

**Reading and Reception in Early Modern England:  
Aesthetics, Judgment, and Selfhood from Sidney to Milton**

by

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## Preface

Early modern subjectivity was invented in the space between reader and text, and defined within, around, and against the textual encounter. That is the central contention of this study, which aims to place early modern thinking and writing about reception at the center of a new account of early modern selfhood. For the poets and critics I consider, encountering a text was the quintessential act of a subject engaged fully with the world. Early modern debates about reception were also debates about the powers of the subject: questions about freedom of choice, imaginative autonomy, self-evaluation, and the relationship between sensation and thought were all key aspects of an ongoing early modern conversation about receptive experience. The poets and critics upon whom I focus collectively interrogated, debated, and revised the contours of private mental experience through a dense, contradictory, and ever-evolving discourse of literary reception. That discourse took shape *within* the fictive scenarios of early modern English literature as well as around them.

Taking early modern writing about literary reception seriously means looking anew at subjectivity as a central early modern concern. Throughout this study, I consider early modern subjectivity not as it was expressed through strategic modes of literary self-fashioning, nor as it was delimited by a repressive state. Rather, I consider selfhood to be an object of early modern inquiry that was

continually re-imagined, re-theorized, and written *around*. I am most interested, that is, in subjectivity as it was circumscribed by receptive discourse. Looking closely at the ways in which poets and critics debated the parameters of the receptive body and furnished the receptive imagination with an ever-changing array of powers, predilections, and susceptibilities provides us with an account of early modern selfhood as it was imagined to be. The ideal receptive subject created by those debates was over-determined, freighted with the fantasies and anxieties of a literary culture seeking recognition, legitimacy, and, above all, an audience capable of engaging with its work in proper and productive ways.

To address the larger concerns about selfhood that are encapsulated in receptive discourse, we must first begin, as early modern critics did, with the textual encounter. All of the writers I consider, from Spenser to Milton, see a provocative tension in the relationship between the reader's receptive body and the constructed text, a tension based upon the fundamental indeterminacy of interpretive control. Is the reader a passive vessel for a kind of textual meaning transmitted unambiguously in language? Or is he or she, instead, a maker and judge of meaning, capable of approaching the text as an active critic? Poetry became a testing-ground for these questions; in the poetic texts I consider, the central characters are themselves receptive subjects, struggling to negotiate the divide between private subjectivity and the encroachments of the sensible world.

The dissertation focuses on the ninety-year period between Sidney and Milton because that period saw a number of crucial shifts in conceptualizing receptive experience. Between about 1580 and 1670, poets and critics engaged in a

fundamental reconsideration of the powers, limitations, and responsibilities of the reader, culminating in a late-seventeenth-century emphasis on critical engagement as the first duty of the receptive subject. Developing out of early modern attempts to delineate the body's role in aesthetic experience and influenced by the emerging discipline of philosophy of mind, that new model of reading contradicted an earlier view, endorsed, for example, by Sir Philip Sidney and poet-courtier George Puttenham in their late-sixteenth-century treatises about English poetics. For Sidney and Puttenham, as for many of their contemporaries, the unique power of poetry lay in its ability to persuade a reader while bypassing that reader's critical faculties. That older model derived from a commonplace of classical rhetorical theory: the notion that pleasure was key to effective persuasion, and that good oratory should, as Cicero put it in a famous formulation, *docere, delectare, et movere* – teach, delight, and move.<sup>1</sup> According to many early Elizabethan theorists, poetry, like oratory, had to seduce its audience by giving pleasure before it could effectively instruct. Poetry was understood to engage a reader by a process of somatic seduction, a kind of sensual appeal, and it was only after an initial phase of bodily response that imaginative engagement and rational persuasion could take place.

By the time of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that established model, with its emphasis on the efficacy of somatic response, was beginning to lose influence. Instead of valuing sensory openness and the receptive flexibility such openness offered, mid-seventeenth century accounts of readerly response argued that

<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 2.19.21.

judicious discernment and moral vigilance were essential to proper reception. I suggest that the emergence of this new critical reading ideal had wide-ranging implications: a person's virtuous self-improvement was now predicated upon an independent exercise of mind rather than a passive acquiescence to textual instruction; and readers, now considered to be makers of textual meaning, were encouraged to cultivate a mode of critical self-regard and to become adept observers of their own responses to art. By making new claims for the autonomy of the reader, the poets upon whom I focus shaped sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideas about perceptual experience, intellectual freedom, and the powers of the receptive self.

By refashioning the receptive subject and revising the theoretical parameters of bodily response, early modern poets and theorists engaged in a complex restructuring of the contours of private selfhood. The mid-seventeenth-century reader, earlier the receptive object of somatic appeal, was newly reimagined as a self-conscious arbiter of poetry's content. For early modern poets and critics, theorizing this new judging subject entailed rethinking poetry's purposes, power, and ethical limits. Moreover, the emergence of a self-sufficient readerly persona meant that anxiety about internal self-regulation and the proper limits of bodily experience, which had dominated writing about poetry and the self during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, shifted to the realm of public interaction, where the central concerns about selfhood became questions about the proper exercise of judgment in a social world. The ideal reader who emerged from these debates was one for whom evaluating, criticizing, and

engaging rationally with a work of poetry were key to mastering poetic reception, which was newly conceived as a skill rather than an automatic process deriving from natural human predilections.

As I have already suggested, the textual encounter was over-determined, a means by which early modern critics could explore a deeper and more fundamental anxiety about the nature of subjectivity; this anxiety drew from and circled back upon a growing philosophical interest in theorizing mental experience. The early decades of the seventeenth century saw fresh investigations of the relationship between two key concepts of behavior, passion and action, which had long held a central place in thinking and writing about the self. Passions were those experiences by which a person could be “moved” or “transported” (the modern terms themselves suggesting one’s passive relationship to emotional experience). And those passions were understood in terms of the body as movements of the blood.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, actions were imagined to proceed from of one’s own soul: self-determined, unable to act upon one from outside, they remained under the authority of the self. Passions were not merely a way of describing emotions; instead, as part of a larger metaphysical scheme, they provided a view of subjective experience as a whole, imagining it to be at least partially contingent and beyond an individual’s control.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As Christopher Tilmouth puts it, the passions were, “physiologically, alterations of the heart.” Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion’s Triumph Over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Gail Kern Paster, et al., eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, though, new questions about the degree to which some aspects of affective experience should be considered active and self-determined, as opposed to passive and shaped by external forces, became freshly urgent. An earlier model of the passive self, physiologically vulnerable to external forces such as climate and geography, was called into question, and the nature of the distinction between passive and active states became contested. In an attempt to organize the processes of subjective experience into a coherent theory of behavior, Descartes, Hobbes, and other philosophers reframed the classical model of selfhood, in which the passive nature of the self was its prevailing characteristic. Instead of regarding the self as wholly passive, Descartes posited that only the body could be passive; the soul, by contrast, was active, capable of directing the body's motions. Other seventeenth-century philosophers proposed models which complicated the strict functional distinctions conventional in classical passion theory. In the mid-seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes argued that bodily differences between individuals, and their varying receptivity to sensible objects, affected their ability to make active judgments.<sup>4</sup> And Ralph Cudworth, the leading thinker of the group of philosophers known as the Cambridge Platonists, wrote in the 1670s about the interplay between passive and active modes of sensation and the cognitive differences between animals and human beings: "Sense which only passively receives particular outward objects doth here like the brute hear nothing but mere noise...but no music or harmony at all; having no active principle and

<sup>4</sup> Susan James, *Passion and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 213.

anticipation within itself to comprehend it by, and correspond or vitally sympathise with it; whereas the mind of a rational and intellectual being will be ravished and enthusiastically transported in the contemplation of it.”<sup>5</sup> The unique nature of human sensation, at once passive and active, is, Cudworth argues, precisely what makes possible rational aesthetic engagement, and even the experience of the sublime.

These philosophical investigations collectively moved the core questions about subjectivity away from passive experience and toward judgment and evaluation, positing those activities as the unique province of human experience and, moreover, as crucial to ethical decision-making. The poets and critics I consider were at once influenced by this shift and active participants in it. While their approach to questions of judgment and self-understanding was not systematic, it was wide-ranging and innovative. The literary sphere offered a range of unique theoretical possibilities: in its embrace of ambiguity, in its liberation from the constraints of the normative and the polemical, literature functioned as an arena of radical conceptual free play. Freed from the demands imposed by the conventions of argumentation, and operating, for the most part, within the sphere of the fictive, the poets I consider were able to establish reception as the fundamental act of the early modern subject while depicting, at the same time, the contradictions, inconsistencies, and elusive aspects of a theory still under development.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *Intellectual System* iii, p. 160. cited in J. H. Muirhead, “The Cambridge Platonists,” *Mind* 36:142 (April, 1927), 175.

At the heart of my inquiry is a concern with poetry's attempts to define its own purposes, and to undertake a series of interrogations into the very nature of selfhood across a range of genres – from the poetic treatises of Sidney and Puttenham to the fictive scenarios of lyric and epic poetry by Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton. The anxiety about reception that pervades these early modern poetic works was a tremendously productive anxiety; out of a desire to pin down the mechanisms of reception, poets re-conceived the boundaries of the receptive body many times over. That process of continual reinvention did not end with Milton, of course. But by the 1670s the newer model of reception, emphasizing rational engagement, had found its most forceful and prolific advocate. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton endorses an account of receptive subjectivity which, drawing upon decades of philosophical, religious, and poetic debate, imagines critical engagement to be the first duty of the reader, and discernment the cornerstone of a morally informed process of reception. Still, such a confidence in the powers of rational engagement is shot through with an abiding discomfort: the power of the sensible, Milton maintains, can never be fully extricated from the goals of literature.

In calling for a new approach to issues relating to early modern reception, subjectivity, and private mental experience, my project seeks to revise and supplement recent criticism in a few different areas. First, while my approach owes a considerable debt to reader-response criticism as a whole and recent work

on reception in particular,<sup>6</sup> early modern anxieties about the textual encounter are not, in my view, principally anxieties about modes of persuasion or rhetorical success. Instead, early modern poets' central concerns were more fundamental: they sought to identify exactly how and under what conditions readerly judgment could occur. Thus they were preoccupied not simply with provoking their readers into constructing an ideal meaning, but also with interrogating the very feasibility of such active interpretive engagement. Identifying the receptive functions of judgment and evaluation, and seeking to theorize how the anonymous reader, lying somewhere beyond the margins, might assimilate the text, are the central concerns driving early modern receptive inquiry. Thus the key question for the poets I consider is not simply *how* to maximize rhetorical success or ensure readerly compliance but, more troublingly, *whether* particular modes of persuasion are compatible with an evolving conception of receptive subjectivity.

What is more, recent critical interest in subjectivity has tended to focus on the early modern body as a primary site of affective experience. A now-classic narrative argues that early modern physiology considered the body to be porous, humoral, constantly under the influence of its surroundings, and susceptible to changes in environment. Emotional experience, on this account, derived from humoral imbalances, whose effects were felt somatically as well as affectively. The post-Cartesian mind/body divide had yet to be invented, and only gradually

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967); Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1984); Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994); and Lana Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995).

was mental activity distinguished from bodily experience.<sup>7</sup> While the general shape of my narrative supports this account, I suggest two important<sup>8</sup> modifications. First, the shift away from an integrated model of affective experience, toward a mind/body dualism, was neither absolute nor unambivalent. Even for Milton, who of the poets I consider is the most interested in asserting the protective power of the rational mind, bodily experience was inextricably bound up with deliberative action.

More importantly, I consider sensation and perception to be the two fundamental concepts bounding early modern subjectivity, surpassing body and mind in their critical utility and explanatory force. The central tension I see in early modern thinking about affective experience is the friction between the sensed and the known, the aesthetic and the noetic; the early modern receptive body is repositioned again and again on a continuum linking *aesthêsis* and *noêsis*. Reception is imagined by Spenser and Puttenham to be above all a power of sensation, while Milton considers a process of judicious testing to hold within it the greatest possibilities for receptive work and moral improvement. Whereas emphasizing an emergent mind/body divide grants the early modern subject only two incommensurable modes of affective experience, foregrounding sensation and perception instead allows for a nuanced view of the many ways in which the early modern subject was imagined to negotiate the materials of the perceptible

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2004); Paster, et al., ed.s, *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2004); Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

world.<sup>9</sup>

Finally and most broadly, I wish to consider early modern subjectivity in terms of modes of judgment rather than modes of performance.<sup>10</sup> I seek, that is, to replace a recent critical interest in identity as a function of performance, and a sense that discourses of performance provide scholars with the richest sources for theoretical excavation, with an emphasis on an emergent conception of identity as constituted by a subject's capacities for judgment, criticism, and evaluation. Insofar as I am interested in performance, I am most intrigued by the rhetorical performances which took place *around* a theoretical receptive subject, and the ways in which performances of criticism and evaluation became the indices of a fully-developed readerly identity. While the works I consider are, to be sure, cultural documents which perform identity as well as circumscribe it, I wish to focus upon the theoretical indeterminacy at the heart of all receptive inquiry. My project attends, then, to the judicious performances of the mysterious, unknowable, imaginary receptive subject, looking always over the poet's shoulder, yet lying always just beyond the critic's grasp.

The five chapters of the dissertation move from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and attend at once to the broad sweep of the early

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen's monograph, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books 2007), is the most sustained recent work on *aesth sis* as a theoretical category, tracing its history from ancient Greek philosophy into the early modern period and the Enlightenment.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1980); Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Culture and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993); Diana E. Henderson, *Passion Made Public: Elizabethan Lyric, Gender, and Performance* (Champaign: U of Illinois, 1995), and Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1995).

modern conversation about reception and to the generic and conceptual diversity of its most important texts. Chapter One, "Spenser's Virtuous Body: *Aesthêsis* and Ethical Action in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*," argues that *The Faerie Queene*'s last complete book invests aesthetic experience with the power to mediate subjectivity and to foster virtuous development. In Book VI, Spenser traces the affective experiences of a handful of sensing subjects – Calidore, the Salvage Man, Serena, Colin Clout – and makes two broad claims for the value of aesthetic experience in a morally ambiguous world. First, Spenser proposes what I am calling an ethics of bodily knowledge, a system of moral judgment by which sense-experience can play a crucial role in inculcating virtue. Spenser's second claim is that sensation is not at odds with moral development, but is, rather, a crucial tool by which a subject can seek, understand, and perform virtue. In a depiction of reception which is also a defense of the value of art, Book VI reveals that the aesthetic encounter contains within it the power to educate and transform the sensing subject. What is more, by situating sensation on the boundary-line between mental activity and somatic experience, Spenser integrates the powers of mind and body, proposing that virtue in general – and courtesy in particular – is a reproducible sensible object whose purpose is to foster admiration and emulation in its beholders.

Chapter Two, "Constructing a Poetics of the Natural: Proportion, Decorum, and Bodily Appeal in George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*," addresses courtier-poet Puttenham's sprawling 1589 treatise on English poetics, focusing especially on one of the text's central tensions: the relationship between

poetry as constructed commodity and the receptive body as natural, sensual, universal in its responses and affinities. In keeping with his commitment to situating the poet in terms of the natural relationships which structure the world, Puttenham transforms humanist ideas about readerly judgment and prudent discernment into a set of unconscious processes which take place physiologically and over which an auditor has no control. In so doing, Puttenham offers a theory of reception that approaches, gestures toward, and continually revises the notion that the receptive body and the materials of art are inextricably bound together by a set of natural laws. Puttenham analyzes the poet-audience relationship in a variety of ways – in terms of an aesthetic ideal of proportionate composition and response; as a partnership flourishing under the conditions of a universal natural order; and as a crucial social tool, essential to decorum and courtly success – yet his central claim is for the supremacy of the receptive body as the ultimate arbiter of poetic quality. Thus Puttenham imagines reception to entail not discernment but a kind of unconscious acquiescence to a set of natural rules, an acquiescence over which the receptive subject has no control. The poet's highest aim, then, should be to operate within the parameters of those natural rules, guaranteeing the persuasive efficacy of his art by conspiring with nature.

Chapter Three, "Introspection and Self-Evaluation in *Astrophil & Stella*," argues that Sidney sees *Astrophil*, the subject of his sonnet-cycle, as an exemplary figure of aesthetic reception. What is more, *Astrophil*'s emergent self-awareness, predicated as it is upon perceptual experience, suggests powerfully the transformative possibilities of art. For Sidney, the mode of image-perception that

governs the sonnet-cycle grants the subject three intertwined powers. First, image-perception is the impetus for poetic creation; only after an image strikes the poet's mind – as the Muse's imperative implies – can creative work proceed. Second, image-perception possesses a singular rhetoric, a power of persuasion which does not require rational consideration on the part of its audience. The register of the visual is thus the register of the plea, the exhortation, and the appeal. Just as the poet is affected by image of Stella, the reader, and indeed Stella herself, are vulnerable to the suasive power of the poet's images. While Stella's subjectivity is mentioned hardly at all over the course of the sonnet-sequence, in her responses to Astrophil we can glimpse a mode of receptivity which is sensitive to, if not necessarily constituted by, beauty in its constructed forms. Finally and most broadly, looking makes self-awareness possible: introspection is the key to a mode of detached, critical self-knowing which allows Astrophil not only to present himself to Stella in a rhetorically effective way, but also to begin to grasp the contours of his own selfhood, to view his affective engagements as objects of reflection and regard. By foregrounding these three powers, Sidney's sonnet-cycle troubles a late sixteenth-century orthodoxy about the order and functions of the self. Sidney's depiction of Astrophil as a subject defined by his own introspection, whose inward looking is a form of self-analysis, suggests Descartes' *cogito*: Astrophil's existence is affirmed, and indeed constituted, by his own self-directed thought.

Chapter Four, "Donne and the Limits of Interpretive Independence," focuses on Donne's ambivalent attitude toward independent interpretation and the

autonomy of the receptive subject. Critical engagement with one's own soul is, for Donne, the essence of Christian formation, and meditation – the devotional practice by which such engagement can be achieved – the highest form of prayer. Yet in his letters, sermons, and poems, Donne is continually troubled by an ambivalence regarding the soul's powers of self-examination. Is the soul, Donne wonders again and again, a legible, self-disclosing text, open and available for examination by its possessor? Or is it, rather, an interpretive challenge to be solved only by recourse to the institutional authority of the Church and, by extension, of the clergy? This tension, between private, independent contemplation and the powerful authority structures within which worship is circumscribed, is fundamentally a tension between two modes of spiritual exegesis, two ways of reading the soul: a tension which had long existed regarding textual interpretation but which Donne extends to the work of self-examination. For Donne, I wish to suggest, the private, self-reflexive judgment of the soul achievable through meditation, on the one hand, and the reforming force of the injunctions of clergy and Church, on the other, are equally important arbiters of personal morality. Yet devising a spiritual practice by which an individual is accorded sufficient latitude for self-examination while ensuring adequate guidance from the Church requires Donne to revise established principles governing both meditation and rhetoric. In his discussions of meditation, in which he acknowledges the limitations of the visual register and the human imagination in a way medieval meditation-books do not, and in his sermons, designed to guide yet careful never to lull their audiences into passivity,

Donne offers a tentative endorsement of the critical powers of the soul, and yet expresses, too, an abiding skepticism about the ability of the individual ever to achieve a reformation of the self, a throwing-off of sin.

The fifth and final chapter, “Knowledge, Opinion, and the Aesthetics of Taste in *Comus*, *Areopagitica*, and *Paradise Lost*,” argues that, unlike Spenser and Puttenham, Milton does not consider aesthetic experience necessarily to entail a somatic acquiescence to the seductions of the sensible. Rather, Milton sees *aesthesis* in its highest form as the key act of the critical subject: testing and its emblematic fictive representation, tasting, are crucial means by which to evaluate truth-claims in a postlapsarian world. Aesthetic testing opens up to the subject a realm of free judgment, allowing for the exercise of personal choice. Yet because aesthetic experience is supremely private, subjective, and irreproducible, it resists evaluation by sources of moral authority. The tasting/testing of *aesthesis* must fill the void left by God’s postlapsarian absence; the perfect wisdom guaranteed by God’s proximity has been replaced by the imperfect knowledge that results from human evaluation. Milton is attracted at once to the educative possibilities of experiential testing and repelled by the contingent, unverifiable nature of human experience; he valorizes the sphere of wisdom, divinely-granted and unquestionable, yet worries about the tendency of God’s Word to crystallize into a static icon. In attempting to strike a balance between the spheres of knowledge and of intuition, of testing and of belief, Milton places discernment at the heart of a readerly aesthetics, yet gestures continually toward the moral possibilities of intuition. Thus *aesthesis*-as-testing proves to be a capacious and critically useful

concept for Milton, encompassing not only the productive process of learning but also – in *Comus*, for example – the dark seductions of appetite and the dynamics of moral trial, the test that lies at the heart of all human temptation.

The decades following *Paradise Lost* saw an expansion of the critical powers of the subject and an embrace of the independent, unverifiable perceptual encounter as a valuable way of experiencing the world. The reader became a newly autonomous arbiter of literary value. Enlightenment theories of aesthetics sought to integrate the processes of private critical examination and aesthetic response that Milton had held in ambivalent opposition, and taste gradually emerged as a core value in a newly-ascendant system of critical evaluation. The re-invention of the receptive subject in the decades after Milton brought with it the invention, too, of new modes of self-understanding which acknowledged and even embraced the doubt that must necessarily underlie all belief – doubt which Milton, an early advocate for the critical subject, exposes as the dynamic force driving all human inquiry.

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## Chapter I

### Spenser's Virtuous Body: *Aesthêsis and Ethical Action in Book VI of The Faerie Queene*

#### Introduction

The last complete book of Spenser's epic explores and interrogates virtue's instantiations, its particular seductions, the many ways in which it is received, performed, and circulated. The deepest preoccupation of *The Faerie Queene's* Book VI, "Of Courtesy," is not with courtesy as an abstraction but, instead, with courtesy as an aesthetic object and a reforming force. Book VI's account of courtesy is, above all, an account of the power of aesthetic experience to mediate subjectivity and to foster virtuous development.

In Book VI, Spenser traces the affective experiences of a handful of sensing subjects – Calidore, the Salvage Man, Serena, Colin Clout – and makes two broad claims for the value of aesthetic experience in a morally ambiguous world. First, Spenser proposes what I am calling an ethics of bodily knowledge, a system of moral judgment by which sense-experience plays a crucial role in inculcating virtue. The second claim is that sensation is not at odds with moral development, but is, rather, a crucial tool by which a subject can seek, understand, and perform virtue. In a depiction of reception that is also a defense of the value

of art, Book VI reveals that the aesthetic encounter contains within it the power to educate and transform the sensing subject. What is more, by situating sensation on the boundary-line between mental activity and somatic experience, Spenser integrates the powers of mind and body, proposing that virtue in general – and courtesy in particular – is a reproducible sensible object whose purpose is to foster admiration and emulation in its beholders.

I seek, then, to revise a critical consensus which regards as Spenser's greatest anxiety a concern about the limits of bodily self-regulation – a concern summed up by Gail Kern Paster when she writes, referring not to Spenser in particular but to early modern culture in general, that the porous boundaries of the early modern body threatened “the psychic economy of the humoral subject in an age newly preoccupied with corporeal self-discipline.”<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this kind of anxiety is given considerable attention in Book VI, and in Canto vi the Hermit argues that the senses should be rigorously controlled as part of a larger program of moral self-improvement. Yet throughout Book VI that ideal of sensory control is continually shown to be problematic. Because it entails a merely tempered and partial engagement with art, extreme sensory self-control places art's greatest benefits and pleasures out of the subject's reach. Spenser's deeper commitment, I argue, is to a receptive ideal predicated upon sensory openness and freedom, and his greatest anxiety is not about the vulnerability of the sensing body but rather the misprision that can result when independent interpretation is not mediated by a poetic authority.

<sup>11</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell), 13.

As I attempt to view Spenser not through the lens of a mind/body divide but rather in terms of a larger receptive program, I seek to move beyond the rigid and limiting pairs of binaries on which criticism of Spenser has long relied. The notion of the split subject, and the related theoretical distinction between “inward” and “outward” kinds of subjective experience, is an interpretive convention legitimized by longstanding critical consensus. To take just one example, Gerald Morgan argues that, in Book VI, “courtesy is a moral concept that focuses both on the inwardness of virtue and the fitness of its outward expression.”<sup>12</sup> Such an analysis is particularly tempting in light of passages like the following, a formulation from the Proem: “But vertues seat is deepe within the mynd, / And not in outward shows, but inward thoughts defynd.”<sup>13</sup> The couplet certainly suggests a clear distinction between public identity and private virtue, but to treat it as a summation of the Book’s view on courtesy is to ignore the complexities of Spenser’s position.

I will attempt to replace the familiar inward/outward binary with a more nuanced account of courtesy, and, at the same time, attend to the complexities of Spenser’s broad theory of virtuous experience as a whole. Though my argument that aesthetic experience functions as a type of moral information for Spenser might seem, at first, to presuppose a divided subject, in which a morally astute intellect, for example, can impose order upon an unruly perceptual system, in fact, for Spenser, the free play of the senses is an essential somatic means to a virtuous

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Morgan, “Spenser’s Conception of Courtesy and the Design of the *Faerie Queene*,” *The Review of English Studies* 32:125 (Feb. 1981), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow: Longman, 2001), Book VI Proem 5.8-9.

end. What is more, by foregrounding aesthetic reception as a key mode of interpretation, Spenser accords the body a power of judgment not accounted-for by any inward/outward divide. For Spenser, the subject is a complex and integrated interpretive *system* through which sense-experiences are processed and meaning is uncovered: reception for Spenser entails engaging with the world as a whole, and with virtue in particular, as an object for *aesthêsis* – for sensation – as well as for judgment and analysis.

Thus by depicting sensation as an educative capacity and courtesy as an aesthetic object, Spenser imagines a set of moral subjects whose virtuous status is contingent upon their interaction with and imitation of the aesthetic traces of the world they inhabit. In the Faeryland of Book VI, beauty is allied with the ethical, and imitations of beauty are crucial for moral development: only by imitation can beauty's moral power be disseminated in the world. And Spenser's courteous subjects – Calidore, the Salvage Man, and the Hermit most importantly – are at once exemplars of virtue and its disseminators: they spread virtue throughout the social world they inhabit, affecting others through the bodily channels of perception.

By tracing the complex ties by which Spenser links sensory openness with moral rectitude, the aesthetic with the virtuous, my argument will necessarily attend to Spenser's intellectual predecessors, for Spenser's positions on virtue and sensation represent important modifications to an inherited classical tradition which consigned sensation to the realm of the irrational. By emphasizing the ethical function of sense-experience, Spenser's account, though grounded in

Aristotelian and Thomistic accounts of the soul and invested in a Protestant emphasis on self-mastery, foregrounds bodily experience as a crucial means for the cultivation of virtue. By suggesting that sense-experience can itself be morally inflected, Spenser reframes the standard account of sensation which dominated discourses of bodily reception at the end of the sixteenth century, and re-imagines sense-experience to be an extension of a morally active subject.

Therefore I will first examine the theoretical background against which Spenser positioned his claims, with a particular emphasis on Aristotle's account of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I will then analyze four episodes from Book VI which explore the crucial link between sense-experience and virtuous action: the Proem's suggestive image of Elizabeth as virtue's exemplar; the Salvage Man's rescue of Calepine and Serena in Canto iv, in which bodily knowledge prompts virtuous intervention; the Hermit's advice to Serena and Timias after they have been wounded by the Blatant Beast, which suggests a tension between bodily experience and moral continence; and Calidore's vision of the Graces and conversation with Colin Clout in Canto x, during which the poet's role in fashioning moral subjects is examined in light of aesthetic experience.

