and it reflects the twin movements of intellectual and ontological progress that culminate in cosmic recursion to God—the time when "God shall be all in all" (3.341; 6.732). Milton here uniquely syncretizes Hellenistic and Christian notions of *participation*, variously imagined as expansion and return, or descent and ascent. When the poet envisions a universe created *ex Deo* and a God "from whom / All things proceed, and up to him return" (5.469–70), he adapts the former tradition of participation beginning with Plato's theory of *methexis*, an ontological connection between an ideal form and the peculiar instance of a form who shares or participates in its essence (e.g., *Phaedrus*, 253a). Julie Canlis shows how Neoplatonic successors softened the strict soul-body dualism to allow a descending hierarchy of

ontological status, and a return that signalled increasing assimilation into The One.[51] Yet the Christian tradition, which at times borrowed heavily from the Neoplatonic scheme, more broadly works to "reject [a] pantheistic description of participation outright" – that is, it rejects ontological participation even as it stresses communion with the divine.[52] Instead, *koinonia,* or communion premised on intimacy and identification, like that between humans and God through Christ, becomes the major model of participation in Christian history, as scholars like David L. Balás and T. F. Torrance have shown.[53] Milton could have followed suit in foregoing *methexis* and imagining unfallen participation only as *koinonia*–communion. Instead, he insists on both communion and ontological participation. As a result, the reputedly individualistic author creates an ontology wherein knowledge and ascendance are possible only through intimacy and exchange.

The uniqueness of knowledge in *Paradise Lost* is shaped by the dual requirements of this ontological and communal participation. As Adam's summary of Raphael's teaching suggests, knowledge is the product of close engagement with "created things"—something the first man practices from the very start. Such a celebration of materiality eschews Gnosticism, in which knowledge itself is the cause of creaturely elevation away from corporality. Milton's is a remarkably bodily ascent; its key metaphor (if indeed metaphor) is digestion. Participation here also differs from Neoplatonist dualism and contemplation, since ascent comes through looking outward, towards creation—not inward, through "escape in solitude to the solitary," as Plotinus would have it (*Ennead* VI.9.11.51).[54] Adam, we saw, could not and would not sit pensive and find his way to God. His

---

[51] Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 27. The first chapter serves as an excellent overview of participation.
[52] Ibid., 30.
[53] See especially David L. Balás, *Metousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Studia Anselmania 55 (Rome: IB Libreria Herder, 1966) and T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965). For a recent account, see Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[54] Plotinus, *Ennead, Volume VI: 6–9*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, LCL 468 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 345.

expectation is for a collective journey: in "*our* knowledge… *we* may ascend." Indeed, *koinonia* participation requires others because it involves likeness and difference, sharing and exchange.[55] "Time may come," says Raphael, "when men / With angels may participate": when they will share in (partake) higher being *and* meals, without simply becoming angels (*PL* 5.493–94). That growth will come by sharing (imparting) such things as food; that is indeed the natural order of things.[56] Gathering, eating, and sharing food is a kind of knowing, as will be discussed below, and "participating godlike food" is in fact a pathway to knowledge, as Satan unwittingly argues (9.717). From the theological doctrine of union to the analogy of a shared meal and the cycles of communicated abundance, participation is what allows knowledge to flourish in Paradise.

This representation of knowledge tracks with the principles Milton had articulated in earlier prose works. Again as in *Areopagitica*, knowledge requires difference, dynamic transfer, and a functionally collaborative ethic. In his imaginative work, however, the poet exchanges the host of metaphors representing these principles in his prose for the material reality of a natural world sustained and defined by them. Whereas in *Areopagitica* he is free to choose analogues for truth and knowledge, in *Paradise Lost* Milton must accommodate the archetypal symbol given him by the book of Genesis and its interpretive tradition: the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Crucially, he extends the fruit's significance both materially and metaphorically. In the first, the peculiarity of Eden's metaphysics in effect transfers the power of that wisdom-giving plant to the entire created order; by partaking in the scale of nature humans can indeed grow in knowledge and aspire to be like the gods. In the second, Milton expands the metaphor of the fruit into a broader figurative network

---

[55] Milton would likely have been disturbed by the concomitant loss of self that is celebrated in a strictly Neoplatonic union. The enlightened man for Plotinus "had become someone else and he is not himself and does not count as his own there" (341).

[56] For Shoaf, the poet's ingenious use of *part* "constitutes the master pun" of the poem. "Its two senses—'belonging to, as part of, and 'separated,' as apart from," clash and build in some of the most important speeches (*Poet of Duality*, 68). Together with its cognates, participation dominates the discourse of knowing in the poem figuratively and literally.

of eating and sharing knowledge. Food generally and the fruit specifically becomes a powerful analogue for the communal dynamism of knowledge, its consumption a sharp reminder of the ethical entailments of learning.

Methexis

To trace the material and metaphorical extensions of the fruit, we need to start earlier. The poet himself develops these complex ideas by steps, careful not to overburden his narrative with the jargon of contemporary philosophy.[57] Raphael does not descend from heaven to give a lesson about knowledge or the materiality of being—those are not, in fact, his marching orders (5.229–45). Instead, the topic emerges in conversation over lunch, where Adam picks up on the angel's subtle movements from gastronomy to ontology, ontology to epistemology, well before the angel declares that "knowledge is as food" two books later (7.126). The early humans' experience with food prepares the way for this conversation. Gastronomy is at once evidence of their knowledge and an analogue for its operation. No sooner has the angel's visit been announced to her by Adam than Eve wields her impressive knowledge of the victuals afforded by the garden:

> She turns, on hospitable thoughts intent
> What choice to choose for delicacy best,
> What order, so contrived as not to mix
> Tastes, not well joined, inelegant, but bring
> Taste after taste upheld with kindliest change. (5.332–36)

[57] When Samuel Johnson complains that Milton "has unhappily perplexed his poetry with his philosophy," he means only that the ontology of the poem is at times inconsistent. He in fact praises the integration of philosophy and science: "The heat of Milton's mind might be said to sublimate his learning, to throw off into his work the spirit of science, unmingled with its grosser parts" (*Lives of the Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale and John Mullan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 108, 104).

One early critic complains that her expertise in food preservation and preparation is "too philosophical [i.e., scientific] for the female character of Eve."[58] A modern reader may instead be tempted to dismiss this knowledge as another instance of Milton's domestication of the first woman. Yet Eve here demonstrates maker's knowledge in her judicious selection of herb and plant. The proof of her pudding is in the eating, which later prompts Raphael to acknowledge that earthly food "may compare with heaven" (5.430–32; cp. 5.328–30). Her cuisine, moreover, is peculiarly artistic: the work of "order[ing]," mixing, and separating is reminiscent of the Son's creation in Book 7. As Katie Kadue argues more generally, this domestic "temper[ing]" (5.347) reflects Milton's own "conception of his writing as the measured and laborious gathering, combining, and adjusting of textual ingredients," a project whose success is by no means guaranteed.[59] The lead-up to Raphael's arrival is itself a balancing act of preservation and presentation, requiring like skill from the poet, who must "bring / Taste after taste… with kindliest change" in a potentially intemperate discussion of gastronomy and epistemology.

The mixture is fruitful, synthesizing ideas Milton champions elsewhere. Readers of *Areopagitica* can hardly encounter the clunky phrase "What choice to choose" (*PL* 5.333) and not remember that "reason is but choosing" (*CPW* 2:527); the idea is so central for Milton that his God casually and parenthetically remarks that "(reason also is choice)" (*PL* 3.108). As I suggested in the previous chapter, the author's rejection of enforced reason emphasizes the agent of reasoning—the person doing the choosing. Eve's sapient rejection of "inelegant" mixtures signals her own elegance (5.335), and so the image of God in her. The very word "elegant," with its root in *legere* ("to gather, pick out"; *OED*, s.v.), describes her rational action. More importantly, however, her elegant

---

[58] Robert Thyer's notes for Thomas Newton's 1749 edition, as cited in *John Milton: The Critical Heritage: Volume 2, 1732–1801*, ed. John T. Shawcross (1972; repr. London: Routledge, 1999), 158.
[59] Katie Kadue, *Domestic Georgic: Labours of Preservation from Rabelais to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 130.

choosing and tempering of food resembles the act of knowing as Adam describes it earlier in Book 5. The faculty of reason, he says, reliably "join[s] and disjoin[s]" the sensory imprints of the imagination, "fram[ing] / All what we affirm or what deny, and call / Our knowledge or opinion" (5.106–108). Although unfettered fancy "misjoining shapes, / Wild work produces oft" (5.111–12), Eve avoids mixing things "not well *joined*" (5.335, emphasis added). The first woman is thus implicitly aligned with the faculty of reason rather than fancy: with waking sense, not drowsy sensuousness.

If this is so, Adam's explanation of Eve's "troublesome dream" at the start of Book 5 is credible, but not in this case correct (5.*arg*). Her constitutional temperance is disturbed by material intrusion, underscoring the continuity of mental and physical nourishment in the garden. Adam knows firsthand that "God is also in sleep, and dreams advise," as Eve will later learn (11.612). Perhaps that is why his explanation feels so tentative. Despite critical attention on Eve, *he* is the first human dreamer, his "drowsèd sense" seized by "soft oppression" in sibilant lullaby (8.288–89). Adam's "fancy" actively imagines his insertion into the garden (8.294), and when God puts him to sleep in creating Eve, it is again "fancy my internal sight" which grants him knowledge of what happens (8.461). Fancy is not the problem. Adam is therefore justifiably confused about the dream's origins: "Created pure," Eve can harbour no evil; so "evil whence?" (5.99–100). This response is striking for its nearly materialist supposition: evil thought must come from somewhere, and clearly it does not begin with Eve.[60] While Milton rejects the most extreme version of this argument (because evil is insubstantial and does not at length originate with God), Adam is on the right track. The narrator himself gives a material explanation for the qualities of dreams when, at the very start of Book 5, we are told the first man's sleep "Was airy light, from pure digestion bred, / And temperate

[60] Even the apparently figurative language of harboured thoughts and mobile evil that "into the mind of god or man / May come and go" and "leave / No spot or blame behind" seems rather material, especially given the joined and mis-joined shapes of reason and fancy.

vapours bland" (5.4–5). So should it be with Eve, whose diet we know is well-tempered. Were it not for Satan's interference in Book 4, she might have persisted so: "inspiring venom" in Eve's ear the night prior, Satan appears to have "taint[ed] / The animal spirits that from pure blood arise" and "raise[d] / At least *distempered*, discontented thoughts" (4.804–7, emphasis added). In linking the mechanisms of knowledge to such material causes, Milton prepares us for Raphael's more stunning linkage of being and knowing, with digestion as his key metaphor.

Coming immediately before the angel's teachings on ontology and epistemology, these two episodes— literal, material distempering in the dream; analogical, rational mixing in the meal—ought to teach us that the figurative and the literal can coincide in a monist universe.[61] Eve's judicious gastronomy might well nourish the good reason that enables her very gastronomy. Given the couple's understanding of the importance of food, it is hardly a coincidence that, having received the angel as guest, Adam begins with a relevant first topic of discussion: whether angels eat, and how. Adam and Eve assume the affirmative in their preparation for Raphael's arrival. They expect continuity, though to different extents. Eve confidently and endearingly remarks that her meal will "entertain our angel guest, as he / Beholding shall confess that here on earth / God has dispensed his bounties as in heaven" (5.328–30). Adam, less assured, offers Raphael "These bounties [from] our nourisher," still ignorant of their food's suitability for "spiritual natures; only this I know, / That one celestial Father gives to all" (5.398; 5.402–3). While Eve's confidence is proven correct, we have in Adam's cautious introduction the roots of Raphael's philosophical discourses, which will address a digestive universe, divine generosity, spiritual substance, and of course the "one" almighty creator.

[61] For this idea more broadly, see Stephen Hequembourg, "Monism and Metaphor in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 52 (2011): 139–167. Hequembourg asks us to read Raphael's one-matter-all speech "not as a philosophical set-piece, but as a response to a specific (and perhaps urgent) question on Adam's part" (158); the same could be asked of the angel's earlier speeches.

The angel may introduce questions of knowing explicitly, but he does so for an audience ready to associate tasting with knowing.

Raphael affirms this instinct in his first extended speech as he draws similarities between human and angelic alimentation. Adam's dietary probe (is our food unsavoury to spiritual natures?) is a subtle inquiry into just how foreign this "Heavenly stranger" is (5.398). The angel reassures Adam that his kind are like humans, but more; man is "in part/ Spiritual" (5.405–6), angels more fully so. As such, they can eat and sense and reason, actions which are subsumed under, rather than erased by, higher angelic capacities:

> Intelligential substances require [food]
> As doth your rational; and both contain
> Within them every lower faculty
> Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,
> Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,
> And corporeal to incorporeal turn. (5.408–13)

This first adumbration of the great chain of being is also the first time Raphael gestures towards the process of understanding. Adam has not asked about knowledge at all, but the two are so closely linked through the metaphor of eating that Raphael immediately responds with a stream of words which have both physical and intellectual meanings: "sense," "concoct," "digest," "assimilate." His very words turn things "corporeal to incorporeal." This could seem a strained introduction of philosophy on Raphael's part, but as I have just suggested, Adam and Eve have had reason to ponder the relationship between their rational nature and the things they eat. They also just discussed the roles of the senses and faculties in the wake of Eve's dream; as if he has overheard them, their guest confirms that even higher beings operate in the same way. The radical implication is that humans themselves may "corporeal to incorporeal turn" through a metabolic intellection not

yet described. This is another of Raphael's indications that, as Shaun Ross argues, "the food itself may have an innate potency to alter the humans' bodies."[62] Within a hundred lines, the angel considers their future participation and slyly remarks that "from these corporal nutriments perhaps / Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit" (5.496–97). All food in the garden is, in this way, potential fruit of knowledge.

Koinonia

The choice of eating as the grand metaphor for epistemological growth is crucial also because it doubles as a model for creaturely relation. Eating can be consumptive or communal. If all food is the fruit of knowledge and all creatures are eaters, even angels, that is not necessarily good news for the humans. The conceivably frightening prospect of a hungry angel able to digest and assimilate lower creation is thankfully averted by Raphael's description of the natural order of this universe as one premised on mutual nourishment. Interdependence and benevolence establish a cosmic ecology rather than a hellish food-chain:

> For know, whatever was created, needs
> To be sustained and fed; of elements
> The grosser feeds the purer, earth the sea,
> Earth and the sea feed air, the air those fires
> Ethereal, and as lowest first the moon;
> […]
> The sun that light imparts to all, receives
> From all his alimental recompense

[62] Shaun Ross, *The Eucharist, Poetics, and Secularization from the Middle Ages to Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 228.

In humid exhalations, and at even

Sups with the ocean. (5.414–18; 5.423–26)

The rule appears at first to be strict hierarchy, with lesser serving greater. Yet Milton's signature anadiplosis in these lines weaves together high and low elements, and through ellipsis brings them even closer together: "earth the sea, / Earth and the sea feed air, the air those fires /Ethereal." The forward rhythmic thrust of trochaic substitution at the first foot of line 417 favours the movement of rarefaction from earth to sea, air, fire, and shortly the moon. So committed is he to gradation and interpenetration that Milton abolishes the traditional ontological divide between the sublunary and superlunary spheres; what happens on earth thus affects what happens on the sun.[63] As the passage unfolds, the picture is that of a self-sustaining universe whose members are joined in grand feast. Each serves and is served. Each partakes and imparts, not least the sun that "light imparts to all" and stoops at evening to sup with the ocean. Adam, whose "balmy sweat" has "fed" that same sun, knows this story is also his (8.255–56).

