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The Poem as Thinking Machine

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Fifty years ago, Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* indelibly transformed the terrain of Milton studies. It did far more. The book's enduring contribution to literary studies is one of method: chapter after chapter reveals the inseparability of historical, philosophical, and aesthetic perspectives. Fish has never been primarily interested in the branching heterodoxies of Reformation theology or in the factional divisions of the Long Parliament, but well before the "religious turn" in literary studies, he demonstrated how the broader vocabularies of Reformation Christianity might highlight the same semiotic conundrums that would sound so fresh to us as filtered through French theory. Before one branch of historicism was branded "new," Fish demonstrated the vivid way in which a historically specific ideological framework can sharpen, estrange, and revise our assumptions about authorial intent. At a time when all-the-new-thinking was marked by contemptuous disavowal of New Criticism, Fish staunchly demonstrated the foundational utility of close semantic and formal analysis: nothing can disrupt the critic's bland inertias like a passage or a narrative feature that "refuses to work the way it should." Finally, and I've no idea whether this was his conscious intention or not, Fish demonstrated why the interdependence of formal and philosophical problem-solving can nowhere be seen so vividly as in poetry.

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Not all of the elegant analytics in *Surprised by Sin* can be adapted for reading in general, of course. Specific to the poetry of Milton, and affording much glee to the author of *Surprised by Sin*, is the tautology of divine omnipotence and its strict entailment of obedience. Obedience pure and simple, obedience impervious to reason or extenuating circumstance. Far from apprehending this absolutism as stifling to literary criticism, or to thought in general, Fish portrays it as intellectually invigorating because it so effectively makes nonsense of sentimental efforts to soften Milton's theology. Without the scaffolding of Reformation Christianity, this part of the paradigm dissolves. What remains, and remains as a beacon to critical method more generally, is Fish's insistence upon the interdependence of meaning and readerly process.

On the question of historicism: Angelica Duran and Richard Strier have sketched a powerful critique of Fish's historicism (and my so-broad endorsement) in their Introduction to this volume, and I thank them for sharing their thoughts with me. Fish's take on Milton's theological positioning is admittedly a kind of shorthand, a single configuration (divine omnipotence/fallen epistemology) reiterated again and again as a key to meaning and rhetorical strategy. Others, upon whose learning I depend, have traced Milton's evolving political and doctrinal thought with far greater nuance, bolstered by extended archival and historical research. What I have found and still find so valuable about Fish's approach is something more elemental: it was *Surprised by Sin* that first demonstrated to me the possibility that one might contemplate the radical otherness of thought in a different historical context *without diminishing the urgency and immediacy of that thought*. In other words, Fish invited me to inhabit, both intellectually and emotionally, a realm of the hypothetical. What would it mean to believe in originary severance from a deity who combined omnipotence with perfect benevolence? What would follow from that premise? What conundrums would be heightened? Which resolved? What would make this trade-off a price worth paying? I've argued elsewhere that historical reading, properly construed, demands of the reader

- a kind of stereoscopic engagement: submitting to the imaginative discipline of time and circumstances and habits of mind that are not our own and also, inevitably, seeking moments of recognition in estrangement. Likeness with difference. Without likeness, reading becomes a kind of low stakes antiquarianism. Without difference, reading lapses into complacency of another sort, where the furthest stretch of imagination can do no more than flatter opinions already held. (Gregerson 684).

Surprised by Sin laid the groundwork for the model of engaged reading that still seems to me to be at the center of historical literary study.