From the very start, we see that virtue and sensation in Book VI are linked in a kind of symbiosis that regulates poetic creation and poetic reception alike. Book VI opens with an account of the speaker's own compositional process, his debt to beauty as inspirational force and creative stimulus. From the very opening

of the Proem, we glimpse the central role that perception plays in regulating the speaker's internal world and, in turn, the progress of the poem itself:

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,  
In this delightfull land of Faery,  
Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,  
And sprinckled with such sweet variety,  
Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,  
That I nigh rausht with rare thoughts delight,  
My tedious trauell doe forget thereby;  
And when I gin to feele decay of might,  
It strength to me supplies, & chears my dulled spright.<sup>14</sup>

This opening passage establishes a connection between physical perception and spiritual strength, a connection determined, in part, by beauty's pleasurable encroachment on the boundaries of the subject. The speaker describes aesthetic experience as a passive and self-directed process, requiring his submission to beauty's "raushment," but also determined by his self-guided progress through the landscape of Faeryland. As it anticipates the Book's later focus on the morally transformative power of the senses, the passage suggests that encounters with beauty, predicated as they are on aesthetic experience, function as a key source of mental refreshment and creative renewal. What is more, sense-experience supplies not only spiritual refreshment and pleasure but also a kind of "strength," the word suggesting at once the active power required for continuous poetic production and the promise of moral protection. As we shall see, the tension between pleasure and virtue, aesthetic freedom and sensory self-protection, runs through Book VI, culminating in a depiction of reception as a

<sup>14</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, VI Proem 1.1-9.

project embarked upon in the space between interpretive independence and authorial guidance – a view of aesthetic experience which would come to be shared by Spenser’s poetic successors.

### **Courtesy in Humanist Thought**

In focusing on courtesy, Spenser situates his epic’s final book in terms of a humanist tradition of courtesy-writing whose aims were more pragmatic than theoretical. Sixteenth-century continental courtesy-manuals sought to provide instruction to ambitious courtiers attempting to negotiate the complex world of court. Such texts advise their readers to cultivate a sensitivity to the conditions governing conversation, a kind of social sensitivity which requires an attention to the status and disposition of one’s interlocutor. Baldassare Castiglione addresses the issue in his famous conduct-manual, the *Book of the Courtier*, which was translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561. Speaking about conversation, Castiglione’s Ottaviano sums up the responsibilities of the courteous subject: "Whoever has to engage in conversation with others must let himself be guided by his own judgment and must perceive the differences between one man and another, and change his style and method from day to day, according to the nature of the person with whom he undertakes to converse."<sup>15</sup> Continental conduct-books, then, offered a kind of theoretical vocabulary for exploring the nature of

<sup>15</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles Singleton (Garden City: Anchor, 1959), 109. While Ottaviano’s view is contested by Pietro da Napoli, who charges that Ottaviano is describing not a true courtier but merely a “noble flatterer,” Ottaviano counters persuasively by explaining that courtiers, unlike flatterers, are motivated by love of their prince. While I am careful not to assume that Ottaviano’s view corresponds exactly to Castiglione’s, it is significant that it is Ottaviano who wins the argument here.

subjective experience. It is those texts' attention to subjectivity that, I suggest, interests Spenser most. The courtesy-books open up questions about the nature of aesthetic engagement and moral development, and Spenser seizes upon, expands, and complicates those questions in Book VI of his epic.

In addition to the Continental courtesy-books, Spenser relies for his approach to courtesy and reception upon a conceptual framework based on early modern passion theory. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, passion and action were the poles between which all human experience was organized. Cicero, whose work was one of the most important sources for early modern passion theory, divides the passions into four main types – distress, pleasure, fear, and desire.<sup>16</sup> For Cicero, passions are the means by which a person can be “moved” or “transported” (the modern terms themselves suggesting one's passive relationship to emotional experience). And passions are experienced somatically, as movements of the blood, indivisible from emotional experience. By contrast, actions proceed from of one's own soul, and remain under the regulating authority of the self.<sup>17</sup> The paired concepts of passion and action, then, perform important theoretical work in classical as well as in early modern thought: they organize affective experience according to a subject's relationship with the outside world. Passions are not merely a way of describing emotions; as

<sup>16</sup> Susan James, “Explaining the Passions,” in *The Soft Underbelly of Reason*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (London: Routledge, 1998), 22.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Gail Kern Paster, et al., eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

part of a larger metaphysical scheme, they suggest that subjective experience is at least partially contingent and beyond an individual's control.

Yet the relationship between passion and virtue was a fraught one. Cicero held that passions are always at odds with rational judgment: as Christopher Tilmouth puts it, "passions are characteristically premised on ... a judgement ... contrary to right reason," the universal standard of virtuous decision-making.<sup>18</sup> Yet another view argued that passion and virtue could, in fact, be aligned. Aristotle and his most important interpreter, Thomas Aquinas, suggested that a person's ability to experience passions could, under the right circumstances, aid in their virtuous development. The passions, if consistently aligned with reason's dictates, could become "the very manifestations of a virtuous soul."<sup>19</sup>

Can the passions co-exist with virtue, aiding or manifesting a person's moral success, or are they fundamentally at odds with it? That question lay at the heart of early modern debates about the limits of sensation and the moral possibilities of aesthetic experience.<sup>20</sup> In addressing this debate, Spenser takes a

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Tilmouth, *Passion's Triumph Over Reason: A History of the Moral Imagination from Spenser to Rochester* (Oxford, 2007), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Tilmouth 23.

<sup>20</sup>For Spenser's contemporaries, the relationship between passion and action could get complicated. Writing in 1604, the English theorist Thomas Wright classed passions as, in fact, types of *actions*:

Three sorts of actions proceed from mens soules, some are internall and immateriall, as the acts of our wits and wils; others be mere externall and materiall, as the acts of our senses, seeing, hearing, moving, &c., and others stand betwixt these two extremes, and border upon them both; the which we may best discover in children, because they lacke the use of reason and are guided by an internall imagination, following nothing else but that pleaseth their senses, even after the same manner as bruit beasts doe: for, as we see beasts hate, love, feare and hope, so doe children. Those actions then which are common with us, and beasts, we call Passions, and Affections or perturbations of the mind.

bold approach: modifying Aristotle's view, he suggests that passions are not merely *signs* of virtue but forces capable of educating and of enriching a person's virtuous development. By suggesting that sense-experience can be morally helpful, Spenser is arguing for a view of the self that moves beyond a strict division between virtue and sense, and offering a vision of a receptive subject whose sensation and judgment are fully integrated in the service of a larger project of virtuous self-improvement.<sup>21</sup>

In the following section, I will discuss the ways in which Aristotle's model of the human soul, and particularly the division in Aristotle's *Ethics* between contemplative and practical modes of intellection, is foundational for Spenser's account of courteous behavior. I will also show how a single question lies behind the investigations Aristotle, Aquinas, and Spenser make into the way perception works: how are sensation and intellection linked? What mechanism is

Wright adds to the classical division between self-directed and passive states another distinction – a distinction between those activities which belong either to the mind or the body, and those which exist on the boundary of the mind/body divide, linking the two aspects of the self. Moreover, Wright's scheme, like those of other contemporary thinkers, has an evaluative component: passions are the province of children and animals, of creatures who lack the ability to reason and are guided solely by a desire for pleasure.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, Aristotelian and Continental ideas about perception and courtesy alone cannot fully account for a Protestant poet's view of ethical behavior; yet Spenser's doctrinal commitments in Book VI, as in all of the *Faerie Queene*, are difficult to pin down. Some scholars, most notably Michael Tratner, argue that Spenser's account of courtesy signals Calvinist sympathies. Explaining that Calvin viewed courtesy as a practical virtue, a means of building a functional community of believers in which compassion and forgiveness – coded as “courtesy” – could replace justice and promote social harmony, Tratner argues that Spenser endorses a Calvinist notion of courtesy's role in society. (Tratner, “The thing S. Paule ment by...the courteousness that he spake of”: Religious Sources for Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*.” *Spenser Studies VIII* (1990), 147-174). While Tratner's claims are no doubt intriguing, his focus on identifying Spenser's radical Protestant commitments alone is problematic, because it produces a narrow view of courtesy's theoretical work in Book VI.

responsible for bridging the gap – acknowledged by Aristotle and Aquinas to be a fundamental one – between the soul’s sensory and rational powers? Spenser’s qualified answer, that sense-based reception necessitates a mode of subjectivity in which mind and body are integrated, represents the central claim of Book VI and the governing principle underlying its depiction of courtesy.

### **Spenser's Aristotelian Heritage**

Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s work, are logical starting-points for our inquiry into Spenser’s receptive approach because they were so influential on philosophical ideas, particularly ethical theory, in the middle and late sixteenth century. As a cornerstone of humanist education at Cambridge, the *Ethics* was surely familiar to Spenser, as was the commentary by Aquinas, who was widely considered to be Aristotle’s greatest interpreter.<sup>22</sup> To fully account for Aristotle’s views on perception, ethics, and the links between them, we must first address Aristotle’s theory of the tripartite soul, and then turn to his basic ethical principles. Aristotle divides the human soul into three parts, each responsible for a different function, and each containing within itself yet further divisions. Each of the parts, or “faculties,” of the soul – the nutritive, the sensitive, and the intellective – interacts with the world differently, according to its unique function. The nutritive faculty directs growth and locomotion, enabling a person to eat and survive; the sensitive faculty is responsible for sensation,

<sup>22</sup>Ronald A. Horton. “Aristotle and His Commentators.” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (U of Toronto, 1990), 57-60.

processes like seeing and hearing; and the intellectual faculty, unique to humans, is capable of cognition and rational thought. Aristotle arranges these faculties in a hierarchy of increasing complexity, and each faculty, responsible for a unique kind of processing of external information, interacts with the others. Even as the faculties are divided from one another, they are tied together by the demands of survival: hunger, for example, is a desire of the nutritive faculty, but in order for it to be fulfilled, the sensory faculty must locate food via sense-perception.

Together with this theory of specialized functions, which imagines a sympathy between certain types of information and particular parts of the soul, Aristotle's notion of active and passive capacities further divides the functions of the soul into different classes. Perception for Aristotle is a passive process, and therefore all organs of perception are passive. When we perceive something, that is, our perceptual faculties are acted upon by that thing and transformed by it. The eyes' capacity to be acted upon and altered by the visual material it perceives, for example, makes vision possible. This passivity is manifested primarily through physical change; the eyes change their form sympathetically in response to a perceived object. For Aristotle, Stephen Everson argues, perception is "paradigmatic example of a physical activity": its processes can be fully accounted for by material changes in the sense-organs, which respond passively to their objects of perception, or "proper sensibles."<sup>23</sup>

Yet cognition is fundamentally an active process, effecting change rather than abiding it. Unlike perception, which can only take place through physical

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Everson, *Aristotle on Perception* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 5.

modification, the relationship between cognition and the physical world is more complex. Aquinas interprets the relationship between intellect and sense as one of clear division, suggesting that a mind/body distinction dominates Aristotle's *Ethics*: "Since the intellect or reason is not a faculty of any bodily organ, it is not directly subject to the action of any bodily power."<sup>24</sup> Yet cognition has a complicated relationship to sensation. On the one hand, cognition is wholly independent, active, and self-determining. On the other, cognition is often reliant on information provided by the sense-organs as a starting-point for the construction of rational thought.

Aristotle does more than distinguish between cognition and sensation. He also divides intellection itself into two types, practical and contemplative – a distinction which reinforces the claim that sense-perception offers little benefit in a subject's search for truth. While both practical and contemplative intellection entail rational thought, the practical intellect translates the desires of the sensory soul into cognition; the contemplative intellect, on the other hand, is independent of sensory desire, discerning the truth or falsity of things on the basis of their absolute value, and deeming them to be good or bad regardless of their relationship to one's desires. The essential difference between these two types of intellection, then, is their connection to one's sensory soul.<sup>25</sup> They are distinguished by their respective ways of viewing the world: the practical intellect finds truth in a perceptual object when it is "in agreement with right

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox, 1993) 80.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 139.

desire” – in other words, when it corresponds to the desires of the sensory soul.

The intellective faculty, by contrast, can view the world without the filter of self-interest.

Spenser’s revision to Aristotle’s account is his assertion that courtesy, and indeed all virtue, is not an abstraction that can only be grasped by divorcing the intellect from the body, but instead, a kind of object that can be deployed socially, circulated, imitated; it can derive from and be known through bodily experience. Spenser’s Book VI sets forth a theory of ethical behavior which derives from Aristotle, but makes important changes to the classical account. By linking sensation and intellection in a single model of perception, Spenser does not elide Aristotle’s distinctions between those functions; instead, he envisages them to be tied together by their equal status as important tools in the arsenal of a morally vigilant subject, each faculty actively engaged in the moral protection of the self. A subject’s capacity for sensation becomes an integral part of that subject’s moral self-protection and social participation.

Another modification Spenser makes to Aristotle’s ethical system concerns the nature of moral development. In Aristotelian thought, habit is the most important force in fashioning a moral subject. As we have seen, the sensory soul is imagined to be a passive participant in the active process of the intellection, as this passage from Aristotle’s *Ethics* explains: “The concupiscible power and every appetitive power ... heed and are obedient to reason....Persuasion, reproach, and entreaty in all cases indicate that the irrational

principle is somewhat influenced by reason.”<sup>26</sup> Aquinas glosses this passage as meaning that “reason is not controlled by the movements of the passions of the sensitive appetite but quite the contrary – reason can restrain such passions.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet Aquinas also argues that this principle applies only to temperate people who are “endowed with the habit of moral virtue”; rational restraint is a learned skill, not a natural quality.<sup>28</sup>

Yet while Spenser owes much to an Aristotelian heritage of thinking and writing about subjectivity and ethics, he suggests that aesthetic experience and virtue can be linked in a radically different way. A brief lyric illustration offers a concise representation of the view he explores in greater depth in *The Faerie Queene*. In his *Hymne in Honour of Beautie*, one of the *Fowre Hymnes* printed in 1596, Spenser describes the lover as an imaginative creator: “Thereof he fashions in his higher skill / An heauenly beautie to his fancies will, / And it embracing in his mind entyre, / The mirrour of his owne thought doth admyre.”<sup>29</sup> Here, the lover is not consumed by love, but, instead, directs the process of spiritual uplift which leads to an intimation of the Forms of Beauty, themselves deriving from

<sup>26</sup>Aristotle cited in Aquinas, *Commentary*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 79. Elsewhere in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, virtue is understood to consist of properly moderated emotion. For Aristotle, ethical behavior is an affective state which positions a person’s behavior between two undesirable extremes, and which can be acquired by habit. The virtuous person, when angered, is neither uncontrollably furious nor indifferent: instead, he shows anger moderately. Yet this virtuous moderation can only be achieved by proper cultivation and education; it is not an innate or inborn quality. In this way, virtue is distinguished from the senses: while the former can be perfected, the latter cannot. Because a subject can be habituated to ethical behavior, ethics is the province of reason, which can respond to education’s rational appeals as well as to the familiarity of frequent repetition.

<sup>29</sup> Spenser, “Hymne in Honour of Beautie,” in *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999), l. 221-224.

the Good.<sup>30</sup> Aesthetic experience – in this case, a glimpse of the beloved – sparks this process, and the active force of “fancies will,” the desiring imagination, drives it to its culmination. This model posits aesthetic reception as the essential first step in achieving knowledge of virtue. As we shall see, Book VI draws upon and modifies Aristotelian and Continental modes of subjectivity in order to make his own claims about the centrality of beauty not just to erotic experience, but to ethical development in general.

### **Setting the Stage: Courtesy in The Proem**

Book VI begins by acknowledging the necessity of sense-experience for moral development and, more broadly, for the maintenance of a harmonious social order. As the central images of the Proem suggest, courtesy is a rarefied quality, requiring particular conditions for optimal growth and reception; poets must practice artful imitation in order to amplify and disseminate it. By addressing these three aspects of courtesy – its cultivation, its reception, and its production – the Proem touches on a set of related questions about the degree to which individuals respond passively and actively to their environment. The Proem anticipates later episodes in Book VI by suggesting that courtesy depends on sensory experience for its growth and continuance – and, in turn, that social harmony rests on the capacity of individuals to make proper moral judgments based on information provided by the senses.

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd Gerson, "Plotinus," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/plotinus/>>.

The Proem opens not with a discussion of courtesy itself but, instead, with an account of the experience by which courteous action is made possible: the apprehension of sensuous pleasure. At the Proem's opening, the speaker gives an account of his journey through Faeryland, a journey which is filled with distractions: his paths "are...sprinkled with such sweet variety, / Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye, / That I nigh rausht with rare thoughts delight, / My tedious trauell doe forget thereby."<sup>31</sup> Recalling the experiences of the central figures in earlier Books, such as Redcrosse and Guyon, the speaker's confrontations with beauty nearly result in moral swerving, in neglecting his serious purpose. The ever-present danger of "ravishment," of being overcome by sensuous pleasure which invades the body through the organs of perception, suggests that the poem's educative purpose – the "tedious travel" which stands for the moral work of both writer and reader – is continually in tension with its status as a seductive aesthetic object. Spenser resolves this tension by positing that aesthetic experience is necessary both for creative endeavor and for moral development, suggesting a tantalizing link between pleasure and virtue.

Even as he establishes this link, Spenser suggests in the Proem that imitation – the observation and emulation of social performance – is a crucial part of moral education. Elizabeth, as the poem's highest-ranking social figure, is depicted in the Proem as the source of virtue and its most influential exemplar. What is more, in a move that suggests that sensory pleasure is a requisite part of moral development, the Proem marks Elizabeth as an aesthetic object, possessing

<sup>31</sup> Spenser, *Proem* VI 1.3-6.

a beauty that is crucial to her ethical power. Observers engage with that beauty somatically: Elizabeth's virtue "doth inflame / The eyes of all, which thereon fixed beene."<sup>32</sup> While that virtue can be experienced by onlookers directly, it can also be disseminated more broadly and less directly by means of the poet's artful inventions. "That from your selfe I doe this vertue bring," Spenser explains, addressing Elizabeth, "And to your selfe doe it returne again."<sup>33</sup> Thus the poet, by constructing virtue's images, gives the monarch a moral power that extends beyond her individual magnetism and spreads throughout the social world.

Yet the poet's task of imitation is a challenging one, because representation always entails a complex negotiation of the boundaries of truth and falsehood. If a poet is to use the materials of virtue to create a new work of art, that new work must transform the original source without fundamentally changing it, but also without slavishly reproducing it. The tension between a legitimate instantiation of virtue and a false simulation is a central concern of the *Proem*, and one which it confronts directly when it discusses the fallen nature of courtesy:

Its now so farre from that, which then it was,  
That it indeed is nought but forgerie,  
Fashion'd to please the eies of them, that pas,  
Which see not perfet things but in a glas:  
Yet is that glasse so gay, that it can blynd  
The wisest sight, to thinke gold that is bras.<sup>34</sup>

The *Proem*, then, offers two competing images of visual production and modification: the semitransparent glass and the reflective mirror.<sup>35</sup> While the

<sup>32</sup> Book VI *Proem*, 7.2-3.

<sup>33</sup> Book VI *Proem*, 7.2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Book VI *Proem* 5.2-5.

mirror produces accurate imitation, the glass is distorting, alluding to the line from 1 Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass, darkly,” giving access only to a partial and misleading intimation of the divine.<sup>35</sup> Distinct from the poet’s work of representation, forged courtesy misleads the senses and, instead of offering an enriching, sensually accessible instantiation of virtue, merely tricks the senses into valuing what they should not. The weight of moral responsibility, then, lies on the maker of images as well as on their viewer: if even “the wisest sight” can be misled by false representations, then the poet is responsible for ensuring his art’s value, its currency in the economy of representation. At the same time, the passage hints at the productive nature of reflection as well as at its perils: “true” imitation, when it entails the social and poetic performance of Elizabeth’s virtuous brightness, is, as we shall see, crucial to the successful transmission of ethical conduct.

The suggestion in this passage and elsewhere that beautiful images and seductive poetic representations, though potentially dangerous, can serve an instructive purpose is tied to early modern debates about the proper function of poetry, debates in which the pleasurable and profitable aspects of poetry were commonly linked. The theory behind this conventional linkage was that pleasant form could make moral instruction more palatable. Writing of the ethical work of the poet, Sidney explains that true poets “meerly make to imitate, and imitate both to delight & teach, and delight to move men to take that goodnesse in hand, which

<sup>35</sup> See Rana Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> King James Version, 1 Cor. 13:12.

without delight they would flie as from a stranger.”<sup>37</sup> For Sidney, proper poetic invention consists in making normative distinctions, “not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be.”<sup>38</sup>

Spenser’s depiction of courtesy in the Proem expands the Sidneian account of beauty’s ethical uses in two ways. First, Spenser places a remarkable degree of emphasis on bodily processes of apprehension, suggesting that the physical senses are crucial channels for the reception and production of virtue. Second, Spenser suggests that by disseminating beautiful images of virtue, the poet contributes to the maintenance of a harmonious social order, not just the moral development of individuals. Taken together, then, Spenser’s two modifications suggest that sensory pleasure is not, as Sidney argued, a means to coerce the rational faculty into learning, but instead a virtuous end in itself, an *alternative* to rational appeal in its power to inculcate virtue.

In the Proem’s final image, Elizabeth’s courtiers surround her, absorbing her virtues even as they celebrate them: “Right so from you all goodly vertues well / Into the rest, which round about you ring, / Faire Lords and Ladies, which about you dwell, / And doe adorne your Court, where courtesies excell.”<sup>39</sup> Like the dancing maidens who surround the Graces in Canto x, these courtiers celebrate and amplify Elizabeth’s courtesy, providing a kind of aesthetic compliment to her surpassing beauty. But this scene also represents, by a single image, the model of a well-organized virtuous society, in which one moral

<sup>37</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poesy,” in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 218.

<sup>38</sup> Sidney, “Defense,” 235.

<sup>39</sup> Book VI *Proem* 7.6-9.

exemplar inspires emulation, reduplication, and orderly beauty. As we shall see, in the more complex and chaotic world of Faeryland, the relationship between sensory experience and moral decision-making is not so clearly set out.

### **The Salvage Man**

Canto i opens by emphasizing Calidore's natural courtesy, establishing a distinction between inborn virtue and its social deployment. In Calidore, "it seemes, that gentlenesse of spright / And manners mylde were planted naturall," the horticultural image recalling of image of virtuous flowering in the Proem.<sup>40</sup> Yet to this Calidore "adding comely guize withall, / And gracious speech, did steale mens hearts away": he perfects his physical appearance and manner of social interaction in order to move all those who see him. Courteous behavior – *seeming* courteous – is "grounded" in a prior condition of courteous *being*, a virtuous capacity bestowed at birth. It is this inborn virtue that the Salvage Man, whose virtuous development is the focus of a crucial episode in Canto iv, shares with Calidore.<sup>41</sup>

The Salvage Man is Calidore's untaught double, a figure who possesses, like Calidore, a natural instinct for virtue, but who is unable to enhance his inborn talent by any courtier's art. Never having been exposed to language, the Salvage Man uses gesture and other nonverbal signs in order to communicate with Serena, and the success of their interactions suggests powerfully that virtue's most basic channels of transmission are the body's. Stripping the processes of sensory

<sup>40</sup> VI.i.2.3-4.

<sup>41</sup> VI.i.2.4-5.

reception and communication down to their simplest forms, Spenser uses the Salvage Man as a means by which to show that while art may be capable of organizing virtue and enhancing its sensory appeal, virtue is always encapsulated in and mediated by the boundaries of the somatic. Thus the Salvage Man's encounter with Serena in Canto iv is characterized by modes of reception and production to which the senses can naturally respond and which exist outside of language; the gesture and the non-linguistic sign are, in this episode, resistant to formal organization but capable nonetheless of transmitting courtesy and eliciting it in response. The episode suggests that the senses are the crucial means by which the material of virtue is transmitted – capable all on their own fashioning a courteous subject out of an untaught creature.

Serena's scream at the opening of Canto IV – a “loud and piteous shrigh” – is a non-linguistic cry for help to which the Salvage Man, who cannot understand language, automatically responds: it pierces his heart with compassion.<sup>42</sup> Just as Calidore will, a few Cantos later, be pulled toward the scene of the Graces' dance by the power of its enchanting sounds, the Salvage Man is drawn to the scene of Calepine's attack by an aural imperative which exercises an emotional pull. Once there, the Salvage Man finds a tableau of discourtesy which carries a dark suggestion of the reciprocity inherent in courtesy: Turpine is “chasing the gentle Calepine around,” describing a circle of violence which suggests that brutality, like courtesy, has a reduplicative power.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> VI.iv.2.3.

<sup>43</sup> VI.iv.2.8.

Just as Elizabeth's courtesy inspires a reflexive courteous response in her attendants, Turpine's violence provokes a violent response from the Salvage Man, but it is a response provoked equally by pity; the Salvage Man is motivated not only by a desire to seek justice for Calepine, but to help Serena. The Salvage Man, who "neuer till this houre / Did taste of pittie, neither gentleness knew, / Seeing his sharpe assault and cruell stoure / Was much enmoued at his perils vew, / That euen his ruder hart began to rew, / And feele compassion of his euill plight."<sup>44</sup> His compassion is determined by his sensory engagement with the scene, and it develops in terms of the responses of his body.

The Salvage Man's reaction to the attack on Calepine establishes his body as a site of affective response. Obeying the dictates of his body, the Salvage Man acts without the benefit of contemplation and emerges triumphant unaided by any art, unmotivated by any strategy of self-preservation or self-promotion. After Turpine flees, the Salvage Man's body becomes the means by which he performs courtesy – a particular sort of courtesy which flourishes away from court, outside of language, and which is based upon the delicate give-and-take of signified and signifier central to artistic production and reception. Unable to communicate verbally, and thus to deploy the skills of rhetoric and persuasion which aid courtiers like Calidore in their attempts to curry favor, the Salvage Man must use gesture and nonverbal vocal expression in order to convey his intentions to Serena. The crudeness of the Salvage Man's gestures ensures that his self-presentation will not be enhanced by any false beauty:

<sup>44</sup> VI.iv.3.1-6.

But the wyld man, contrarie to her feare,  
Came to her creeping like a fawning hound,  
And by rude tokens made to her appeare  
His deepe compassion of her doleful stound,  
Kissing his hands, and crouching to the ground.<sup>45</sup>

The Salvage Man's performance of compassion is also a performance of servility, and it reassures Serena of his good intentions. He uses another system of signifiers in order to convey his courteous hospitality: transforming Turpine's shield and spear into "signes," he leads Serena and Calepine into his dwelling-place, his welcome encoded in his destruction of the weapons which so recently threatened them.<sup>46</sup>

The passage casts the Salvage Man's reaction to Calepine's attack in terms of a kind of bodily recognition: he experiences the scene visually, "tastes" pity, and experiences compassion through the responses of his "ruder hart." These responses are as natural to him as sense-perceptions, and his body, too, is in a natural state, unconcealed and unprotected by any armor. He is "naked without needful vestiments, / To clad his corpse with meete habiliments," his nakedness, like the Graces' in Canto x, a sign of his sincerity.<sup>47</sup> The Salvage Man's powers are not enhanced by any artful modification; he is as guileless as the day he emerged "from his mothers wombe," through which "He was invulnerable made by Magicke leare."<sup>48</sup> His powers derive from birth, not instruction; and while he is surely incapable of the contemplative intellection considered by Aristotle to be

<sup>45</sup> VI.iv.11.1-5.

<sup>46</sup> VI.iv.13.2.

<sup>47</sup> VI.iv.4.4-5.

<sup>48</sup> VI.iv.4.9.

the sole means for understanding virtue, his attack is motivated by a moral impulse, and it sends Turpine fleeing.

The Salvage Man's status as an untaught but naturally virtuous figure links him with Calidore, but the episode reveals that to consider Calidore's manners "natural" is to accord nature, erroneously, the power of implanting social skills. In fact, the Salvage Man's example suggests, a person can be born with the capacity for virtuous impulses, but not proper manners; nature only has the power to instill an individual with a kind of moral physiology, a bodily capacity for action. In positing this view, Spenser is responding to a Continental tradition of nature-nurture debate, articulated, for example, by Ottaviano in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Ottaviano, one of the participants in the symposium about courtly behavior which comprises the entire book, declares that "in virtue it is necessary to have master who, by his teaching and good reminders, shall stir and awaken in us those moral virtues of which we have the seed enclosed and planted in our souls; and, like a good husbandman, cultivate them and open the way for them."<sup>49</sup> While a person may be born with virtuous capacities, his or her full potential cannot be fully realized without education and guidance, Ottaviano tells us. In a sense, Spenser agrees: isolated from exemplary figures, the Salvage Man has failed to develop any habits of civilized life – language, reason, courtesy in any conventional form – and it is only by seeing and hearing another person in distress that he can experience pity, a kind of affective imitation.

<sup>49</sup> Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 297.