Milton in this way expands the Genesis story of the single consumption of a singular fruit to a world constantly at banquet. As David B. Goldstein has shown, it is "the paradise of minds and bodies sharing sustenance" that enacts community in *Paradise Lost*. Tasting, understood by most critics as "the threshold of individual morality in Milton's poetry," is only part of the story.[64] Because to taste is to choose and to know (Latin *sapere*), ingestion seems a private act. But Milton pays attention also to the partner dynamics of dining, so that Amy Tigner finds "eating in Eden is a distinctly social and communal event."[65] No one eats alone, save for one unfortunate incident that leads to catastrophic ignorance. The act of knowing is thus tangled up in the participatory

---

[63] See Harinder S. Marjara, *Contemplation of Created Things* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 73ff.
[64] David B. Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 176, 177.
[65] Amy Tigner, "Eating with Eve," *Milton Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2010): 243.

community that eating creates and sustains. This has profound implications for how we should think about the distribution of knowledge in the poem. It is why, after eating the fruit of knowledge, one of the first things Eve weighs is whether to "partake" with Adam or keep "the odds of knowledge" (9.818–20); "In Milton's poem, to eat is to be consumed by ethics."[66]

Raphael's speech describing the feast of elements and heavenly bodies, a precursor to the more famous "one first matter all" speech, delimits the moral laws of a world in cyclical flux. Without it, the important ethical dimension of *koinonia* is lost, and knowledge becomes an end in itself—indeed a dead-end, since we have seen in the previous chapter that truth must be kinetic if it is to remain truth. In speaking about feeding and the sun and grosser elements, Raphael is also talking about knowing and the reciprocal hospitality that governs intellectual exchange. Adam understands this. Having heard that the thirsty sun receives an "alimental recompense" from all (5.424), later the first man admits he has not yet offered suitable "recompense" to his intellectual host, "who thus largely hast allayed / The thirst I had of knowledge" (8.5–8). Like the sun that at evening sups with the ocean, Raphael has con-descended to eat with his friends, giving and receiving. As proper hosts, Adam and especially Eve provide in abundance the best of earth they can muster. An infinite such series of generous exchange defines the world morally and physically, so that David Quint sees in the unity of creation "a larger communion, drawing creature toward Creator, built into the cosmos and into the physical act of eating itself."[67]

The physical properties of Eden accommodate such a communion through the principle of abundant exchange. Milton's emphasis on the abundance, even excess, of Paradise seems itself immodest. Adam in recognition thanks God, who "So amply, and with hands so liberal / […] hast provided all things" (8.362–63). The second half of that sentence—"but with me / I see not who

---

[66] Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics*, 177.
[67] David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost: Reading the Designs of Milton's Epic* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2014), 183.

partakes" (8.363–64)— is resolved by the time of Adam's first reported speech in the poem, wherein he again reasons out God's infinite good, "As liberal and free as infinite" given this "ample world" (4.413–15). And no wonder, since nature itself teaches humans to reject zero-sum thinking as they prepare for Raphael's arrival. The earth participates in the governing logic and ethic of abundance, as Adam notes:

> well we may afford
> Our givers their own gifts, and large bestow
> From large bestowed, where nature multiplies
> Her fertile growth, and by disburdening grows
> More fruitful, which instructs us not to spare. (5.315–20)

The pleasing symmetry of these lines traces the rationale of mutual generosity through polyptoton: word begets word; "givers" beget "gifts"; "growth" keeps on "grow[ing]". Dearth is as unnatural as death. Giving incurs no final loss and may in fact lead to more abundance, stemming as it does from "one celestial Father [who] gives to all" (5.403). And just as Adam and Eve are generous with their food and lose nothing essential to them, so can Raphael and Adam increase their knowledge by sharing stories that the other might not have.

This ethical and natural principle of abundant exchange central to *koinonia* deeply shapes the poem's narrative. Failure to understand or accept it is at the root of Satan's fall and subsequently that of Adam and Eve. Diana Treviño Benet is surely right that the ultimate origins of evil are, for Milton, inexplicable.[68] Even in the earliest part of the story, when Satan "fraught / With envy against the Son of God…. could not bear / Through pride" the latter's exaltation (5.661–65), we are given no reason for this response. Nevertheless, it does not follow that "the Father's announcement

[68] Diana Treviño Benet, "The Fall of the Angels: Theology and Narrative," *Milton Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2016): 1–13.

causes Satan's envy."[69] Raphael says Satan is "*yet* fraught / With envy" – and thus possibly *still* fraught from an earlier period. ("Fraught" itself suggests time has passed.) The devil's subsequent argument with Abdiel may reveal a rationale for envy, if not an origin. The heart of their disagreement turns on the nature of angelic participation and, accordingly, how "good" is distributed and circulated. In rejecting the reality of abundant exchange and embracing zero-sum thinking, Satan impugns God as a hoarder unwilling to share glory. Later, he will accuse God of hoarding knowledge, bringing Adam and Eve towards a refusal of participation that breaks the virtuous cycles of exchange and leads to the separation and ignorance of the fall.

Milton takes pains to show that what Satan rejects is not only authority, but communion. Perhaps surprisingly, the Book 5 account of his original sin is couched in the language of unity as much as obedience. The Father's appointment of the Son as the head of the angels is followed by a first explicit command: "Under his great vicegerent reign abide / United as one individual soul / For ever happy: him who disobeys / Me disobeys, breaks union" (5.609–12). This is the imperative of *koinonia*: be united, be happy. We learn that the angels in joyous obedience spend the rest of the day in "Mystical dance" (5.620), manifesting the cyclical movements of participation. At evening, "Forthwith from dance to sweet repast they turn / Desirous" (5.630–31), ready to engage in dining, that most frequent image of participation:

> They eat, they drink, and in communion sweet
> Quaff immortality and joy, secure
> Of surfeit where full measure only bounds
> Excess, before the all-bounteous king, who showered
> With copious hand, rejoicing in their joy. (5.636–41)

[69] Ibid., 7.

You can hear in this passage the generative call-and-response of union. The "bounteous" king imposes no external "bounds" on pleasure, and in giving joy he receives it, re-joicing. The musicality of the first line—perfect pentameter, internal rhyme in "eat" and "sweet"—connects this feast with the "harmony divine" of the angelic, starry dance just described (5.625). Yet Milton evidently felt the need to stress the shared abundance such union entails. This passage contains one of just two instances of "communion" in the poem. Indeed, the word was added only in the 1674 edition. 1667 reads "*refection* sweet" and does not yet include lines 637 and 638, which introduce the bold language of quaffing, surfeit, and excess. Quint notes that this change further connects the angelic banquet with the meal Raphael shares with Adam and Eve.[70] It also underscores what they discuss during that meal: the pleasure and plenitude of a communion premised on giving. Adam's later invocation of God's capacity to elevate creatures through higher "union or communion" (8.431)—the only other instance of the word—registers its power.

Almost from the start Satan spins a different narrative. God's decree is for union under the Son, an ideal that should not be foreign to an angel. Satan has indeed enjoyed the immersive mutual presence of conversation discussed earlier. He is perfectly capable of *koinonia*. There is no other way to understand his strikingly intimate address to the angel who would later be called Beelzebub: "Thou to me thy thoughts / Wast wont, I mine to thee was wont to *impart*; / Both waking *we were one*" (5.676–78, emphasis added). The devil now betrays his old friend by lying to him about his purpose for assembling the angels under him. Then, in his speech to the latter, he again ignores altogether the call to union to focus on the perceived injury being done to the angels. Satan's argument assumes, baselessly, a zero-sum game: the promotion of another is the demotion of the rest of us; to honour him is to debase ourselves. So he claims that the newly elevated Son "hath to himself engrossed / All power, and us eclipsed under the name / Of king anointed" (5.775–77). Of

[70] Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost*, 182.

course, this only makes sense if power, honour, etc. are in short supply, rather than in communicated abundance. In Satan's zero-sum world, the sun would not sup with the ocean, but consume it; trees disburdened of their fruit would not multiply their fertile growth, but rather bear no more fruit; and God, rather than giving abundantly to his creatures, "rejoicing in their joy," arrogates honour and good for himself alone.

The problem, as Abdiel points out, is that none of this reflects reality. Against the devil's spurious reasoning, the seraph appeals to "experience": "we know how good, / And of our good, and of our dignity / How provident he is, how far from thought / To make us less" (5.826–29).[71] Satan takes stock of each exchange, win or loss, in isolation. He scorns to submit and stoop, "to bend / The supple knee" (5.787–88), since that makes him lower. Yet according to Abdiel, God is "bent rather to exalt / Our happy state under one head more near united" (5.829–31). Paradoxically bending to exalt, the Son is "reduced" to one of the angelic number (5.843), yet through that reduction lifts the angels to a greater level of participation without himself being diminished.[72] His descent is one of *koinonia* identification, uniting the angels nearer to himself and therefore to the God whose image he is. This is why Abdiel, in recognition of yet another virtuous cycle, says "all honour to him done / Returns our own" (5.844–45). The fundamental incompatibility of his and the devil's perspectives reveals their competing understandings of what participation entails. For Satan, it is parting with something. For Abdiel, it is partaking in something larger.

Communicating envy

[71] The comparative marker "less" responds to Satan's obsession with keeping score. Prostration is too much for one ruler, and worse for "double" the number (5.781–84). Note Abdiel's empiricism here, as well as his later decision "to try" Satan's "puissance" after having "tried" Satan's reason and found it "Unsound and false" (6.119–21). Angels are capable of intuition, but they retain their capacities to see and reason discursively.

[72] Fowler's edition notes in a different passage (6.777*n*, p. 379) that to "reduce" is to lead back (*OED* 2), especially towards an origin in God (*OED* 4a). Its usage is thus explicitly participatory.

The continuous movements of honour and good witnessed in Eden and Heaven track with the currents of knowledge Milton describes in his earlier prose. Like Adam, the author of *The Reason of Church Government* acknowledges the ethical imperative to impart one's gifts, and particularly that to "dispose and employ those sums of knowledge and illumination" afforded each person (*CPW* 1:801). *Areopagitica* affirms the abundance of "all this flowry crop of knowledge" and decries its suppression on the part of "an *Oligarchy* of twenty ingrossers over it" (2:558–59). When Satan claims that the Son "hath to himself *engrossed* / All power," he therefore channels a deeply Miltonic sentiment. The sin of hoarding is one recognized by devil, angel, and human alike. That is what makes it such a potent accusation to levy at God. Moreover, if it is the very nature of knowledge to circulate—if it can grow only collectively, through exchange—then to stop the communication of knowledge is almost to eradicate it. To lodge it in a tree useless already seems a kind of violence; to then prohibit access seems positively sinister. Milton's Satan in this way exploits a tension latent in Genesis, where God may appear to be holding back knowledge and life from the humans (Gen. 3:22–24). It is this supposed pettiness—not knowledge, not the prohibition—which Satan determines to be a "fair foundation laid whereon to build / Their ruin!" (*PL* 4.521–22).

Adam and Eve's intuitive understanding of God's benevolent abundance means Satan has his work cut out for him. The perverse act of building a ruin is miseducation, a reversal of what Milton in *Of Education* says is the end of learning: "to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him" (*CPW* 2:366–67). Satan's own zero-sum worldview inspires his strategy and serves as template for the temptation. Observing the supreme pleasure of Adam and Eve "Imparadised in one another's arms," "aside the devil / Turned for envy" and once again thought himself impaired (4.506; 4.502–3). Though keenly aware of the many gifts the first humans enjoy, he is keener still to observe that

all is not theirs it seems:

> One fatal tree there stands of knowledge called,
> Forbidden them to taste: knowledge forbidden?
> Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord
> Envy them that? Can it be sin to know,
> Can it be death? And do they only stand
> By ignorance, is that their happy state,
> The proof of their obedience and their faith? (4.513–20)

As often, it is difficult to tell whether Satan believes this passionate argument or is merely rehearsing it. Either way, his response is itself suspicious, reasonless. Suspicious, because the devil without justification supposes that God "env[ies]" or begrudges Adam and Eve knowledge, keeping it all to himself. This projection of envy onto God says more about Satan than anyone else. Reasonless, because Satan takes the name of the tree and makes the tree stand for knowledge rather a pledge of obedience. The act of tasting from the tree is forbidden, not knowledge itself, which should be obvious enough to someone who was earlier praised by Uriel for his "Unspeakable desire to see, and know / All these… wondrous works" (3.662–63). These alterations objectify knowledge and deny the principle of dynamism that characterized it in *Areopagitica* and still characterizes it in Milton's epic poem. Unfortunately, the devil is right to identify envy as the enemy of knowledge, and his determination to "excite their minds / With more desire to know, and to reject / Envious commands" is ultimately successful (4.522–24).

For Milton the Fall occurs in parts: first Eve, then Adam. But the temptation begins earlier, when Satan misdirects Eve's ethical understanding of participation. The same day he discovers the couple, Satan spends the night by Eve's ear "Squat like a toad," an animal traditionally associated

with envy (4.800).[73] The next morning she recounts her dream to Adam, how "alone [she] passed through ways / That brought me on a sudden to the tree / Of interdicted knowledge" (5.50–52). Her unfortunate hypallage suggests that Satan has already planted some confusion: it is not knowledge that is "interdicted," but the tree being tasted. The satanic figure makes his case in the terms to be repeated by devil and woman in the Fall sequence: "Deigns none to ease thy load and taste thy sweet, / Nor god, nor man; is knowledge so despised? / Or envy, or what reserve forbids to taste?" (5.59–61). As Kristen Poole points out, in this first inducement Satan "twists the notion of God's abundance, so that it becomes Eve's responsibility to help contain the divine overflow."[74] He weaponizes her instinctive hospitality to help the plants, pitting it against her more important duty to obey God. Eve knows already that there is plenty, maybe even too much, of everything in the garden; there is no reason for "reserve" (5.61). Satan supplies "envy" as the only alternative motive. This is the first time in the poem that she encounters the concept. It will disrupt her understanding of herself and her perception of the disparity between herself and Adam.

For Eve, the garden's abundance is not just about eating whatever she wants. Her relationship to the plants of the garden is not one of predation, but partnership; she helps them and is helped by them. She therefore should have reason to be suspicious of an argument that conflates mere consumption with hospitality. Satan develops the temptation by shifting the focus to the hospitality of the garden's maker. The deception is now far more daring as the angelic figure adopts the language of participation. Why shouldn't humans get to eat the fruit, he asks,

> since good the more
>
> Communicated, more abundant grows,

---

[73] Toads and frogs were thought to swell with envy (e.g., Horace, *Satires* II.iii.314ff, referring to Aesop's fable). In the House of Pride, Spenser's Envy "still did chaw / Betweene his cankred teeth a venemous tode" (*FQ* I.iv.30).

[74] Kristen Poole, "'With Such Joy Surcharg'd': The Predicament of Satiety in Patristic Theology and *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2015): 11. Comus tries a similar strategy with the Lady.

> The author not impaired, but honoured more?
>
> Here, happy creature, fair angelic Eve,
>
> Partake thou also. (5.71–75)

Astonishingly, Satan voices an argument that undercuts his own zero-sum logic and thus his envy. Each word in this understated claim, hidden in a dream and couched in a rhetorical question, echoes throughout the poem—from the resounding hypocrisy of a devil who saw the Son of God "*honoured*… / and thought himself *impaired*" (5.663, 665), to Eve's idolatrous apostrophe to the fruit praising "the *good* / By thee *communicated*" (9.754–55), to Adam's analogy about "fertile *growth*" that restores any "*Abundance*" given away (5.314–20; emphasis added).[75] All he says is true. Yet the end directive to "partake" here means strictly to eat, to consume, not to share in the cycle of knowledge and the step-by-step ascent Raphael says is possible. Satan gives only half of the story, and thereby uses Eve's own true beliefs against her.