What Fish added fifty years ago to specifically poetic analysis was a fresh insistence upon the poem's existence in time. The poem is not a thing we take in as a "whole," but rather as a succession of spatio-temporal parts and momentums. Reading entails perform a "blend of definiteness and provisionality" (*Surprised* 200), not unlike the faith that led Abraham to "go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance . . . not knowing whither" (Heb 11.8, cited in *Surprised* 200). On the very simplest level, syntax itself entails an ongoing, supple negotiation of expectation and revision. If I begin a sentence thus . . . you rightly expect me to supply an independent clause. Whether I subvert that expectation or agree to fulfill it, we have entered into a fluid contract whose stakes are both semantic and aesthetic, a contract poised on the ground where thought and feeling (and the power negotiation we call rhetoric) are inseparable. The play of hypothesis and anticipation, definiteness and provisionality is built into the very structure of language; that push and pull is substantially aggravated when one superimposes the schemas of meter and lineation. Line break alone is in perennial tension with the units of syntax, now in accord, now at odds, now slyly undermining or extending a unit of meaning that had (for the moment) appeared to be complete. The path of reading is the path of error. And in poetry, as opposed to an instruction manual, this error is a virtue. Errancy becomes part of the permanent architecture of the poem. Even when we "know better" (if that is ever a relevant concept for poetic understanding) – even when we "know better," on a second or a fiftieth reading, a trace of the first encounter remains – we are linked to our earlier, fallible selves. That's what thinking feels like.

But what about that other dimension of time in which the poem exists? What about its transmission from one generation to another? In one sense, what is true for the individual reader is true for the collective: we read in the company of "prior selves," both living and dead. And as the individual may change her mind from one rereading to another (though not, in Fish's model of Milton, the parameters of right reading), so a community may find that its ideological timbre, and thus its ground of meaning, has changed. John Freccero has described Petrarch's *Canzoniere* as "a score to be performed by generations of readers" (138). Fish himself invokes "the authority of interpretive communities" when, some years after *Surprised by Sin*, he asserts, "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing" (*Is There a Text* 327). His own reading of *Paradise Lost* derives its power from an a priori understanding of what the poem *must* mean, given the conundrum of an omnipotent Christian God and a fallen humanity, given, that is, what he takes to

be the parameters of Milton's Reformation theology. In this, he follows a sound Augustinian hermeneutic: in the search for understanding, "a rule such as this will serve, that what is read should be subjected to diligent scrutiny until an interpretation contributing to the reign of charity is produced" (Augustine 93; for a slightly abbreviated version of this passage, see Fish, *Surprised* 281).

So, two frameworks that transcend the merely temporal: religious doxa (a theory of creation) and hermeneutics (a theory of reading). And a figure (the reader) whose only medium, by contrast, is that of time. What becomes of that reader when the two frameworks she must consult—Reformation Christianity, say, and a contemporary interpretive community that congratulates itself on skepticism—diverge? What does it mean, in other words, to read outside the ideological/historical moment? My question is not, or not yet, about reading in general, but about a shared particular. How ought we to read any author who is not of our own time and place? What has Milton to say to one who is not (and none of us is) a seventeenth-century Puritan? And how does a book published in 1967 help us to address such issues?

By way of (positive) illustration, I would like to adduce two contemporary readers whose work as construers is inseparable from their work as constructors. Two poets, that is: Louise Glück and Monica Youn. Let me be clear about what I am and am not asserting, and why I believe the poems discussed below are pertinent to a consideration of *Surprised by Sin*. I do not argue that either Glück or Youn have ever read Fish's work, though they may well have done. Far less do I argue that they have written in direct homage to Fish's account of *Paradise Lost*. Rather, I argue that the tenor and acuity of their poetics, as evidenced in these poems, are deeply Miltonic in precisely the terms that Fish analyzed and celebrated in his path-breaking book: they foreground transactional rhetoric—the back and forth of argument, petition, tactical efforts at making-sense—and thus of temporality—time-of-speaking intersecting with time-of-reading in all its partiality and partialness. Their method, like the one Fish taught us to discern in Milton's poetry, is that of a highly structured cognitive unfolding. In this, their work is antithetical to a poet like Ronald Johnson, whose "erasure" of *Paradise Lost*, in *Radi os*, dispenses altogether with the rigors of predication and hypotactic tethering. Verbal echo alone is the least reliable measure of poetic kinship. Like Milton, Glück and Youn are invigorated by structure, and by stricture; in stricture they discover the reciprocal promptings of poetic form and affective intellection, whereas Johnson prefers to float. Put simply, I am arguing that the interpretive method forged by Stanley Fish in *Surprised by Sin* can teach us – has certainly taught me – how to read some of the strongest contemporary poetry in English.