Moreover, for Spenser the distinction between the seed of virtue, which the Salvage Man seems clearly to possess, and its cultivated fulfillment can be understood in terms of a distinction between the body's knowledge and the artful interventions of the civilized world. Applied to the concerns of Book VI as a whole, this distinction suggests that there are two types of courtesy: not only the cultivated and emulative courtesy learned by courtly subjects and students, but the purer, more universal virtue of compassionate assistance – a sort of radical courtesy unfiltered by social convention and based on innate disposition alone.

The Salvage Man episode offers a kind of test-case for the limits of somatic knowledge and instinctive virtue. His status as an untaught but naturally or innately virtuous character complicates the Proem's emphasis on the necessity of courteous models for virtuous development; and the fact that he lacks a sophisticated rational ability brings into relief the power of the automatic, morally inflected responses of the body to precipitate moral behavior, without the aid of rational contemplation or even language. While it is the Salvage Man's natural capacity for virtue which makes his compassionate behavior possible, it is not until he experiences a kind of sensory assault, an encroachment on his psychological and physical isolation by the cry of a woman in danger, that his moral potential can be fulfilled. Courtesy is a virtue that is fundamentally social; and the two aspects of its success – pleasing performance and canny reception – cannot survive in a vacuum, but require an audience of willing beholders for their perpetuation.

### **At the Hermitage: Spenser's Rejection of Radical Asceticism**

Canto vi, positioned at the very center of Book VI, examines the relationship between perception and virtue in terms of a process of moral healing. Serena and Timias' cure in the hermitage, while effective, reveals that the radically controlled model of perceptual experience endorsed by the Hermit is both impracticable and unhelpful in the social world. As a former knight, the Hermit has a grasp of practical virtue; as a recluse and philosopher, though, he can devote his energies to what Aristotle would call contemplative intellection. It is the Hermit's very status as a social outsider, devoted to contemplation and uninvolved in the processes of virtuous perception and reduplication required for courteous behavior, that makes his advice inadequate. By counseling Timias and Serena to subdue their perceptual faculties, to place them under rigorous rational control, the Hermit offers an ascetic's solution to a problem which is fundamentally social: the problem of slander.

In Canto vi, I suggest, Spenser presents the Hermit as a problematic figure who reveals the deficiencies of a radical system of sensory self-control. Such an emphasis on control limits the ability of a subject to have morally valuable sense-experiences, and thus to function effectively as a moral actor in a social world. In advising Serena and Timias to narrow the bodily channels of perception which, as we have seen, can lie so fruitfully open to morally inflected experience, the Hermit denies the value of moments of spontaneous, nonrational perception – moments of sensory ravishment – which are made possible by the free play of a virtuous subject's senses. And by replacing Book VI's earlier emphasis on the

active performance of virtue with an injunction to a kind of defensive self-discipline, the Hermit reorders the value-system endorsed elsewhere in Faeryland – a reordering that proves problematic for Timias and Serena.

At the opening of Canto vi, we learn that Serena and Timias' wounds are complex, affecting them at once physically and spiritually. While their respective wounds were inflicted under different circumstances (Serena was attacked and abducted by the Blatant Beast; Timias was wounded by Despetto, Decetto, and Defetto), they suffer in similar ways, experiencing both bodily harm and a kind of moral sickness which afflicts them spiritually. Having tried unsuccessfully to apply "salues," or bodily medicine, to his patients with no sign of improvement, the Hermit assigns a spiritual cause to their bodily wounds. According to the Hermit, Timias and Serena's "inner parts" – the term suggesting both the body's inner organs and the immaterial register of the mind and spirit – are diseased and chaotic, "rankling inward with unruly stounds."<sup>50</sup>

Yet while his diagnosis seems to be correct, the Hermit's cure is problematic: "For in your selfe your onely helpe doth lie, / To heale your selues, and must proceed alone / From your owne will, to cure your maladie," he advises, endorsing a radically individualistic solution.<sup>51</sup> According to the Hermit, Serena and Timias must exercise a willed control over their senses in order both to cure themselves and to prevent further harm. The senses are the first cause of their sickness: "For from these outward senses ill affected, / The seede of all this euill

<sup>50</sup> VI.vi.5.3.

<sup>51</sup> VI.vi.7.1-3

first doth spring.”<sup>52</sup> If, as the Hermit suggests, unregulated sensation is to blame for Serena and Timias’ affliction by the Blatant Beast, then the harm of slander can be reversed and prevented by rigorous sensory self-discipline: “Abstraine from pleasure, and restraine your will, / Subdue desire, and bridle loose delight...Shun secresie, and talke in open sight.”<sup>53</sup> And when they follow the Hermit’s advice, Serena and Timias are quickly cured.

The Hermit’s advice rests, however, on a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of slander. Rather than deriving solely from personal weakness, slander is a social danger which may attack a person justly or unjustly. As M. Lindsay Kaplan points out, early modern slander could be the result “both of personal flaws and malicious imputations.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore self-regulation cannot prevent slander entirely; the cost of participating in a social world is living in constant danger of false accusation. Indeed, the slippage between these two possible kinds of slander – ill repute earned and unearned, just and unjust – is a complexity which the Hermit, isolated from society by choice, never takes into account. And in neglecting the deeply social nature of slander, the Hermit offers a solution which renders courtesy impossible: because courteous behavior rests on a person’s social participation, evading that participation as the Hermit advises would entail giving up courteous behavior forever and restrict Serena and Timias from participating fully in the world as ethical subjects.

<sup>52</sup> VI.vi.8.1-2.

<sup>53</sup> VI.vi.14.5-8.

<sup>54</sup> M. Lindsay Kaplan, *The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 53.

If Hermit's approach, while practicable and helpful outside of the social world, is nearly impossible to follow within it, it does give voice to an important early modern anxiety about the dangers inherent in aesthetic pleasure. Serena's wounding, the episode which causes her to seek the Hermit's care, takes place during a scene of aesthetic pleasure different from any of the three examples we have discussed so far: Serena's episode is unlike the Proem's account of fruitful wandering through the beautiful paths of Faeryland, or the scene of courteous reduplication in the Proem's self-enclosed setting of courtly beauty, or the raw ethical initiation of the Salvage Man through sensory channels. Instead, Serena's experience reveals more forcefully than any of those scenes the dark side of aesthetic experience, its moral ambiguities and dangers.

Serena's wounding appears to have a double cause: it follows both Serena's discovery "in couert shade" with Calepine, and her wandering alone among a field of flowers directly after that discovery. It is hard to know which of these two causes is the truer one: is Serena's wounding an apt punishment for her sexual dalliance, or an unfair penalty for her solitary wandering, during which she is perhaps careless, but not actually guilty of misbehavior? Critics have attributed the attack primarily to Serena's wandering, which might be unproblematic in intent (Serena is wandering merely to gather flowers) but risky in execution (Serena is not vigilant enough to her surroundings, leaving herself open to attack). If this is the case, then Serena's desire to seek out sensory pleasure is surely a contributing factor in her attack, a lapse in judgment that

leaves her open to violence. But, if this is so, why is sensory pleasure, so helpful elsewhere in Book VI, so dangerous here?

The answer lies in the fact that Serena's subjective experience of beauty is a dangerously unregulated one; she lacks the virtuous grounding which makes the speaker's experience of sensual pleasure in the Proem, and, later, the Salvage Man's, morally fruitful. The problem, then, is the problem of aesthetic experience unmediated by the guidance of an interpretive authority, whether internal or external. She has neither a powerful force of will, nor an exemplary Queen, nor an instinctual ethical mandate to guide her; she is wholly given over to a desire for pleasure, a problem particularly dangerous because of her gender. Even the most perfected virtue could not guarantee her safety in the face of sexual violence. Therefore Serena's attraction to beauty is arbitrary and unfocused, dependent only on her whims. Serena is drawn in by the seductions of the natural world which surround her, and, "Allur'd with myldnesse of the gentle wether, / And pleasaunce of the place," she "Wandred about the fields, as liking led / Her wauering lust after her wandering sight."<sup>55</sup> Not only does Serena's body wander; her desires do too, and her "liking," itself variable and inconsistent, is the only principle regulating her "lust" and her "sight." Unlike the speaker in the Proem, whose experience of pleasure takes place along a path of moral progress, Serena wanders "off the path," and, in her physical and mental wavering, leaves herself open to attack.

<sup>55</sup> Vi.vi.23.3-7.

Given Serena's dangerous attraction to pleasure, the Hermit's advice to her might seem apt; like the other figures in Book VI, she needs some stable principle to restrain her aesthetic curiosity. But while the Hermit is able to effect a temporary cure, his prescription goes too far. If the Hermit's task of healing is twofold, both to encourage a capable and protective moral habitus and to invest Serena with a kind of rational moral strength which is capable of commanding the body's desires, then the first step in healing is perceptual discipline: "First learne your outward senses to refraine / From things, that stirre vp fraile affection; / Your eies, your eares, your tongue, your talk refraine / From that they most affect, and in due termes containe."<sup>56</sup> Yet those organs and activities which require restraint according to the Hermit are the very channels by which, as we have seen, virtue can be perceived and disseminated. Even when the self is not well-ordered, as in Serena's case, to place rational controls on perception is to dismiss the power of bodily knowledge in creating a community of virtuous actors.

The Hermit is attempting to remove from perception its inherent dangers, to suggest a mode of existing in the world that eliminates the possibility of misprision and moral error. While we learn early on that the Hermit's healing power stems from both his experience and his social withdrawal – both from his adventures during his former life as a knight, during which he "past through many perilous assays," and from his present life of contemplation – his advice to Serena

<sup>56</sup> VI.vi.7.6-7

and Timias reveals a narrow and idealistic view of social participation; he offers a hermit's solution, impracticable in the world outside the hermitage.<sup>57</sup>

It might be easy to assume, based on the Hermit's advice, that Spenser, too, endorses a radical rejection of sensation. In fact the picture is more complicated. As we have seen, Spenser does not argue for a simple or absolute break between body and mind. "Giue salues to euery sore, but counsell to the minde," instructs the last line of stanza 5, recasting two popular proverbs and summing up the Hermit's process.<sup>58</sup> Yet elsewhere in Book VI we see that drawing an absolute distinction between body and mind, physical and rational healing, is a dangerous oversimplification. Rigid rational control over perception has costs, one of which is an inability to understand virtue in its actualized, socially circulated forms. The final figure in our investigation, Calidore, is guilty of a lustful misreading similar to Serena's; yet he is helped by a guide who, unlike the Hermit, is adept at negotiating both the dangers and the pleasures of aesthetic experience.

#### **The Educative Power of Beauty : Calidore's Encounter with the Graces**

Canto x, which includes the image of the dancing Graces on Acidale, puts two types of sensory experience in conflict, even in competition: the experience of physical lust, and the experience of morally instructive aesthetic ravishment. The slippage between the two kinds of experience suggests their treacherous similarity, but it also makes a powerful argument for the necessity of aesthetic

<sup>57</sup> VI.vi.3.3-4.

<sup>58</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 639n.

experience for ethical development – as long as that experience is coupled with rational interpretive work. Calidore’s vision of the Graces’ dance is two-pronged, inspiring physical lust akin to Serena’s but leading not to sickness but rather to a fuller understanding of the virtues of civility and courtesy. Unlike the Salvage Man or Hermit episodes, the vision of the Graces in Canto x is a depiction of sensory experience in response to a highly stylized aesthetic moment, and as such it functions as a kind of poetic defense, an argument for the moral value, not just of natural beauty, but of its aesthetic construction.

This section’s attitude toward the senses might seem surprising in light of earlier parts of the epic. Redcrosse, the hero of Book I, learns to mistrust his sensory experiences as early as the end of that book’s first Canto, after his hallucinatory encounter with Duessa. Book I is crowded with, even obsessed with, moments of sensory deception, but Redcrosse’s world is quite different from Calidore’s. Whereas seeking holiness requires a careful management of one’s bodily and imaginative response in order to prevent moral missteps – the same kind of management the Hermit endorses – courtesy by its very nature demands an engagement with the environment, both natural and social. And while holiness is not necessarily a virtue of social success, such success is a crucial aspect of courtesy. Thus the radical guardedness which Redcrosse learns to exercise over his senses in Book I would be unhelpful to Calidore. If courtesy is a virtue of successful “being-in-the-world,” Calidore is only able to achieve it through sensory engagement, through participation, both intellectual and somatic, in the social world of Book VI.

Canto x is Book VI's climax, the narrative revelation of the Proem's allusion to the "sacred nursery / Of vertue.../Where it in siluer bowre does hidden ly / From view of men."<sup>59</sup> The image Calidore sees, of the dancing virgins encircling the three graces, is a glimpse of that sacred space, courtesy's source; yet even while the image depends on the senses for its apprehension, it proves to be elusive and transient, resisting further sensory investigation. What is more, it is important to note that the image of perfected virtue does not, at first glance, reveal itself as such: instead, it inspires a kind of desire in Calidore which is at once intellectual and erotic, a desire to "know" in all its suggestions.<sup>60</sup> Yet it is the overlap of erotic and intellectual stimulation which, the passage suggests, accounts for perfected virtue's power. The aesthetic register can exercise a pull on the body which intensifies, rather than detracts from, its instructive power; Canto x reveals art's unique ability to appeal to the whole self, the sensory and rational faculties together.

As we are throughout Book VI, in Canto x we are constantly reminded that the visual register can be treacherous. The Canto opens by describing the undesirability of valuing "painted show," the false beauty of court: Calidore has decided to "set his rest amongst the rusticke sort, / Rather then hunt still after shadowes vaine / Of courtly fauour"; "For what hath all that goodly glorious gaze / Like to one sight, which *Calidore* did view?"<sup>61</sup> The "one sight" is the image of the dancing virgins encircling the graces, juxtaposed here with the array of

<sup>59</sup> Book VI *Proem*, 3.1-4.

<sup>60</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 668n.

<sup>61</sup> VI.x.2.6-8; VI.x.4.1-2

beauties which court offers. This comparison, we learn, is a misleading one, however, because the image of the graces to which courtly beauty is unfavorably compared is itself transient, elusive, and, it seems, a vain shadow, disappearing just as Calidore approaches it.

Calidore's first perception of the dancing maidens is marked by curiosity and described consistently in terms of appearances and "seemings," signs which, at other moments in the epic, signalled misprision. The hill of Acidale is a place "whose pleasaunce did appere / To passe all others, on the earth which were"; as he approaches the dance, "him seemed that the merry sound / Of a shrill pipe he playing heard on hight."<sup>62</sup> Yet the fact that the image of the Graces *seems* to be a false image does not necessarily mean that it is one. Calidore, waylaid by erotic desire, lacks the ability to tell the difference between virtue's false image and virtue's true source. Recalling the Proem's juxtaposition of true and false kinds of courtesy, which suggests that even wise observers can mistake a counterfeit representation for a reflection of the truth, this passage suggests at once the senses' powers and their perils.

But at least at first, Calidore is in no position to assess the truth of what he is seeing. Instead, the dance mesmerizes him, and he responds not rationally, but sensually: "Much wondred *Calidore* at this straunge sight, / Whose like before his eye had neuer seene, / And standing long astonished in spright, / And rapt with pleasaunce, wist not what to weene."<sup>63</sup> As he approaches, the dancing maidens mysteriously vanish "all away out of his sight," the phrase again underscoring his

<sup>62</sup> VI.x.5.4-5; VI.x.10.2-3.

<sup>63</sup> VI.x.17.1-4.

dependence on sensory experience. Sensory experience remains tantalizingly elusive and mysterious until Colin Clout intervenes.

With Colin's assistance, the "dark conceit" (to borrow Spenser's phrase for the hidden allegorical meaning of his epic) of this episode becomes illuminated, and the thrust of the passage shifts from sensory ravishment to rational appeal. Colin's analysis, or "dilation," of the scene makes clear that its purpose was to foster imitation: "Therefore they alwaies smoothly seeme to smile, / That we likewise should mylde and gentle be, / And also naked are, that without guile / Or false dissemblance all them plaine may see."<sup>64</sup> As a kind of emblem of true courtesy, the tableau is the most self-consciously constructed of Book VI, its image a kind of meta-poesis requiring a reading by Colin. Moreover, Colin's intervention means that contemplative intellection and active virtue can be integrated into a single aesthetic experience: an understanding of virtue neither requires somatic withdrawal or the social retreat of the Hermit. Instead, virtue is always present in the world, available to the senses – even if one's sensory experience of virtue may benefit from the guidance of a poet, an expert aesthete whose moral importance, in light of this episode, becomes hard to dispute.

As Calidore's encounter with the Graces shows, moral instruction can take place by means of sensory experience; and therefore the educative force of art – and poetry in particular – lies not only in its ability to make virtue palatable, as in Sidney's formulation, but also in its particular power over the senses. In a striking reversal, Spenser argues that lust, both physical and intellectual, can be a

<sup>64</sup> Vi.x.24.1-4.

channel for virtuous development. The culmination of Book VI's sustained exploration of courtesy and the relationship between moral development and sensory experience is a moment which joins the fictive world of Faeryland with the reader's somatic and intellectual experience of the poem itself. Spenser closes Book VI by reminding us of the deeply sensuous nature of poetic reading – a quality which accounts for poetry's particular suasive force.

### **Ethics and Perception After Spenser**

Spenser's interest in the moral dimensions of aesthetic experience was not unique to him; in the decades following the *Faerie Queene*, philosophers proposed models which modified Aristotle's system and complicated its strict functional distinctions. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Hobbes argued that bodily differences between individuals, and their varying receptivity to sensible objects, affected their ability to make active judgments.<sup>65</sup> Around the same time, Descartes developed a theory of the soul in which the soul is "at once sensitive and rational too, and all its appetites are volitions."<sup>66</sup> For Descartes, the soul is the seat of thought; thought becomes a newly broadened concept, encompassing a range of activities including cognition, memory, and sense perception. As Susan James explains, Descartes believed that "our experience of affect ... is an integral part of our thinking."<sup>67</sup> By uniting moral discernment with perceptual

<sup>65</sup> Susan James, *Passion and Action* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 213: This is an unorthodox, yet to me persuasive, account of Descartes' thinking.

<sup>66</sup> Descartes cited in James, 90.

<sup>67</sup> James 107

experience, Spenser too imagines a single morally inflected evaluative system which applies, in different ways, both to rational and sensory experience.

The leading thinker of the group of philosophers known as the Cambridge Platonists, Ralph Cudworth, wrote in the 1670s of the interplay between passive and active modes of sensation and the cognitive differences between animals and human beings: “Sense which only passively receives particular outward objects doth here like the brute hear nothing but mere noise...but no music or harmony at all; having no active principle and anticipation within itself to comprehend it by, and correspond or vitally sympathise with it; whereas the mind of a rational and intellectual being will be ravished and enthusiastically transported in the contemplation of it.”<sup>68</sup> The passive nature of the senses, Cudworth argues, is precisely what makes possible rational engagement, even an experience of the sublime. Just as Spenser did 80 years before, Cudworth is here revising Aristotle’s model of contemplative intellection to accommodate sensation.

Spenser’s position, that sense-experience can aid in virtuous understanding and ethical development, was neither wholly new, being rooted in Aristotle’s thought, nor free of contradiction. But Spenser’s endorsement, however complex, of aesthetic experience suggests that the poet’s role in the social world is crucial. Just as Colin Clout brings educative force to Calidore’s experience of sensory pleasure, the poet’s task, Spenser suggests, is not only to create, control, and distribute aesthetic objects, but also to guide us as we make tentative, naïve, imperfect contact with those sources of seductive beauty.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *Intellectual System* iii, p. 160, cited in J. H. Muirhead, “The Cambridge Platonists,” *Mind* 36:142 (April, 1927), 175.

## Chapter II

### Constructing a Poetics of the Natural: Proportion, Decorum, and Bodily Appeal in Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*

*But what else is language and utterance, and discourse and persuasion,  
and argument in man than the virtues of a well-constituted body and mind,  
little less natural than his very sensual actions?  
The Art of English Poesy (1589)<sup>69</sup>*

If Spenser considers virtue to be an aesthetic object whose power can be accessed only through the free play of the receptive subject's senses, Puttenham imagines language in all its guises to be the product of physiological fitness: instead of positing, with Spenser, an economy of virtuous exchange, Puttenham emphasizes a dynamic principle of natural poetic production and reception. For Puttenham, that is, rhetoric is analogous to sensation, and he groups rhetoric together with other "sensual actions" in order to suggest that all language operates upon its hearers unconsciously, automatically, without the necessity of reasoned engagement or reflective receptive work. *The Art of English Poesy*, Puttenham's sprawling 1589 treatise, is devoted to the idea that English poesy is part of the

<sup>69</sup> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007), 384.

texture of everyday life, as fundamental to human experience as the very mechanisms of sense-perception which make its reception possible.

I seek in this chapter to explore Puttenham's theory of poetic reception – a theory that approaches, gestures toward, and continually revises the notion that the receptive body and the materials of art are inextricably bound together by a set of natural laws. Puttenham analyzes the poet-audience relationship in a variety of ways – in terms of an aesthetic ideal of proportionate composition and response; as a partnership flourishing under the conditions of a universal natural order; and as a crucial social tool, essential to decorum and courtly success – yet his central claim is for the supremacy of the receptive body as the ultimate arbiter of poetic quality. In this, Puttenham imagines reception to entail not discernment but a kind of unconscious acquiescence to a set of natural rules, an acquiescence over which the receptive subject has no control. The poet's highest aim, then, should be to operate within the parameters of those natural rules, guaranteeing the persuasive efficacy of his art by conspiring with nature.

Recent scholarly work on Puttenham has focused almost exclusively on two aspects of his treatise: on the one hand, its socio-political significance and the conditions of its production; and, on the other, its status as a rhetorical manual written to give advice to aspiring poets. While such historicist approaches have yielded important information about Puttenham's life and circle, and have situated the treatise in the context of other rhetorical manuals written in the late sixteenth century, they have neglected Puttenham's abiding interest not only in poetic production, but in the mechanisms of poetic reception. I suggest that

Puttenham's treatise is not merely a guide for poetic composition but a sustained exploration of what it means to be a hearer and reader of poetry. *The Art of English Poesy* is as interested in theorizing the physiological and social dimensions of the poetic *encounter* as it is in offering a set of instructions to aspiring courtier-poets.

Puttenham takes three approaches to the question of reception, and by doing so suggests that reception is at once a physiological dynamic, a poetic concern of central importance, and a social expedient. I will first address Puttenham's notion of proportion as the essential force regulating poetic engagement, the crucial dynamic that makes persuasion possible. For Puttenham, proportion exists equally within a poem – it is a set of harmonious linguistic relationships, a feature of well-arrayed language – as it does within the receptive subject. Proportion is key to poetic persuasion because it capitalizes on the natural predilections of the ear for balance and harmony; a poet deploying proportion effectively uses his audience's unconscious attraction to good form in order to seduce them to attention and agreement. But such unconscious attraction is not limited to somatic reception, the process of hearing. Instead it extends even into the realm of the cognitive, and Puttenham explores the distinctions between bodily and mental reception by using two rhetorical terms, *energeia* and *enargeia*, to organize the two types of poetic appeal according to their proper objects. As we shall see, though, the distinctions Puttenham draws between body and mind are complicated, rather than reinforced, by this binary scheme. In the end, proportion works as a successful overarching concept because it undermines

distinctions between bodily and mental perception; Puttenham endorses a receptive subject whose cognitive and somatic registers are closely aligned, and often indistinguishable.

Puttenham's notion of proportion as the concept that bridges the gap between the linguistic and the somatic, the created poem and the receptive subject, means that he must also restructure received accounts of the relationships between the natural world and the poet's task. In the chapter's second section, I explore the ways in which the terms *nature* and *art* were re-imagined by Puttenham as part of an effort to establish the natural as an overarching poetic principle. Unlike the some of his contemporaries – I use passages from Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* as examples – Puttenham considers art and nature to exist in a mutually informing relationship, not in a hierarchical one. Because the poet must capitalize on the natural predilections of the body and mind in order to be successful in his attempts to persuade, nature comes to represent the parameters within which a poet must work. Art is not (as Sidney suggests) simply a separate or superior realm of aesthetic beauty and moral purity. For Puttenham the poet works, instead, in tandem with nature; his task is neither to merely imitate nor to compete with nature, but instead to write, as Puttenham puts it, “even as nature herself” does, using natural rules to his advantage.

The concluding section of the chapter addresses decorum, the principle which, according to Puttenham, governs at once poetic production, courtly behavior, and social success. As a term with a long history and a complex set of associations, decorum is uniquely useful for Puttenham: it links literary judgment

together with affective experience and social performance. Tracing decorum from Aristotle through Cicero and the Italian humanist tradition, the section argues that Puttenham deploys a classical sense of decorum as active virtue or “prudence” in order to emphasize the poet’s investment in the physiological. The decorous courtier, like the successful poet, must attend to harmony and proportion; both courtier and poet are engaged in artful performances, and both are concerned with eliciting a sympathetic audience response. Because decorum is a skill that demands an awareness of contingent circumstances as well as a virtue that transcends the specific or the temporary, it is essential for the poet to master: it allows the poet to achieve success in the social world both poetically and by other types of performance. Puttenham’s poet, then, has a unique task: to employ judgment, and to tap the judging capacities of the audience, by appealing to their bodily predilections and the natural responses they have to poetry – a task which is equally central to classical accounts of decorum.

All three of Puttenham’s linked concerns are different and complimentary answers to the same question, the question which, I suggest, represents Puttenham’s deepest conceptual investment in the *Art*: how can reception, slippery, contingent, and unpredictable, fit into a taxonomy of natural rules according to which it can be classified and controlled? Thus Puttenham’s interest in reception stems not only from a desire to determine the parameters within which poetry can be most efficacious, but also from an effort to enlist even nature itself in the service of human endeavor. By suggesting that the poetic encounter should be understood in terms of a set of universal rules, Puttenham is refining a

mode of poetic instruction and uniting the separate genres of physiological text and poetic manual. The *Art* evinces Puttenham's desire to understand the relationship between poetry as constructed object and the receptive body as "natural," sensual, universal in its responses and affinities. Puttenham's determination to pin down the mechanisms of subjective experience makes his text wide-ranging, inconsistent, and digressive, but it also leaves us with a sense of poetry as a legitimate part of the natural world – perhaps the strongest "defense" of poetry possible during an era when such defenses proliferated.

For present purposes I am concerned, as Puttenham is, with reception in its broadest possible sense: reception not merely as the act of reading or hearing a poem, but as the set of affective and social experiences which poetic engagement entails. As such, for Puttenham, attending to reception becomes not only crucial to the poet-courtier's creative and social success, but also the sole stable principle in an arbitrary courtly world characterized by shifting alliances and changing fashions. In order to create a successful work of poetry – and, at the same time, to construct a successful social performance – a poet must look to the bodily response of his audience as the index of poetic quality.

How does Puttenham approach the receptive body as a theoretical site? Such a question has attracted some scholarly interest – most notably from David Hillman, who suggests a Bourdieuvian reading of Puttenham's attention to decorum<sup>70</sup> – yet it has never been considered in terms of the modes of power and

<sup>70</sup> See David Hillman, "Puttenham, Shakespeare, and the Abuse of Rhetoric." *SEL* 36:1 (Winter 1996), 73-90.

control which Puttenham considers to be inherent in nature and to lie outside the boundaries of a particular courtly scene. Puttenham's view may indeed conceal a strategic desire for courtly advancement; we might read Puttenham's assertion of the natural, that is, as a useful fiction, obscuring the reality that social forces do in fact determine the conditions of poetic production and reception. Such an account offers a powerful fantasy of art as an apolitical object, a product of nature alone, an equalizing and uniting force. That fantasy, given to us again and again in the *Art*, is a deliberate attempt to remove from the poetic encounter the troubling reality of contingency, and the insoluble problem of shifting poetic preferences and tastes. Puttenham thus suggests that the poet is not subject to any rules or strictures other than nature's, and is therefore free to practice poetic self-promotion while remaining radically disengaged from a circuit of courtly allegiances and fashions.

While Puttenham's emphasis on a natural poetics is itself an oblique acknowledgement of the power of the social, it is nevertheless a striking endorsement of the power of an ideal natural body to mediate poetic content and to discern artistic quality. By emphasizing that the tension inhering in the poetic encounter is a natural phenomenon rather than a product of social conditions, Puttenham names the body itself as poetic judge. The power of judgment contained in the body, a power which Puttenham imagines all hearers of poetry naturally to possess, lies at the heart of a theory of selfhood which suggests that cognition is simply another somatic process. For Puttenham, as for many of his

contemporaries, thinking and feeling were modes of bodily experience; and Puttenham imagines that art, as a part of nature, is capable of exerting on its audience the power to control subjectivity itself, and to determine the actions of the receptive body.<sup>71</sup> My reading of Puttenham seeks to situate his account of the natural in terms of a larger theory of reception whose strategy is to redefine, and thus to defend, the role of the poet – a strategy which entails a provocative assertion of the power of the physiological to supersede structures of social and political power.