The first woman, who knows only a world of abundance and mutuality, is unfortunately a near-perfect target for a conspiracy theory based on the subversion of those things. She acts ethically and rationally in desiring knowledge and believing it must be shared. Satan's account of the undiminishable communicability of good adheres to the pattern revealed in nature and described by the angels Abdiel and Raphael. It is especially true for knowledge, whose continual progression is its necessary condition, as in Milton's earlier works. Eve's mistake is to believe the false premises of the snake's argument: that God withholds knowledge, and that the fruit can give it. She credits the serpent in no small part because, in sharing his happy state, he appears to act justly: "that one beast which first / Hath tasted, envies not, but brings with joy / The good befallen him" (9.769–71)—just

---

[75] This diction reverberates even in *Paradise Regained*, where Jesus argues that God "impart[s] / His good communicable to every soul," and affirms that virtue is non-zero sum: "Yet so much bounty is in God, such grace, / That who advance his glory, not their own, / Them he himself to glory will advance" (*PR* 3.124–25; 3.142–44).

as she herself has fed Raphael and the garden has fed her. But in doubting God's generosity and attempting to skip the steps by which Raphael says humans may ascend to him, she like the devils "disobeys, breaks union" (5.612), and removes herself from the virtuous cycles of participation that could have led to her greater ontological and epistemological growth. This failure of judgement leaves her solitary under the tree, eating alone at last.

The ethical and intellectual effects of the decision to extricate herself from the natural order of things are immediate. "Earth felt the wound" not just because of pathetic fallacy (9.782), but because humans were to this point part of the whole of nature. Alienation begins internally and quickly leads to ignorance. Outraged about God's begrudging envy, Eve hypocritically makes herself the new keeper of "the gift" (9.806), arbiter of who shall get the fruit and thus who shall have knowledge. Envy rather than good has been communicated from Satan to Eve as she wonders

> to Adam in what sort
> Shall I appear? Shall I to him make known
> As yet my change, and give him to partake
> Full happiness with me, or rather not,
> But keep the odds of knowledge in my power
> Without copartner? (9.816–21)

Eve considers for a second a life of privileged epistemological solitude.[76] In this moment she teeters between seizing zero-sum advantage—"the odds of knowledge"—and the participatory happiness that would allow her and Adam to "partake" the same full happiness without diminishment to either. She decides on the latter, not because the former is not tempting, but because she does not wish to risk suffering alone. In a cruel echo of her husband's request for a partner—"but with me /

[76] Cf. Goldstein, *Eating and Ethics,* 201: "Eve's temptation to transcendence is also a temptation away from commensality, from the company of Raphael's meal, to the kind of omnipotent solitude and 'secrecy' that God the Father enjoys."

I see not who partakes…" (8.363–64)—Eve decides out of envy that "Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe" (9.831). She initiates the first turn of an endless cycle of death.

Adam for his part does not need his wife to make this decision for him. Without even hearing her fears about "another Eve," he rejects the possibility of a new life (9.828; 9.911); like Eve, he determines their state "never shall be parted, bliss or woe" (9.916). But if her rejection of participation stems from the temptation to go at it alone, Adam's unwillingness to part with Eve betrays his fear of solitude and his predilection for insipid sameness. The allure of simplicity, of total union rather than communion, prompts him increasingly to define his partner as if she were *only* part of him—as if she were "still [his] lifeless rib" (9.1154). The biblical Adam's poetic love song here turns possessive and restrictive: "flesh of my flesh, / Bone of my bone thou art" (9.914–15). Is she not anything else? The principle of elegant mixing that Eve comes to represent ought instead to remind Adam that pleasure and participation in Eden requires unity-in-difference rather than simple union. For Eve to be his "collateral love" (8.425), she must stand beside him, part *and* partner of all these joys (4.411). To her credit, after the Fall Eve does stand as his partner, albeit in their woes rather than joys. She is the first to show penitence in Book 10, setting in motion a conversation and repentance that brings the couple back onto the path of obedient understanding. Eve's difference from Adam asserts itself in spite of her faulty knowledge and her plans born of despair. At the very least, it allows them to face their judgement together.

The final image of *Paradise Lost* offers hope that Adam and Eve can remain hand in hand, solitary but not alienated from providence or the world before them. The violence and arrogance presaged by books 11 and 12 do not extinguish quite the human pursuit of truth and its progressive revelation—still through conversation, and in recognition of the partiality of our knowledge and our shared, unique role in the natural world. It seems remarkable that Milton—twenty years after *Areopagitica*, civil war and blindness interposing—could refuse the ready and easy way of cynicism.

Though there cannot now be a gradual ascent to participate with the angels, the act of communing with each other serves the cause of knowledge. Even having eaten bad fruit, we may come to choose the better in time.

"Complete Within Thyself": Knowing Self-Sufficiency in *Paradise Regained*

Milton in 1666 was busy making good on his epic promise, conversing in turns with his steady muse and with his less steady amanuenses. He appears by then to have mostly finished writing *Paradise Lost*, settling back in London after diminution of plague to make revisions and corrections for his major epic. At the same time, Milton likely began to work on his minor epic.[1] The challenges faced by the blind poet during the composition of the former poem were heightened during the composition of the latter. Still he was dependent on others for reading and for writing, his daily milking, but now some of his more reliable friends and students were no longer at hand. He complains in a letter from that summer that any grammatical or spelling errors should be attributed to "the boy who wrote this down while utterly ignorant of Latin, for I was forced while dictating – and not without some difficulty – to completely spell out every single letter" (*CPW* 8:4). As Barbara K. Lewalski notes, "Milton must often have had such anxieties about having to trust his words and thoughts to anyone available."[2] And yet, given the chance to engage in a fantasy of projection about the one man who could lack nothing and need no-one, he instead wrote what is perhaps his final abdication of self-sufficiency.

Paradise Regained tests Milton's convictions about conversation and solitude, the collaborative search for truth, and the participatory nature of knowledge. His surprising choice of subject matter—the temptation of Christ in the desert—appears to privilege solitary experience, as Douglas Trevor has argued.[3] It could be read as a complement or corrective to the intensely interpersonal story of Eden, where trouble generally attends those who are alone. Yet there is more continuity

---

[1] Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 449. This contradicts Edward Phillip's supposition that *PR* "was begun and finisht and Printed after the other was publisht," but accords with Thomas Ellwood's accounts (*The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire [London: Constable and Company, 1932], 75).
[2] Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, 450.
[3] Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 191.

than correction in Milton's brief epic, where no sooner is "this glorious eremite" mentioned than "the spiritual foe" follows close behind (*PR* 1.8, 1.10).[4] We do not have here the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman (*CPW* 2:235), or man with God, or even man with himself; we do, however, have the agonistic conversation of Jesus and Satan. The hero of *Paradise Regained* is a singular figure not because he is the idealized solitary, capable of knowledge on his own, but because he produces truth from the devil's lies, coming to a clearer understanding of himself in the process. The incompleteness of Jesus's knowledge—itself a topic of critical debate[5]—reflects Milton's enduring belief in gradual revelation. Bolder still is Milton's implication that even Christ has room to grow. While another poet might have imagined a messiah "complete / Within [him]self," utterly self-sufficient (4.283–84), Jesus comes to reject that most subtle of temptations. He is no Miltonic fantasy. He must indeed be better.

"Who this is we must learn"

While readers of *Paradise Regained* have often disagreed about who knows what and when, all agree that in his brief epic Milton is still very much concerned with the process of knowing as a moral and intellectual exercise. John Carey in his edition notes that the poem allows ambiguity about some very

[4] Readers may indeed be startled to learn in Book 4 that Jesus has *never* been alone, but ever under the watchful eye of Satan (4.507–15).

[5] Much of the discussion has focused on Jesus's understanding of himself as the "son of God" and especially his pre-existence as the Son; see, e.g., John Carey, *Milton* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1969), 122–137 ("Christ does not really know who he is himself" [124]), and Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1954), 110–121 ("he crosses and recrosses the boundary… of the humanly uncertain and the divinely sure" [118]). For John Rogers, Jesus's apparent amnesia forms the basis of the poem's drama, since he already has a "perfect knowledge of his messianic future" ("Paradise Regained and the Memory of Paradise Lost," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 594). Jesus seems to me far more interested in figuring out questions about his future than about his past, implying his knowledge is far from perfect.

basic questions central to understanding the action of the text:[6] what are Satan's motives in tempting Jesus? To what extent does Jesus act out of his humanity or divinity? What does each figure know, and when? This last is especially vexing since it tangles or untangles answers to the preceding questions. If Satan already knows that Jesus is divine, then why does he begin (or continue) his temptation? If Jesus knows the nature of his own divinity, then why does he need to go into the desert at all? Divinity itself might entail Jesus's knowledge, just as Satan's fallen nature clouds his otherwise angelic reason. We cannot unspool one narrative thread without committing to unraveling the others, such that reading *Paradise Regained* requires us to make interpretive decisions almost right away. Because Milton's text bears no single sense, whatever premise we first take to be true shapes the conclusion and the other premises. The effect, far more than in *Paradise Lost*, is to make the act of interpretation central to the poem's subject and experience.[7]

As interpreters, we are again aligned with the perspective of Satan at the start of the epic. The chief devil reprises his former role as chief investigator, this time in exaggerated empirical terms. Milton establishes the Satan of *Paradise Regained* with reference to the old one as avatar of solitary knowledge: "I, when no other durst, sole undertook / The dismal expedition to find out / And ruin Adam" (*PR* 1.100–102). The devil is keen to spin a narrative of singular greatness, as indeed he does in *Paradise Lost* with stories of his "uncouth errand sole…. To search with wandering quest," "To know, and this once known," "to build / Their ruin" (*PL* 2.827–30; 2.839; 4.521–22). But where before Milton provided alternative, godly versions of empiricism in Abdiel, Uriel, Adam, and Eve,

---

[6] John Carey, ed. *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, rev. 2nd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007), 417–20. Citations are to this edition of the poem. Similarly, John Rogers remarks how a text "seemingly written in a stylistic mode as plain and unambiguous as Milton appears to have been capable of producing, conjures for us a world in which so few matters of consequence can be simply or clearly understood" ("*Paradise Regained* and the Memory of *Paradise Lost*," 591).

[7] See, e.g., Mary Ann Radzinowicz, "*Paradise Regained* as Hermeneutic Combat," *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* 15, no. 3 (1984): 99–107, and Louis L. Martz, *Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 258–61.

that space has been vacated in *Paradise Regained* to the machinations of Satan. The latter seems genuinely to believe that "the way found prosperous once / *Induces* best to hope of like success," as if this were simply a repeat experiment (1.104–05, emphasis added). Although some critics suspect the devil may be feigning ignorance of Christ,[8] echoes across the two poems suggest his purpose is the same. The epic narrator, not Satan, says he "a while surveyed / With wonder" the man just pronounced God's beloved son (1.37–38; 1.32), as Satan does in *Paradise Lost* when he descries "Creatures of other mould…. Whom my thoughts pursue / With wonder" (4.362–63). This is before Satan's public speech in front of the devils in *Paradise Regained*, so he has no reason to feign. Later, he "with curious eye / Perused" Jesus, excusing his curiosity as the fake cherub did with Uriel:

> What can be then less in me than desire
> To see thee and approach thee, whom I know
> Declared the Son of God, to hear attent
> Thy wisdom, and behold thy godlike deeds? (*PR* 1.383–86)

Satan's "Unspeakable *desire to see and know*" in *Paradise Lost* (3.662) is here redirected towards Jesus. We can and should suspect his intentions. But the epic narrator and the devil together testify to his desire to know, and we have no good reason to doubt his curiosity or the incompleteness of his knowledge. A carryover from the prior poem, Satan with his relentless inquiry essentially poses the epic question of *Paradise Regained*: "Who this is we must learn" (1.91).

All eyes are then fixed on Jesus, who is subject and type and protagonist all at once. He is under constant scrutiny. Not only Gabriel, but "all angels conversant on earth / With man or men's affairs" are asked to "behold" this new figure recently proclaimed son of God (1.130–32). Readers, too, join angels and devils in viewing him, but there is not much to view by way of action. The

[8] Most influentially, Allen, *The Harmonious Vision*, 110–121, esp. 111–13. In both poems, the devil's mission statement comes in front of a crowd, but descriptions of his curiosity do not.

climax of the story, Jesus's heroic deed, is understated—almost supplemental: "Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said *and stood*" (4.561, emphasis added). As even this narrative apogee suggests, we need to hear and read Jesus as much as we need to see him. Satan knows this, too, and he spends much of the poem trying to make sense of him through typological interpretation. Milton's readers have followed Satan's lead in comparing Jesus to Solomon (2.205–8), David (3.351–54), Hagar (2.308–10), and Elijah (2.312–14), among others.[9] Jesus himself encourages comparisons to Job, Elijah, and David. Accordingly, though Satan and readers must learn "who this is," we cannot do so only directly; he is understood obliquely, out of the corner of the eye, or through a series of echoes. A single sense or perspective will not do, which is perhaps why Milton records the story of Jesus' baptism on three different occasions, or recounts the story of the child in the temple from his own perspective (1.206–14), Mary's (2.96–100), and even Satan's (4.215–21). These models of Jesus sometimes accord, but they are productive also when they conflict. In this way the poem signals its acceptance of ambiguity and "double sense" (1.435), even when Satan and Jesus do not.[10]

If we limit ourselves to the biblical canon, however, we miss out on some of the most important analogues—ones Jesus and Satan are not privy to and so cannot reflect upon. This is *Milton's* Jesus, and so some of the most revealing sources for who this is come from the author's canon. Those sources are in fact the reason for many of the poet's substantive additions to the biblical text: the feast Satan offers Jesus in Book 2, which hearkens to the ethics of eating; the

---

[9] The classic study is Barbara K. Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1966), which describes Satan and Jesus as being themselves engaged in debates over typology. As will become clear, my reading accords with Lewalski's contention that neither Jesus nor Satan know everything at the start, but that each grows in knowledge through their debates. Yet where she emphasizes the illumination Jesus receives after each temptation, it seems to me their discussion itself accounts for much of his growth.

[10] One of the most telling examples comes in the epic simile comparing Jesus to both Hercules *and* Oedipus, themselves ambiguous figures, at the climactic moment in which it would be tempting to imagine instead a simplified good defeating simplified evil; see Maggie Kilgour, "Odd Couplings: Hercules and Oedipus in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 56 (2015): 75–113.

narrator's extrabiblical focus on Jesus's solitariness throughout; the invention of a final temptation to wisdom and a life of studious retirement (4.240–84). These in turn invite comparisons to Milton's Adam and Eve, to Samson, the Lady, Satan, the Son, and the poet himself. It is by considering these figures, too, that we can understand Jesus as the culmination of Milton's lifelong reflection on self-sufficiency. God, according to *Paradise Lost*, is in himself complete; in him

> 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. (*PL* 8.415–16)

Jesus, human divine, exists at the crossroads of this divide. He belongs within human society and outside it as son of Adam and "son of God," and so his sufficiency is at issue as much as his knowledge. When Satan in the last book of *Paradise Regained* promotes philosophical learning as the way to "render thee a king complete / Within thyself" (*PR* 4.283–84), he merges the two questions, suggesting both that Christ is deficient and that knowledge and wisdom can repair his shortcoming.[11] To examine Jesus's self-sufficiency—to see if Satan is right—is to learn what "son of God" means in relation to the divine Word. Doing so calls for comparison with Milton's other human characters and with the divine figure whom the human Christ aspires to become.