My first example is a poem that appears in Glück's 1992 volume, *The Wild Iris*.

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VESPERS

In your extended absence, you permit me
 use of earth, anticipating
 some return on investment. I must report
 failure in my assignment, principally
 regarding the tomato plants.

I think I should not be encouraged to grow
 tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold
 the heavy rains, the cold nights that come
 so often here, while other regions get
 twelve weeks of summer. All this
 belongs to you:

So far so good. Like the speaker in Milton's Sonnet 19, the speaker here invokes the Parable of the Talents as a template for the anxious contemplation of debt and equity, obligation and reward. As in Milton's sonnet, the speaker here is moved to protest what s/he perceives to be an unjust disposition of circumstance and expectation. As in Milton's sonnet, the speaker's protest prompts a corrective acknowledgment of godhead's absolute title to creation. In contrast to Milton's sonnet, however, Glück's poem slyly continues to posit room for negotiation:

on the other hand,

I planted the seeds, I watched the first shoots
 like wings tearing the soil, and it was my heart
 broken by the blight, the black spot so quickly
 multiplying in the rows. I doubt
 you have a heart, in our understanding of
 that term. You who do not discriminate
 between the dead and the living, who are, in consequence,
 immune to foreshadowing, you may not know
 how much terror we bear, the spotted leaf,
 the red leaves of the maple falling
 even in August, in early darkness: I am responsible
 for these vines.

(37)

In its elemental circumstance, the poem might be a child's version of Genesis (or *Paradise Lost*): a human in the garden is talking to God. The question that animates the circumstance is one a child might ask: why death? The rhetorical playing-out of question and circumstance employs just enough of the childlike to leaven theological critique with earth-bound comedy: Glück's speaker might at once point be a teenager challenging curfew. If the comedy is not itself particularly Miltonic (though one thinks of Satan's petulant reply to Ithuriel in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*), its contribution to a complex discursive back-and-forth is, I would argue, very much in the Milton mode. Which is to say, it exhibits a distinct tactical affinity to Miltonic poetics as illuminated by Stanley Fish. Further, and more importantly, it construes and demonstrates a kind of meaning that is inseparable from rhetorical transaction. This too is a Fishian proposition.

Which returns us to the problem of continuity across a temporal and ideological divide. What has drawn Glück to Milton's example, I believe, and in particular to Sonnet 19 and *Paradise Lost*, is his uncompromising rigor of form and thought. How to locate some cognate stricture in a largely desacralized context, and in free verse at that? Well, you might begin by putting maximum pressure on enjambment and other modes of formal resistance, juxtaposing liturgical and spreadsheet templates, for example (*vespers, returns on investment*), to a conversational demotic (*on the other hand, or if I am*). Second, you acknowledge the incommensurate epistemological status of the human speaker and the deity by staging an end-run: omniscience is revealed to be an epistemological liability (*you may not know*). Thirdly, by portraying, turn by witty turn, both the petulance and the preposterousness of a speaker who is, in essence, trying to trick or taunt or shame God into existing, you invite the reader to imagine a human voice or persona whose liabilities are very much her own. Finally and foremost, you honor the continuing urgency of the child's intelligent question: why should all this have to die?