### **Puttenham and Reception: A New Approach**

Interest in Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy* has grown over the last two or three decades, and critical attention has most recently focused on situating Puttenham's treatise within the genre of the courtesy book or conduct manual. For example, Daniel Javitch has investigated the links between Puttenham's notion of "decencie" and Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, perhaps the most influential Continental courtesy book of the early modern period.<sup>72</sup> In a similar vein, Frank Whigham's *Ambition and Privilege* explores the ways in which courtesy became

<sup>71</sup> Recent accounts of the early modern body have explored the relationship between thought, emotion, and somatic expression; the Galenic "one-gender" theory; emotional affect as gendered performance; the body of the courtier as Bourdieuvian *habitus*; and the body as social artifact upon which power may be inscribed. See, for example, Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body* (UChicago, 2004); Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex* (Harvard, 1990); Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1999); and David Hillman, "Puttenham, Shakespeare, and the Abuse of Rhetoric" (SEL 36/1, Winter 1996, 73-90). My account of Puttenham's natural body is not a rejection of these accounts but is rather an attempt to illuminate Puttenham's fantasy of social performance divorced from political contingency, a view which owes much to a critical emphasis on the centrality of the early modern body as theoretical site.

<sup>72</sup> See Daniel Javitch, "Poetry and Court Conduct: Puttenham's *Art of English Poesie* in Light of Castiglione's *Cortegiano*." *MLN* 87:7 (Dec. 1972), 865-882.

a commodity, obtainable via courtesy books like *The Art*, during the 1590s, a period of unprecedented social mobility in England.<sup>73</sup> Broader political investigations include David Hillman's work on Puttenham's use of "decorum" to endorse the class-system of which he was a part, and Jonathan Crewe's attention to Puttenham's views on theater as hegemonic.<sup>74</sup> Reading Puttenham's treatise as a kind of reference book, Annabel Patterson and Eugene R. Kintgen have investigated systems of knowledge organization in early modern England, situating Puttenham in a Ramist tradition of empirical enquiry.<sup>75</sup> And the most recent critical edition of the *Art*, edited by Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, explores Puttenham's life and examines his text in light of his frustrated political aspirations and volatile personality.

The fact that scholars have for the most part concerned themselves with Puttenham's focus on poetic production and courtly performance means that their accounts neglected the *Art*'s deep commitment to exploring reception. Because most critics have read the *Art* as a work chiefly concerned with poetic production – a kind of conduct-manual designed to shape the reader into an ideal poet-courtier, or a text whose rhetorical strategies function to raise Puttenham's own status in Elizabethan court circles, or both – they have paid little attention to

<sup>73</sup> See Javitch, *Poetry and Courtliness in Renaissance England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978); and Whigham and Rebhorn, "Introduction," in *The Art of English Poesy* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> See David Hillman, "Puttenham,"; Jonathan Crewe, "The Hegemonic Theater of George Puttenham." *ELR* 16:1 (Dec. 1985), 71-85; and Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

<sup>75</sup> See Annabel Patterson, *Hermogenes and the Renaissance: Seven Ideas of Style* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970), and Eugene R. Kintgen, "Reconstructing Elizabethan Reading." *SEL* 30.1 (Winter 1990), 1-18

Puttenham's concerns with reception and audience subjectivity. Yet Katharine Craik's treatment of Puttenham in her book *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England* represents an important exception to the general scholarly neglect of Puttenham's reception theory. Focusing on the *Art's* ideas about readerly response and the text's debt to late-sixteenth-century conduct manuals, Craik's study ties together the theoretical and aspirational aspects of Puttenham's text. By arguing that Puttenham proposes a theory of reading which aided gentlemen in the project of self-fashioning, Craik emphasizes Puttenham's engagements with the readerly body. According to the *Art*, Craik argues, reading could be a transformative and self-improving activity, bound up with social mobility and political success.

Craik's study offers a fascinating reading of Puttenham's text as a courtesy book invested in the body of its readers. Yet I wish to argue that Puttenham's interests were both broader and more complicated than mere social and political ambition. Like Craik, I suggest that Puttenham imagines reading (and hearing) poetry to be a physically affecting process, but it is Puttenham's commitment to a view of reception as an unconscious and automatic process that makes such a view possible. By examining the *Art* outside the narrow genre of the courtesy book, looking freshly at its key ideas – the relationships between cognition and sensation, nature and art, and decorous behavior – I wish to propose that Puttenham's reception theory situates poetic making firmly in the natural world, and makes a case for the power of the poet by uniting reader and poet

through their equal investment in harmony, proportion, and the unconscious recognition of poetic beauty.

### **Proportion and the Receptive Subject**

Mastery lies at the heart of Puttenham's account of poetic creation and reception because it is a virtue that encompasses social success and natural control.

According to Puttenham, the poet must achieve mastery not only over his audience, but over his poetic material as well, in order to successfully persuade.

Puttenham's emphasis on mastery derives from a classical notion of "active virtue" or "practical wisdom," Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, in which knowledge and social or political competence are joined. Separating out the types of mastery Puttenham endorses leaves us with three categories – categories which are never explicitly laid out in the *Art*, but nevertheless function as the *Art*'s dominant principles, shaping Puttenham's notion of *phronesis*. First and most crucially, a poet must have rhetorical mastery, or the ability to persuade an audience effectively; second, he should seek social mastery, or the poet's ability to perform the duties of a good citizen and a good courtier; and finally, he should develop empirical mastery and good judgment, the ability to observe nature at work in the world and to construct poetry either based on or with an eye to enhancing that nature. In keeping with the notion of active virtue as a hybrid skill, linking contemplation and action, Puttenham's three varieties of mastery are all mutually informing and linked together; good rhetoric is useful in social life, and that rhetoric can be aided by practical observation. When, towards the end of

the treatise, Puttenham presents the concept of “decorum” as the poet’s governing principle, he is knitting together these three varieties of mastery and grouping them under a single term.

The key to all three types of mastery, however, is an attention to the harmonies and relationships which structure the natural world, and which are replicated in microcosm in the hearer’s body. By foregrounding the receptive body, Puttenham imagines it as an important critical space, necessitating theoretical attention; moreover, he revises classical ideas about both social and artistic decorum, or propriety, assigning to the body and the senses what was traditionally the domain of the rational and the ethical. By working with and against the body’s “natural” affinity for conformity, Puttenham’s poet is able to persuade without appeals to the rational judgment of the hearer. By establishing what I will call a poetics of bodily appeal, Puttenham pre-empts any charges of arbitrariness while developing a stable poetic value-system, resistant to the vicissitudes of courtly culture even as it is keenly attentive to them.

Puttenham begins Book III, “On Ornament” – the book that includes the most sweeping and comprehensive discussion of poetic principles in the treatise – by consolidating his treatise’s primary concerns into a concise description of what ornament is and how it functions. “As no doubt the good proportion of anything doth greatly adorn and commend it,” Puttenham begins,

and right so our late-remembered proportions do to our vulgar poesy, so is there yet requisite to the perfection of this art another manner of exornation, which resteth in the fashioning of our maker’s language and style to such purpose as it may delight and allure as well the mind as the ear of the hearers with a certain novelty and strange manner of conveyance, disguising it no little

from the ordinary and accustomed, nevertheless making it nothing the more unseemly or misbecoming, but rather decenter and more agreeable to any civil ear and understanding.<sup>76</sup>

In a single sentence, Puttenham sums up the concerns of the most ambitious and conceptually rich section of the *Art*. First Puttenham establishes his own conception of proportion by setting it against conventional accounts: by proportion he does not mean the harmonious arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables (what he calls “our late-remembered proportions”) which distinguished “vulgar” poetry from classical verse. Instead, Puttenham is interested in “another manner of exornation,” namely the kind of adornment which uses harmonious relationships to achieve efficacy. Such ornament is efficacious because it capitalizes on the natural, already-existing predilections of the hearer’s ear and mind. The poet can benefit from the ear’s natural affinity for beauty and order: poetry written with an awareness of that affinity is particularly persuasive.

Even as he ties together ear and mind by addressing their shared investment in aesthetic harmony, Puttenham also establishes a distinction between cognitive and sensible experience which becomes central to Book III. When he writes that well-proportioned poetry “may delight and allure as well the mind as the ear of the hearers,” he is positing a subject whose receptive capacities can be divided into two categories, the intellectual and the somatic. As we shall see, while this distinction is important to Puttenham’s reception theory, it is not a clear-cut one. Because both body and mind respond automatically to the appeals

<sup>76</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 221.

of well-proportioned poetry, the rational judging power presupposed by a tradition of rhetorical theory becomes subsumed by Puttenham's notion of an unconscious power of judgment possessed equally by ear and mind.

At first glance, Puttenham's opening statement, with its focus on constructing efficacious rhetorical appeals, might seem unremarkable, even conventional: other treatises acknowledged that a poet's rhetorical mastery is crucial to his success, since persuasion is one of poetry's chief goals; in a handbook like Puttenham's, efficacy lies at the heart of the poet's project.<sup>77</sup> An inefficacious poet fails to achieve, not a goal ancillary to poetic creation, but the chief purpose of poetry, the very purpose at the heart of poetic making – effective persuasion of an audience. While these ideas were hardly revolutionary in early modern rhetorical and poetic discourse, and indeed went without saying (they were rooted in Aristotelian conceptions of good rhetoric, which stressed the almost symbiotic relationship between hearer and speaker), Puttenham's unusual move in Book III is to focus on the physiological processes of persuasion, not merely its psychological aspects. This turn to the body expands the parameters of persuasion from mere imaginative engagement to encompass a theory of *somatic* efficacy. While rational and emotional response remained important to, and indeed tied together with, these somatic aspects of poetic reception, for Puttenham the body possesses a remarkable judging power.

<sup>77</sup> For comparison, see, for example, Abraham Fraunce's *Arcadian Rhetoricke* (1588); Thomas Campion, *Observations on the Art of English Poetry* (159?); Thomas Lodge, *Defence of Poetry* (1579) – as well as the most important classical sources, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

For Puttenham, sensation and cognition are separate processes, but they are also analogous and complimentary. On the one hand, the mind, like the senses, can appreciate formal beauty, but that beauty is restricted to “mental objects,” that is, the register of abstract ideas. On the other hand, sensation can aid cognition by providing the mind with sensory data. In his discussion of both of these aspects of the relationship between sensation and cognition, Puttenham turns to a classical distinction between *enargeia* and *energeia*, Aristotle’s terms for clarity and vigor – a dichotomy which depends on a dualistic model of subjective response.

Puttenham describes that model at the opening of Chapter 3. “This ornament then is of two sorts: one to satisfy and delight the ear only by a goodly outward show set upon the matter with words and speeches smoothly and tunably running; another by certain intendments or sense of such words and speeches inwardly working a stir to the mind. That first quality the Greeks called *enargeia*, of this word *argos*, because it giveth a glorious luster and light. This latter they called *energeia* of *ergon*, because it wrought with a strong and virtuous operation.”<sup>78</sup> The conceptual divide between *enargeia*, the poetic image which stuns the hearer by means of sensory appeal, and *energeia*, the vital explanatory force of an idea enframed by a word or sound, implies a subject whose perceptual capacities are similarly divided. Puttenham explains that some poetic images, employing *enargeia*, affect the ear only, while those possessing *energeia* appeal to the mind.

<sup>78</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 227.

In an article discussing Spenser's poetics, Joseph Campana describes early modern *enargeia* as a concept which, when adopted as a dominant aesthetic, "renders poetry a system of representation that restrains the energy of physical and affective experience in order to establish a moral clarity rooted in appeals to ethos, or reasonable and moderate emotion."<sup>79</sup> By contrast, *energeia* "appeals to pathos, or intense and painful affect"; the difference between the two terms, then, lies not only in their divergent methods of poetic persuasion but in the kind of subjectivity each term constructs.<sup>80</sup> Campana's analysis is in line with Puttenham's depiction of the differences between the two modes of poetic power: *enargeia*, which functions "to satisfy and delight the ear only by a goodly show set upon the matter with words and speeches smoothly and tunably running," is a kind of formal integrity, fulfilling the hearer's instinctual attraction for good proportion.<sup>81</sup> *Energeia*, by contrast, is effective "by certain intendments or sense of such words and speeches inwardly working a stir to the mind."<sup>82</sup>

Yet even as Puttenham structures his argument along these binaries and persists in maintaining a distinction between the body and the mind, that distinction is complicated by the shared susceptibility of the two aspects of the self to good proportion. Indeed, the more deeply Puttenham explores the respective capacities of the body and the mind, hearing and imagining, the more difficult it becomes to separate them. Sensible proportion and its cognitive

<sup>79</sup> Joseph Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect," *PMLA* 120:1 (2005), 36.

<sup>80</sup> Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry," 36.

<sup>81</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 227.

<sup>82</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 227.

counterpart turn out to be quite similar. Puttenham's account of sensory and mental reception is discussed in terms which stress the attraction of both mind and body to what is "proper" to each, and, even more significantly, suggests that each register operates along unconscious lines, its affinities natural and automatic:

Everything which pleaseth the mind or senses, and the mind by the senses as by means instrumental, doth it for some amiable point or quality that is in it, which draweth them to a good liking and contentment with their proper objects...in like sort the mind for the things that be his mental objects hath his good graces and his bad, whereof the one contents him wondrous well, the other displeaseth him continually, no more no less than ye see the discords of music do to a well-tuned ear.<sup>83</sup>

The purpose of the passage is not principally to classify different types of stimuli (the mental as opposed the sensible), since it does this only in passing. Instead, Puttenham aims here to argue for propriety as the central rule governing *all* perception. Puttenham is using Aristotle's notion of "proper sensibles" to suggest that constructing aesthetic correspondences lies at the heart of all good poetry. If proper sensibles draw particular organs to them, and if the natural affinity between object and organ binds the two together in a seductive relationship, then the poet's imperative is to write poetry with a view to eliciting the subject's natural physical and mental responses – to create, as it were, a set of "proper sensibles" organized in poetry. Here, Puttenham suggests that poetic reception is

<sup>83</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 347.

a two-way process, whose dynamic is determined by the audience as much as by the poet himself.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, by modifying conventional humanist views about moral education and the importance of the body to ethical and aesthetic experience, Puttenham makes possible a new view of the responsibilities of the poet. Poetic persuasion becomes not merely an exercise in cognitive and emotional appeal, but also and necessarily an engagement with the physiology of the hearer. By suggesting that the body is the gateway to poetic experience as well as the key to poetic reception, Puttenham demands an attention to the organs of perception as the loci of aesthetic experience. Indeed, it is only by attending to these parts of the body that the poet can achieve success; they are the only absolute and unchanging arbiters of poetic quality. As a result, Puttenham pays close attention to the relationships between poetic form and bodily experience, arguing for poetic proportion on the basis of the body's affinity for it, and suggesting that the poet must write with a view for affecting the body's predilections for harmony.

Puttenham ties together hearing and understanding in order to suggest that inherent in language itself lies its power to persuade; proportion and (implicitly, as it is the topic of the Book as a whole) ornament are indeed integral to the persuasive project of the poet. Yet his account maintains a distinction between form and content, the poet's ideas and the ways in which those ideas were

<sup>84</sup> David Hillman sees Puttenham's investment in proportionate response as an effort to understand and control the constructed nature of social status: "Puttenham's struggle to find a universal standard for the correspondence of 'the mynde' and its 'obiects' is in effect a struggle to apprehend his own *habitus* – that which creates, as Bourdieu puts it, 'the correspondence between the objective classes and the internalized classes, social structures and mental structures, which is the basis of the most ineradicable adherence to the established order'" (Hillman, "Puttenham, Shakespeare, and the Abuse of Rhetoric." SEL 36:1 (Winter 1996), 77).

conveyed. Classical rhetoric traditionally argued for ornament as a mere appendage of signification. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his discussion of classical rhetorical theory: “Debates about rhetoric and the appropriateness of particular expressions in specific genres are possible only because there are various ways of saying the same thing: the figure is an ornament which does not trouble the representational function of language.”<sup>85</sup> If ornament and meaning can be separated, then the process of seducing the reader sensually – the process of delighting and alluring Puttenham mentions – can be separated from the project of conceptual persuasion and logical appeal. Yet as Puttenham explores the dimensions of ornament and decorum more fully in Book III, we see that these two processes cannot be clearly distinguished, after all. As Puttenham lays out the distinctions between sensation and cognition, it becomes clear that the links between them are in fact more complex than a simple dichotomy would suggest and that, indeed, they continually blur into one another, equally parts of a fully integrated self.

### **Nature and Art**

By linking the cognitive and somatic registers of reception, Puttenham not only establishes a theory of subjectivity according to which thought and hearing are equally indebted to bodily experience, but also argues for a way of looking at poetic making which ties together natural and artificial beauty. For Puttenham, the poet works in league with the natural world, and is even a part of it; his

<sup>85</sup>Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 158.

feignings may be artful, but they are produced within the parameters of the natural. Because persuading an audience of hearers requires appealing to, and fruitfully tapping, their bodily predilections, the poet is operating under nature's rules even as he creates seductive fictions. Puttenham manages to hold these two central early modern concepts, nature and art, in provocative tension, even while he gestures toward a reconciliation: a vision of the poet as natural artificer, operating within nature's parameters, manifesting his works in the body of the hearer.

Writing within a just few years of Puttenham, Sir Philip Sidney endorses a common view about the links between nature and art in his classic *Defence of Poesy*. In a famous passage, Sidney suggests that the poet constructs a separate kind of nature, an artful "golden world" which shares qualities with reality but improves upon it:

Only the poet ... doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature ... Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done ... Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.<sup>86</sup>

Arguing for the poet's special skills in constructing an alternative poetic world, Sidney clearly divides the natural world from the realm of art. His notion that poetic constructions are separate from, even in competition with, nature's works means that the poet's task should be to create a "better nature": to construct a world that is superior both aesthetically (in its devotion to harmony and

<sup>86</sup> <sup>86</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 215-6.

proportion) and, perhaps more significantly, morally (capable as it is of presenting virtuous situations as object lessons) to our own.

Puttenham's unusual move in Book III – and the move which separates his account from Sidney's more conventional view – is to suggest not simply that the poet's task is analogous to nature's, but that the poet must work *together with* nature in order to achieve his poetic goals, foremost among them “efficacy.” Since persuasion depends on the audience's bodily response, the poet must be attentive to that response, working within the natural parameters by which it can be elicited.

Nature and art, as Puttenham's exploration reveals, are terms which hold within themselves deeper complexities, and he begins exploring those complexities by introducing a kind of taxonomy of artifice in Book III. After describing and rejecting a few possible models for the poet's relationship to nature – the gardener, who enhances nature's abilities; the alchemist or the painter, who counterfeits them – Puttenham asserts that the poet is a creator

*even as nature herself*, working by her own peculiar virtue and proper instinct and not by example or meditation or exercise as all other artificers do, is then most admired when he is most natural and least artificial.<sup>87</sup>

The passage offers a radical revision to Sidney's standard account of the relationship between nature and art. Not only does art, usually considered a unitary activity, become heterogeneous and hierarchical – divided into categories determined by the relationships artists have with nature – it is also capable of

<sup>87</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 386 (emphasis mine).

being “more” or “less” artificial within itself. Instead of sharply distinguishing between the two registers, as Sidney does, Puttenham is blurring the lines between them and raising an intriguing question: how can a poet be as natural as Puttenham believes he should be, while maintaining the artfulness which determines aesthetic – not to mention social – success?

Puttenham offers a few different answers to this question. The first has to do with the poet’s debt to nature: the fact that, as we have seen, a poet’s poetry is successful only when it capitalizes on the body’s natural tendencies and affinities. From the outset, Puttenham links ethical value, reception, and in turn the poet’s efficacy, with the hearer’s physiology. Discussing the poet’s ability to produce good poetry in Book I, he describes creative endeavor in terms of mental organization:

For as the evil and vicious disposition of the brain hinders the sound judgment and discourse of man with busy and disordered fantasies...so is that part, being well affected, not only nothing disorderly or confused with any monstrous imaginations or conceits, but very formal, and in his much multiformity uniform, that is, well proportioned, and so passing clear, that by it, as by a glass or mirror, are represented unto the soul all manner of beautiful visions, whereby the inventive part of the mind is so much helped, as without it no man could devise any new or rare thing.<sup>88</sup>

The brain’s “disposition,” – a term which, in the late sixteenth century, meant both formal arrangement and, as a rhetorical term, the organization of parts of an argument<sup>89</sup> - determines a person’s ability to judge and, in turn, that person’s poetic aptitude. Aptitude is characterized, then, not primarily by production but,

<sup>88</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> “Disposition, n, 1a and 1c.” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989. *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 10 July 2009, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>).

more significantly, by an ability to *receive* spiritual visions. Because Puttenham's commitment to reception centers on the predilections of the brain for good or evil, it situates the poet's body at the nexus of poetic production. But in addition to linking the processes of reception and production in a single chain of somatic creative experience, Puttenham also imagines *judgment* to be a process predicated on bodily capacities. Instead of suggesting that judgment could be cultivated through education or perfected by experience, Puttenham here emphasizes the brain's role in determining a person's facility to make judgments. A person's "sound judgment and discourse" are here imagined to be embedded in the self, not cultivated but rather imbued by nature and only masked or interfered with by the brain's poor disposition. In other words, Puttenham imagines judgment and discourse as natural capacities whose expression the brain may either aid or obstruct.

This view of the brain's receptive and creative capacities has important implications for Puttenham's conception of readerly experience. First, judgment becomes universalized: every person has the potential to exercise good judgment, even if that potential is not always realized. Moreover, by dividing receptive subjects into two categories – the well- and the ill-disposed – Puttenham evades the problem of the poet's affecting disposition itself. Instead, the poet need concern himself only with eliciting those reactions which a well-disposed mind is bound to produce. When he writes effectively, the poet becomes an element in a system of mental experience which proceeds according to a set of natural and automatic laws.

By setting forth this systematic linkage between the brain's disposition, the ability to judge, and successful poetic production, and by suggesting that each process makes possible the next, Puttenham addresses the poet's role as well as the reader's here. For Puttenham, reception is itself a key part of poetic production, as receiving beautiful visions makes possible the poet's creative success. The poet's body, like that of the audience member, is the route through which beauty can be experienced and understood. According to Puttenham, a poet must himself experience aesthetic beauty before he can disseminate it: reception is a requisite part of composition, a necessary first step.

Again, a comparison with Sidney is instructive here. Discussing the superiority of poetry over philosophy in the *Defence*, Sidney writes

...learned men have learnedly thought that where once reason hath so much overmastered passion as that the mind hath a free desire to do well, the inward light each mind hath in itself is as good as a philosopher's book; since in nature we know it is well to do well, and what is well, and what is evil, although not in the words of art which philosophers bestow upon us; for out of natural conceit the philosophers drew it.<sup>90</sup>

While Sidney, like Puttenham, treats ethical knowledge as a natural birthright, he also accepts wholesale the distinction between natural and artificial ways of viewing the world. For Sidney, philosophers construct artful ways of describing the state of things, using nature's truth as a baseline. They take nature's reality, study it, and "bestow" an artful rendition of that reality upon their readers and

<sup>90</sup> Sidney, *Defence*, 226.

listeners. What is more, they use nature's principles as their matter but operate outside nature, stepping outside its parameters to create art. By contrast, Puttenham's poet exists *within* nature, part of its very texture and subject to its rules. The distinction seems minor, but its implications are far-reaching. Puttenham imagines poetry to be nature in itself – and thus linked in important ways to bodily experience.

In attempting to make this point, however, Puttenham runs up against the limits of the terms he is using. In a chapter toward the end of Book III titled “That the good poet or maker ought to dissemble his art, and in what cases the artificial is more commended than the natural, and contrariwise,” the slippage between two closely related senses of “art” – as creative production and as dissembling, feigning, concealing – becomes problematic.<sup>91</sup> The chapter begins by reminding us that the poet is not just literary maker but courtly subject, raising what to Puttenham was a pressing (and personal) problem: how and when a poet should conceal his humble origins at court.<sup>92</sup> Dissembling is at the very heart of courtly behavior, Puttenham asserts: he seeks to investigate how “so wisely and discreetly [the poet] behave himself as he may worthily retain the credit of his place and profession of a very courtier, which is, in plain terms, cunningly to be able to dissemble.”<sup>93</sup> Yet such dissembling – Puttenham cites adjusting one's dress, behavior, even the appearance of physical health, to suit one's courtly conditions – is both a betrayal of the natural laws to which a poet is indebted, and

<sup>91</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 378.

<sup>92</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Frank Whigham and Wayne Rebhorn's Introduction to their edition of Puttenham's *Art* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 379.

a risky move which might alienate the audience. Indeed, after discussing at length the typical deceptions of the courtier, all of which rely on concealing the body or feigning bodily affliction, Puttenham concludes that *sprezzatura*, the illusion of poetic effortlessness, is the only worthy means by which a poet can dissemble: the poet should, in a literary context at least, “when he is most artificial, so to disguise and cloak it as it may not appear, nor seem to proceed from him by any study or trade of rules, but to be his natural.”<sup>94</sup> This familiar formulation takes on a new resonance in light of Puttenham’s earlier discussion of bodily response. *Sprezzatura* becomes the inverse of poetic appeal: the poet should convince the hearer that his artful devices are as unconscious and automatic to him as the audience’s responses.

The body of the poet, then, is central to his efficacy, just as the body of the hearer plays a key role in poetic persuasion. That body should not be concealed or interfered with, because its very processes are crucial for poetic success. Puttenham takes this idea a step further toward the end of the chapter, when he draws an explicit connection between bodily sensation and the power of language. “But what else is language and utterance, and discourse and persuasion, and argument in man than the virtues of a well-constituted body and mind, little less natural than his very sensual actions...?”<sup>95</sup> By removing rhetoric from the realm of the rational or contemplative and situating it within a set of bodily capacities that encompasses sensation, Puttenham establishes the natural as the register of the poetic. The poet’s goal should be, not to interfere with natural rules and

<sup>94</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 382.

<sup>95</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 384.

harmonies – and thus not to dissemble physically or affect a false persona at court – but instead to allow those harmonies to inform and regulate his own work.

When, toward the end of the treatise, Puttenham introduces “decorum” as the normative principle governing literary creation (as well as social behavior), he is really deepening this idea of natural poetic making, developing its features, and extending it beyond the boundaries of the literary into the political.

### **Decorum and *Phronesis***

In all things to use decency it is only that giveth everything his good grace and without which nothing in man’s speech could seem good or gracious, insomuch as many times it makes a beautiful figure fall into a deformity, and on the other side, a vicious speech seem pleasant and beautiful; this decency is therefore the line and level for all good makers to do their business by. But herein resteth the difficulty: to know what this good grace is and wherein it consisteth, for peradventure it be easier to conceive than to express.<sup>96</sup>

By the end of his treatise, Puttenham has complicated the distinction between the natural and the artful which was conventional during his period by asserting that a poet should make use of nature’s laws in order to persuade the audience. He has also undermined the division between the cognitive and sensual registers, arguing for a kind of continuum of perception linking mind and body. When he arrives at decorum, or “decency,” in the work’s final chapters, Puttenham faces a problem. On the one hand, decorum is a useful term which describes the harmonious

<sup>96</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 347.

relationships which structure both poetic and courtly performance – relationships which have, up until now, been merely gestured toward, never summed up in a single word. But decorum, because it allows for the manipulation of our receptive capacities by aesthetic seduction– it can trick us into being persuaded by beautiful falsehoods – seems troublingly linked with deceit. If the poet’s task is to work in league with nature, how can decorum, a quality which can confuse our perception of poetic content, be used to his best advantage?