Jesus's primary interlocutor, Satan, is rhetorically diminished from his former glory in *Paradise Lost*. Yet Milton gives the devil his due in *Paradise Regained* in the form of perspicacity. As already mentioned, Satan's query is the reader's query and that of Jesus, who gains increasing confidence about his identity and his path forward through conversation with him. Satan also

---

[11] Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, 288–99, draws attention to theological traditions that distinguished between *scientia* (knowledge) and *sapientia* (wisdom). Satan offers classical learning to satisfy the requirements of both, and the distinction is useful in understanding why Jesus is so dismissive of the classical authorities: he thinks only scripture can offer true wisdom.

identifies and articulates the poem's interpretive cruxes. He is sincerely perplexed ("[S]woll'n with rage" [4.499]) as he outlines the problem of trying to understand "In what degree or meaning" Jesus is "called / The Son of God, which bears no single sense" (4.516–17). "All men are Sons of God," Satan points out, and "The Son of God I also am, or was" (4.520, 518). As John Rogers has noted, he is absolutely right on this account, and the mystery is revealed only progressively; it is not even clear exactly when Jesus understands his relation to himself as the Son.[12] Moreover, the devil correctly reasons that the answer will depend on the nature of Jesus's humanity. After his first encounter with Jesus, Satan tells the other devils that this new subject of his temptation is unlike Eve (2.140–43), and also unlike Adam. "Though Adam by his wife's allurement fell," he is

> However to this man inferior far,
> If he be man by mother's side at least,
> With more than human gifts from heaven adorned,
> Perfections absolute, graces divine,
> And amplitude of mind to greatest deeds. (2.134–39)

Satan's prevarication muddles his syntax and adds a double sense. Is that "if" a true conditional expressing uncertainty, or is he saying something like, "if he is man, he is so on his mother's side"? Does the conditional extend to the clause that Jesus is adorned with superhuman gifts, or is he making that claim outright? Regardless, the devil is asking the right questions, or making the right claims. The key issue is whether and how Jesus is "more than human." As it turns out, he is right to try to answer these questions by looking back to Adam and Eve.

Milton's previous depiction of unfallen humanity indeed lends nuance to the debate about Jesus's divinity and self-sufficiency. When Satan tries to understand his adversary's ambiguous nature—his "perfections absolute" and "graces divine" and "amplitude of mind"—he unwittingly

---

[12] See Rogers, "*Paradise Regained* and the Memory of *Paradise Lost*," 591–92.

evokes Milton's Adam and Eve. This is true more generally; *Paradise Lost*, but not necessarily Genesis, furnishes an account of the first humans as nearly godlike creatures capable of righteous action and elevated thought. Satan's praise of Christ in fact echoes specific descriptions of unfallen humanity in the first poem. The narrator remarks upon Adam's "own complete / Perfections" in describing his native dignity, which requires no retinue when meeting an angel for a guest (*PL* 5.352–53). So self-evident are his charms and capacities that even while warning him of his mutability, Raphael admits that "God made thee perfect" (5.524). Eve, even more than Adam, is extolled by her husband in terms that echo Satan's praise of Jesus: "so *absolute* she seems / And in herself complete, so well to know her own" (8.547–49, emphasis added). She is synonymous with "grace" in the poem (e.g., 8.488, 8.600–602), and her "greatness of mind" is acknowledged by Adam and modern critics, if not by Raphael (8.557). What Satan sees in Jesus has therefore already been seen and witnessed in the first couple. What seems beyond the scope of humanity, or more than human, may simply be humanity uncorrupted in Milton's telling.[13]

Of course, perfection for Milton is not defined by stasis. Adam and Eve are made "perfect, not immutable" (5.524), and the very fact that they are not self-sufficient should give us pause when we see Jesus in *Paradise Regained* similarly praised. Adam, we have seen, requires conversation and participation to grow intellectually and ontologically. This is by design. His negative initial experience with solitude and his social temperament are less important than his human need for others, just as Eve's more pleasurable independence does not in any way negate her dependence on Adam, God, and the created world. A stoically-minded patron of rugged individualism might see such dependency as a fault; Milton does not. When Adam in *Paradise Lost* 8 says "man by number is to

[13] Already 100 years ago Allan H. Gilbert wryly observed that "Satan is not in the habit of associating perfection with humanity" ("The Temptation in *Paradise Regained*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 15, no. 4 [1916]: 608). Apparently critics are not, either, which might explain why even Gilbert does not make the connection to the Adam and Eve of *Paradise Lost*.

manifest / His *single imperfection*, and beget / Like of his like, his image multiplied" (8.422–24, emphasis added), he is not bemoaning his loneliness. He expresses rather the reality of his physical limitations, before immediately underscoring his requirement for "dearest amity" (8.426) and intimating that even God is in the habit of raising creatures to talk with (8.429–31). There is nothing wrong with wanting or needing a friend.[14] Conversely, creaturely ambition for utter independence, to need no one and nothing, *is* morally questionable. Eve's downfall begins with an innocuous wish to express independence; it culminates in an ironic alienation from Adam even as she becomes overly needy and possessive of him. In the interim she has fallen for the temptation of leading a "life more perfect" (9.689), of eyes "perfectly… / Opened and cleared" (9.707–8), and thus dependence on no one for wisdom except perhaps the sapient plant. Perfection, it seems, is compatible with both humanity and insufficiency—but not with illusions of self-sufficiency.

Naturally, one could argue that Milton evokes such comparisons to show the difference in quality between the first man and the greater man. Perhaps Jesus is truly perfect in a way that Adam and Eve were not. For Thomas H. Luxon, Jesus's experience in the desert is evidence of his manly self-sufficiency: "The Son of *Paradise Regain'd*, however much Milton depicts him as human, is a person content in solitude." Jesus indeed lacks the defining imperfection of humanity, "the constitutive loneliness by which Adam chiefly distinguished himself from God — he is just fine alone; he needs no partner in conversation, not a woman, not a man, and certainly not Satan."[15] This appears to be Satan's calculation, too: Adam "by his wife's allurement fell" (*PR* 2.134), victim to his fear of loneliness, but Jesus has no such fear or need. Luxon's Jesus is his Father's son—essentially

---

[14] Thomas H. Luxon's learned reading of Adam and of Jesus in *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005) unfortunately makes humanity and perfection incompatible, leading logically to conclusions I find incompatible with Milton's broader emphasis on divinity as communality.

[15] Ibid., 165, 188.

the Son, since "Like his Father, he in himself is perfect; in him is no deficiency found." This is an attractive position because it might account for Jesus's frigidity in the poem; in his rigor and seeming imperviousness, he does not often feel like a full human, as did the perfect humans Adam and Eve. Moreover, the poem often cites typological parallels of exceptional people who nevertheless fall short of Christ. In Book 4, the narrator unfavourably compares the first woman to the Messiah: "Eve was Eve, / This far his over-match" (4.6–7). His supremacy is then underscored through a series of similes emphasizing his impenetrable greatness: a winepress beating off a swarm of flies, the solid rock dashing the surging waves to shivers, the cunningest man who has to endure the petty attempts of a man too proud to admit defeat (4.10–20). He is, it seems, by this point ready to regain the paradise lost by our first parents when they became imperfect.

A view of this superlative and sufficient Christ, unfortunately, is untenable without significant interpretational sacrifices—among them, continuity between Milton's first epic and his brief epic, internal consistency within *Paradise Regained*, and theological sensitivity to the humanity of Jesus. First, it is entirely possible that Jesus is morally and intellectually superior to Adam and Eve, sufficient to withstand Satan, and still not be the idealized stoic solitary critics sometimes make him out to be. They too were "Sufficient to have stood," after all (*PL* 3.99), and if Milton's essential point is that Christ did what the first humans could have done, he cannot very well make Jesus's success depend on his being categorically different from them. The contrasts and parallels are there not to show that Jesus himself was utterly different, but that things could have been different—that an unfallen scenario existed.[16] Second, any image of a ready-made Christ seems at odds with the

[16] Milton's additions to the biblical narrative seem designed to make Jesus a second Eve, who must reject the temptation of food as well as knowledge. See Elizabeth Marie Pope, *Paradise Regained: The Poem and the Tradition* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1947), especially 56–64 and 70–79, and David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost: Reading the Designs of Milton's Epic* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2014), 169–76. Dennis Danielson, *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) demonstrates the poet's theological commitment to

basic premise of *Paradise Regained* that Jesus needed to go into the wilderness for a reason. He does not do so "to seek solitude,"[17] as we shall see. In fact, at the outset he appears not to know why he was led to the desert at all, and he himself suggests that his revelation is progressive and incomplete: "to what intent / I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know; / For what concerns my knowledge God reveals" (*PR* 1.290–93). That is precisely the position Adam and Eve take at their best, since for them too God through Raphael "impart[s] / Things above earthly thought, which yet *concerned* / *Our knowing*" (*PL* 7.81–83, emphasis added). It would be strange for Milton, after decades of preaching gradual knowledge, to make his exemplar of godly learning operate in a way inaccessible to us. I have been arguing that knowledge is by nature incremental and communicative. The problem with a self-sufficient, divinely superhuman Christ is that Milton's social epistemology leaves no room for him. Nor is he coherent in the narrative continuum between Adam, Eve, and Jesus that the author carefully builds across the two poems.

Perhaps the deepest issue with this reading is that the Son of *Paradise Lost* is nothing like the self-contained, solitude-seeking figure who supposedly represents the peak of divine sufficiency. Even if we grant that God, in his playful debate with Adam, is serious when he says he is "alone / From all eternity" (*PL* 8.405–5), the Son clearly is not. Milton's Arianism diminishes the self-sufficiency of the Son compared to standard trinitarian doctrine, which generally frowns at the subordination of one Person to the other. If God is remote, he is so remote that we never see him being remote. We see him instead through his social Son and in society with that Son—in Books 3, 5, and 6, clearly, but also any time the Son speaks as his Word and authority. The Son, who is not yet Jesus, is singular as the firstborn of creation and the creator himself of all subsequent things. He is

---

making sure the Fall was never necessary or the best of all possible worlds. Though God brings good out of evil, man's first disobedience is in no way fortunate, since paradise would have kept improving along with Adam and Eve.

[17] Luxon, *Single Imperfection*, 165.

not singular in the sense of being alone. On the contrary, he greets a fallen Adam with a warmth ill-befitting Milton's reputation: "Where art thou Adam, wont with joy to meet / My coming seen far off? I miss thee here, / Not pleased, thus entertained with solitude" (10.103–5). If, as Trevor, Luxon, Samuel Smith, and others believe, Jesus is "content in solitude," he is here most unlike the Son whom he has yet to become. It seems prudent for this reason to distinguish carefully between Jesus as we see him in the latter poem and the divine figure of *Paradise Lost*. He is not simply the Son in a human body (a strange kind of Modalist heresy) or an amnesiac deity.[18] He is a specific, peculiar human being who is coming into his own as the Son of God. When readers find the Jesus of *Paradise Regained* to be frigid, inaccessible, and impersonal, it is not because he is too similar to the Son of *Paradise Lost*.[19] It is because he is not yet sufficiently like the divine figure who descends, in the cool of day, with mild aspect to tenderly greet those who have betrayed him (*PL* 10.92–97).

"A multitude of thoughts"

The distance between the "ineffable" (*PL* 5.734) but affable Son and the brusque, precocious Jesus suggests that like Milton's other heroes and heroines, the protagonist of *Paradise Regained* has room to learn and grow. In stepping out alone and finding himself crowded by his thoughts and interrupted by a physical interlocutor, Jesus retraces the steps of the Lady and of Eve. David Quint has artfully argued that these characters are representative of a deep-seated wish on the part of Milton to imagine "a solitary, virtually self-sufficient human being undefiled by worldly temptation and approved in faith by God."[20] In each case this apparently righteous wish is denied: the Lady,

---

[18] See, for example, Rogers, "*Paradise Regained* and the Memory of *Paradise Lost*," 596.
[19] Northrop Frye's harsh description of Christ as "a pusillanimous quietist in the temptation of Parthia, an inhuman snob in the temptation of Rome, a peevish obscurantist in the temptation of Athens," though rather unfair, captures the critical frustration ("The Typology of *Paradise Regained*," *Modern Philology* 53, no. 4 [1956]: 227–38).
[20] David Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost*, 154.

despite her "sun-clad power of chastity" (*A Maske* 781) and successful rejection of Comus, finds herself bound to her chair until her brothers and then Sabrina come to her rescue; Eve, less successful, falls victim to the temptation in part because Satan has convinced her of her imperfection (*PL* 9.703–17). The initial temptation to sufficiency ironically results in her fall, guaranteeing her insufficiency and imperfection. Jesus's story also parallels Samson's. Led into a remote place, each man reflects upon his history and the as-yet unfulfilled prophecy for him to deliver Israel "from the Roman yoke" and "from Philistian yoke" respectively (*PR* 1.217; *SA* 38–39). Each is interrupted in their musings by seeming well-wishers (Satan; the Chorus) who nevertheless rub salt in the wound of their inaction. That Jesus and Samson are drastically different characters who meet different endings—the one regaining paradise, the other "quitting" himself in suicide—is not revealing. That they arrive at their opposite determinations through a similar process of solitude and conversation is significant. The resonance and example of earlier iterations of Jesus's story suggest how he must gain new knowledge without falling for old tricks.

The complexity of solitude in Milton's works allows for a variety of outcomes in this journey, though in *Paradise Regained* Jesus does not exhibit some profound new ability to be alone. Samuel Smith contends, *pace* Luxon, that Jesus's experience of solitude is a human one rather than an otherworldly seclusion: Christ follows in the footsteps of Isaiah and Elijah, retreating to find "the time and solitary space needed to process the 'holy Meditations' and 'deep thoughts' that will clarify his purpose" before returning to society. Yet even this more balanced account of a "bounded" solitude—"voluntary, relative, temporary, purposeful"[21]—misses the ambiguity and paradox of solitude for Milton described in my first chapter. Jesus does not, like Eve or Samson, voluntarily seek out solitude; on the contrary, Milton three times tells us that Jesus is *led* to the wilderness

[21] Samuel Smith, "The Son's Bounded Solitude in *Paradise Regained*," in *Their Maker's Image: New Essays on John Milton*, ed. Mary Fenton and Louis Schwartz (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2011), 167, 166.

(1.189; 1.290; 1.299). It is far from clear that the reason for his journey is solitary contemplation, and indeed it may be argued that, like most of Milton's characters, he is never truly alone. Descriptions of Jesus's solitariness instead register the precarity of his knowledge. The outcome of his venture is not a foregone conclusion, nor does isolation yield the revelation he seeks. For that, he will need to sally out to see his adversary and "exercise" his otherwise cloistered virtue (*PR* 1.156; *CPW* 2:515).[22]

The initial description of Jesus's journey into the wilderness appears to support the self-sufficient saviour some critics have found in *Paradise Regained*. At the same time, it hearkens back to the poet's early works in its suggestion that solitude is a form of conversation. Jesus,

> Musing and much revolving in his breast,
> How best the mighty work he might begin
> Of saviour to mankind, and which way first
> Publish his godlike office now mature,
> One day forth walked alone, the spirit leading
> And his deep thoughts, the better to converse
> With solitude. (1.185–91).

This is Christ the "glorious eremite" (1.8): pensive, "godlike," authoritative. Away from the crowds of John the Baptist and even apart from his close disciples, it seems he can finally spend time with himself and figure out how to save the world. The passage clearly reflects the retirement poetry popular in the 1660s and which Milton had preempted by some thirty years in works like *A Maske* and "Il Penseroso." But paradox sets in early, beginning with a subtle pun that contrasts "mighty" action with the modal verb "might" – potential as power and as contingency. Jesus knows the goal, but he does not yet know "How best" or "which way" to reach it. He appears to be in control at the

[22] The Father's stated purpose to *exercise* Jesus recalls a less famous passage from *Areopagitica*: "our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise as well as our limbs and complexion" (*CPW* 2:543).

start of line 189 ("One day forth walked alone"), but just as quickly we find "the spirit leading." This guidance is more than a quick nudge: lost in the wilderness later "he still on was led" (1.299); "by some strong motion I am led" (1.290).[23] His solitude, if we can call it that, thus is externally instigated and involves paradoxical conversation with solitude itself.