In the title poem to *Blackacre*, her most recent book, Monica Youn's indebtedness to Milton is far more explicit (though not, I would argue, more essential) than is Glück's in "Vespers." The poem is actually one of two, both titled "Blackacre," with which Youn's volume culminates and concludes. Deriving from legal discourse, the titular term designates a yet-to-be-specified parcel of real property, much as "John Doe" designates a yet-to-be-specified person. The first, brief "Blackacre" foregrounds a theme that has been a shadow presence throughout the book: the speaker's inability to conceive a child. While not my primary focus here, its seven lines establish essential grounding for the longer "Blackacre," a fourteen-section prose poem prompted by the

fourteen rhyming end-words in Milton's Sonnet 19. I'll invite you to look at only two of those sections here:

BLACKACRE

1. SPENT

In Sonnet 19, Milton makes the seemingly deliberate choice to avoid “the” and “a”—respectively, the most common and the sixth most common words in English usage. Instead of these articles---definite and indefinite---the poem stages a territorial dispute between possessives: the octave is “my” land, the sestet is “his” land, with the occasional “this” or “that” flagging no-man’s-land. We come to understand Milton’s mistake---the professed regret of the poem---as this act of claiming. It is only through his taking possession that the universal light is divided up, apportioned into “my light”---a finite commodity that by being subjected to ownership becomes capable of being “spent.”

“Spent”---a word like a flapping sack.

My mistake was similar. I came to consider my body---its tug-of-war of tautnesses and slacknesses---to be entirely my own, an appliance for generating various textures and temperatures of friction. Should I have known, then, that by this act of self-claiming, I was cutting myself off from the eternal, the infinite, that I had fashioned myself into a resource that was bounded and, therefore, exhaustible?

8. PREVENT

“Prevent”---a word like a white sheet folded back to cover the mouth.

A white egg bursts from the ovary and falls away, leaving a star-shaped scar. Corpus albicans, the whitening body. Such starbursts, at first, are scattered constellations, frost embroidering a dark field. But at what point does this white lacework shift over from intricacy to impossibility, opacity, obstacle – the ice disc clogging the round pond, the grid of proteins baffling the eye?

“Prevent”---a word that slams shut, a portcullis (Latin: cataracta).

Letter to Leonard Philarus, September 28, 1654: “the dimness which I experience night and day, seems to incline more to white than to black. . . .”

(68, 75)

The discursive model here is reader-based, rather than speaker-based, as in Glück's poem. Not Adam in the garden but the bookish protagonist confronting a question of existential importance. Etymology, grammatical analysis, biographical context, associational and imagistic meditation: all instruments for the back-and-forth we call interpretation (*interpret*---to go between). "The reader cannot relax for an instant," writes Stanley Fish about the poetry of Monica Youn: highest praise from the author of *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. And that reader is in league, "in conversation," one might say, with a reader/poet, very much as in *Paradise Lost*. I do not know how Stanley Fish came to write a blurb for *Blackacre*, but the choice seems to me to be a natural: the athletic intellection of Youn's poetry is in the mode that Fish first anatomized and championed in Milton fifty years ago.

Like Glück, like Milton, Youn believes that poetry worth its name requires a stern taskmaster. Without resistance, poetry loses skeletal strength. So what if you are young and bright and writing at a time when the youngest and brightest have challenged the boundaries between lyric and essay and private annotation? A time when even the poetic line is optional? Where do you find resistance then? Perhaps in the arbitrary tyranny of a far-from-arbitrarily chosen sequence of fourteen words: spent, wide, hide, bent, present, chide, denied, prevent, need, best, state, speed, rest, wait. Perhaps in that intractable place where our will-to-continuity encounters its firmest "No": in the ever-perishing body and its transient fertility.

Lyric poetry has sometimes been accused of speciously positing an a priori or autonomous realm of subjectivity. But long before Marxist economics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or modern cognitive science confirmed for us the radically dependent status of that thing we call the self, poetry's deepest instinct has been for the generative powers of constraint. The subject of the poem is that *produced by* limitation. Hence, I would argue, the continuing power of Milton's poetic example and Fish's hermeneutic. One needn't believe in a Christian God to embrace the notion of freedom inseparable from obedience.

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