We have seen in the previous section that Puttenham rejects the notion of somatic dissembling when he discusses the poet’s commitment to the natural. And in fact he considers decorum to be a virtue which is not necessarily complicit in the deceit of the audience – instead, when properly understood, it allows the poet to construct harmonious linguistic and conceptual relationships. When Puttenham writes that decorum is “the line and level for all good makers to do their business by,” he is suggesting that it is the central principle governing successful poetic production. It seems to be an appealingly simple overarching principle in a treatise which offers few succinct directives; yet the term soon opens up to reveal an array of complexities. Puttenham first describes decorum as a sort of ornament, capable of perfecting poetic language: “it is only that [decency; i.e., decorum] giveth everything his good grace and without which nothing in man’s speech could seem good or gracious, insomuch as many times it? makes a beautiful figure fall into a deformity, and on the other side, a vicious speech seem pleasing and beautiful.”<sup>97</sup> Because of its unique power, decorum is

<sup>97</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 347.

responsible at once for poetry's beauty and its efficacy; it is the key to a poet's success, the principle governing poetic production.

Yet we soon discover that decorum is an inherently contradictory and elusive concept. "But herein resteth the difficulty: to know what this good grace is and wherein it consisteth, for peradventure it be easier to conceive than to express," Puttenham cautions early on. He continues: "I see no way so fit as to enable a man truly to estimate of decency as example, by whose verity we may deem the differences of things and their proportions, and by particular discussions come at length to sentence of it generally, and also in our behaviors the more easily to put it into execution."<sup>98</sup> Decorum is a precept, but it is a precept which resists abstraction: we can understand and imitate it best by example. So decorum is a virtue that is at once absolute and contingent. On the one hand, decorum can mean the particular rules of propriety determining behavior in a specific situation; in that sense, it is always changing, since the social conditions of performance are never identical. Yet the term can also be more expansive, gesturing toward a transcendent system of proportion regulating all "natural" processes in the world.

Decorum lies at the crux of Puttenham's poetic project because it links formal beauty and proper action; it is an artful means of accessing and expressing proportion, propriety, and harmony in a courtly world. As such, it is as much a virtue of comportment as it is a poetic skill. Puttenham offers a catalog of examples of indecorous behavior at court in order to illustrate its dangers (and its

<sup>98</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 349.

remedies); in every case, however, the body of the indecorous courtly “performer” – and, often, the body of his or her audience – is the site of judgment, the index of propriety. In one example, a courtier speaks rudely of a lady to Henry VIII and his speech “held a great disproportion to the King’s appetite”; a high voice in a male orator is derided because it goes against both the nature of his gender and the nature of oratory, the province of masculinity.<sup>99</sup> The body which possessed an unconscious power of reception in Puttenham’s theory of rhetorical appeal is here presented as capable of a kind of “natural” judgment of proper behavior. In the first example, the courtier’s speech is problematic because it does not take into account the desires of the audience; in the second, the orator fails to persuade because he is, himself, an affront to nature. In both cases, a lack of attention to the harmonious relationships which structure physical presentation and somatic response leads courtiers to behave indecorously. In the tension between the subject’s unconscious recognition of proper proportion and the deliberate project of affective self-fashioning, Puttenham locates decorum: it is the virtue which links the bodily and the social, uniting them by emphasizing their equal investment in harmony and formal coherence.

Puttenham’s deep interest in the relationship between decorum, performance, and audience response has been little discussed by scholars perhaps because Puttenham himself never addresses it explicitly. The reason for Puttenham’s tentative treatment of decorum and its attendant poetic principles is that a strong endorsement of audience reception would pose a problem for

<sup>99</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 350.

Puttenham's project. If audience response is the primary means of determining poetic efficacy, how can any transcendent system of poetics exist? How can poets gain social capital and defend themselves against the charge of being mere entertainers?<sup>100</sup> By endorsing the body as the ultimate arbiter of poetic decorum, Puttenham's theory of reception is a complex and suggestive answer to one of the central problems of courtly poetic production: how can one formulate a coherent poetics in a court culture characterized by shifting alliances and fashions? How can poetry exist in a world of contingency?

To answer this question, Puttenham suggests that reception operates according to certain consistent principles, which, once presented to the poet, can be used to his advantage. At the same time, the poet must be highly attentive to his particular situation: the latter part of the *Art* is filled with examples of proper behavior at court, examples which function (Puttenham admits) as stand-ins for a general principle, since such a principle cannot be formulated out of such disparate examples. So there is a tension inherent in the poet's task: poetry must

<sup>100</sup> The charge that poetry is inferior to philosophy and history as a mode of representation went all the way back to Plato, who in the *Ion* claims that poets, whose craft derives from divine inspiration, are masters of nothing: "The god takes [poets'] intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants...they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them" See Plato, *Ion*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. John R. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 942. Another famous charge of Plato's, found in Book X of the *Republic*, cited the corrupting potential of poetry, arguing that it was at odds with reason and knowledge. These charges were conventional foils against which the genre of the early modern poetic defense positioned itself. For more on the defensive posture of early modern poets, see Margaret Ferguson, *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 1983).

attempt to persuade in terms of an audience's natural response, but also take into account the particularities of the poet's situation.

In fact, part of the reason for Puttenham's emphasis on the universal and unchanging nature of bodily response is the fact that other measures of poetic success – such as flattering content – are highly elusive in the ever-changing world of the court. Still, Puttenham does not ignore the fact that poetic efficacy requires an attention to the fluid and contingent features of the social world. In this second sense, decorum means not only formal proportion but social and political fitness: such decorum encompasses both skill in poetic making – the crafting of the poem, a mastery of technique – and knowledge about the social context of poetic performance, in addition to a broader awareness of the “natural” processes of bodily reception.

Yet by presenting decorum as the core principle of his poetics, Puttenham necessarily engages with decorum's long and complicated history in classical rhetorical theory and ethics. He both appropriates and pushes against that history in order to construct a theory of somatic reception. In order to fully understand Puttenham's engagement with the term and his revisions to it, it makes sense to begin with Puttenham's classical sources: with Aristotle's *Ethics*, in which he lays out the concept of *phronesis*, or active virtue, a concept which Cicero (who transforms it into decorum), the Italian humanists, and finally Puttenham variously gesture toward, reconceptualize, and appropriate.

Aristotle's *phronesis* is usually translated as practical wisdom or practical intellect, and encompasses virtues as various as good speaking, proper

deportment, and the ability to make good decisions in public life.<sup>101</sup> At one point he sums it up as “a reasoned and true capacity to act with regard to human goods.”<sup>102</sup> *Phronesis* is a kind of judgment about social action, “a truth-attaining rational quality, concerned with action in relation to things that are good and bad for human beings,” Aristotle explains.<sup>103</sup> Or, as Victoria Kahn puts it, prudence is “that faculty of judgment which provides an internal rule of decorum or authoritative standard of interpretation, one that is not logical but pragmatic, and that enables us to act appropriately within a social and political context.”<sup>104</sup> Thus prudence consists in the set of skills required for social mastery – the same set of skills a courtier must cultivate to attain success at court. Moreover, it is a judging skill, a rational faculty, which must be cultivated to be achieved. And *phronesis* uniquely links the interior world of ethical self-regulation with public life: when successfully employed, it functions as a kind of bridge between the private and the social.

If Aristotle endorses *phronesis* as a virtue which allows one to deploy ethical conduct in political life, Cicero translates the concept to *decorum* and focuses on the relationships between morality and prudence. For Cicero, a prudent or decorous person adjusts his or her behavior – whether political action or rhetorical display – to a particular set of circumstances; decorum, then, consists in attending to the shifting conditions of audience response and, more

<sup>101</sup> We have some evidence that Puttenham read Aristotle (see Whigham and Rebhorn, “Introduction”); what is more, these concepts were so pervasive in early modern rhetorical theory he would have had some familiarity with them.

<sup>102</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics* 1140b6, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1908).

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics* VI.v.4, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Loeb, 1956), 337.

<sup>104</sup> Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1985), 9.

broadly, of social life.<sup>105</sup> Like Aristotle's practical wisdom, Cicero's decorum is a skill of social performance; Cicero often discusses the concept in terms of rhetoric. Yet Cicero links it explicitly with moral goodness. In a famous formulation, Cicero ties decorum to ethical behavior: "*quod decet, honestum est et, quod honestum est, decet*" ("For what is proper is morally right, and what is morally right is proper").<sup>106</sup> By establishing close tie between morality and propriety, Cicero suggests that decorum, while it is a highly contingent virtue on the one hand (its content changing depending on the conditions in which the decorous subject finds himself), is also an absolute value: it is linked inextricably with moral goodness.

In the early Italian Renaissance, Italian theorists took an interest in Cicero's attention to decorum, translating it from a political and rhetorical context to a literary one. The transition from rhetorical propriety to the literary variety was in some sense a natural one. Like an orator, a writer must pitch his or her composition stylistically so its form is appropriate to its subject matter; in addition, the audience's social rank and biases must be attended to, in poetry as in oratory, in order to successfully persuade that audience.<sup>107</sup> Along with these simple translations of rhetorical principles to the sphere of the literary, the fifteenth century witnessed a broader shift in conceiving literary experience, most

<sup>105</sup> Kahn explains Cicero's interest in the rhetorical dimensions of decorum thus: "Just as the orator is guided by decorum in adapting his speech to the exigencies of the moment, so the prudent man enacts decorum in the moral sphere by responding to the particular and contingent in human affairs" (Kahn, *Rhetoric*, 35).

<sup>106</sup> Cicero, *De Officiis* I.94, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge: Loeb, 1913).

<sup>107</sup> As Antonio Minturno explains in his 1564 *Ars Poetica*: "Decorum consists in dramatic suitability of speech and behavior to character" (Minturno cited in Patterson, *Hermogenes and the Renaissance*, 14).

importantly the experience of reading. For Italian thinkers of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the act of reading became tied to prudence in two ways: first, reading could encourage prudence by educating the reader about proper conduct; but second and more remarkably, reading became itself an exercise in active virtue, in prudence, as it demanded the reader's imaginative engagement with a text.<sup>108</sup> *Phronesis*, pragmatic judgment, was now conceived as a necessary part of the reading process: it allowed the reader to make sense of a text not as a kind of passive hearer or viewer but as an ethically discerning subject, approaching the text critically. Cicero's explicit linkage between morality and propriety was newly conceived in terms of the reading process: the reader's active engagement with a text both required moral judgment and helped develop that judging capacity. By moving a concept formerly tied to rhetoric and political life into the realm of literary experience, the Italian humanists suggested that the very act of reading was fraught with political and ethical significance.

Puttenham is indebted to this notion of readerly prudence and literary discernment for his ideas about the receptive capacities of the subject. Yet in keeping with his commitment to situating the poet in terms of the natural relationships which structure the world, Puttenham transforms humanist ideas about readerly judgment and prudent discernment into a set of unconscious processes which take place physiologically and over which an auditor has no control. Puttenham's notion of decorum adds to the traditional account an overarching notion of bodily conformity, of physiological harmony, which

<sup>108</sup> Kahn, *Rhetoric*, 40.

foregrounds the body of the audience member as an important site of critical attention. At the same time, it preserves important features of the classical account: for Puttenham, as for his classical predecessors, decorum is at once precept and skill, blurring distinctions between transcendent virtue and the kind of active social engagement which allows one to achieve success in public life.

Such social engagement becomes an important part of Puttenham's theory of propriety. For Puttenham, the poet possesses particular skills which allow him to contribute uniquely to political life. In Book I, Puttenham refers to "universal knowledge," the special province of the poet. Though he does not mention it by name, Puttenham is discussing decorum here too, long before his more explicit treatment of the concept in Book III. Tracing the history of the poet's public role, Puttenham describes how ancient Roman poets had a two-edged reputation: the common notion that "poesy was a delicate art, and the poets themselves cunning prince-pleasers," was balanced by the fact that "they were thought for their universal knowledge to be very sufficient men for the greatest charges in their commonwealths," skilled both in giving advice and in regulating their own behavior.<sup>109</sup> The paradox of the poet was his equal engagement in the immediate world of the court and his access to "universal knowledge," the realm of the true and widely applicable. This "universal knowledge," helpful in making political decisions, would have been familiar to Aristotle and Cicero as *phronesis*. But Puttenham – picking up on the links between *phronesis* and literary activity forged by the Italian humanists – suggests that this knowledge is the unique

<sup>109</sup> Puttenham, *Art*, 107-8.

province of the poet. A facility with the harmonious relationships with nature is, as Puttenham establishes throughout his treatise, crucial for poetic persuasion. But the poet, having mastered that technique, can also apply it to public life. For Puttenham, *phronesis* becomes a kind of mastery of the realm of the somatic and the natural, mastery which can be as instructive in the “real” world of political action as it is in the constructed world of the literary. Indeed, these divisions are continually undermined in the treatise, as Puttenham strives to establish poetry as existing within the parameters of the natural.

The moral dimension of poetic making may not seem important to Puttenham; compared to his classical predecessors, not to mention other early modern theorists like Sidney, Puttenham has little to say about the morally instructive power of poetry. Yet as Annabel Patterson astutely notes, “at no time during the Renaissance are aesthetics discussed in isolation from ethics, and any valid theory of imagination always carries with it the implicit context of moral action.”<sup>110</sup> Indeed, Puttenham gestures toward an ethical position in his discussion of decorum. If the poet possesses a kind of “universal knowledge,” he has, perhaps, a responsibility to use that knowledge in the political world. More significantly, the endorsement Puttenham gives here of decorous and proportionate action suggests that nature itself should be regarded by the poet not only as the means to an end – persuasion of the audience – but also as a kind of morally directing force, steering the poet toward the good. The many examples

<sup>110</sup> Patterson, *Hermogenes and the Renaissance*, 41.

he cites of indecorous behavior carry the force of a moral rebuke: such actions are not simply inappropriate in a particular situation, but they are fundamentally wrong, an affront to nature's laws. Similarly, the *phronesis* which the poet uniquely possesses seems to suggest goodness as well as expediency. If Puttenham never goes as far as Cicero does in linking propriety and morality, he nevertheless hints at the relationship, suggesting a principle governing poetic making that goes beyond mere efficacy. Thus Puttenham counters the criticism of poets as mere entertainers by citing their unique ability to deploy practical wisdom in a political context. And he extends the notion of the natural, earlier restricted to the relationship between poet and hearer, to encompass political decision-making. Joining the classical conception of *phronesis* as knowledge about being and acting in the world with a nuanced notion of the singularity of poetic knowledge, Puttenham manages to defend the poet against charges of irrelevance or frivolity.

The discussion of decorum functions as the climax and summation of Puttenham's treatise because ties together the many concerns of the text in a single, compact term. For Puttenham, decorum consists in an ability to make good judgments, which in turn which allows one to recognize proper behavior and by doing so, to achieve social and political success. Bridging the gap between the two registers of decorum, the contingent and the universal, entails constructing a conceptual link between art and nature; it suggests that even epideictic poetry or occasional verse, whose value might seem to rest on the exigencies of the moment, can in fact be classed in terms of the nature's universal

harmonies. The index of proportion lies within the receptive subject – the judging power of the body, a power Puttenham considers to be “natural,” is capable of determining propriety.

The three areas of Puttenham’s thought upon which this chapter has focused come together in the final pages of the *Art*. The intimate relationship between poet and hearer demands attention to proportion and harmony, the principles which equally inform behavior at court and political decision-making. In order to be successful, the poet must test his own literary choices against a larger context of natural decorum or propriety. No matter the scale or the particular context of creative endeavor, natural relationships should, Puttenham argues, govern that endeavor. Proportion and harmony are not simply rhetorical expedients, but also ethical principles to be followed in all aspects of public life.

When, at the end of the treatise, Puttenham discusses the poet’s responsibility to nature, he sets two notions of the natural in opposition: on the one hand, the natural world which already exists and surrounds us; and on the other hand, the constructions of the poet, which are equally, if differently, natural in the sense that they are in harmony with our cognitive and sensory capacities. The poet, then, should not strive to imitate nature, nor simply inculcate his audience with virtuous ideas, but instead should create an alternative space for poetic creation and reception, a space characterized by harmonious proportion and situated within the parameters of nature’s rules. By arguing for an aesthetics of formal proportion, Puttenham offers a provocative alternative to early modern debates about the distinctions between nature and art – an alternative which

establishes both the poet's moral legitimacy and his power in the social world. The power of the poet, the *Art's* conclusion asserts, lies not in the use of any particular poetic content or device, but rather in poetic form itself.

I have tried to establish that Puttenham is a poet of reception, concerned above all with the ways in which the poetic encounter works, and striving always to endorse a vision of the poet as a manipulator of the social world who is, at the same time, firmly entrenched in the natural. Viewing Puttenham through the lens of early modern physiology and the dynamics of rhetorical performance opens his work up to new questions about the relationship between subjectivity and the realm of art. While Puttenham's treatise is focused on devising strategies of poetic persuasion, manipulation, and appeal, Sidney's *Astrophil & Stella* is devoted to exploring the ways in which physiological experience can be linked to self-knowing. If Puttenham sees aesthetic experience as a natural exercise of body and mind, disposed as they are to proportion and harmony, Sidney considers *aesthesis* to be the supreme act of a subject engaged in a project of self-knowing. As we shall see, the receptive body which lies at the heart of Puttenham's theory of reception is, in Sidney's sonnet-cycle, the site of a complex project of introspection and self-knowing.

## Chapter III

### Introspection and Self-Evaluation in *Astrophil & Stella*

#### Introduction

From the very beginning of *Astrophil & Stella*, from the moment, in Sonnet 1, when Astrophil's Muse pronounces her famous command – “Look in your heart, and write” – introspection provides the sonnet-cycle with its narrative drive and its affective power. As Astrophil's project of lyric persuasion develops, we see that the task of wooing Stella is linked inextricably with his own capacity to understand himself, an understanding which derives from a careful observation of his own soul. For Sidney, Astrophil is an exemplary figure of aesthetic reception, and Astrophil's emergent self-awareness, predicated as it is upon perceptual experience, suggests powerfully the transformative possibilities of art. Through Astrophil, Sidney attends to a set of questions about selfhood which became freshly urgent at the close of the sixteenth century: what does it mean to know oneself? How is perceptual experience linked to self-knowing, and what are the limits of self-knowledge?

To be sure, *Astrophil & Stella* is not a work of philosophy and does not address these issues systematically or comprehensively. Yet it does, I suggest, make important claims about mental experience during a period of intense debate

about the nature of perception, a period when Aristotle's model of mental experience came under new scrutiny. In 1641, 60 years after *Astrophil & Stella* was written, Descartes published his *Meditations*, making available a new vocabulary for conceptualizing the self, and helping to reorient early modern beliefs about how thinking and feeling worked. That the middle of the seventeenth century saw fundamental revisions to earlier accounts of subjectivity – a historical moment Bruce R. Smith characterizes as a “crisis of consciousness” – is well established.<sup>111</sup> Yet I wish to demonstrate that the historical boundaries of that crisis have been too narrowly defined, and that *Astrophil & Stella*, though written in 1581, in fact made a number of crucial refinements to a late sixteenth-century orthodoxy about the order and functions of the self. Sidney's depiction of Astrophil as a subject defined by his own introspection, whose inward looking is a form of self-analysis, suggests Descartes' *cogito*: Astrophil's existence is affirmed, and indeed constituted, by his own self-directed thought.

While looking inside oneself lies at the heart of *Astrophil & Stella's* depiction of subjectivity, in the 1580s the introspection was a concept still in development and yet unnamed. When early modern philosophers working in the tradition of Aristotle described the process of looking inward, they imagined a basically perceptual act: the mind's eye viewing universal forms held as images in one's soul. For Aristotle, sensing and thinking were tied together inextricably, and image-perception was a crucial aspect of cognition. “The soul never thinks without an image,” proclaims Aristotle in his *De Anima*, a famous formulation

<sup>111</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *The Key of Green* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 127.

which was adopted with some modifications by early modern metaphysicians.<sup>112</sup>

This mental kind of image-perception was different from the ordinary visual type, yet it was aligned with vision by analogy: “To the thinking soul,” Aristotle explains, “images serve as if they were contents of perception.”<sup>113</sup> Unlike ordinary perceptual objects, these mental images are universal forms; abstracted from the contingencies of context, they offer a subject a glimpse of absolute truth. Mental vision, then, is crucial for thought, but its unique power lies in its ability to access the realm of ideas – not to provide the observer with a tool for critical self-reflection.

Yet for Astrophil inward looking is not merely a mode of observation, nor a search for universal truths, but instead a kind of critical engagement with the source and nature of his erotic desire and, more broadly, an attempt to analyze his own consciousness. While the term introspection was not invented until the 1650s, after Cartesian investigations of the soul had established that thought possesses a constitutive power, the seeds of the concept and of the principles undergirding it were planted decades earlier.<sup>114</sup> *Astrophil & Stella* experiments with a mode of self-understanding on the cusp of its emergence. By depicting introspection as the province of the detached, self-aware subject who subjects his sensations to scrutiny, and by considering it to be a psychological process which necessarily entails a distinction between perceiving and thinking, Sidney hints at a

<sup>112</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* III.6, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>113</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* III.6.

<sup>114</sup> “introspection,” n<sup>1-3</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

model of subjectivity defined by a division between sensation and cognition.

What is more, Sidney's model links the project of introspection with the province of art, tying together aesthetic reception and self-understanding and suggesting that art itself offers the subject an array of introspective possibilities. If image-perception holds the key to self-understanding, then art itself plays a crucial role in structuring the perceiver's inner life.

For Sidney, image-perception offers three intertwined powers, which together define and organize *Astrophil & Stella*. First, image-perception is the impetus for poetic creation; only after an image strikes the poet's mind – as the Muse's imperative implies – can creative work proceed. Second, image-perception possesses a singular rhetoric, a power of persuasion which does not require rational consideration on the part of its audience. The register of the visual is thus the register of the plea, the exhortation, and the appeal. Just as the poet is affected by image of Stella, the reader, and indeed Stella herself, are vulnerable to the suasive power of the poet's images. While Stella's subjectivity is mentioned hardly at all over the course of the sonnet-sequence, in her responses to Astrophil we can glimpse a mode of receptivity which is sensitive to, if not necessarily constituted by, beauty in its constructed forms. Finally and most broadly, looking makes self-awareness possible: introspection is the key to a mode of detached, critical self-knowing which allows Astrophil not only to present himself to Stella in a rhetorically effective way, but also to begin to grasp the contours of his own selfhood, to view his affective engagements as objects of reflection and regard.

All three of these powers of image-perception are important to the progress of the sonnet-cycle, which is a project of persuasion and rhetorical self-presentation even as it is an experiment in self-knowing. But it is this last power of looking, the power of self-constitution attainable through introspection, in which I am most interested. Sidney follows Aristotelian doctrine in considering the image to be the unit by all thinking is made possible. But he troubles that account by setting personal truth against philosophical truth, thus questioning orthodoxy from inside it. If, as Forrest Robinson observes, one of Sidney's most important innovations was to expand the sphere of the image to encompass the verbal picture,<sup>115</sup> Sidney invested that verbal image with an extraordinary power. For Sidney, image-perception makes possible a new kind of subjectivity – not merely the inward-looking gaze described by Aristotle, but a radically individualistic subjectivity capable of looking critically even at itself.

### ***Energia and Sidney's Defense of Poesy***

Pinning down exactly how much direct access Sidney had to Aristotle's texts, though controversial, is of less consequence than the fact that a cultural preoccupation with Aristotelian philosophy unquestionably influenced Sidney.<sup>116</sup> Sidney did work on a translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* – probably never finished – and likely was exposed to classical psychology both in school and during his

<sup>115</sup> Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known : Sidney's Apology In Its Philosophical Tradition* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1972), 136.

<sup>116</sup> For more on Sidney's familiarity with Aristotle, see Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known* ; Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier-Poet* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1991); and Neil L. Rudenstine, *Sidney's Poetic Development* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1967).

adult life.<sup>117</sup> And Aristotle provided Sidney with a hugely important set of ideas about perception, cognition, and self-knowing – an orthodoxy which at once circumscribed Sidney’s thinking about perception and invited him to push up against its limits. A fuller discussion of Aristotle’s theory of the soul and the medieval and early modern variants of faculty psychology which developed out of it exceeds the scope of this paper; for now, it is helpful to focus on a few aspects of Aristotelian cognitive theory against which Sidney positioned himself in *Astrophil & Stella*.

Aristotle describes the *psuche*, the soul or mind, as a remarkably flexible power which exists in a state of openness or passivity in the face of the objects of its perception: "The mind is potentially the objects of its thought, but that it is not any of them in a realized form until it is actually thinking; it is potentially those objects in the same way that a writing tablet on which nothing is actually written is potentially something written upon."<sup>118</sup> This description of the mind as *tabula rasa*, lying dormant until faced with an overpowering impression, provided a vivid image of passivity. At the same time, the mind was imagined to possess a passive power of transformation, since the process of perception entailed integration and assimilation. As Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle’s most influential interpreter, wrote, "whatever is received is received in the mode of the receiver": objects perceived by the mind are of necessity at the same time transformed the mind’s nature.

<sup>117</sup> Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney*, 84.

<sup>118</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, III.4.

These two apparently paradoxical conceptions of the mind – as a passive *tabula rasa* and as an active force capable of transforming its objects – offered early modern philosophers dueling conceptions of the relationship between subjective experience and the material world.<sup>119</sup> This tension underlies early modern thinking about the nature of perception, which becomes fundamentally a question of control: to what degree does the soul construct, rather than merely acquiesce to, the sense-impressions it receives? Ian Maclean sums up the problem: “if both the object received is transformed by the receiver and is received by him without transformation a strange combination of transformative activity and passivity is in question.”<sup>120</sup> According to this view, the soul manages to be active and passive at the same time, and the subject at once in thrall to sensation and bound to transform its perceptual objects. The slippage between the soul’s active and passive capacities, then, suggests model of subjectivity in which the mind is continually negotiating its own power.

If the mind’s capacity for perceptual control was disputed, so too was its ability to reflect upon itself. Knowledge in general was imagined to be accessible only by perception or by a mental process analogous to perception: knowledge, that is, could be attained only by “attuning the soul’s gaze,”<sup>121</sup> turning the receptive capacity of the soul, conceived of in visual terms, outward to the world. That kind of vision allowed for a glimpse of truth: it directed the soul toward the

<sup>119</sup> See Ian Maclean, “Language In the Mind,” in *Philosophy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Constance Blackwell and Sachiko Kusukawa (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999), 296-321.

<sup>120</sup> Maclean, “Language in the Mind,” 313.

<sup>121</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 154.

eternal images of the Good. Turning inward likewise allowed one a glimpse of eternal truths, as long as those truths were reflected upon the soul; but, since such looking operated on the register of the abstract and the absolute, it could not provide much information about private, idiosyncratic affective experience.

Thus investigating oneself was a challenge, in part because objective knowledge of one's own existence was considered impossible to obtain. Instead, for some early modern thinkers, knowledge of oneself was merely "existential," an intuition of one's own existence grasped by analogy, predicated upon the mind's evident ability to perceive objects external to itself.<sup>122</sup> Such a conception of reflexive thought could result in some dizzying abstractions, as Joseph Scaliger suggests: "The mind knows about itself in two ways. First, it is known by itself and knows that it knows itself and is known by itself. Second, it knows both itself and that it has the power of knowing, by which reflection it does not disjoin itself as it were, but rather turns itself into twins."<sup>123</sup> The mind, then, is capable of an awareness of its own perceptual capacities and, through that awareness, can come to an awareness of its own existence. According to this model, the mind cannot be its own object apart from its power to know: the mind can only grasp itself through its own processes. According to such a theory, the subject, unable to step outside of his own perceptions, is not able to view himself, or gain a coherent sense of his own mental processes, from any objective distance.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Maclean, "Language in the Mind," 311.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph Scaliger cited in Maclean, "Language in the Mind," 317.