Given Milton's ambivalence towards solitariness, it is unsurprising that Jesus's experience in the desert turns out to be no private retreat. A hint of discomfort appears in the passage already quoted. "Musing" is innocent enough; the Second Brother in *A Mask* affirms that "musing Meditation most affects / The pensive secrecy of desert cell" (385–86) and Il Penseroso admires the "even step, and musing gait" of Melancholy ("IP" 38). With Jesus "much revolving in his breast" (*PR* 1.185), however, we can hear echoes of Satan at Mount Niphates "much revolving" his plans and his sufferings "in his tumultuous breast" (*PL* 4.31; 4.16). Thoughts take on an almost physical presence for Jesus. Not long after this initial description, he is "with such thoughts / Accompanied of things past and to come / Lodged in his breast" (*PR* 1.299–301). As he moves towards seclusion (such as it is), this dynamic is exacerbated, and the more troubling aspects of solitude come to fore:

> Thought following thought, and step by step led on,
> He entered now the bordering desert wild,
> And with dark shades and rocks environed round,
> His holy meditations thus pursued.
> O what a multitude of thoughts at once
> Awakened in me swarm, while I consider
> What from within I feel myself, and hear

[23] Milton softens the biblical narrative to avoid stripping Jesus of agency altogether. Luke's account has the Spirit lead (impel) Jesus into the wilderness – not by choice. Mark is even stronger: "the spirit driveth him into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12, *KJV*), translating Gk. *ekballō* with accusative of place ("to lead one forth or away somewhere with a force which he cannot resist"); see "Strong's NT 1544," 2d, *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g1544/kjv/tr/0-1/.

What from without comes often to my ears,

Ill sorting with my present state compared. (1.192–200)

The mind is its own place, but rarely does Milton pair them so neatly together—thought for thought, step for step. As Jesus crosses the threshold into the psychological space that solitude represents for many writers of the seventeenth century, he finds himself accosted by the very thoughts that are supposed to bring him peace.[24] Worse, the sinister echoes continue. "[W]ith dark shades and rocks environed round" recalls Sin, who also sits at the border of a "darksome desert" "With terrors and with clamours compassed round" (*PL* 2.973; 2.862). The line also inverts Satan in Chaos, "on all sides round / Environed" as he fights off the warring elements (*PL* 2.1015–16). The external quiet that Jesus hears amplifies, through contrast, the intellectual commotion of awakened thoughts "swarm[ing]" his mind. Listening carefully, readers can hear in his exclamation the literally Chaotic freight of cognitive isolation.

Such an enclosure of intellectual energy must give way eventually. The alternative, as we saw in the divorce tracts and in *Areopagitica*, is an unwholesome suppression of thoughts and feelings that bubbles over into vice and error. This phlegmatic Christ is not, of course, like the desperate husband of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. He does not need to be, because it is also the nature of truth to crop up and spout out. (His soliloquizing here may in fact be testament to that.) The closer analogue is Samson, who *is* a desperate husband, but whose pursuit of solitude at the start of the play makes him a foil for Christ in the 1671 volume. Critics who assert Jesus's desire for *quies* are more accurately describing Samson: "Retiring from the popular noise, I seek / This unfrequented place to find some ease" (*SA* 16–17). Neither character actually finds ease, however. Samson responds in terms disquietingly close to Jesus: "Ease to the body some, none to the mind / From

[24] See my first chapter, and for other examples, Wendy Olmsted, *The Imperfect Friend: Emotion and Rhetoric in Sidney, Milton, and their Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 175–185.

restless *thoughts*, that like a deadly *swarm* /Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging" (18–21, emphasis added). Milton reserves some of his most poignant verse for him, an alternative portrait of what life as a defeated blind man could be.[25] The terrifying solipsism which the poet limns in his hymn to light is manifest in Samson's exasperation: "Light the prime work of God to me is extinct" (*SA* 70; cp. *PL* 3.49–50). He articulates too some of Satan's woeful sense of imprisonment; his opening soliloquy, like Jesus's, hearkens to the devil at Niphates. His thoughts "present / Times past, what once I was, and what am now," just as for Satan conscience "wakes the bitter memory / Of what he was, what is, and what must be" (*SA* 21–22; *PL* 4.25). Samson's "restless thoughts," like Satan's "troubled thoughts," are self-accusatory (*SA* 19; *PL* 4.19). "Whom have I to complain of but myself?" (*SA* 46), asks Samson, as Satan wonders, "whom hast thou then or what to accuse" (*PL* 4.67)? I do not argue that Jesus is Samson, though the latter triangulates between Jesus and Satan at least on the level of echo and allusion. But Samson like Satan is a figure of failed conversation, and a reminder of the high stakes of going at it alone. Solitude has the power to "awaken" a multitude of thoughts, as Jesus learns (*PR* 1.196–97). To stop the swarm, he must learn also to diffuse and exercise them by speaking to someone other than himself.

The straightforward and traditional solution is of course for Jesus to speak with God. Solitude as a spiritual practice is meant to enable such conversation, so it is all the more surprising that Jesus does not think to pray to help him settle his thoughts. We do not, in fact, witness direct communication between the Father and his Son. In two of the three synoptic gospels, God uses the second-person voice to address Christ at his baptism: "Thou art my beloved Son" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22); in *Paradise Regained*, the Father uses the third-person voice: "This is my son beloved, in him am pleased" (1.85). The biblical Christ often withdraws to lonely places to pray, to speak with God

[25] The poet would know more than most extreme dependency and what it feels like to be "Within doors, or without, still as a fool / In power of others, never in my own" (*SA* 77–78).

(Luke 5:16); Jesus in Milton's poem is nowhere seen praying. His holy meditations appear deliberative rather than conversational, and they are disappointingly unproductive. At the outset, the prospect of thoughts lodged in his breast that "might recommend / Such solitude before choicest society" is a positive one (1.302). "Full forty days" later (1.303), surely he has come to at least partial revelation? No. Book 2 confirms that Mary's son, "tracing the desert wild, / Sole but with holiest meditations fed,"

> Into himself descended, and at once
> All his great work to come before him set;
> How to begin, how to accomplish best
> His end of being on earth, and mission high. (2.109–114)

This could seem a vindication of contemplative solitude—were it not the same situation he found himself in forty days prior ("Musing… *how best* the mighty *work* he might *begin*" [1.186]). Jesus's time in the desert, like the Israelites' forty years of wandering, bears little fruit. No wonder he asks, "Where will this end?" (2.245). Milton's preservation of biblical details here is as interesting as his alteration of them. *Paradise Regained* seems initially to promise a mid-seventeenth-century narrative of spiritual retreat, but never delivers one. Nor do his source texts, which instead suggest that the purpose of Jesus's time in the desert is "to be tempted of the devil" (Matt. 4:1).[26] The poem underscores that fact with the addition of a scene in which God, speaking to Gabriel, says he will "expose" Jesus to Satan's solicitations in preparation for a greater battle against Sin and Death (1.140–62). There is no mention of solitude, prayer, or fast as part of God's design. Accordingly,

[26] The other synoptic gospels Mark (1:12–13) and Luke (4:1–2) indicate only that he was tempted by Satan during those forty days, without spelling out that the purpose itself was the temptation. They do not, however, suggest Jesus was on spiritual retreat or even fasting – just that he ate nothing.

Satan's appearance and repeated colloquy are not interruptions of a spiritual program: they are the point, the necessary exercise that sharpens Jesus's purpose and brings intellectual relief.[27]

"These growing thoughts"

Milton's conversation-deprived hero works through his private thoughts with Satan rather than with God, growing in confidence and specificity with each encounter. It seems wrong to say outright that Jesus needs his devilish interlocutor to untangle, feed, or refine his knowledge; but it is more wrong to suppose that he already had everything he needed, or that Satan's temptation was superfluous. Clearly God didn't think so. Mary too encourages her son to "nourish" his high thoughts (1.229–30). This Jesus does in his study of scripture and his apparent study of pagan authors and customs—which, he repeatedly notes, are "not unknown" to him (2.443), brandishing at one point his familiarity with "Their wines of Setia, Cales, and Falerne, / Chios and Crete" (4.117–18).[28] Jesus is likely wise to more than he lets on, then, but knowledge is in the making: he has yet to sort out exactly how his theories of power, government, and learning should affect his own life. He had previously sought the scholars of the Temple at Jerusalem "to propose / What might improve my knowledge or their own" (1.213–14), a collaboration that realizes the metaphorical building of the

[27] While it was a theological commonplace to see Jesus's time in the desert as a kind of initiation, Milton's exclusive emphasis on the temptation is striking. Calvin, for example, says Christ was led into the desert "for two causes": to be tempted, and so that "after the fast of forty dayes as a new man, or rather a heavenly, hee might come forth to exercise his office" (John Calvin, *A Harmonie Upon the Three Evangelistes[…]*, trans. Eusebius Pagit [London: T. Adams, 1610], 125). Milton diverges from scripture and commentators, too, by placing the bulk of the temptation *after* the forty days.

[28] Jesus, or else Milton, is coy about this knowledge. His expressions of it are concessive, almost confessional, yet they admit also a hint of pride; so he relies on negative or parenthetical constructions: "not unknown," "Think not but that I know these things," "(For I have also heard, perhaps have read)" (2.443; 4.286; 4.116). Thomas Festa has memorably written that "If… the devil is in the details, in *Paradise Regained* the Messiah also lurks between parentheses" ("The Temptation of Athens and the Variorum *Paradise Regained*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 76, no. 1 [2013]: 19).

Temple in *Areopagitica*. Now he must attain deeper knowledge through the combative approach also described in that treatise.

Either by God's design or Milton's, Satan obliges Jesus to articulate his motives and discover himself as the peaceable redeemer of mankind. There is real uncertainty on Christ's part, despite his steely demeanour and bold speech, about how he ought to proceed. This stems firstly from the progressive nature of his revelation and secondly from the uniqueness of his position as human Messiah. Quite in contrast to readers who find him nearly omniscient, Jesus describes his journey of knowledge as a gradual one. He was serious and precocious at a young age, understanding himself to be a religious scholar and moral teacher "born to promote all truth, / All righteous things" (1.205–206). But he does not know himself to be the Son of God until Mary reveals to him that he is "no son of mortal man" (1.234). And while even before this he desires earnestly to "rescue Israel from the Roman yoke" and "quell o'er all the earth / Brute violence and proud tyrannic power" (1.217–19), he does not know that he is "the Messiah," the "King of Israel born" (1.245; 1.254). We know the story so well it is easy to forget that he does not. In fact, he keeps adding to his knowledge by consulting the scriptures to learn what Mary left out: "that [his] way must lie / Through many a hard assay even to the death" (1.264). Milton in this way depicts Jesus learning in parts and through human means. If he somehow came to know everything about himself by the time he meets Satan, that event is conspicuously missing from an otherwise careful narration. It is more likely that, like Milton himself, Jesus must work to reconcile his calling with an inauspicious start: "What from within I feel myself… Ill sorting with my present state compared" (1.198–200).

Unlike Milton, Jesus has the additional complication of being the Messiah. His question is not just what it means to be the "Son of God" (Satan's query, and an important one). Rather, he must figure out how his longstanding aspirations—to learn, to teach, to rule—fit within his prophetic role as suffering redeemer. It is suitably Miltonic that Christ in this text does not seem to

want to waste his talents or initial ambitions. Upon learning he must "work redemption for mankind" (1.266), he does not abandon his natural desire to investigate truth and persuade the nations. Instead, he must do those things as a Messiah, and that aim forms the subtext of his debate with Satan. The devil tempts with wealth, renown, martial victory, good connections, and worldly wisdom. If Jesus had no ambitions of his own to know, persuade, and govern, these temptations could be easily rebuffed as utterly irrelevant to his eventual sacrifice, and God's exercise prove no exercise at all. But Milton's protagonist does have those ambitions, and Satan at times makes legitimate arguments about how they could be achieved. Having observed Jesus his entire human life, the devil is wise to the young man's desires. He need not overhear Jesus soliloquizing about the "victorious deeds" and "heroic acts" that "Flamed in his heart" (1.215–16) to know that "all thy heart is set on high designs, / High actions" (2.410–11). He knows the sore spots and outstanding questions that Jesus himself must determine, especially the "means" by which such great acts will be achieved, and when (2.412). Lewalski remarks that "[t]he fact that many of Satan's temptations will recall to Christ courses of action he himself has speculated about must enhance their attractiveness." Yet Jesus's very indecision or hesitation about how to proceed seems to me reason enough to reject the additional assumption that "Christ has already appeared to dismiss" some of the possibilities he had weighed as a young man.[29] Indeed, it is by sifting through Satan's arguments that Jesus develops a better sense of how his uniquely humanist messianic ideal can be realized.[30]

If those earlier aspirations were dormant rather than swirling in Jesus's breast, Satan revives them when he moves away from the temptation of lunch to the more Miltonic concerns of public duty and fame in Book 2 of *Paradise Regained*. Jesus is keenly aware, as is his mother, that in Nazareth

---

[29] Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic*, 191.

[30] Though her focus is on biblical typology, Lewalski describes this "battle of wits" in similar fashion: "Christ is led forth into the desert in order to achieve through temptation a full self-awareness, and in order to merit a complete revelation from God concerning his mission" (191).

"his life [has been] / Private, unactive, calm, contemplative" (2.80–81; cf. 3.232–35). Only when God speaks audibly at his baptism—outing him, so to speak—is he certain that he "no more should live obscure / But openly begin" (1.287–88). That word *obscure* is a pointed one. It is the one Satan will attack him with when he asks why Jesus "hide[s]" his "godlike virtues,"

> Affecting private life, or more obscure
> In savage wilderness, wherefore deprive
> All earth her wonder at thy acts, thyself
> The fame and glory, glory the reward
> That sole excites to high attempts the flame
> Of most erected spirits. (3.21–27)

David Quint observes that this temptation "to be seen and admired by other creatures instead of being approved in the sight of God" is a reprisal of Satan's temptation of Eve, and indirectly Comus's temptation of the Lady.[31] It is also a version of Milton's own rhetoric in the 1633 "Letter to a Friend." Confessing "my *life* as yet *obscure*, & unserviceable to mankind," Milton nevertheless argues that a natural desire for fame itself "dissuade[s] prolonged *obscurity*," and that an "*affected* solitarinesse" often stands in the way of other admirable pursuits (*CPW* 1:319, emphasis added). There is authorial heft to Satan's argument, and authorial projection in Jesus's situation. The taunt that Jesus will not "regain / [His] right by sitting still or thus retiring" (*PR* 3.163–64) was of course relevant to a young Milton, and doubled as a reminder to a post-Restoration Milton that retirement from public life was not the only option. It also forces Christ to consider what kind of public ministry he will pursue, and how he feels about the type of fame he is likely to find upon achieving the heroic deeds that flame in his heart.

---

[31] Quint, *Inside Paradise Lost*, 172. For a recent discussion of Milton's distrust of fame, see David A. Harper, "'Fittest to Choose': Milton against Celebrity," *Milton Studies* 63 (2021): 94–106.