<sup>124</sup> In his poem *Nosce Teipsum*, published in 1599 (a few years after *Astrophil & Stella*), John Davies describes the problem of self-directed vision thus:

In *Astrophil & Stella*, Sidney makes important modifications to the accounts of mental experience which he inherited. In two areas, the sonnet sequence offers a provocative alternative to the Aristotelian status quo: first, in Sidney's interest in developing a model of critical self-reflection, which hints at a distinction between mental and somatic experience not accounted for by the classical focus on image-perception; and second, in his attempt to re-imagine the mental image not as an intimation of a universal truth but, instead, as radically idiosyncratic, private, and incommunicable, yet possessing a power of persuasion superior to externally-imposed systems of knowledge-organization. The groundwork for these modifications is laid in Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, which contains a passage to which critics have long turned in order to locate the principles informing Sidney's sonnet-writing. The passage reiterates a commonplace of Aristotelian image-theory, the importance of vision in locating moral truth. Lamenting the fallen state of English love-poetry, Sidney describes proper poetic conception as an elusive ideal:

Other sort of poetry almost have we none, but that lyrical  
kind of songs and sonnets: which, Lord, if He gave us so  
good minds, how well it might be employed, and with how  
heavenly fruit, both private and public, in singing the praises  
of the immortal beauty: the immortal goodness of that God  
who giveth us hands to write and wits to conceive; of which  
we might well want words, but never matter; of which we

“...for the mind can backward cast  
Upon her selfe, her understanding light ;  
But she is so corrupt, and so defac't,  
As her owne image doth her selfe affright.”  
Despite this difficulty, Davies' aim is similar to Sidney's:  
“My selfe am center of my circling thought,  
Only my selfe I studie, learne, and know.”

could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have  
new-budding occasions.<sup>125</sup>

In keeping with a conventional model of knowledge-seeking, Sidney suggests that poets should look outward in order to find the truths located in the natural world – truths which function as signs of a higher spiritual truth which, while inaccessible to the senses, can yet be intimated by perceptual engagement. Looking provides access to knowledge even as it enables a form of divine praise. Suggesting the bounty of Eden in its abundance and proximity, the idealized setting in which Sidney imagines perceptual work and poetic production to take place remains, like Eden, an inaccessible paradise. Yet while the poet might be well provided-for by the bounty of the world around him, the challenge lies in transforming that bounty into poetry that is not only artful but true – to use the “new-budding occasions” which God offers in order to craft works of art.

Moving from poetic matter to poetic style in the next sentence of the *Defence*, Sidney treats the image as the principle at the center of a creative value-system. If looking outward at God’s creative bounty gives the poet a wealth of poetic matter, then looking inward – that is, examining one’s own affective experience – can provide a stylistic guide likewise based in nature. One’s inner life, that is, offers a glimpse of the truth of human experience, a truth whose conveyance is crucial to persuasion. Yet Sidney argues that contemporary poets ignore the suggestive power of that truth, devoting too much time instead to studying what Astrophil calls “inventions fine”:

<sup>125</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, “The Defence of Poetry,” in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 246.

But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of irresistible love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love: so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers' writings – and so caught up certain swelling phrases which hang together, like a man once told my father that the wind was at north-west and by south, because he would be sure to name winds enough – than that in truth they feel those passions, which easily (as I think) may be bewrayed by that same forcibleness or *energia* (as the Greeks call it) of the writer.<sup>126</sup>

Instead of deriving their matter and style from natural truths, which, unmediated by art, are always present in the world, poets too often use the writing of others as a source for their love-lyric. It is a crucial misstep not only because in doing so these poets disrupt the proper chain of divine inspiration, but also because, in closing themselves off from affective experience and engagement with the world around them, they cannot write with the force of authentic experience. Instead, they use rhetorical flourishes – “swelling phrases which hang together” – to mask the emotional void at the center of their writing. *Energia*, a term which sums up the proper relationship between poetic matter and poetic reception, does important work here: it suggests a rhetorical strategy which, by foregrounding the verbal image, appeals to a reader's or hearer's most basic cognitive predilections; and it underscores the fact that visuality lies at the heart of Sidney's aesthetic system.

In a single passage in the *Defence*, then, Sidney treats both outer and inner vision: he describes, first, the process of looking outward which he deems necessary for successful poetic production and, second, the appeal to the mind's eye which crucial for a poem's affective power. Yet responding to *energia* is fundamentally different from participating in the observation of the created world.

<sup>126</sup> Sidney, “Defence,” 246.

For Sidney, unlike many of his contemporaries, the affective and cognitive processes which occur within a subject differ from other types of perceptions in their resistance to description, their status outside of language.

The term *energia* derives from Aristotle, but even in its original Greek it had a range of meanings, and for that reason it has a long history of disputed translation. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Sidney's most likely source for the term, Aristotle uses *energia* to describe the persuasive force of the visual imaginary:

We must now explain the meaning of "[bringing something] before the eyes," and what must be done to produce this. I mean that things are set before the eyes by words that signify actuality [ἐνεργούντα]. ... "Thee, like a sacred animal ranging at will" expresses actuality, and in "Thereupon the Greeks shooting forward with their feet" the word "shooting" contains both actuality and metaphor."<sup>127</sup>

While the passage only offers explanations by example, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that the power of a verbal image derives from its vividness, its concreteness, its basis in the sensible rather than the abstract – that is, its *energia* or "actuality." Elsewhere in Aristotle, this "actuality" could suggest the transformation of matter from mere potentiality to finished object, the formation of a table out of wood, for example.<sup>128</sup> Modern scholars of Aristotle have translated *energia* as a range of terms: as "passion,"<sup>129</sup> "affective experience,"<sup>130</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* III.3.xi.2, trans. J.H. Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 405.

<sup>128</sup> Istvan Bodnar, "Aristotle's Natural Philosophy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.  
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/aristotle-natphil/>>.

<sup>129</sup> Rudenstine, *Sidney's Poetic Development*.

<sup>130</sup> Joseph Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect". *PMLA* 120:1 (2005), 33-48.

“internal activity,”<sup>131</sup> and “achieved presence.”<sup>132</sup> Tracing the term back through centuries of translation in search of its earliest sense, Jean Beaufret emphasizes the *energia*’s connection to fulfilled potential: in ancient Greek, he writes, the concept of *energia* governed “the secret relation of the statue to the marble, but also of the grain to the plant or of the earth to the harvests that it bears.”<sup>133</sup>

Further complicating matters, the term *energia* was so frequently confused with the Greek word “*enargia*,” or “visuality,” even during Aristotle’s lifetime, that the distinctions between the two terms and concepts were blurred even in Aristotle. This confusion of terms necessarily produced a conceptual slippage along with it; *energia*’s sense of activity, production, and fulfillment was tied together with *enargia*’s suggestion of visual immediacy, so that the boundaries between the two sets of concepts were blurred.

Yet I would like to suggest that the slippage was a productive one for Sidney, a conceptual bleeding together which serves Sidney’s purposes perfectly. By joining vitality and visuality, *energia* in the *Defence* expresses the instantaneous, non-rational persuasive force of a verbal image. It also carries with it a suggestion of immediacy and lucidity of a poetic image: an explanatory, persuasive power encapsulated in language. As such, it helps Sidney to theorize audience response. If the language of the poetic image finds its fulfillment in the reader’s imaginative engagement, then the reader’s experience of poetry is

<sup>131</sup> George A. Blair, *Energeia and Entelecheia: "Act" in Aristotle* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1992)

<sup>132</sup> Jean Beaufret, *Dialogue With Heidegger: Greek Philosophy*, trans. Mark Sinclair (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>133</sup> Beaufret, *Dialogue*, 99.

constructed by the predilections of the imagination. Moreover, the concept ties together rhetoric and affective experience by suggesting that a poet should seek to construct a forcible image by drawing on his own experience; if a poet fails to persuade the audience, it is not for lack of knowledge but rather for lack of feeling. The audience which such a model implies is one for whom considered engagement is less powerful than the immediacy of a poetic image. The concept presupposes a subject whose perceptual capacities are open to *energia*'s particular power.

Thus Sidney does not only evaluate the power of the image to persuade, revisiting a common concern of early modern poets and rhetoricians. He also argues that image-perception can structure a subject's inner life by furnishing the imagination with material for desire, reflection, and self-definition. As the passage from the *Defence* suggests, the interior world of the heart and the material world of perceptible objects are both regarded as sites which can be "read" by a kind of somatic sensory engagement. And in *Astrophil & Stella*, the kind of mental "looking" to which the Muse refers introduces us to this expanded notion of the image: we are advised from the very opening of the sequence that introspection entails a process analogous to perception. If the *Defense* suggests that Nature is the source of invention, *Astrophil & Stella* suggests that the image is the first source of self-constitution, a kind of building-block of subjectivity.

In the sonnets, that is, the image is the unit of all cognitive activity and affective experience. And the persuasive force of *energia*, the energy underlying the verbal image which is capable of fostering an imaginative communion

between writer and reader, is crucial to Astrophil's aim: cultivating a sophisticated critical subjectivity by which he can persuade Stella of his love. Yet language often fails to convey what Astrophil can see with his mind's eye when looking into his heart. In tracing Astrophil's introspective process, I will turn first to Sonnets 1 and 5, which foreground self-examination as the key to poetic and erotic success; then to Sonnets 15 and 16, which interrogate the possibilities of a poetics based upon Stella's image, which lies outside language and can only be expressed in a sonnet's fissures and gaps. Finally, I will discuss Sonnets 44, 45, and 94 – poems which examine the mechanisms of rhetorical persuasion and the limits of introspection, and which propose a new mode of subjectivity predicated on an ability to look critically at one's own soul.

### **The Sonnets**

The early sonnets of the sequence set Astrophil's own affective experience against the established precepts of conventional love-poetry, early modern ideals of virtuous spiritual conduct inherited from Plato and Aristotle, and the process of poetic emulation. Astrophil exists not apart from the material world but as a full participant in it, and as a self-aware subject he is always-already persuaded, seduced, pulled in by the image. It is not possible for Astrophil to take a stance regarding his own experience – or even to be fully aware of that experience – without the productive engagements of his senses. Astrophil privileges the private self, and the vital, secret, idiosyncratic processes of image-perception,

over the precepts of logic or systematized knowledge-seeking. As the subject of his own inquiry, Astrophil holds the most important truths within himself.

By divorcing Astrophil from conventional systems of interpretation and behavior, the sonnets make two powerful suggestions: first, that Astrophil's experiences resist the strictures of language and ideology – they are incommunicable and incommensurable, and leave Astrophil with the challenge of constructing a persuasive work of art which stems from an experience of sensory ravishment which cannot easily be encapsulated in verse. Moreover, this challenge requires Astrophil to experiment with self-presentation, cultivating an attitude of self-regard which is neither wholly dispassionate – since his ardor is a key element in his persuasive cause – nor naively solipsistic. That is, the project of wooing Stella becomes at the same time a project of subjective self-construction, and Astrophil's success is closely bound up with his ability to look inward in proper and productive ways.

Sonnet 1 articulates the challenge of this poetic self-fashioning by couching it in terms of creative advice, recalling Sidney's own poetic precepts in the *Defence*. In the first lines of Sonnet 1, Astrophil establishes the paradox of his project: his goal is to transform his love into verse, but he is hampered by the stylistic demands of poetic endeavor. In an effort to persuade his beloved of his sincerity, he has experimented with various methods of self-presentation:

“Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show, / That she (dear she) might take some pleasure from my pain / ...I sought fit words to paint the blackest face

of woe, / Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain.”<sup>134</sup> Yet all of that study has yielded little poetry: “But words came halting forth, wanting invention’s stay” – “stay” suggesting at once sojourn and support – and poetic success still eludes him. Writer’s block dissolves only after Astrophil heeds the advice of his Muse, who berates him and offers a single imperative: “Fool . . . look in thy heart, and write.”

The opening sonnet modifies a conventional sonnet-trope in order to place Astrophil at the center of his own creative project. Recalling Sidney’s complaints about contemporary love-poetry in the *Defense*, the Muse encourages Astrophil to set aside stylistic emulation in favor of the straightforward conveyance of deeply-felt emotion. Astrophil should reject as reference-points conventional systems for organizing emotion into language (“inventions fine,” for example), and focus instead on articulating the deeply personal truth located in his heart, perched on the tenuous boundary-line which separates imaginative and somatic experience. Yet the command poses a challenge: it requires Astrophil to establish a stance with regard to his own experience which is at once committed to accuracy and rhetorically strategic. To see clearly, Astrophil must look inside in a way that is not, as early modern cognitive theory had it, merely intuitive, using deductive reasoning to establish the validity of his own perceptions. Such a method would render him incapable of taking a critical attitude toward his own mental experiences. Instead, in order to understand and communicate his feelings and desires, Astrophil must view himself as a perceptual object accessible, like all

<sup>134</sup> This and all text from *Astrophil & Stella* taken from *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

other perceptual objects, to his own consciousness. He must divide his subjectivity into two parts and, viewing his affective experiences from the outside, become a masterful reader of himself. Only by looking inward in this detached manner is Astrophil able to forge a likeness of himself in language – a likeness which is pitched strategically to win Stella.

While Sonnet 1 hints at the existence of a hidden private truth and provides Astrophil with guidance in approaching his persuasive project, Sonnet 5 places Astrophil more explicitly at the center of his own poesis. It proposes a rejection of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition and demonstrates the gap between the sensation-based value system governing Astrophil's self-understanding and the established discourses of love-poetry into which he inserts himself. Because the sonnet approaches the question of visual engagement in terms of the pursuit of happiness, it is able to address Astrophil's aesthetic engagement as part of a conventional tension between his intellect and his will. The sonnet manages to make a case for the supremacy of erotic desire and its attendant drive, artistic production, over Neoplatonic truisms.

The sonnet inserts itself into two linked debates central to humanist philosophy, particularly the work of the Italian Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino. The first debate concerned the nature of happiness. Was it better, medieval philosophers wondered, to obey the dictates of the intellect (*intellectus*) or those of the will (*voluntas*) when seeking happiness? The two views were imagined as separate and irreconcilable, the intellect requiring God's assistance, in the form of his "lumen gloriae" ("glorious light"), the will autonomous, capable of seeking

happiness by its own powers.<sup>135</sup> The second controversy considered the nature of the material world. Was it a means to immaterial truths, or a barrier to them? Plotinus, whose thought served as the basis of Neoplatonism, rejected the material world, claiming it covered, "like a cloak," the invisible, spiritual truths of God.<sup>136</sup> Yet the earthly could also be a means for accessing the divine, whose truths it mirrored. Sidney's Sonnet 5 considers both of these debates in terms of Astrophil's erotic aspirations.

The sonnet opens with a phrase, "It is most true," which becomes a recurring refrain: "It is most true, that eyes are formed to serve / The inward light," the sonnet begins, rehearsing a commonplace of a Neoplatonic value-system which favored spiritual over somatic apprehension. The position Sidney summarizes at the opening and throughout the sonnet is that of intellectual, rather than will-based, decision-making. Following the intellect's directives seems to be a sure route to happiness. The "inward light" here, which replaces the material world as the proper domain of the eyes, recalls the "lumen gloriae" necessary for such an intellectual approach to happiness. As the sonnet proceeds, more maxims appear, given the force of imperatives: "the heavenly part / Ought to be king"; "...on earth we are but pilgrims made, / And should in soul up to our country move." All of these statements propose that the material world, and the

<sup>135</sup> Tamara Albertini, "Intellect and Will in Marsilio Ficino: Two Correlatives of a Renaissance Concept of the Mind," in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 205. J. H. Muirhead summarizes the Neoplatonic view of *lumen gloriae* thus: "Though the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord yet is its light a derivative one" (Muirhead, "The Cambridge Platonists." *Mind* 36:142 [April 1927], 127.)

<sup>136</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* III.6.11, cited in Segius Kodera, "Narcissus, Divine Gazes and Bloody Mirrors: The Concept of Matter in Ficino," in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 287.

desire of the will to pursue earthly beauty, should be replaced by a total giving-over of the self to an intellectual pursuit of happiness in line with Neoplatonic orthodoxy.

Yet the sonnet's speaker does not share this view, and not only because the sonnet's closing line, "True, and yet true, that I must Stella love," undoes all of the preceding statements by asserting the supremacy of the will. The conventional discourse of rational consideration runs through the sonnet. Those who ignore the urgings of the intellect and, instead, are ruled by their will, are on a path leading not to happiness, but unhappiness, the early lines of the sonnet suggest: such people are "Rebels to nature" who "strive for their own smart." Yet the sonnet also contains an alternative discourse of aesthetic engagement through which Sidney endorses the creative power of the will. If "Cupid's dart / An image is, which for ourselves we carve," then lovers are continually engaged in image-making, just as the poet is; image creation, and visual perception (since worshipping the created image entails engaging with it visually), are central tasks of the lover.

By articulating at once a Neoplatonic position, according to which image-worship is problematic and God's light should aid the intellect in seeking spiritual truth, and giving equal weight to a counter-position which favors image-making as a creative act, the sonnet endorses the particular power of the will, but at the same time performs an intellectual feat of self-contradiction which establishes the speaker as an observer of his own experience. The speaker is at once conscious of the Neoplatonic dictates which surround him and of his own erotic desire, which

he feels powerless to resist. The result is not a mere endorsement of the will over the intellect, but instead a performance of a type of intellectual engagement through which Astrophil reflects upon and ultimately accepts the will's desires. Introspection in this sonnet produces a comprehensive self-awareness, which encompasses both sides of the debate, including the radical, productive engagements of the soul in image-making.

If Sonnets 1 and 5 suggest the importance of self-examination for poetic success, Sonnets 15 and 16 put that advice into practice, depicting the ineffectual methods of unsuccessful poets and positing particular modes of looking as productive alternatives to a range of poetic conventions. Sonnets 15 and 16 both reiterate the *Defense's* insistence upon authentic emotional communication instead of on rhetorical flourishes, and they reinforce Sidney's argument that poetic study is no match for true feeling when seeking poetic success. Yet they complicate that imperative by underscoring the difficulty of conveying in language perceptual experiences which are deeply private and which depend on experience to be understood. That is, Astrophil is faced with the challenge of communicating the affective power of Stella's image, which by his own admission must be felt to be appreciated. He is caught in a paradox: if, as Sidney suggests, good poetry must emerge from the depths of authentic emotion, not from stylistic emulation, how can such emotion be communicated in the very medium which it resists? How can language be employed to depict an inherently incommunicable image, which can be understood only experientially?

Recalling the writer's block of Sonnet 1, Sonnet 15 tackles the question of poetic imitation: the aim of poetry should not be stylistic mimesis, a form of imitation that requires looking outward. Instead, the inward gaze should regulate poetic activity; moreover, the image, not language, should be the primary principle governing Astrophil's poetics. Pushing against the limits of language in order to endorse the primacy of the image, which exists outside of language and cannot be contained in it, the sonnet urges the aspiring poet to take a stance, not against poetic conventions, but instead in terms of his own experience – and look inward in order to access the image which can inspire a kind of radical poetic composition divorced from shifting poetic fashions.

Sonnet 15 begins by depicting other poets' quests for poetic matter in the all of the obvious places:

You that do search for everie purling spring,  
Which from the ribs of old Parnassus flowes,  
And everie floure, not sweet perhaps, which growes  
Near thereabout, into your Poesie wring;  
You that do Dictionarie's methode bring  
Into your rimes, running in ratling rowes...

The sonnet names two possible sources for poetic inspiration: Parnassus, home of the muses is the conventional wellspring of art, and the “springs” which, “purling” or babbling, offer pleasing sounds which suggest the rhythms of poetry.<sup>137</sup> In addition to these models, Sidney mentions the dictionary – a text of language-organization which, at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was associated with translation, not definition, as the English-only dictionary had not yet been

<sup>137</sup> “Purling,” adj. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.) The *OED* gives Sidney's as the first recorded use of the term.

invented.<sup>138</sup> The dictionary thus suggests a foreign poetics, a poetics of imitation. Mimicking a dictionary's alphabetical arrangement, moreover, would lead a poet to write exaggerated lines of alliteration, an example of which the sonnet itself goes on to perform ("running in rattling rows"). By cautioning against both a slavish imitation of classical models and excessive displays of technique, these opening lines suggest that the poet cannot merely look outward in order to find poetic matter and form. Even Petrarchan imitation, to which Sidney is himself indebted, falls under the poem's scorn. Poets who employ such methods expose themselves as frauds: they "bewray a want of inward touch: / And sure at length stol'n goods do come to light." Thus the aesthetic value-system endorsed by the poem is distinctly personal, deriving from the poet's experience, not imitation or study.

When the speaker advises, in the poem's final line, that a poet seeking fame should "Stella behold, and then begin to endite," he offers a concise imperative which echoes the Muse's opening command, but which is yet more explicit in pointing up the primacy of the image. First, he is suggesting that viewing Stella can, by giving the poet occasion to look at once outward (at Stella's image in the world) and inward (at Stella's image inside his heart), acquaint the poet with himself: it shifts the locus of inspiration from the world of poetic imitation and convention to the poet's own image-reflecting soul. By doing so, he proposes a poetics defined by an engagement with the image rather

<sup>138</sup> The first dictionary in the modern sense to appear in England was published 1538: a Latin-English dictionary printed by Thomas Elyot. English-only dictionaries did not become popular until the early seventeenth century.

than the word. And by recommending a process of introspection which focuses on the writer's own experience of beauty, he is emphasizing the power of the radically personal, private image which must be experienced in order to be understood. Ending the poem with an injunction to write suggests the failure of language to contain the powerful, idiosyncratic experience of image-perception. The final line's caesura, after "behold," marks the moment of sensory ravishment, a moment which, itself resistant to language, can be represented only by a linguistic void. After all, writing about such an experience cannot be a process of pure depiction; the perception of Stella's image provides one not with poetic matter (as classical imitation might), but with poetic momentum. Introspection, then, is the key to successful poetic endeavor.

In urging the poet to place himself at the center of his own poesis, the sonnet suggests that looking inward, beholding one's own affective experience, is the key to successful composition. And Sonnet 16, like the sonnet which precedes it, addresses an epistemological problem – how can one know what love is? – by again referring to a kind of affective knowledge which lies outside the strictures of language. If Sonnet 15 suggests that the beholding body is the site of knowledge and creative energy, the sonnet which follows it complicates that suggestion by looking critically at affective experience. The sonnet proceeds according to the premise that knowledge of love must derive from experience, and that such knowledge is accessible only to a subject aware of his own inner state. Yet it also reminds us that the modes of looking inward prescribed by Sonnet 15 are not perfect, and that even a self-aware subject can mistake false love for the

real thing. The sonnet's most significant contribution to the cycle's theory of subjectivity is its ambivalence about the mechanisms of judgment. The subject is at once circumscribed by the limits of affective experience and urged to move beyond them – a paradox depicted in Astrophil's evolving notion of love.

The sonnet opens by describing Astrophil's "nature," which predisposes him to an attraction to beauty:

In nature apt to like, when I did see,  
Beauties, which were of many carets fine,  
My boiling sprites did thither soon incline,  
And, love, I thought that I was full of thee.

The first lines make it clear that the body's predilections and the linked somatic experiences of looking and feeling are prior to knowledge. Moreover, the knowledge which those experiences make possible evades analysis, establishing its legitimacy purely on the basis of its affective power. When Astrophil observes his physical reactions – his "boiling sprites," attracted to beauty as if of their own accord – and draws conclusions from them, he is embarking upon an introspective project which aims to find a correspondence between love as an abstraction and love as it is manifested in the body.

These bodily reactions function as the measure of truth, the basis of all judgment, equally in the first half of the poem as after the turn at line 10 – "But while I thus with this young lion played / Mine eyes (shall I say cursed or blessed?) beheld / Stella." While Astrophil's attraction to Stella is more intense than the kind of love described in the poem's first lines, it is likewise contained within the limits of the body, and persuasive by virtue of its power over the somatic. Yet if, as Sonnet 15 suggests, bodily experience should function as the

measure of knowledge, then judgment, tied as it is to the body's shifting engagements, cannot operate independently of that experience. The competition between will and intellect depicted in Sonnet 5 seems to be resolved: the will, erotic desire, steers even Astrophil's judgment.

Yet just as in Sonnet 5, the state of things in Sonnet 16 is more complex than it first appears. The tension between Astrophil's "thought" and his body's responses suggests an attitude of introspection which looks inward to find, not absolute truths, but instead the kind of truths which emerge out of somatic experience. Still, Astrophil's judgment operates apart from those truths. It performs the work of critical self-examination by stepping outside of the self, which is affected, as a passive object, by a beautiful image. And the moment of beholding Stella is a moment of self-knowledge, in which judgment's gaze must be recalibrated and the workings of the body must be re-evaluated. The sonnet's final couplet – "I now have learned love right, and learned even so / As who by being poisoned doth poison know" – endorses a mode of experiential learning, but it also reminds us that beholding Stella offers Astrophil the opportunity for a kind of dispassionate examination of his suffering body, an examination which requires a critical inward gaze.

Yet we as readers are denied access to the power of Stella's image; just as it cannot be grasped intellectually, it cannot be depicted in language. Sonnet 15's notion that Stella's name can inspire creative success is here turned around, as Stella's name itself possesses a kind of power which forecloses any other description. And the experience of beholding Stella in Sonnet 16 as in Sonnet 15

is depicted structurally and typographically in spaces, absences, and punctuation marks which together emphasize the status of such experience outside of language. In lines 11 and 12, Stella's textual appearance is deferred, separated from the act of looking by a line break. When she does appear, we are faced – as in Sonnet 15's final-line caesura – with a failure of language: her name is followed by a colon, then by a phrase which suggests that all further description is superfluous. “Now that she is named, need more be said?” The subject of the poem is not really Stella's image, then, which functions only as a shadow toward which the poem continually gestures. Instead, the poem records a process of self-examination marked by continual revision, whose conclusions, if not its cause, can be expressed in sonnet form.

Though Sonnet 16 establishes the fact that Stella's image cannot be contained in speech or writing, Sonnet 44, “My words, I know, do well set forth my mind,” opens by articulating a fantasy of correspondence between feeling, image, and word – a correspondence we sense to be impossible based upon earlier sonnets, which show us that Stella's beauty cannot be encapsulated in language:

My words, I know, do well set forth my mind;  
My mind bemoans his sense of inward smart;  
Such smart may pity claim of any heart;  
Her heart (sweet heart) is of no tiger's kind...

By Astrophil's logic, his affective experience, perfectly translated into language, cannot but win over any reader, even Stella, who, after all, possesses a heart not fierce but “sweet.” These opening lines, which list a set of mechanisms for effective persuasion, together construct a brittle rhetorical framework of cause and effect which rests solely on a fantasy of emotional legibility. The logic which

underlies that fantasy is based in a theory of rhetoric which views audience response as a factor under a speaker's control, but it also represents an attempt by Astrophil to pin down the mechanisms of depiction and perception which make communication possible. The fact that Stella does not respond in the manner Astrophil predicts – in fact, “more I cry, less grace she doth impart” – requires him to replace the first fantasy with a second: that of the transformative power of the receptive subject. This second fantasy is part of Astrophil's ongoing investigation of the nature of subjective experience, Stella's as well as his own. Though he cannot look inward to examine Stella's affective state, he attempts to fit her behavior into the mold of an established theory of active perceptual engagement – an attempt which, as in the case of the sonnet-cycle's many other experiments in orthodoxy, ultimately breaks down.

As Astrophil seeks an explanation for Stella's cool response, which contradicts the precepts of rhetorical theory, he describes his search as a quest which has ended in truth: “I much do guess, yet find no truth save this” – a truth which, like the “truths” of Sonnet 5, is in line with a kind of Neoplatonic orthodoxy, yet which contradicts lived experience. That truth is a version of Aquinas' maxim, “whatever is received is received in the mode of the receiver,” here applied to Stella's soul in the most literal and lyrical way:

That when the breath of my complaints doth touch  
Those dainty doors unto the court of bliss  
The heavenly nature of that place is such  
That once come there, the sobs of mine annoys  
Are metamorphosed straight to tunes of joys.

According to this theory, set forth in vivid imagery, Stella transforms the plaintive sounds of Astrophil's pleading into beautiful music by the power of her own beauty. (The sexual innuendo of the passage offers an alternative set of meanings which run alongside its philosophical investments.) This theory replaces the fantasy of a perfect correspondence between feeling and word with a fantasy of a perfect correspondence between a person's disposition and the objects of their perception. What is more, this second fantasy imagines a mode of extra-linguistic communication – in “breath,” “sobs,” and “tunes” – which renders rhetorical precepts irrelevant.

The sonnet, then, dismisses a conventional rhetorical system which would consider linguistic appeal to culminate, unproblematically, in effective persuasion. It replaces that system with an alternative mode of communication which gives Stella, the receptive subject, control over the material of perception. By breaking the rhetorical compact between speaker and audience, this new mode threatens to undermine the logic undergirding the sonnet-cycle. Yet by offering as an alternative the fantasy of an extra-linguistic rhetoric, it places Astrophil's body, rather than his words, at the center of his persuasive project, eliminating the need for a translation from feeling to language, and investing Stella's receptive capacity with a new power.