Milton's invention of Jesus's prior aspirations to knowledge, teaching, and government, which have no precedent in scripture, leave room for Satan's invention of means to reach them. Whether he admits it or not, Jesus has no problem with glory itself. His youthful ambition (even before learning he is Messiah) to teach or rule would surely result in public and even global renown. Not satisfied with the emancipation of Israel, he dreams of moving "Thence to subdue and quell o'er all the earth / Brute violence and proud tyrannic power, / Till truth were freed, and equity restored" (1.218–20). This increasingly abstract emancipation (first Israel is freed, then truth) recalls *Areopagitica* in its personification of Truth; it recalls also truth's avatar Osiris, whom Plutarch says "travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms."[32] Yet Jesus's initial musings do not rule out arms. Even if reluctantly, he envisions the need to "subdue" "the stubborn" (*PR* 1.226), those whom winning words will not reach. He will "try, and teach the erring soul," but failure on his part or the listener's may result in force (1.224). This alone opens the door for Satan to propose solutions that bring fame ("That last infirmity of noble mind ["Lycidas" 71]), conquest, and yes, persuasion. Over the course of Books 3 and 4 especially, Satan's solicitations and inquisitions prompt Jesus to refine his perspectives until he at last redefines glory, rejects force, and regains paradise without pretension to self-sufficiency.

Their mode of conversation is less the friendly construction of knowledge than the rejection of poor or false ideas, a chiseling of truth out from the stone of possibility. Satan complains (understandably) that Jesus appears to take pleasure only in contradicting (4.157–58). This is often true, but productively so; Christ's answers refute false binaries or add context to Satan's sweeping claims and assumptions. Moreover, Jesus asks questions, both open-ended and rhetorical. The most important kind are those that have no definite answer, but which can lead to a better understanding

[32] Plutarch, *Moralia: Volume V*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 306 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 356b.

of his task. On the issue of glory, for example, we can trace Jesus's evolving thought through a series of questions: "Among the heathens…. Canst thou not remember / Quintius, Fabricius, Curius, Regulus?" (2.243, 245); "What if with like aversion I reject / Riches and realms"? (2.457–58); "What is glory but the blaze of flame"? (3.47); "Shall I seek glory then, as vain men seek / Oft not deserved?" (3.105–6); and last, "What if he hath decreed that I shall first / Be tried in humble state, and things adverse…. that he may know / What I can suffer, how obey?" (3.188–89; 3.194–95). Jesus is rhetorically engaged, making arguments intended to convince his opponent, even as he engages in deliberative thought. "What if" suggests openness rather than certainty, as does the subjunctive mood ("if there be in glory aught of good…" [3.88]). He is reflecting in real-time. Where previously "a multitude of thoughts at once" rushed to overwhelm Christ (1.196), discursive disagreement gives structure and purpose to his evolving positions.

The discussion of glory, which leads into a discussion of violence and empire, demonstrates that Satan is more than a sounding board. Jesus's questions and conclusions are dynamic, responding to the logic of the conversation. We could miss this if we assume that the Son of God is already perfect and, being complete in himself, impervious to the ideas of others. He would work through syllogism, not dialogue, and pose rhetorical questions that lead only to predetermined answers. As mentioned above, Satan changes tactic when he begins to discuss the "means" by which the Messiah will achieve his goals. Somewhat surprisingly, Jesus in counterpoint recalls heathen exemplars who have accomplished great feats without wealth: "Quintius, Fabricius, Curius, Regulus." This evocation appears to be a response to Satan's mention of Antipater as someone ushered into power by wealth, and it prompts a self-comparison by Jesus: "what in me seems wanting, but that I / May also in this poverty as soon / Accomplish what they did, perhaps and more?" (2.450–52). Yet crucially, every one of these exemplars is a military figure, implying that Jesus has still not ruled out martial glory. When Satan thereafter cites Alexander the Great, Scipio,

and Pompey as models of early accomplishment (3.31–36), he is simply continuing down the path Christ has left open. Either Jesus has failed to be specific enough, or Satan's further provocation causes him to realize what kind of glory he is or is not interested in.[33] Upon hearing the example of these conquerors, Jesus articulates a new level of disdain for violence and the militarism which he has just tacitly endorsed:

> They err who count it glorious to subdue
> By conquest far and wide, to overrun
> Large countries, and in field great battles win,
> Great cities by assault: what do these worthies,
> But rob and spoil, burn, slaughter, and enslave… (3.71–76)

Curius, famous for conquering the Samnites and Sabines; Regulus, who with Lucius Manlius brutally invaded north Africa; Quinctius and Fabricius, whose glory rested on their martial prowess despite their restraint and temperance: none of these figures escapes the censure Jesus now directs at the more famous men. Although Milton's hero might be accused of inconsistency, this is also self-correction. His original plan was to "subdue" the stubborn (1.226) and the tyrannic (1.219); the use of that word again at line 3.71 signals his abandonment of that option at last. Glory "may by means far different be attained / Without ambition, war, or violence" (3.89–90). Satan has thus exercised Christ into considering a morally superior path compatible with great deeds.

Force now excluded, the spread of truth becomes a primary aim—indeed, the means by which he can rule an alternative kingdom, happier far. Jesus had already preferred persuasion to violence, having "held it more humane, more heavenly first / By winning words to conquer willing hearts, / And make persuasion do the work of fear" (1.221–23). One of several tools to carry out his

---

[33] Satan "continually attempts to increase [Christ's] mortal sense of personal unimportance and insufficiency" (Allen, *Harmonious Vision*, 120).

ambitious agenda, persuasion nevertheless retains an element of force or domination. Milton captures this through the strategy, familiar from *Areopagitica*, of using combative language to describe explicitly nonviolent action.[34] Satan himself is "confuted and convinced" by Christ, the latter word retaining the etymological sense of overcoming and conquering in the seventeenth century (*PR* 3.3; *OED* "convince," s.v.). Yet instead of conquest by force, Jesus hopes "to guide nations in the way of truth / By saving doctrine, and from error lead" (2.473–84). There is a shift here from persuasion to guidance that seems to better respect the autonomy of the listener: people are led and "attract[ed]," not pushed. Such a reign "Is yet more kingly," since by it he "Governs the inner man, the nobler part" (4.276–77); another monarch "o'er the body only reigns, / And oft by force" (2.478–79). Jesus is not so naïve as to think all will follow him, and he like Milton is still skeptical of decisions made by a multitude. But also like Milton, he is willing to find and publish wisdom where it may be found, to those willing to hear.[35]

Satan is a careful listener, even if he understands and offers only force. He hears Jesus speaking of this different kingdom and presses the argument to one logical conclusion: "Be famous then / By wisdom; as thy empire must extend, / So let extend thy mind o'er all the world, / In knowledge, all things in it comprehend" (4.221–24). Mind and empire, knowledge and power for him are coextensive, repeating an attitude from *Paradise Lost* that allowed him to despoil Hell as its possessor. Nevertheless, Satan's argument rings Miltonic: having acquired wisdom, Jesus must find a way to share it. Sharing it, in turn, requires a capacity for suitable conversation. The devil employs terms familiar from the marriage treatises of the poet's earlier years:

---

[34] E.g., *PR* 1.157–60, Jesus's unarmed "great warfare" in the desert and conquest of Sin and Death "By humiliation"; 4.607–9, Jesus "vanquishing / Temptation" and thus "frustrat[ing] the conquest fraudulent." In *Areopagitica*, Milton's ideal readers paradoxically "assent[ ] to the force of reason and convincement" in defending "beleaguer'd Truth" (*CPW* 2:554).

[35] Though not explicit, this attitude anticipates the biblical Christ's iconic refrain: "he that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9, Matt. 11:15, Luke 8:8, etc.)

> And with the Gentiles much thou must *converse*,
> Ruling them by persuasion as thou mean'st,
> Without their learning how wilt thou with them,
> Or they with thee *hold conversation meet*? (4.229–32, emphasis added)[36]

Without such learning, Satan suggests, Christ risks becoming an incompatible partner who falters in his mission to teach the nations, his rhetorical impotence failing to satisfy or enlighten the gentiles. The so-called Temptation of Athens is, at its core, a temptation about not just knowledge, but its spread—a challenge Milton had grappled with throughout his career. Satan promises wisdom and the means to distribute it. It is a false promise: Milton has learned that there must be willing labourers of Truth, and that sometimes even the best persuasion is insufficient. Great learning and rhetoric cannot guarantee that the nations (or even one English nation) will follow truth. That is why Jesus, who is equipped with great learning and rhetoric anyway,[37] can reject the apparent fulfilment of his lifelong dream.

"Perfect in himself"

Jesus's personal revelation in the desert includes a greater understanding of his power and of his limitations, of force and restraint. He could take up arms, but he shouldn't. He does not know everything, nor does he yet need to. He could eat lunch, or he can fast. In other words, he needs to exercise the type of self-rule that at one point he makes the condition of his better kingship: "he who reigns within himself, and rules / Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king; / Which every

---

[36] Cp., for example, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*: "a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage" (*CPW* 2:246). Similar language of course reappears in *Paradise Lost*; e.g., "How have I then to hold convèrse / Save with the creatures which I made" (8.408–9).
[37] See Donald Swanson and John Mulryan, "The Son's Presumed Contempt for Learning in *Paradise Regained*: A Biblical and Patristic Resolution," *Milton Studies* 27 (1991): 243–61, and Festa, "Variorum *Paradise Regained*," 18–19.

wise and virtuous man attains" (2.466–68). Scholars cite biblical and Neoplatonic sources for this sentiment; Thomas Corns very plausibly hears echoes of Milton's description of Cromwell from the *Second Defence*.[38] But Satan hears in these lines an opportunity for another temptation. How can Jesus develop such autonomy? By undertaking what Milton apparently did: a period of retired leisure in study of the greats: "These here revolve, or, as thou lik'st, at home, / Till time mature thee to a kingdom's weight"; for the "rules" of philosophy "will render thee a king complete / Within thyself" (4.281–84). This last idea is in some ways the ultimate dream for Milton—to become self-sufficient through study and exercise of moral virtue. Satan's evocation of Athens's "studious walks and shades" (4.243) bring to mind Il Penseroso's desire "To walk the studious cloister's pale" and the "arched walks of twilight groves" ("IP" 156; 133); the temptation of the "olive-grove of Academe, / Plato's retirement" (*PR* 4.244–45) similarly recalls *Prolusion 7*, which envisions Plato sitting under a plane-tree, away from the commotion of the city (*CPW* 1:295). The early Milton, or at least one version of him, could have approved such a path for Christ, idealizing its pleasures. In *Paradise Regained*, where Satan presents learning as the guarantor of sufficiency, he does not.

Jesus is vociferous and systematic in his infamous refusal of the devil's final temptation. He rejects and appears to devalue all sorts of classical learning, preferring Hebraic sources instead. Nevertheless, for reasons that will become apparent, he strikes especially long and hard at one school of thought:

> The Stoic last in philosophic pride,
> By him called virtue; and his virtuous man,
> Wise, perfect in himself, and all possessing,
> Equal to God, oft shames not to prefer,
> As fearing God nor man, contemning all

[38] Proverbs 16:32 seems especially relevant. Corns, "'With Unalter'd Brow,'" 113–14.

> Wealth, pleasure, pain or torment, death and life,
>
> Which when he lists, he leaves, or boasts he can,
>
> For all his tedious talk is but vain boast,
>
> Or subtle shifts conviction to evade. (4.300–308)

The "Stoic[s] severe," mentioned last and almost incidentally by Satan in his list of philosophical traditions (4.280), receive a "careful and relatively long construction of their errors."[39] Milton had previously critiqued the Stoics for their stingy severity through Comus (*A Mask* 705–6), and for the emptiness of their debates, which are rehearsed by devils in *Paradise Lost* (2.564–69). Here Jesus levies a more fundamental criticism at the false presumption of anyone who thinks he can be "perfect in himself" (*PR* 4.302). As we have seen, Milton has no problem representing figures as complete or perfect, especially if they continue to improve. Yet in *Paradise Lost*, Adam had established with God that only "Thou *in thyself* art perfect, and in thee / Is no deficience found; not so is man" (*PL* 8.415–16, emphasis added). Claiming self-sufficiency is tantamount to appointing oneself "Equal to God" (*PR* 4.303). While it is well and good to aim for greater moral virtue and perfection, not even the Son of God can find that in himself.[40] For someone to pretend otherwise in futile pursuit of self-sufficiency is, ironically for the Stoics, to betray a lack of self-knowledge—to remain "Ignorant of themselves" (4.310).

The second part of Jesus's critique demonstrates his potential for self-understanding. He reacts so strongly to Satan's enticement to become "a king complete / Within thyself" because it

---

[39] Reid Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 261. By contrast, the other schools receive a line or two at most. The observation, as Barbour notes, was first made by the eighteenth-century scholar Charles Dunster, who suggested that Christ takes special care to refute Stoicism at length "precisely because it seems so attractive and amenable to a Christian culture" (i). For Barbour, Milton makes strategic use of Stoic thought and sentiment in the earlier and middle periods of his career but turns decisively against the school in the later works (240–65).

[40] Jesus does not criticize the *means* of seeking self-sufficiency through learning, but the goal itself.

contains the seeds of his own temptation. It was Jesus back in Book 2 who first presented the Stoic notion that "he who reigns within himself, and rules / Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king; / Which every wise and virtuous man attains" (2.466–68). Now he must specify that contempt of "pleasure, pain or torment, death and life" itself suggests pride and lack of self-knowledge. Although Satan has not raised the Stoic principle of apathy, freedom from passions, Jesus feels the need to denounce it, as Milton also does in *De Doctrina Christiana*: contrary to patience is "the stoic *apatheia*, for sensibility to feelings of pain, and complaints or lamentations, are not inconsistent with [true] patience, as may be clearly seen in Job and the other holy people when bearing adversity" (*CWJM* 8.2:1107).[41] Yet, despite Jesus's self-comparison with Job, it is his very aloofness and apparent lack of interest in wealth, pleasure, pain or torment, life and death which has made him appear cold to many readers. He is unsettled by his thoughts, as we have seen; if he suppresses other feelings, we simply do not know, since he gives little voice to suffering or pleasure. Jesus's reflection on the Stoics here may thus signal a new recognition on his part that feeling and expressing passion is a necessary part of the virtuous life.

Milton highlights Christ's stolidity through contrast by weaving into the narrative two examples of holy people bearing adversity. First are the disciples Andrew and Simon, left behind at the river Jordan by Jesus and dismayed by his disappearance; they "together got" and "Their unexpected loss and plaints outbreathed" in a speech of almost 30 lines (2.28–29; 2.30–57). In communicating how their "joy is turned / Into perplexity," they follow the biblical model of the Psalms, which do not shy away from genuine anguish (2.37–38). Like many Psalms, they also end in hopeful prayer: "Let us be glad of this, and all our fears / Lay on his providence" (2.53–54). The

[41] Milton adds to Johannes Wollebius's foundation the example of "Job and the other holy people," and removes the pious qualifier that the complaints ought to be "rather for our sins than for our suffering"; see Johannes Wolleb, *The Abridgment of Christian Divinitie[…]*, trans. Alexander Ross (London: [Printed by T. Mab and A. Coles,] 1650), 254 (book 2, chapter 3).

episode is an inventive, humanizing break from the unemotional introduction of Christ in the first Book, and it reminds us, too, that his retreat has consequences for others. Immediately after Andrew and Simon, we hear the "troubled thoughts" of Mary, whose "breast, though calm; her breast, though pure" holds cares and fears to be relieved only "in sighs" (2.63–65). She comes awfully close to accusatory language in her plaint, sounding sarcastic in her recollection that she is "highly favoured, among women blest; / While I to sorrows am no less advanced, / And fears as eminent, above the lot / Of other women" (2.68–71). Mary fully voices the uncertain expectancy of a woman who knows that her soul will be pierced with a sword (Luke 2:35; *PR* 2.90–91). And yet, after great turmoil, she too ends on the conviction that "some great purpose" is at work; her job is to patiently await its fulfilment and the return of her son (2.101; 2.105–8). These three figures model a spiritual version of what Milton in *De Doctrina Christiana* had designated *autarkeia*: self-sufficiency defined as "the virtue by which one is contented with oneself above all, and with that lot which seems to have been divinely assigned" (*CWJM* 8.2:1083).[42] That is of course different from the self-sufficiency that Jesus comes to reject, and he too demonstrates *autarkeia* by accepting his mission and striving to understand it. Still, where Mary, Andrew, and Simon stay well clear of *apatheia*, Milton's Jesus must reckon with his own Stoicism before he can become the biblical Christ who at the garden of Gethsemane admits his agony and submits to God in spite of it.