That power becomes important in the next sonnet, “Stella oft sees the very face of woe,” which again tackles the puzzle of Stella's unsympathetic response. That sonnet, like Sonnet 44, is concerned with Astrophil's role in the rhetorical compact, the ways in which his persuasive strategies need to be modified in the

face of Stella's reactions. That concern becomes an investigation of the mechanisms of perception – not, as in Sonnet 44, in terms of Stella's unconscious or unintentional powers of receptive transformation, but instead as they relate to different forms of aesthetic presentation. Sonnet 45 contrasts image and narrative, theorizing a fundamental difference between their effects, and, by doing so, complicates its earlier endorsement of the visual image over linguistic description.

The sonnet opens by describing Astrophil's appearance, calculated to elicit Stella's pity: "Stella oft sees the very face of woe / Painted in my beclouded stormy face." Despite his being a veritable emblem of sadness, "painted," or artfully presented, in order to display sadness to best effect, Stella feels no compassion for him. Her compassion is reserved for fictional lovers, whose story affects her deeply:

Yet hearing late a fable, which did show  
Of lovers never known a grievous case,  
Pity thereof gat in her breast such place  
That, from that sea derived, tears' spring did flow.

Stella's pity is tapped not when she sees Astrophil, an image of sadness, but, instead, when she is confronted aurally by a fictional narrative. There are two differences between Astrophil's self-presentation and the fable, then: first, Astrophil is not fictional, and his desire is circumscribed by the social world; and second, Astrophil presents himself as a visual image rather than as verbal image – woe is "painted" on his face, but not elaborated in language. The problem of Astrophil's ineffective self-presentation, then, comes down to a problem of genre.

Part of the fable's power lies in the fact that, as fiction, it offers Stella's imagination freedom to elaborate upon and embellish it. Like all "imaged things," the fable appeals to her capacity for imaginative ravishment in a way Astrophil cannot: her imagination can range "with free scope" through its scenarios, whereas her encounters with Astrophil hamper her capacity for pity by their proximity and specificity. The scenario emphasizes the affective power of Stella's imagination over her somatic responses, but it also implies reception is a kind of skill to be mastered. The problem is not, then, simply Astrophil's ineffectual appeals; it is also Stella's receptive bias, her inability to "skill to pity" Astrophil. The kinds of productive and receptive mastery the sonnet addresses are anything but "natural," at least in the sense meant by Sonnet 16 ("In nature apt to like..."): Astrophil's performances and Stella's reactions are, instead, functions of preference and imaginative application. By suggesting that the rhetorical compact should be revised in order to take Stella's receptive biases into account, the sonnet offers a critical and complex account of the art of persuasion.

Yet persuasion is but one of *Astrophil & Stella's* two primary concerns. Sonnet 45 also treats the other: Astrophil's self-constitution, the ways in which he understands himself and his own affective experiences. This second concern is, like the first, linked to genre in this sonnet. Astrophil seems to fail in his persuasion not simply because he is too real, too close, to allow Stella's imagination its "free scope." The problem lies also in his self-presentation as an image rather than as a story or "fable." His face may be "painted" with signs of his sadness, but his visage lacks the explanatory force and the affective trajectory

of narrative. Astrophil surmises that the sonnets themselves – each a discrete scene of sadness or yearning, depicting just a slice of Astrophil’s experience, bounded within the strictures of sonnet form – will fail to persuade unless taken collectively as a single “tale,” the term suggesting narrative coherence (in addition to a sexual double-entendre). When Astrophil declares, in the final line, “I am not I,” he is using the concise proclamation of self-negation at once to fictionalize himself (thus appealing to the first part of Stella’s genre bias) and to draw attention away from his singularity (taking care of the second part). The line’s visual dynamic – the “I”’s standing alone, the second separated from the “tale of me” by a colon – stress Astrophil’s shift from the lived register to that of the literary. The visually enigmatic “I,” a kind of cipher which resists elaboration, is replaced at the line’s end by the “tale of me,” which offers the promise of a story emerging from the sonnets as a whole.

Toward the end of the cycle, the reflexive mode of self-examination endorsed in the early sonnets begins to break down, as Sidney gestures toward a more complex account of selfhood. Sonnet 94, “Grief, find the words,” depicts a failure of introspection – a failure which nevertheless performs important self-evaluative work. Grief has taken possession of Astrophil’s soul, clouding his inner vision and rendering him unable to describe his state. Astrophil appeals to Grief to translate his experience into language,

for thou hast made my brain  
So dark with misty vapours, which arise  
From out thy heavy mould, that in bent eyes  
Can scarce discern the shape of mine own pain.

The central injunction of the first sonnet, "look in thy heart, and write," is rendered impossible in the face of Grief's beclouding influence. Grief disrupts Astrophil's inner vision and thus the chain of events which, in earlier sonnets, Astrophil has identified as crucial for poetic success: introspection, evaluation, composition. Just as Stella's beauty overwhelms vision, leaving linguistic description to approximate the experience of beholding her image, so Astrophil's description of grief reminds us that the soul is likewise made up of incommensurable images which require a translation into language even as they resist that translation. Astrophil laments that his inward-looking eyes can "scarce discern the shape of mine own pain," imagining his pain to be an image lodged within his soul. The image-based model of the soul which Sidney inherited is clearly foregrounded here, but – as in many of the sonnets – that stated orthodoxy is undermined by the sonnet's performance of a more sophisticated account of selfhood.

The creative circuit linking "inbent eye" with composing brain is not the only aspect of Astrophil's inner life that is disrupted. His soul has no sense even of its own existence: "my poor soul, which now that sickness tries / Which even to sense, sense of itself denies." This incapacity to sense oneself recalls early modern debates about existential knowledge. In the absence of sensation, knowledge of one's own reality, according to some early modern accounts (like Scaliger's, mentioned above), should be impossible. Yet for Astrophil this is clearly not the case. The paradox of the sonnet lies in the fact that, despite claiming incapacity, Astrophil *can*, and does, write about his own experience

beautifully and vividly, and within the confines of the sonnet form. This is possible because a kind of meta-introspection is at work: Astrophil's self-perception is predicated on a process of observation so comprehensive that it can observe even his own inward eyes as they sweep across the contours of his soul. The simple imperative of the opening sonnet has evolved into a complex process of detached observation, one which demands a theory of subjectivity which can account for this extraordinary power of critical self-regard. That theory – an approach to existential knowledge which depends not on sense but on thought – lay just outside of Sidney's reach, his experiments in subjectivity in *Astrophil & Stella* gesture toward an objective view of the self, a distinction between mental processes and affective experience – features of the Cartesian model which was to emerge in the middle of the next century.

### **Later Theories of Mental Experience**

In a well-known passage from the 1641 *Meditations*, Descartes proposes the following thought experiment:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily

true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.<sup>139</sup>

Descartes' famous assertion of existential certainty revises earlier theories of cognitive self-awareness by replacing intuition with observation as the primary means of knowing oneself. Instead of endorsing perceptual experience as the foundation of such knowledge, as his predecessors did, Descartes proposes that the basis of epistemological certainty lies in thinking, and that mental activity itself offers sufficient proof of the mind's existence: thoughts cannot come into being, after all, without a thinking subject. Moreover, because passions exist only in the body and are not experienced by the soul, Descartes imagined the mind to be the sole province of volition, or active cognition.<sup>140</sup> While Descartes' many revisions to the Aristotelian orthodoxy he inherited is a broad and complex issue, his fundamental innovation – his emphasis on thought as the key unit of self-reflexive mental observation – is one which Sidney, without access to the conceptual vocabulary Descartes invented, gestured toward several decades earlier.

Yet while Astrophil does distance himself from his own experiences in order to observe and strategically organize them, Descartes' sense of a radical disjunction between mind and body seems inapt for a work so devoted to exploring the rhetorical possibilities of affective experience. Instead, Sidney

<sup>139</sup> René Descartes, *Med. 2, AT 7:25*, cited in Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/descartes-epistemology/>>.

<sup>140</sup> Susan James, "Explaining the Passions: Passions, Desires, and the Explanation of Action," in *The Soft Underbelly of Reason*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (London: Routledge, 1998), 25.

endorses a theory of self-knowing in which perceptual experience is vital to the construction of subjectivity, but in which the subject can, at the same time, step outside of that experience to view it with a critical attitude. In his discussion of Descartes' theory, referred to in shorthand as the *cogito*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives a description of self-knowing with which Sidney would perhaps have agreed:

But there is a third meaning of the *cogito*, the only solid one: the act of doubting in which I put in question all possible objects of my experience. ... The certitude I have of myself is here a veritable perception: I grasp myself, not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself, but as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act. ... This [self-constituting] thought ... *feels* itself rather than *sees* itself...searches after clarity rather than possesses it, and ... creates truth rather than finds it.<sup>141</sup>

Merleau-Ponty proposes a theory of self-knowing in which a subject's perceptual engagement with the sensible world makes self-awareness possible; he imagines subjectivity to be contingent, fluid, and ever-evolving. Rather than positing the subject as a self-sufficient actor closed off from the sensible world, Merleau-Ponty regards the subject as a "thought in act," his or her subjectivity dependent upon an exchange with the outside world. Merleau-Ponty's subjectivity is, like Astrophil's, self-constituting – it "creates truth rather than finds it" – yet indebted to perception and enmeshed in its material surroundings.

<sup>141</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 22.

Merleau-Ponty's notion that subjectivity is determined by somatic experience, and that knowledge is not possible outside the constructed and contingent limits of one's physical engagement with the world, can illuminate aspects of Astrophil's character for which Sidney lacked a conceptual vocabulary. Astrophil's radical rejection of modes of knowledge other than those available to his senses leaves him in the very position of naïve perceptual engagement which Merleau-Ponty argues provides the only basis for true knowledge. Astrophil's subjectivity is constructed out of a series of somatic experiences – experiences which are not incidental to his self-understanding but in fact constitutive of it. Merleau-Ponty writes of the “thought in act,” the label he gives to a materially enmeshed, ever-changing subjectivity, as the key unit of subjectivity. Astrophil is conceived by Sidney similarly, as a kind of “thought in act” whose actuality stems from his somatic inherence in the world.

Like Astrophil, Merleau-Ponty is dissatisfied with empirical inquiry as a means of understanding the world. For Merleau-Ponty, empiricism is flawed because it assumes observation is a neutral activity, unadulterated by any human bias; it also assumes that perceptual experience can, under the proper conditions, allow us access to the “real” world without mediation. In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues, there is no absolute truth which can be understood apart from or outside of the somatic engagements of the subject. Moreover, he argues that consciousness is necessarily determined by a subject's bodily reality, since only by participating

physically in the world can we come to know it. In short, “the only foundation for knowledge is our concrete inherence in the world.”<sup>142</sup>

Summing up his project, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of perception in constructing our consciousness: “By these words, the ‘primacy of perception,’ we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us.”<sup>143</sup> In *Astrophil & Stella*, those moments of supreme constitution occur when Astrophil looks inside himself, an act of perception which is at the same time an act of self-examination and analysis. In calling for a new mode of self-understanding predicated on the dispassionate viewing of one’s own soul, Sidney is not only gesturing toward a dualistic model of consciousness, but rethinking the very processes of poetic creation and reception. Those revisions helped to shift the early modern conversation about selfhood away from an emphasis on passive experience and toward a model of active aesthetic engagement, a model which was to be contested and ultimately triumph in the decades following *Astrophil & Stella*.

<sup>142</sup> Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Macmillan, 1989), xv.

<sup>143</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy*, 25.

## Chapter IV

### Donne and the Limits of Interpretive Independence

#### Introduction

If cultivating a critical introspective mode is key to Astrophil's self-understanding, for Donne introspection offers unparalleled interpretive possibilities to the Christian subject. Critical engagement with one's own soul is, for Donne, the essence of Christian formation, and meditation – the devotional practice by which such engagement can be achieved – the highest form of prayer. Yet in his letters, sermons, and poems, Donne is continually troubled by an ambivalence regarding the soul's powers of self-examination. Is the soul, Donne wonders again and again, a legible, self-disclosing text, open and available for examination by its possessor? Or is it, rather, an interpretive challenge to be solved only by recourse to the institutional authority of the Church and, by extension, of the clergy? This tension, between private, independent contemplation and the powerful authority structures within which worship is circumscribed, is fundamentally a tension between two modes of spiritual exegesis, two ways of reading the soul: a tension which had long existed regarding textual interpretation but which Donne extends to the work of self-examination.

For Donne, I wish to suggest, the private, self-reflexive judgment of the soul achievable through meditation, on the one hand, and the reforming force of the injunctions of clergy and Church, on the other, are equally important arbiters of personal morality. Yet devising a spiritual practice by which an individual is accorded sufficient latitude for self-examination while ensuring adequate guidance from the Church requires Donne to revise established principles governing both meditation and rhetoric. In his discussions of meditation, in which he acknowledges the limitations of the visual register and the human imagination in a way medieval meditation-books do not, and in his sermons, designed to guide yet careful never to lull their audiences into passivity, Donne offers a tentative endorsement of the critical powers of the soul, and yet expresses, too, an abiding skepticism about the ability of the individual ever to achieve a reformation of the self, a throwing-off of sin.

The account of Donne this chapter seeks to establish, then, is that of a preacher troubled by the inscrutability of private experience and yet convinced of the unique salvific power of self-analysis; certain of the transformative potential of rhetoric, yet wary of its ability to delight a complacent auditory without effecting spiritual change. By drawing upon letters Donne wrote to his friend Henry Goodyer before his ordination, the poems known as *The Anniversaries*, and sermons given over the 16 years of his clerical career, I aim to show that Donne's belief in the supremacy of the self, however complicated by an awareness of its dangers, was part of an ongoing early modern conversation about the interpretive powers of the individual. Donne's contribution to that

conversation, I suggest, was to consider salvation to be an interpretive project embarked upon in the tension between private experience and priestly edict – a project analogous to and linked together with the challenge of Scriptural exegesis.

Donne's attitudes toward the various activities that might fall under the broad heading of spiritual practice – self-examination and private prayer, textual analysis, preaching and public worship – were informed by a meditative tradition with roots in medieval theology as well as by competing modes of Scriptural interpretation which vied for supremacy in the seventeenth-century Anglican church. Donne's ideas about introspection and self-scrutiny emerged out of a productive tension between a medieval emphasis on interpretive freedom and a more typically Protestant anxiety about correctly identifying the Word's truest and purest sense. Such tension made possible Donne's view of the imagination as a fertile source of spiritual intuition which, nevertheless, must be controlled by priestly intervention and perfected by an effort of will.

Broadly speaking, two modes of Scriptural interpretation were available to Donne in the first decades of the seventeenth century. These two approaches were at odds with one another, and yet they contributed equally to Donne's attitude toward interpretation – and indeed equally to an Anglican practice still under construction. An older view of readerly conduct, with its origins in medieval theories of exegesis, held that a reader of Scripture should strive to remain open to inspiration and attentive to the possibilities of imaginative elaboration while reading. This model of readership called upon individuals to make imaginative leaps while reading, to draw connections across passages, and

to seek spiritual epiphanies from Scripture – tasks as central to the experience of reading as they were to the processes of prayer and meditation. The second mode, endorsed often by Protestants who, like Luther, considered the Biblical text to contain within it the unmediated essence and summation of God’s will, distrusted this older emphasis on imagination and intuition. Imaginative fantasies, these theologians argued, could obscure or even distort the message which was held perfectly within the text, fully available to the careful reader. Instead of endorsing the free play of a person’s imagination, this “Protestant” approach stressed the importance of reading properly and thus obtaining the truth of the text: an approach which drew a clear line of demarcation between correct and incorrect modes of reading and interpretive conclusions. While the ideal Protestant reader might have been encouraged to experience the text directly, such experience was shot through with a strand of anxiety. To a greater degree than their medieval predecessors, Protestant exegetes were worried about the dangers of Biblical misprision.<sup>144</sup>

Donne, continually feeling the pull of his early Catholicism against the Anglicanism of his clerical career, held these two modes of interpretation in tension. And that tension affected not merely his attitude toward Scriptural interpretation, but his views about self-knowing and devotion in all of their forms. Regarding his auditory and readers, Donne valued imaginative latitude and submission to preacherly authority in almost equal measure: and in his attempts

<sup>144</sup> This account, which goes against the grain of critical consensus about Catholic and Protestant exegetical practice, draws upon the incisive work of David R. Olson, who explores the tension between medieval and post-Reformation modes of exegesis in *The World on Paper* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994).

to find a middle way between the two modes of interpretation, Donne crafted a new interpretive *praxis* which developed out of his ambivalent view of interpretive freedom and the power of the individual mind to access God. Conscious of the value of private introspective work, Donne's sermons supply their listeners with the materials of meditation: images, analogies, and imaginative aids such as the ones found in meditation-books. At the same time, Donne departs from a tradition of rhetoric which sought to teach and delight, and rejects pleasure as a legitimate route to virtue. He offers instead a mode of preaching which favors the startling power of troubling and disruptive speech – speech which at once endorses the moral authority of the Church and urges its listeners to look inside themselves by applying a rigorous self-scrutiny. The friction between these two modes of self-interpretation, one based upon the hierarchical and communal, the other reliant upon the private judgment of the self, runs through Donne's letters, sermons, and poems. In his ambivalence about the source of self-understanding, Donne offers a tentative endorsement of the critical powers of the private self, while remaining attached to a faith in the superior moral guidance of an interpretive edifice.

Independent contemplation is, for Donne, the essence of Christian experience; yet to encourage his audiences to be adept readers of themselves, he must both perform good interpretation and somehow grant his listeners the means by which to arrive at such interpretations on their own. Yet while Donne considers his duty as a spiritual leader to be to encourage his auditory in a struggle for moral reform through self-communion – to put them, as he describes

it, into “colluctation” with themselves – aiding his listeners and readers requires the careful negotiation of the delicate materials of rhetoric. For Donne, persuading is not enough: he must also furnish his auditory with the imaginative material necessary for self-understanding. This task requires the invention of a new rhetoric, predicated upon challenge rather than instruction, and requiring of its hearers and readers a kind of imaginative work, not passive acquiescence, in response. Donne's Christian subject does not only accept verbal images, but constructs them independently at the preacher's prompting, taking on the creative work of the poet and becoming an author of his or her salvation.

Donne's attitudes toward subjectivity in general, and reception in particular, have long been a source of critical debate. In his study of metaphysical poetry, *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Martz argues that meditative manuals served as crucial influences for religious poets like Donne, Southwell, and Herbert; Martz reads Donne's Holy Sonnets and Anniversaries as a set of spiritual exercises whose rhetoric and imagery conform to the instructions given in medieval and early modern devotional manuals. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski likewise suggests that Donne's poems perform meditation, though she suggests that his most important sources were Protestant theories of prayer. Edward Taylor argues that Donne seeks to control his audience by a kind of transitive rhetorical work: “poet is poem is subject is reader,” he writes, referring to *The Anniversaries*; according to Taylor, Donne's ideal mode of reception entails a process of mirroring and imitation which links the realm of human endeavor with

the divine.<sup>145</sup> But Anita Gilman Sherman finds in Donne's poetry an anxiety about an incipient mode of skeptical inquiry, and locates in his work a desire to invent a mode of explication which would solve the problem of epistemological contingency.<sup>146</sup> Other critics have argued that Donne rejects judgment altogether as a poetic principle, and instead "enacts a process of discovery that necessitates the witty destruction of rational discrimination and control for the sake of emotional and intuitive apprehension of complex or mysterious subject matter."<sup>147</sup>

While drawing upon these important studies, I seek to revise and supplement them by attending to Donne's interest in the possibilities and pitfalls of interpretive autonomy. I want to argue that Donne's sense of the productive capacity of the imagination, and of the importance of images which derive not from a priestly edict but from one's own self-understanding, marks an important shift in conceptualizing receptive work. Unlike Spenser, Puttenham, or Sidney, all of whom located the responsibility for meaning-making in the poetic maker himself, Donne moves the locus of signifying control to the receptive subject. Donne, that is, imagines imaginative engagement to be an important first step on the path to independent contemplation, and places the seeking subject himself at the center of a new mode of interpretation. Yet even as he celebrates the interpretive power of the receptive subject, Donne is anxious to circumscribe the analytical powers of the mind within the controlling strictures of the Church. This

<sup>145</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in The Anniversaries* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 135.

<sup>146</sup> Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Arthur Marotti (summing up the claims of critics Joan Webber and Donald Friedman), *Critical Essays on John Donne* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), 5.

anxiety recurs over the course of his life, culminating at the end of his clerical career in a tentative endorsement of the independent Christian subject as spiritual exegete.

### **The Letters**

We can glimpse Donne's early ideas about introspection in two letters written to his friend Henry Goodyer, both composed several years before Donne's ordination. In the letters, Donne offers an approach to self-examination which stresses the private and idiosyncratic nature of moral knowledge, and lays out a number of principles which later become central to his devotional theory as a preacher. By foregrounding the active, introspective capacity of the soul, Donne suggests that moral decision-making is, at its heart, a process of self-diagnosis, and that the careful and deliberate reading of oneself can mitigate spiritual pain. At the same time, he is haunted by the question which will plague him throughout his career: in the absence of any certainty about God's will, should moral authority properly derive from self-examination, or should it rather be imposed upon the self by external mandate?

In the earlier of the two letters I consider, dated October 9, 1607, Donne explains that self-reflection is the quintessential activity of the human soul, the capacity that separates humans from animals:

For as the greatest advantage which man's soul is thought to have beyond others is that which they call *actum reflexum* and *iteratum* (for beasts do the same things we do, but yet they do not consider nor remember the circumstances and inducements, and by what power and faculty it is that they do them), so of those they call *actum*

*reflexum* the noblest is that which reflects upon the soul itself, and considers and meditates it.<sup>148</sup>

In citing the actus reflexus, Donne is likely thinking of a passage from Thomas Aquinas' *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate (On Truth)*, in which Aquinas addresses the question, "Is there Free Choice in Brutes?" In answer, Aquinas explains that while animals have "a sort of conditional freedom," because they have the power to make decisions, their choices are nevertheless circumscribed by the dictates of their passions, and thus they are not truly free. Human beings, Aquinas argues, have a power of reflexive judgment, of a kind of meta-discernment by which actions themselves can come under scrutiny:

Now judgment is in the power of the one judging in so far as he can judge about his own judgment; for we can pass judgment upon the things which are in our power. But to judge about one's own judgment belongs only to reason, which reflects upon its own act and knows the relationships of the things about which it judges and of those by which it judges. Hence the whole root of freedom is located in reason.<sup>149</sup>

St. Bonaventure, a contemporary of Aquinas, considered the actus reflexus to be the soul's power over itself, a kind of first mover whose status within the soul is analogous to God's within the universe. And for Bonaventure as for Aquinas, reflective action entails the exercise of free will:

Free will is the power that commands the will and reason, rules them and moves them both; its first act is not discernment or willing but a reflective action [*actus*]

<sup>148</sup> John Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P.M. Oliver (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 27.

<sup>149</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, Vol. 3, trans. R.W. Schmidt (Indianapolis: Hackett 1954), 142. Emphasis mine.

*reflexus*] upon them both, moving and ruling them, that is, the action expressed when we say we wish to discern and we wish to will. This act precedes reason and will, and its power corresponds to the Father, for his is the most powerful of acts and it is primary, not being moved, but moving.<sup>150</sup>

As Aquinas did, Bonaventure considers the *actus reflexus* to be the overarching power of the soul to view and judge its own actions, a higher-order kind of action. While Bonaventure is more explicit than Aquinas in identifying this reflective action as reason's first cause, both thinkers see it as the primary motive force that makes all other actions of the soul possible.

I dwell upon the origins of the *actus reflexus* because it becomes a key concept for Donne: it is never mentioned again by name, but it underlies all of his ideas about the practice and purposes of meditation and the relationship between the worldly and spiritual aspects of the self. When Donne uses the term in 1607, he uses the English cognate, "to reflect," in order to broaden the medieval sense and to add to Aquinas and Bonaventure's emphasis on power and command an element of meditation and self-scrutiny: an element which his medieval predecessors seem not to have considered. For Donne, that is, the reflective action of the soul is not merely a higher-order power of decision-making, but instead a process by which the soul "considers and meditates" and comes to understand its own actions. Donne agrees with Aquinas and Bonaventure in his sense that to consider the functions of the self from a position of relative

<sup>150</sup> St. Bonaventure, II Sent., dist. 25, p1, a1, q2. Cited in Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, (Washington: Catholic University), 331.

detachment is the quintessence of rational activity. Yet the *actus reflexus* for Donne is perhaps better understood as a capacity of self-regulation, a mode of looking inward that grants the subject the opportunity for reform, self-mastery, and critical reflection. Donne's ideal subject, that is, is capable of a kind of deliberate self-examination which operates not merely by directing the soul but by looking critically upon it.

In another letter to Goodyer, from March 1608, Donne offers a view of introspection which is more radical still. While acknowledging the importance of grace in the salvific project, Donne at the same time argues for the radical indeterminacy of mental self-examination. The result is at once a defense of the soul's power to look critically upon itself, and an acknowledgement that the circular process of self-examination can sometimes offer no solution to the problem of human frailty. Donne begins by tying body, mind, and soul together in a symbiotic trinity:

If I knew that I were ill, I were well, for we consist of three parts,  
a soul, and body and mind, which I call those thoughts and  
affections and passions which neither soul nor body hath alone  
but have been begotten by their communication, as music results  
out of our breath and a cornet.

The integrated nature of the self means that a bodily sickness will result in mental impairment, and the soul's health is directly connected to the health of the body and mind. As a result, self-knowledge – a kind of information attainable only when the soul is functioning well – is difficult to obtain when any part of the self is diseased. At the same time, however, Donne proposes that spiritual

improvement is impossible except by the very self-knowledge which sickness renders inaccessible:

Of our souls' sicknesses, which are sins, the knowledge is to acknowledge, and that is her physic... of the disease of the mind there is no criterion, no canon, no rule. For our own taste and apprehension and interpretation should be the judge, and that is the disease itself.<sup>151</sup>

Donne is here suggesting that the processes of self-diagnosis and -interpretation are at once crucial and deeply private: while there is a set of God-granted principles by which one may identify sin, there is no such standard by which to evaluate one's own success in judgment or discernment. For such activities "there is no criterion, no canon, no rule." Donne stops short of granting the introspective subject the power to cure his own sin, a power which always belongs only to God. Still, by emphasizing the importance of a mode of self-knowing predicated upon introspection and self-analysis, Donne is moving closer to what would later become his ideal of carefully mediated independent exegesis.

What is more, the problem of imperfect self-understanding that Donne identifies in his letters becomes a rhetorical challenge in his preaching. If self-knowledge can provide a subject with the surest cure for sin, and if that self-knowledge resists categorization, then the role of a religious authority must be not to provide a solution to sin, but rather to serve as a guide to the project of introspection. Donne's vision of the private self as closed-off and unpredictable means that he is continually aware of the fact that he cannot effect a change in his auditory without their consent: the secret work of self-understanding must

<sup>151</sup> Donne, *Letters*, 31.

proceed in his absence, and his preaching, however persuasive, is restricted to the realm of his auditory's senses, facilitating yet not performing the processes of introspection. Key to such introspection was meditative work, and Donne draws upon and revises long-established principles of meditation, transforming them into tools for self-understanding.

### **The Meditative Tradition**

Donne's remarks on self-knowledge in his letters call for a kind of introspection that can reform the soul and foster a productive mode of self-communion. But given the tension between Donne's emphasis on the power of judgment and discernment, on the one hand, and his sense that those activities must necessarily take place outside the strictures of precept or ideology, on the other, how can introspection be described to, modeled for, or encouraged in a spiritually imperfect auditory? The answer lies in a preacherly rhetoric which strives not merely to perform or depict devotion but to urge the auditory to be independent spiritual subjects. The preacher for Donne is at once a meditative guide, encouraging his listeners in private devotion, and a powerful reforming force, the living, speaking embodiment of the strictures of the Church.

Donne's views on self-knowing owe a great debt to medieval ideas about meditation, a spiritual practice which became increasingly popular in England among Catholics and Protestants alike during Donne's lifetime. For Donne, meditation is the highest form of private devotional practice, the model upon which all forms of independent devotion should be based. What is more,

meditation is a kind of interpretive practice, granting its practitioners not only access to the affective power of the Christian story but also to a self-understanding. Image-perception plays a crucial role in meditation: through intense mental focus on imagined scenes, a lay subject can, ideally, access God directly, without the aid of a priest. Yet such practice requires a careful regulation of the senses and a defensive attitude toward those sensible and mental encroachments which can derail even the most well-intentioned meditator. Meditation entails, that is, striking the proper balance between imaginative freedom and mental self-control, between an openness to inspiration and a rejection of the material world. For Donne, investigating the mechanisms of self-regulation required by meditation means investigating, too, the role of critical receptive capacity itself, in a hierarchy of mental processes in which sensation and image-perception also play important roles. Because meditation requires that a person's authority over his or her own wandering mind and undisciplined body be continually reasserted, meditation offers for Donne an account of the possibilities as well as the dangers of private devotion.