At some level Jesus knows, as readers know, that the mature Son of God does not seek self-sufficiency or freedom from passion. He does not in *Paradise Lost*, nor does he in the Bible. It would doubtless be easier to feel neither pain nor pleasure, especially if he must face "things adverse, / By tribulations, injuries, insults, / Contempts, and scorns, and snares, and violence" (*PR* 3.189–91). Things would be easier, too, if it were possible to wrap oneself in knowledge and become complete

[42] In *DDC* Milton is speaking primarily about material self-sufficiency: making do with one's goods and means. Thus, the virtue is grouped with "economy, industry, and orderliness" (8.2:1083).

within oneself. Complete knowledge, in turn, might come more readily if it did not sometimes require a devilish collaborator. What does Christ choose? The poem ends only with a quiet intimation: "brought on his way *with joy*," "Home to his mother's house private [he] returned" (4.638–39). Similarly, *Paradise Regained* has sometimes been read as a story written by a man disillusioned with public life. "Finding himself in a country that has… dismissed his political agenda," this Milton relinquished his civic impetus in favour of "unmediated communion with God";[43] he advocated now only personal piety, and private knowledge.[44] And no wonder: it would be easier, too, to enjoy one's final years in relative privacy, out of earshot from censorious tongues. After a lifetime of conflict and few fit readers found, the poet must surely have been tempted to know by himself and for himself, complete. But that would have been the easier option.

[43] Trevor, *Poetics of Melancholy*, 191.
[44] For a brief overview of this critical tradition, see Thomas N. Corns, "'With Unalter'd Brow': Milton and the Son of God," *Milton Studies* 42 (2003): 105–6.

Epilogue: Knowing Milton

It would be customary at the close of this study for me to gather those pieces of Milton criticism that I have endeavoured to establish as truth. I should bring together "every joynt and member," striving to "mould them into an immortall feature of lovelines and perfection" that reflects and makes whole the poet's epistemology (*CPW* 2:549). One could reasonably begin with the hardy sinews of conversation and solitude, which Milton regularly twists together and which extend from the start of his career to the end in prose and verse. Truth courses between solitude and conversation as sites of knowledge, often clearest in their overlap. Or perhaps it is the poet's figurative conceptions that merit more attention: the metaphorical Proteus of truth is a flowery crop at one point and a fruit at another; it is a weighty treasure and a lightsome gift.[1] The variety of figures itself reveals the dynamism of knowledge and allows Milton to describe its qualities without the stringent dichotomies of syllogism.[2] Nor would it be unfair to say that what brings together these (sometimes competing) ideas is an approach rather than a set of rules. Knowledge for Milton is personal and interpersonal, and therefore ethical. There are heretics in the truth who do not *know* as they ought; as a corollary, a disembodied truth soon ceases to be truth and cannot be called knowledge without someone actively holding or sharing the knowledge they are given.

Nevertheless, each of these broad attempts to give shape to what is in practice an unruly combination of philosophy, theology, and poetic imagination falls short of providing a perfect structure. It is impossible to unite them into a continuity; they can be only "contiguous" (2:555). The reasons for this are intrinsic to Milton's epistemology itself. As just mentioned, for him knowledge is personal; truth becomes knowledge when it is believed by someone for a good reason. Yet Milton

---

[1] *Areopagitica* (2:558) and *Paradise Lost*; *Reason of Church Government* (1:801).

[2] On a verbal rather than figurative level, we could compare the Miltonic "or" that amplifies possibilities with the Ramist "or" that delimits them. For examples, though not necessarily for a coherent Milton, see Peter C. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton: Paradise Lost and the Poetics of Incertitude* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43–59.

the person changed over the course of his life, despite what he sometimes suggests, and so did his understanding of knowledge. Previous generations of readers looked for and valued authorial consistency. For some, Milton was a religious or political radical almost from the start. For others, he was always the poet who would write *Paradise Lost*.[3] But he should be allowed the human prerogative of changing his mind in response to what he experienced—especially events outside his control. In this study I have drawn particular attention to his evolving experience of solitude as loneliness, in response to the death of his friends and then marital breakdown. It is no great wonder that Milton should have come to idealize collaborative endeavours and prioritize pleasurable and intellectual conversation for the making of knowledge. Even as he weighed his own ambition and felt his peculiar greatness, Milton's preference was for a community of learners, as we have seen in *Areopagitica* and *Paradise Lost*. No doubt he knew how to rhetorically weaponize his singularity when taking an outsider's position, as he does in the divorce tracts and as late as *The Readie and Easie Way*. When he does so, however, it is to call others to join him, even if only some future generation "of sensible and ingenuous men" (*CPW* 7:388). He refuses to imagine himself truly alone.

Acknowledging this change in his thought reveals a more human alternative to the individualistic and triumphalist author of the popular imagination, and makes better sense of the late major works. Certainly the heroic appeal of the original vision has helped its endurance. Already Andrew Marvell's commendatory poem "On *Paradise Lost*" in the 1674 edition makes Milton a

---

[3] Barbara K. Lewalski's *The Life of John Milton*, rev. ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) provides the most sensitive account of Milton's dispositional commitment to reform and radicalism even from a young age. In response, Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns in *John Milton: Life, Thought, Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) argue that the archival and contextual evidence instead paint a picture of a contented Laudian who radicalizes only later. Most recently, Nicholas McDowell, *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), suggests that "consistency can be found in Milton's religious and political development between the 1620s and 1640s[…], but it is to be found less in denominational labels and theological doctrines than in the educational, cultural, and literary principles which shaped his view of the world and of the place of the poet in it from an early age" (12). It would seem we are back to a more consistent Milton, though one whose poetic ambitions are upstream of his ideology.

"mighty poet" who like Samson threatens to bring down the temple—nay, "Heaven, hell, earth, chaos, all"—over himself and his readers (24, 5). More subtly, he also makes Milton a type of Satan. The sheer boldness of his attempt, Marvell says, ensures "none will dare / Within thy labors to pretend a share" (25–26). In similar fashion, others are precluded from joining Satan's daring quest: "this enterprise / None shall partake" (*PL* 2.465–66). But naturally Milton's labours as a blind man did require sharers, and there's no reason to suppose he preferred to be a Samson and a Satan and not an Adam, Eve, or Raphael. Moreover, he goes out of his way to imagine a paradise of ontological and epistemological participation, where *knowing* is an act of intimate exchange. Part of what is lost in the Fall is this natural communion with the created world, with angels, and with each other; alienation and ignorance are concomitant fruit of that tree. Milton mourns the loss as Adam must, and like him he has a choice: "In solitude [to] live savage, in some glade / Obscured" (10.1085–86), or else with wandering steps to keep searching alongside the sad friends of Truth.

As indicated in the final chapter, Jesus in *Paradise Regained* confronts a similar temptation to pursue private enlightenment and embrace self-sufficiency. More than Samson or Adam, this one greater man has the power to act on that impulse. Yet Milton inverts the usual order of things, aligning divinity with sociability in the Son of *Paradise Lost* while ascribing to human immaturity the desire to be complete in oneself in *Paradise Regained*. Jesus must fight the urge to go at it alone; he shows his greatness more by parlaying Satan's temptations into deeper self-understanding. If even the Son of God can gain knowledge through discussion—in a fallen world, with Satan—then so can other humans, who have a lot more to learn. For this reason Milton at the end of his life does not choose to shy away from "publish[ing] his godlike office now mature" (*PR* 1.188), but neither does he feel the need to assume the role of strongman. It is still more mature, more heroic to endure the taunts and storms of public life if it means knowledge can progress. Afterwards, there is no shame in returning to private society—a mother's house, if need be (4.639).

Is the Milton that emerges from this reading then a domesticated figure, shorn of his locks and that sublime egotism which Coleridge called a revelation of spirit? Blaine Greteman in a review of the latest biography of the poet notes that there are "those who are drawn to a muscular, pugnacious, and combative Milton." He worries that for them, a "quieter figure may seem like a bit of a disappointment."[4] I am indeed drawn to the firebrand author of "Lycidas" and *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. But I am drawn more to *Paradise Lost* and the combination of outrageous confidence and narrative unease that allows its author to claim flight "above the Olympian hill" while dreading the fate of Bellerophon, fallen from Pegasus and left alone to wander in the fields below (7.3; 7.17–20).[5] Milton's works are exhilarating because of the considerable power he directs towards his subjects, whether in argument or poetic image. I find them more powerful, not less, knowing that those same works frequently retain artefacts of the counterfactual. It is a healthy hesitation or humility thrust upon him after a lifetime of changed opinions and allegiances. For John Creaser, such changes are indicative of "an explorer who sets himself against finality and closure"[6]—a direct consequence of his understanding of truth as something continually being made, ideally together. Even this summation rings triumphant, however. By the end of his life, Milton has found that neither self-sufficiency nor complete knowledge are possible. Fortunately, this weakness yields artistic strength in the hands of a writer who remains convinced of his divine task.[7]

---

[4] Blaine Greteman, review of *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton*, by Nicholas McDowell, *Milton Quarterly* 56, no. 1–2 (2022): 97.

[5] For Stephen M. Fallon, "the intimations of frailty and error written into the voice of the speaker of the invocations make explicable the empathy with which Milton writes of the fallen human experience," and yet without his confidence, "it is difficult to see how Milton could have allowed himself to write the epic" (*Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007], 207–8.

[6] John Creaser, "Fear of Change: Closed Minds and Open Forms in Milton," *Milton Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2008): 166.

[7] Ross Lerner, "Weak Milton," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 57, no. 1 (2017): 111–134, argues that Milton's productive sense of his artistic weakness in fact begins earlier. Lerner's focus on loss as the source of that weakness, however, seems to better fit the trajectory sketched out here.

Knowledge of this insufficiency, if left utterly to himself, would be too much to bear. Yet Milton's arrogance and anxiety work together to reassure him of community, especially in poetry. Early on he could imagine "a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him," wrapped like a security blanket (*CPW* 1:808). Even after the Restoration, covered "In darkness, and with dangers compassed round, / And solitude," the muse never fails in her nightly visitations (7.27–28). Milton's last act of strength is to make himself vulnerable by inviting readers into that conversation. Poetry more than polemical prose makes demands of his audience and invites misunderstanding. No doubt Milton's narrator takes the reins, makes us passengers on Pegasus. But his poetry in particular nurtures a way of thinking that, like his conception of knowledge, is dynamic and collaborative.[8] Its success depends on the cooperation of readers, who like Raphael and the first humans must join in "great conference to know / Of things above his world" (5.454-55).[9] In one respect Milton has proven too successful: his cultivated ethos of self-sufficiency has obscured an appreciation of his fitful movement towards epistemic humility. It remains for the "faithfull labourers" now building up the body of scholarship on Milton's works—in the collective fashion sanctioned by him—to kindly call his bluff.

[8] See Maggie Kilgour, *Milton's Poetical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), esp. 64–71.
[9] For Tzachi Zamir, "The Inner Paradise," in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 205–231, the lunchtime conversation of Raphael and Adam and Eve is a model for the type of hospitality that poetry requires as an agent of knowledge.

Bibliography

Primary Texts

Aquinas, Thomas. *Truth: translated from the definitive Leonine text [De Veritate]*. Translated and edited by James V. McGlynn. 3 vols. Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952–54.

Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated and edited by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Bacon, Francis. *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon: An Essay on its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts*. Translated by Benjamin Farrington. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964.

Bacon, Francis. *The Works of Francis Bacon*. Translated and edited by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath. 14 vols. London: Longman, 1861–79.

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Edited by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kissling, and Rhonda L. Blair. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Calvin, John. *A Harmonie Upon the Three Evangelistes[…]*. Translated by Eusebius Pagit. London: T. Adams, 1610.

Cavendish, Margaret. "A True Relation of the Birth, Breeding, and Life, of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle." In *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by 17th Century Englishwomen*, edited by Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, 85–97. London: Routledge, 1989.

Cowley, Abraham. *Abraham Cowley: Poetry & Prose: With Thomas Sprat's Life and Observations by Dryden, Addison, Johnson and others*. Edited by L. C. Martin. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949.

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91.

Diodorus Siculus. *Library of History: Volume 1*. Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Loeb Classical Library 279. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933.

Drummond, William. *Drummond of Hawthornden: Poems and Prose*. Edited by Robert H. Macdonald. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976.

Dryden, John. *The Works of John Dryden, Volume 12: Plays: Amboyna; The State of Innocence; Aureng-Zebe*. Edited by Vinton A. Dearing. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Earle, John. *Microcosmography: Or, a Piece of the World Discovered in Essays and Characters*. Edited by Harold Osborne. London: University Tutorial Press, 1933.

The English Bible: King James Version. Edited by Herbert Marks, Gerald Hammond, and Austin Busch. 2 vols. Norton Critical Editions. New York: Norton, 2012.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by Richard Tuck. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Edited by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971.

Hooker, Richard. *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, Volumes I and II: Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Preface and Books I–V*. Edited by Georges Edelen and W. Speed Hill. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977.

Johnson, Samuel. *Lives of the Poets*. Edited by Roger Lonsdale and John Mullan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Mackenzie, George, and John Evelyn. *Public and Private Life in the Seventeenth Century: The Mackenzie-Evelyn Debate*. Edited by Brian Vickers. Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1986.

Marvell, Andrew. *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. Edited by Nigel Smith. Rev. ed. London: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Milton, John. *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*. Edited by Don M. Wolfe and Maurice Kelly. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82.

Milton, John. *The Complete Shorter Poems*. Edited by John Carey. Rev. 2nd ed. London: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Milton, John. *The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III: The Shorter Poems*. Edited by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Milton, John. *The Divorce Tracts of John Milton: Texts and Contexts*. Edited by Sarah J. Van den Berg and W. Scott Howard. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Alastair Fowler. Rev. 2nd ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Milton, John. *The Works of John Milton*. Edited by Frank A. Patterson. 18 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38.

Montaigne, Michel de. *The Essayes of Montaigne*. Translated by John Florio. Edited by J. I. M. Stewart. New York: Modern Library, 1933.

Newton, Isaac. *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton: 1661-1675, Volume 1*. Edited by H. W. Turnbull. London: Published for the Royal Society at the University Press, 1959.

Overbury, Thomas. *Characters: Together with Poems, News, Edicts, and Paradoxes Based on the Eleventh Edition of A Wife Now the Widow of Sir Thomas Overbury*. Edited by Donald Beecher. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 2003.

Perkins, William. *A discourse of conscience wherein is set downe the nature, properties, and differences thereof: as also the way to get and keepe good conscience*. [Cambridge:] Printed by Iohn Legate, printer to the

Vniversitie of Cambridge, 1596; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership. http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A09400.0001.001.

Plotinus. *Plotinus, Ennead, Volume VI: 6–9*. Translated by A. H. Armstrong. Loeb Classical Library 468. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Plutarch. *Moralia: Volume V*. Translated by Frank Cole Babbitt. Loeb Classical Library 306. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936.

Sidney, Philip. *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia: The Old Arcadia (First Edition)*. Edited by Jean Robertson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Spenser, Edmund. *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*. Edited by Anne Lake Prescott and Andrew D. Hadfield. 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Edited by A. C. Hamilton. Rev. 2nd ed. Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007.

Vaughan, Henry. *The Works in Verse and Prose of Henry Vaughan, Silurist*. Edited by Alexander B. Grosart. 4 vols. Lancashire, England: [Printed for private circulation,] 1871.

Virgil. *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Edited by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Wolleb, Johannes. *The Abridgment of Christian Divinitie[…]*. Translated by Alexander Ross. London: [Printed by T. Mab and A. Coles,] 1650.

Critical Works

Achinstein, Sharon. *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Ainsworth, David. *Milton and the Spiritual Reader: Reading and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Allen, Don Cameron. *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1954.

Balás, David L. *Metousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*. Studia Anselmania 55. Rome: IB Libreria Herder, 1966.

Barbour, Reid. *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Barnaby, Andrew, and Lisa J. Schnell. *Literate Experience: The Work of Knowing in Seventeenth-Century English Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Benet, Diana Treviño. "The Fall of the Angels: Theology and Narrative." *Milton Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2016): 1-13.

Benet, Diana Treviño. "The Genius of Every Age: Milton and Dryden." *Milton Studies* 57 (2016): 263–291.

Brown, Cedric C. *Friendship and its Discourses in the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

Cable, Lana. *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton's Iconoclasm and the Rhetoric of Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Calloway, Katherine. "'His Footsteps Trace': The Natural Theology of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 55 (2014): 53–85.

Campbell, Gordon. "Diodati, Charles (1609/10–1638), friend of John Milton." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7679.

Campbell, Gordon, and Thomas N. Corns. *John Milton: Life, Work and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Canlis, Julie. *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2010.

Cárdenas, Manuel. "'Solitude Sometimes is Best Society': Milton, Conversation, and Solitude." Master's thesis, McGill University, 2014.

Carey, John. *Milton*. London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1969.

Cassirer, Ernst. *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Mario Domandi. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Chaplin, Gregory. "'One Flesh, One Heart, One Soul': Renaissance Friendship and Miltonic Marriage." *Modern Philology* 99, no. 2 (2001): 266–292.

Cohen, Floris H. *How Modern Science Came into the World: Four Civilizations, One 17th-Century Breakthrough*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

Conti, Brooke. "'That Really Too Anxious Protestation': Crisis and Autobiography in Milton's Prose." *Milton Studies* 45 (2006): 149–186.

Corns, Thomas N. *The Development of Milton's Prose Style*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.

Corns, Thomas N. *Regaining Paradise Lost*. London: Longman, 1994.

Corns, Thomas N. "'With Unalter'd Brow': Milton and the Son of God." *Milton Studies* 42 (2003): 106–121.

Cottingham, John. "The Role of God in Descartes's Philosophy." In *A Companion to Descartes*, edited by J. Broughton and J. Carriero, 288–301. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008.

Creaser, John. "'Fear of change': Closed Minds and Open Forms in Milton." *Milton Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2008): 161–182.

Danielson, Dennis. *Milton's Good God: A Study in Literary Theodicy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Danielson, Dennis. *Paradise Lost and the Cosmological Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Darbishire, Helen, ed. *The Early Lives of Milton*. London: Constable and Company, 1932.

Daston, Lorraine. "Curiosity in Early Modern Science." *Word & Image* 11, no. 4 (1995): 391–404.

Davison, Andrew. *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Dillon, Janette. *Shakespeare and the Solitary Man*. London: Macmillan, 1981.

Dobranski, Stephen B. *Milton, Authorship, and the Book Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Dobranski, Stephen B. "Milton's Social Life." In *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, edited by Dennis Danielson, 1–24. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Dobranski, Stephen B. *Milton's Visual Imagination: Imagery in Paradise Lost*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Dobranski, Stephen B. "Principle and Politics in Milton's *Areopagitica*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, edited by Laura Lunger Knoppers, 190–206. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Donnelly, Phillip J. *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning: Narrative and Protestant Toleration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Duran, Angelica. *The Age of Milton and the Scientific Revolution*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2007.

Earle, Philippa. "'Till Body Up to Spirit Work': Maimonidean Prophecy and Monistic Sublimation in *Paradise Regained*." *Milton Studies* 62 (2020): 159–189.

Edwards, Karen L. *Milton and the Natural World: Science and Poetry in Paradise Lost.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Edwards, Karen L. "Milton's Reformed Animals: An Early Modern Bestiary." *Milton Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2005): 190–194.

Entzminger, Robert L. "Epistemology and the Tutelary Word in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 10 (1977): 93–109.

Evans, J. Martin, ed. *John Milton: Twentieth-Century Perspectives: Volume 3: Prose*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Evans, John X. "Imagery as Argument in Milton's *Areopagitica*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8, no. 2 (1966): 189–205.

Falconer, Rachel. *Orpheus Dis(re)membered: Milton and the Myth of the Poet-Hero*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Fallon, Samuel. "Milton's Strange God: Theology and Narrative Form in *Paradise Lost*." *English Literary History* 79, no. 1 (2012): 33–57.

Fallon, Stephen M. *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Fallon, Stephen M. *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self Representation and Authority*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Festa, Thomas. *The End of Learning: Milton and Education*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Festa, Thomas. "The Temptation of Athens and the Variorum *Paradise Regained*." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2013): 11–33.

Fields, Albert W. "Milton and Self-Knowledge." *PMLA* 83, no. 2 (1968): 392–399.

Finch, Casey, and Peter Bowen. "The Solitary Companionship of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*." *Milton Studies* 26 (1990): 3–24.

Fish, Stanley. *How Milton Works*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.

Fish, Stanley. *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Frye, Northrop. "The Typology of *Paradise Regained*." *Modern Philology* 53, no. 4 (1956): 227–238.

Gilbert, Allan H. "The Temptation in *Paradise Regained*." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 15, no. 4 (1916): 599–611.

Goldstein, David B. *Eating and Ethics in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Grossman, Marshall. *Authors Unto Themselves: Milton and the Revelation of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Hammond, Paul. *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Hanford, James Holly. "The Chronology of Milton's Private Studies." *PMLA* 36, no. 2 (1921): 251–314.

Harper, David A. "'Fittest to Choose': Milton against Celebrity." *Milton Studies* 63 (2021): 94–106.

Harrison, Timothy M. *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Haskin, Dayton. *Milton's Burden of Interpretation*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Helgerson, Richard. *Self-crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Hequembourg, Stephen. "Monism and Metaphor in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 52 (2011): 139–167.

Herman, Peter C. *Destabilizing Milton: Paradise Lost and the Poetics of Incertitude*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Herman, Peter C., and Elizabeth Sauer, eds. *The New Milton Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Herron, John, and Peter Reason. "A Participatory Inquiry Paradigm." *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (September 1997): 274–294.

Hill, Christopher. *Milton and the English Revolution*. London: Faber, 1977.

Hiltner, Ken. *Milton and Ecology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Hoxby, Blair. *Mammon's Music: Literature and Economics in the Age of Milton*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Jacobus, Lee A. *Sudden Apprehension: Aspects of Knowledge in Paradise Lost*. The Hague: Mouton, 1976.

Jolley, Nicholas. "God." In *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, edited by Lawrence Nolan, 335–344. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Jones, Edward. "'Ere Half My Days': Milton's Life, 1608–1640." In *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, 3–25. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Jones, Edward. "'Filling in a blank in the canvas': Milton, Horton, and the Kedermister Library." *Review of English Studies* 53, no. 209 (2002): 31–60.

Kadue, Katie. *Domestic Georgic: Labours of Preservation from Rabelais to Milton*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Kenney, John P. "Faith and Reason." In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 275–291. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Kerrigan, William. "Milton's Place in Intellectual History." In *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson, 253–267. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Kilgour, Maggie. *Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kilgour, Maggie. *Milton's Poetical Thought.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Kilgour, Maggie. "Odd Couplings: Hercules and Oedipus in *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*." *Milton Studies* 56 (2015): 75–113.

Kilgour, Maggie. "'Thy perfect image viewing': Poetic Creation and Ovid's Narcissus in *Paradise Lost*." *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 307–339.

Knapp, Steven. *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Koester, Christopher. "Solitude and Difference in Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Studies* 57 (2016): 155–184.

Kristeller, Paul Oskar. "The active and the contemplative life in Renaissance humanism." In *Arbeit, Musse, Meditation: Betrachtungen zur vita activa und vita contemplative*, edited by Brian Vickers, 133–152. Zürich: Verlag der Fachvereine, 1985.

Leonard, John. "Language and Knowledge in *Paradise Lost*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, edited by Dennis Danielson, 130–143. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Leonard, John. *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Leonard, John. *The Value of Milton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Lerner, Ross. "Weak Milton." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 57, no. 1 (2017): 111–134.

Lewalski, Barbara K. *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.

Lewalski, Barbara K. *Milton's Brief Epic*. Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1966.

Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. 1942; reis., London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Lobis, Seth. *The Virtue of Sympathy: Magic, Philosophy, and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Loewenstein, David. *Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Long, Mary Beth. "Contextualizing Eve's and Milton's Solitudes in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2003): 100–115.

Luxon, Thomas H. *Single Imperfection: Milton, Marriage, and Friendship*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005.

Maltzahn, Nicholas von. "Dryden's Milton and the Theatre of Imagination." In *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays*, edited by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, 32–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Maltzahn, Nicholas von. "John Milton: The Later Life (1641–1674)." In *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, 26–47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Marjara, Harinder S. *Contemplation of Created Things: Science in Paradise Lost*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Martin, Catherine Gimelli. "'What If the Sun Be Centre to the World?': Milton's Epistemology, Cosmology, and Paradise of Fools Reconsidered." *Modern Philology* 99, no. 2 (2001): 231–265.

Martz, Louis L. *Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

Mauss, Marcel. *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*. 1925. Translated by Jane I. Guyer as *The Gift: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016).

McColley, Diana K. "Milton and Nature: Greener Readings." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 62, no. 3/4 (1999): 423–444.

McDowell, Nicholas. *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Miner, Robert C. *Truth in the Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Olmsted, Wendy. *The Imperfect Friend: Emotion and Rhetoric in Sidney, Milton, and their Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. Oxford University Press, 2023. https://www.oed.com/.

Parker, William Riley. *Milton: A Biography*, ed. Gordon Campbell, 2nd ed. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Patterson, Annabel. *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

Patterson, Annabel. "Milton, Marriage, Divorce." In *A New Companion to Milton*, edited by Thomas N. Corns, 308–322. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

Peters, John Durham. *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Picciotto, Joanna. *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Pigman, G. W., III, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance." *Renaissance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1980): 1–32.

Poole, Kristen. "'With Such Joy Surcharg'd': The Predicament of Satiety in Patristic Theology and *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2015): 1–22.

Poole, William. "'The Armes of Studious Retirement'? Milton's Scholarship, 1632–1641." In *Young Milton: The Emerging Author, 1620–1642*, edited by Edward Jones, 21–47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Poole, William. "The Genres of Milton's Commonplace Book." In *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, 367–381. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Poole, William. "Milton and Science: A Caveat." *Milton Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2004): 18–34.

Poole, William. *Milton and the Making of Paradise Lost*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Pope, Elizabeth Marie. *Paradise Regained: The Poem and the Tradition*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1947.

Principe, Lawrence M. *The Scientific Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Quint, David. *Epic and Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Quint, David. *Inside Paradise Lost: Reading the Designs of Milton's Epic*. Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2014.

Radzinowicz, Mary Ann. "*Paradise Regained* as Hermeneutic Combat." *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* 15, no. 3 (1984): 99–107.

Ramachandran, Ayesha. *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Raymond, Joad. *Milton's Angels: The Early Modern Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Rogers, John. *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Rogers, John. "*Paradise Regained* and the Memory of *Paradise Lost*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, 589–612. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Rosenblatt, Jason P. *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Ross, Shaun. *The Eucharist, Poetics, and Secularization from the Middle Ages to Milton*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Røstvig, Maren-Sofie. *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal*, 2nd ed. New York: Humanities Press, 1962.

Rovira, James. "Gathering the Scattered Body of Milton's *Areopagitica*." *Renascence* vol. 57, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 87–102.

Sanders, Wilbur. *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe & Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Schaeffer, John D. "Metonymies We Read By: Rhetoric, Truth and the Eucharist in Milton's *Areopagitica*." *Milton Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2000): 84–92.

Schoenfeldt, Michael. "How Gardens Feel." In *Geographies of Embodiment in Early Modern England*, edited by Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan, 14–38. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Schultz, Howard. *Milton and Forbidden Knowledge*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1955.

Scott-Baumann, Elizabeth. *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry, and Culture 1640–1680*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Shapin, Steven. "'The Mind Is Its Own Place': Science and Solitude in Seventeenth-Century England." *Science in Context* 4, no. 1 (1990): 191–218.

Shapin, Steven. *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Sharp, Ronald A. *Friendship and Literature: Spirit and Form*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986.

Shawcross, John T., ed. *John Milton: The Critical Heritage: Volume 2, 1732–1801*. 1972; repr. London: Routledge, 1999.

Shoaf, R. A. *Milton, Poet of Duality: A Study of Semiosis in the Poetry and the Prose*. 2nd ed. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1993.

Sitter, John. *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

Skerpan-Wheeler, Elizabeth. "Early Political Prose." In *A New Companion to Milton*, edited by Thomas N. Corns, 291–307. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

Skerpan-Wheeler, Elizabeth. "The Logical Poetics of *Paradise Regained*." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2013): 35–58.

Slights, Camille Wells. *The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981.

Sloane, Thomas O. *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Smith, Samuel. "The Son's Bounded Solitude in *Paradise Regained*." In *Their Maker's Image: New Essays on John Milton*, edited by Mary Fenton and Louis Schwartz, 161–176. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2011.

Smyth, Maura Josephine. "Narrating Originality in *Paradise Lost*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 53, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 137–155.

Spiller, Elizabeth. *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge, 1580-1670*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Stoll, Abraham. *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Sugimura, N. K. *"Matter of Glorious Trial": Spiritual and Material Substance in Paradise Lost*. New Haven: Yale, 2009.

Svendsen, Kester. *Milton and Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.

Swaim, Kathleen M. *Before and After the Fall: Contrasting Modes in Paradise Lost*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

Swanson, Donald, and John Mulryan. "The Son's Presumed Contempt for Learning in *Paradise Regained*: A Biblical and Patristic Resolution." *Milton Studies* 27 (1991): 243–261.

Theodorakopoulos, Elena. "Closure and the Book of Virgil." In *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale, 226–240. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Tigner, Amy. "Eating with Eve." *Milton Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2010): 239–253.

Torrance, T. F. *Theology in Reconstruction*. London: SCM Press, 1965.

Trevor, Douglas. *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Turner, James Grantham. *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

Vickers, Brian. "Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of Otium." *Renaissance Studies* 4, no. 1 (1990): 1–37; no. 2 (1990): 107–154.

Wilding, Michael. "Milton's *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects." *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–38.

Wilson, Emma Annette. "The Art of Reasoning Well: Ramist Logic at Work in *Paradise Lost*," *Review of English Studies* 61, no. 248 (2010): 55–71.

Woodhouse, A. S. P., and George Bush, eds. *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton. Volume Two: The Minor English Poems*. Gen. ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.

Worden, Blair. *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Zamir, Tzachi. "The Inner Paradise." In *The Philosophy of Poetry*, edited by John Gibson, 205–231. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.