In the closing decades of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth, medieval meditation books, often newly available in English, were popular among Anglicans as well as Catholics, and provided provocative models for private devotion.<sup>152</sup> Diverse and varied though the discourse of meditation was, many of these books presented a meditative ideal predicated upon

<sup>152</sup>For a comprehensive treatment of these issues, see Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale, 1973).

imaginative flexibility and independence. Meditation, according to the medieval tradition, depends upon deliberate and sequential thought, usually focused upon scenes from Christ's life. After a period of intense mental focus and visualization, such contemplation should, such books instructed, culminate in a throwing-off of worldly authority in favor of a direct and intimate connection with God. Bernard of Clairveaux, the twelfth-century Franciscan theologian, explains this goal in one of his sermons; according to Bernard, meditation ideally

confidence thyself to the Word, to attach thyself with constancy to Him, to address Him with confidence, and consult Him upon all subjects...<sup>153</sup>

Bernard's language of private and direct communion with God suggests a rejection of human authority – including the authority of the priest. To arrive at that moment of supreme, unmediated access with God, however, one must begin by calling to mind a particular image and dwelling on that image with focus, attention, and mental direction; these characteristics distinguish meditation from ordinary thought. As Francois de Sales puts it in a 1616 treatise:

Every meditation is a thought, but every thought is not meditation; for we have thoughtes, on which our mynd is caried without aime or pretention at all... Meditation: in which our mynd, not as a flie, by simple muysing...but as a sacred Bee flies amongst the flowres of holy mysteries, to extract from them the honie of Divine.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>153</sup>St. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 83.3. In *Life and Words of St Bernard*, trans. Samuel J Eales (London, 1889), iv.508. Cited in Martz, "John Donne in Meditation," in *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed Helen Gardiner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 52.

<sup>154</sup> Francois de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), cited in Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, 15.

To “fly amongst the flowers of holy mysteries” requires not only self-discipline, but a kind of imaginative work which takes advantage of the affective power of visual scenes, even if those scenes reside only in the mind and have no correlate in the sensible world. Such an activity is analogous to sensation, but is different in a few important ways. For one thing, it depends on mental vision and, correspondingly, a shutting-out of all of the distractions of the ordinary material world. As St. Ignatius puts it, “in contemplation or meditation on visible matters, such as the contemplation of Christ our Lord, Who is visible, the composition will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing I wish to contemplate is found.”<sup>155</sup> The delicate negotiation of the material and the imagined encourages the meditator to effect a connection between the worldly and the spiritual which is analogous to Christ’s own. What is more, while the meditative scene may have a historical and geographic specificity, it is also open to the free play of the meditator’s imagination, a free play given more explicit emphasis in a seventeenth-century treatise by the Jesuit Luis de la Puente, translated into English in 1619:

If I am to thinke upon hell, I will imagine some place like an obscure, straight, and horrible dungeon full of fier, and the soules therin burning in the midst of those flames. And if I am to meditate the birth of Christ, I will forme the figure of some open place without shelter, and a childe wrapped in swadling cloutes, layed in a manger...<sup>156</sup>

<sup>155</sup> St. Ignatius, cited in Martz, 27.

<sup>156</sup> Luis de la Puente, *Meditations* I.23, cited in Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, 28.

The visualization and personalization mentioned in these meditation books requires a kind of metaphorical thinking, a willingness to seek commonalities and connections between seemingly disparate scenes.

The challenge of meditation, then, calls for a visual imaginary that is both powerful and flexible, and a creative mode of intuition which makes inferences and sought correspondences. De la Puente's treatise, and other meditation-books like it, sought to cultivate imaginative habits in their readers so that such examples would not have to be supplied. In their emphasis on the image as the unit of devotional work, such books promoted the notion that spiritual experience was private and idiosyncratic, and that, while meditators should follow a specific sequence of tasks when seeking the divine, they were encouraged furnish their path with images of their own devising in order to meet with the greatest success.

The meditation-books' emphasis on self-discipline works together with the endorsement of visuality in order to establish a meditative ideal: a mode of contemplation which is focused yet associative, directed yet open to the affective power of the image. Sensation can be an asset to such contemplation, but only if carefully managed. Perception is dangerous only when it is not tempered by the judging power of the soul. As Lorenzo Scupoli explains in a treatise on meditation: "Watch your senses carefully...instead of embracing objects for the sake of false pleasure, [may the senses] become accustomed to draw from the same objects great helps for the sanctification and perfection of the soul. When an agreeable object is presented to the senses, do not become absorbed in its

material elements, but let the understanding judge it.”<sup>157</sup> Just as image-perception, when well-regulated, is crucial to meditative practice, so ordinary sensation can serve as a spiritual aid. By imagining an ideal perceptual practice founded upon evaluation, Scupoli places the senses within the arsenal of tools available to the Christian subject seeking communion with God.

The principles of meditation laid out in medieval and early modern treatises alike stressed a set of linked processes – concentration, visualization, an imaginative progression from the sensible and worldly to the transcendent and divine. Yet Donne is concerned equally with the spiritual and psychological difficulties inherent in meditation in particular, and private devotion in general. For Donne the preacher, this concern manifests itself as an ambivalence about the locus of moral authority, and a reluctance to confer upon the lay subject the power to save him- or herself: a power which Donne nevertheless accepts as a central capacity of the soul. In medieval and seventeenth-century meditation-manuals, Donne finds a discourse of private devotion which emphasizes three capacities of the independent Christian: an ability to access God without the aid of a priest; a predilection for image-perception and visualization; and the skill to unite sensation with judgment in order to ensure that the material world serves as a spiritual aid. Donne adopts these principles, with important modifications, in his *Anniversaries* and his sermons. Effecting the transformation from image to personal truth, from perceptual object to spiritual aid, means, for Donne, balancing the directives of the will with imaginative freedom, and weighing

<sup>157</sup> Lorenzo Scupoli, *Scriptural Combat* (1589), cited in Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, 127..

priestly authority against individual experience. But when Donne is composing *The Anniversaries*, that program of directed self-mastery has yet to take shape. Instead, in the two poems written to commemorate Elizabeth Drury's death we can glimpse Donne just beginning to delineate the powers and capacities of the soul. At the same time, he shows himself to be deeply uncomfortable about the power of language to interfere with spiritual success, an anxiety which is at odds with the rhetorical goals governing all poetic endeavor.

### **The Anniversaries**

The two poems known as *The Anniversaries*, written between 1610 and 1612 to commemorate the death of fourteen-year-old Elizabeth Drury, represent an early attempt by Donne to unite the spheres of meditation and rhetoric, image and word, in the service of intensifying his audience's imaginative investment. The *Anniversaries* anticipate Donne's later views on meditation by suggesting that observation and image-perception are the core principles of meditative practice and virtuous emulation – activities which nevertheless depend on regulation by an external, authoritative moral force. As transitional works, positioned between the endorsement of meditative freedom articulated in Donne's early letters and the assertions of priestly authority made in the sermons, the two *Anniversaries* see meditation as an aesthetic project to be embarked upon with judicious observation.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>158</sup> The *Anniversaries* have long stymied their readers and, perhaps for that very reason, have been marshaled into the service of a range of critical agendas. Important treatments of the poems include Lewalski's *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton: Princeton UP,

The Anniversaries take an ambivalent view of interpretive autonomy, exploring the benefits and dangers of imaginative free play from three different angles. First, the Anniversaries consider sense-perception to be at once crucial to meditative practice and, at the same time, a problematic bar to an ideal of spiritual perception which transcends sensory engagement entirely. Second, the poems repeatedly juxtapose those areas of human inquiry governed by tradition or methodology - anatomy, astrology, alchemy – with the radically private means of judgment granted a receptive subject by meditation. This tension between mundane learning and spiritual knowledge is never resolved; itself confined to the realm of the sensible, the poem can only gesture toward such perfected aesthesis, but never grant it to its readers. Finally, by offering a dazzling series of images and metaphors, The Anniversaries enact continual self-revision and self-renewal, creating a narrative indeterminacy within which the reader is forced to judge, choose, and interpret independently.<sup>159</sup> All three of these strategies contribute to the Anniversaries' abiding discomfort with their own materiality.

The poems attempt to endorse spiritual contemplation, yet retain a canny

1973) and Martz's *Donne in Meditation: The Anniversaries* (New York: Haskell, 1970), which see the poems as evidence of Donne's Protestant and Catholic sympathies respectively; Edward Taylor's *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in The Anniversaries* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), which seeks to approach the poem in terms of its "intentional meaning" rather than its symbolic content; Richard Corthell's essay "'The Obscure Object of Desire: Donne's *Anniversaries* and the Cultural Production of Elizabeth Drury'" (in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur Marotti [New York: G. K. Hall, 1994]) takes a psychoanalytic and feminist approach to Elizabeth Drury as an object of desire; and, most recently, Anita Gilman Sherman's *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) suggests that Elizabeth serves as a cure for Donne's skeptical anxiety, representing a "definitive end to skepticism" by surpassing the contingency of sense-experience (57).

<sup>159</sup> I am influenced in my conception of Donne's indeterminacy in *The Anniversaries* by Lana Cable's notion of Milton's "affective indeterminacy," explained in her book *Carnal Rhetoric*. Cable argues that a continual succession of metaphors places Milton's reader in a continual state of uncertainty, which must be resolved by choosing; I suggest that Donne employs a similar mode of indeterminacy in order to force his reader into a self-propelled kind of meditative practice.

awareness of the uses of language and sensible imagery. By straddling the realms of rhetoric and inspiration, the poems hover between an endorsement of the critical powers of the meditative self and a reluctance to grant total interpretive freedom to the unregulated imagination.

The First Anniversary opens with a kind of philosophical salvo that proclaims immediately that the work is invested in exploring the powers of the private self. The poem begins with a rhetorical question, which sums up Donne's view of the tasks and duties of the soul:

(For who is sure he hath a soule, unlesse  
It see, and Judge, and follow worthinesse,  
And by Deedes praise it? He who doth not this,  
May lodge an In-mate soule, but tis not his.)<sup>160</sup>

This parenthetical digression, which interrupts a rhapsodic account of the transmigration of Elizabeth Drury's soul, is in fact a key assertion of the principles underlying Donne's view of the links between thinking self and sensing soul. Recalling Augustine's famous division of the soul into the functions of memory, understanding, and will, the emphasis in this passage on seeing, judging, and praising sums up the duties of the meditator, yet also calls our attention to the importance of self-reflection. These three signs of legitimate possession correspond with the three principles of self-diagnosis laid out in the 1608 letter – taste and apprehension and interpretation – and, like those principles, suggest that the transition from sensation to judgment is the quintessential act of a well-

<sup>160</sup> Donne, First Anniversary, l. 3-6. This and all subsequent passages from The Anniversaries from John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: David Campbell).

ordered, self-reflective soul. When the soul fails in these tasks, the soul becomes not the controller of bodily action but instead the body's tenant: it is then an "In-mate soul," an incidental aspect of the self which lodges uncomfortably in the foreign confines of the subject's body, powerless and passive.<sup>161</sup> The Anniversaries continually remind us that choice and deference – "seeing and judging," on the one hand; "following," on the other – are not contradictory powers of the soul, but rather allies in a subject's search for truth. Yet the poems, restricted as they are to the realm of the material and invested in rhetorical persuasion, struggle to strike the perfect balance between enabling the reader to choose freely and ensuring that he or she remains convinced and thus controlled by the poems' powerful claims.

If the opening of the First Anniversary attempts to set down the powers and functions of the soul, the Second Anniversary is a meditator's guide, offering a rich array of images to the reader. The Second Anniversary's parade of meditative images, all prefaced by "Thinke," are at once vivid, arresting means for contemplation, and contradictory metaphors which challenge the reader to choose among them and thus to take an active and evaluative stance in terms of the poem. "Thinke then, My soule, that death is but a Groome, / Which brings a Taper to the outward roome," the poem enjoins; yet it also demands that the reader "Think thee a Prince, who of themselves create / Wormes which insensibly

<sup>161</sup> Edward Tayler reads these lines as an unambiguous endorsement of self-knowledge: "The obligation laid upon the reader – as a requirement for reading the poem! – is nothing less than *nosce teipsum*" (Tayler, *Donne's Idea of a Woman*, 36). Yet Tayler's account ignores the complexity of Donne's approach to self-knowing, seeing an unproblematic directive in what is in fact an ambivalent and contradictory injunction calling upon the reader at once to freely imagine and to obey.

devour their state;” then “Thinke further on thy selfe... / How thou at first wast made but in a sinke;” “Thinke in how poore a prison thou didst lie / After, enabled but to sucke, and cry;” and yet again, “Thinke, when t’was growne to most, t’was a poore Inne, / A Province Pack’d up in two yards of skinne.”<sup>162</sup>

These proliferating images recall the mental pictures central to meditative practice, yet Donne’s images manage to be both more insistent and less commanding than their conventional counterparts. They demand meditative obedience while continually moving the meditator from one subject to another, allowing neither the free imaginative play nor the focused concentration required by early meditation-books. Instead, Donne allows rigorous narrative control to give way to a receptive indeterminacy; by presenting the reader with an array of powerful images, he is paradoxically undoing the power of each one, leaving it instead to the reader to approach the meditative project by pushing back against the poem’s demands. Bereft of a single controlling image, the reader-meditator becomes the author of his own meditative project.

While these images depend upon visualization for their success, the *Second Anniversary* as a whole attempts to reject the senses as legitimate routes to spiritual understanding. In the *First Anniversary*, Donne suggests that perception is a necessary first step in approaching virtue, he also suggests that the material of human sensation has become complicit in the world’s decay. “Sight is the noblest sense of any one,” he writes, “Yet sight hath onely color to feed on / And color is decay’d.” Yet the poem points continually to its own role in uniting

<sup>162</sup> *First Anniversary*, l.85ff.

the sensible and the spiritual, a unity which can make direct communion with God possible. In the poem's closing lines, Donne suggests that poetry itself is uniquely capable of traversing the boundary-line separating the spiritual and material worlds: "Verse hath a middle nature: heaven keeps soules, / The grave keeps bodies, verse the fame enroules." If we consider the First Anniversary to be an expansion of Donne's interest in self-diagnosis and introspection articulated in his letters, it culminates in an assertion of the power of the received text: a power of virtuous dissemination analogous to the power of the meditative image. Yet mediating between these two realms is a project left largely to the Second Anniversary, which goes beyond the earlier poem's interest in delineating the powers of the self, focusing instead on achieving a delicate balance between rhetorical exhortation and imaginative freedom.

The Second Anniversary may indeed have as its highest goal "shutting down the five senses and refusing the imperfect data they deliver," as Anita Gilman Sherman argues,<sup>163</sup> yet its disparagement of the body is hardly consistent or absolute. The poem uses the sensuous appeal of Elizabeth as proof of her virtue – "we understood / Her by her sight, her pure and eloquent blood / Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinkly wrought, / That one might almost say, her bodie thought"<sup>164</sup> – even as it imagines a higher, perfected form of perceptual encounter.

The poem wonders, addressing the soul,

When wilt thou shake off this Pedantry,  
Of being taught by sense, and Fantasy?...  
...up unto the watch-towre get,

<sup>163</sup> Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 50.

<sup>164</sup> Second Anniversary, l. 243-246.

And see all things despoild of fallacies:  
Thou shalt not peepe though lattices of eies  
Nor heare through Laberinth of eares, nor learne  
By circuit, or collections to discern.<sup>165</sup>

Rejecting the systematic modes of knowledge-seeking which dominate earthly inquiry, and rejecting with them the processes of sensation central to mundane human learning, this passage suggests that it is only by a spiritual contemplation of Elizabeth herself – the poem’s governing moral force, the “shee” who possesses ordinary knowledge but who in death has surpassed it – can truth be located.<sup>166</sup> Yet such a view is at odds with the poem’s own investment in the sensuality of the meditative image and of language itself. As he does in the Sermons, Donne is here attempting to reconcile an ideal of sensory transcendence with the spiritual utility offered by rhetoric and imagery. The poem cannot, in the end, transcend its own form: in its debt to sensation it proves that the first two tasks of the First Anniversary’s trinity – seeing and judging – are embedded within the material world, and, without the transmigration offered to the soul in death, cannot be achieved without the full engagement of the senses as well as of the imagination.

By describing the soul as at once guide and emulator, a judge of virtue and a careful observer of virtuous models, Donne expresses the same ambivalence about the independent soul that will come to dominate his sermons: an

<sup>165</sup> Second Anniversary, l. 291-298.

<sup>166</sup> In a similar vein, Sherman notes that in the Second Anniversary, “Elizabeth Drury becomes a monument to premeditated, willed oblivion. She represents the place where Donne hopes to arrive once he has learned to abandon his interest in anatomies and to concentrate instead on 'essential joy.’” (Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 57).

ambivalence which invites him to explore questions about the locus of moral control and the limits which should govern independent contemplation.

Elizabeth's soul was "the Cyment which did faithfully compact / And glue all vertues," and, in a competing image, the Neoplatonic source of all of virtue's instantiations: she is "best, and first originall / of all faire copies," and even in death, "A faint weake love of vertue and of good / Reflects from her, on them which understood / Her worth."<sup>167</sup> As virtue's controlling force and its very source, Elizabeth's role is that of the regulating authority figure, the same role Donne assigns to the Church and its clergy a few years later. If Elizabeth's soul is The Anniversaries' form and matter, for the poet-prophet remains the task of conveying both the narrative of the soul's transmigration and its spiritual importance to his people. That task remains central to Donne's practice as a preacher, as he continues to tease out the limits of independent interpretation and the degree to which the persuasive language of authority should give way to the imaginative freedom of its hearers.

### **Public Prayer, Private Worship**

If the imagination is the successful meditator's greatest tool, it is the greatest liability when one is struggling with prayer. Indeed, it is the failure of the imagination – not simply the susceptibility of the senses – that troubles Donne most deeply. In a sermon preached around 1622, Donne gives an extraordinarily

<sup>167</sup> First Anniversary, l. 71-73.

detailed account of private meditation, which focuses especially upon the frailty of the mind in solitude:

I lock my doore to my selfe, and I throw my selfe downe in the presence of my God, I deuest my selfe of all worldly thoughts, and I bend all my powers, and faculties upon God, as I think, and suddenly I finde my selfe scattered, melted, fallen into vaine thoughts, into no thoughts; I am upon my knees, and I talke, and think nothing; I deprehend my selfe in it, and I goe about to mend it; I gather new forces, new purposes to try againe, and doe better, and I doe the same thing againe. *I beleeve in the Holy Ghost*, but doe not finde him, if I seek him onely in private prayer; But in *Ecclesia*, when I goe to meet him in the Church, when I seeke him where hee hath promised to be found, instantly the savour of this Myrrhe is exalted, and multiplied to me...and presently follows *Communio Sanctorum, The Communion of Saints*...and presently follows *Remissio peccatorum, The remission of sins*, the purifying of my conscience, in that water, which is his blood, Baptisme, and in the wine, which is his Blood, the other sacrament; and presently follows a *Carnis resurrectio, A resurrection of my body*, and presently my body becomes no burthen to me.”<sup>168</sup>

The passage moves from chamber to church, from private devotion to public liturgy, culminating in Donne’s intense personalization of the tenets of the Apostle’s Creed as they are recited communally. The practice of meditation is revealed to be an imaginative challenge; sabotaged by his own thoughts, Donne is unable to focus on God. Mental collapse is both a sign of and a precursor to moral failing: once distracted Donne is “melted,” dissolved into unfocused thought, fallen into sin. At church, by contrast, he finds not only imaginative ballast for his wandering mind, but a sensory corroboration of the core principles

<sup>168</sup> Donne, *Sermon on Mark 16.16: He That Beleeveth Not, Shall Be Damned* (1622?), 5-6. This and all subsequent passages from Donne’s Sermons taken from *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1953-1962, available online through Brigham Young University’s *John Donne Sermons Collection* <<http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?JohnDonne,1583>>.

of Christian faith: the lines of the Creed are transformed by the rites of the Church and the power of communal worship into sensations which allow him to experience, not merely to imagine, scenes from the Christian narrative.

When the *actus reflexus*, the soul's governing force, fails in solitary prayer, the sensible world becomes a devotional liability. Sensation, responsible for intensifying Donne's spiritual experience at church, works against him in private devotion. What is more, the very mechanisms governing self-understanding described in Donne's letters are themselves untrustworthy. In a sermon preached at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne, Lord Mayor of London, on December 12, 1626, Donne tells his auditory that no human act is perfect, and that complacency is the enemy of spiritual improvement: "Deceive not your selves then, with that new charme and flattery of the soule, That if once you can say to your selves that you have faith, you need no more."<sup>169</sup> If private assertions of faith are not sufficient to secure one's soul, neither is private prayer, which Donne depicts, as before, in terms of struggle and failure:

I throwe myself down in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God,  
and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and  
his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the  
whining of a doore; I talke on, in the same posture of praying;  
Eyes lifted up, knees bowed downe; as though I prayed to God;  
and, if God, or his Angels, should aske me, when I last thought of  
God in that prayer, I cannot tell: Sometimes I finde that I had  
forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell.  
A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dangers, a  
straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an  
anything, a nothing, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my  
prayer.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>169</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on John 11.12* (12 Dec. 1626), 6.

<sup>170</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on John 11.12*, 8-9.

For Donne, the meditative scene, ideally populated by the imagined sights and sounds of Christ's experience, is drowned out by the earthly encroachments of city and chamber. The mental predilections upon which meditative practice is designed to capitalize – the mind's receptivity to images, the associative powers of the imagination – are here turned into liabilities. The scene of prayer Donne paints in this sermon and elsewhere is characterized by a struggle not only to access the divine, but, more fundamentally, to put into order the various powers of the self. For Donne, investigating the mechanisms and pitfalls of prayer is a challenge of self-knowing, an effort of self-control. The imagination, an asset for meditation, and the visual register, the key source of meditation's affective power, become devotional liabilities when not overmastered by a powerful reflective capacity.

Donne accomplishes a few related tasks by offering these scenes to his auditory. First, he is presenting himself as an imperfect subject: by articulating his own struggles with prayer, he provides some solace for his struggling auditory. He is also pinpointing the very nature of distraction. It lies, he suggests, not in the encroachments of the sensible world, which are mere accessories to a larger spiritual fault: a disorder of the self, a failure of the *actus reflexus*. Acknowledging the frailty of the individual human soul even while emphasizing its singular power means that Donne, as a preacher, must turn to the task of aiding his auditory in their independent efforts. Rhetoric is not, for

Donne, a tool of manipulation, nor a panacea for spiritual faults. If spiritual improvement must derive from the soul, from an internal rather than external judging power, the preacher's task is not to usurp those duties properly belonging to the soul, but rather to take on the role of the meditation-books: to inspire his auditory by furnishing them with devotional images. The rhetoric employed in such an effort must acknowledge that the authority of the priest is merely secondary in a hierarchy of spiritual influence. What is more, that rhetoric must awaken its listeners to a knowledge of their own salvific power.

We can glimpse Donne's emerging views on rhetoric in a Lent sermon preached in 1618 or 1619, which explores rhetoric's transformative potential and the importance of institutional authority for introspection, yet concludes that passive enchantment is not a viable route to virtue. The sermon text is Ezekiel 33:32, "And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voyce, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they doe them not": a text richly suggestive for a preacher concerned with rhetorical cause and effect. Ezekiel 33 is concerned with the duties of a prophet to his people, and the responsibilities owed, in turn, to God by the prophet's audience. While God calls upon Ezekiel to be a "watchman" to the Israelites, sounding an alarm to warn them of their God's vengeance and deter them from sin, the true moral burden lies upon the Israelites themselves: the wicked among them must recognize their misdeeds and reform; the righteous must exercise self-discipline sufficient to prevent themselves from falling into wickedness. Thus the prophet's role, while crucial, is merely instrumental. As a mouthpiece of God, his

duty is to proclaim God's word; but as an aid to the people, his power lies in reconciling them to themselves, and promoting the kind of self-recognition which makes moral reform possible.

Donne seizes upon the passage in order to offer an account of rhetoric's purposes and limitations, suggesting that, when deployed by preacher with duties analogous to the prophet's, images possess a persuasive moral force which verbal rhetoric, restricted to the aural realm, lacks. Such a view is consistent with the meditative tradition's emphasis on visualization, yet it poses a problem for Donne, who must face the limitations of the medium in which he preaches. He proposes two solutions. The first is to abandon the long-established notion, articulated most famously by Horace, that rhetoric should delight as it instructs. Revising that account, Donne divorces affective appeal from instructive power, suggesting instead that deriving pleasure from instructive speech by no means guarantees that the listener will be morally improved by it. This revision gives Donne license, not only in this sermon but in several others, to propose and to use a new method of rhetorical instruction – one that unsettles, rather than conforms to, the sensual predilections of his audience. What is more, Donne seeks in his project of disruption not, as classical rhetorical theory would have it, the passive acquiescence of an enchanted audience, but rather the auditory's completion of the kind of independent mental work required for proper devotion.

Yet as the sermon proceeds, we find that Donne's concerns lie not only with exploring the preacher's role in spiritual instruction but in pinning down the very processes of internal self-regulation by which rhetoric is received and

interpreted. For Donne, the Ezekiel passage raises two sets of questions: the first dealing with the differences between seeing and hearing, two modes of perception which for Donne offer a Christian subject distinct possibilities for self-understanding and moral reform; and the second having to do with the relationship between the processes of listening and understanding, the gap between accepting rhetorical instruction and obeying that instruction. The sermon suggests that vision-based judgment, which Donne calls discernment, is superior to rhetoric in a hierarchy of moral power; and, moreover, that affective engagement and sensory enchantment, long considered to be key elements in guaranteeing effective rhetorical persuasion, are merely temporary responses to good preaching and not, in fact, indicators of any deeper moral reform. By investigating the instructive possibilities of rhetoric in terms of its limitations, Donne endorses the power of meditation and self-scrutiny as superior to a long tradition of rhetoric and persuasion.

As a watchman, or *speculator*, the preacher is “placed upon a watchtower” to observe the sins of the world. This task of observation, like all modes of spiritual vision, is itself morally inflected. As a kind of latter-day watchman, Donne notes that most of the sin he observes falls into two categories: excessive diffidence toward or excessive confidence in God. In attempting to reform both elements of his auditory, the preacher must apply two distinct modes of preaching, as Donne explains:

Wo be unto us, if we settle not, establish not the timorous and trembling, the scattered, and fluid, and distracted soul, that cannot yet attain, intirely and intensely, and confidently and constantly, to fix it self upon the Merits and Mercies of Christ Jesus; but wo be

unto us much more, if we do not shake, and shiver, and throw down the refractory and rebellious soul, whose incredulity will not admit the History, and whose security in presumptuous sins will not admit the working and application of those Merits and Mercies which are proposed to him.<sup>171</sup>

For Donne, the preacher's responsibility is both to soothe the well-intentioned yet imperfect contingent of his auditory while challenging the nonbelievers. This task requires a rhetoric carefully pitched to at once reassure and move, to comfort and persuade. Such a rhetoric must intervene in the spiritual progress of the auditory without obviating the private spiritual work necessary for salvation. Donne describes this binary in terms distinctly reminiscent of his own struggles with prayer. The well-intentioned are hampered by failures of concentration, and their attempts at meditation are, like Donne's own, characterized by a "scattered, and fluid, and distracted soul," which seeks but cannot concentrate upon God. The more problematic group, however, are those who question belief itself, and whose refusal to accept Scripture's truth is unwavering.

When pleasant preaching is not sufficient for the reformation of nonbelievers, a more forceful approach is needed: a trumpet-call to action, the watchman's sound of warning. While pleasing rhetoric offers no guarantee of compliance on the part of the auditory, the disruptive preaching of the vigilant prophet has an array of uses. Such preaching can reconcile Christian subjects to an awareness of themselves and aid them in the project of self-examination. "The same trumpet that sounds the alarm (that is, that awakens us from our security)

<sup>171</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Ezekiel 33.32* (12 Feb 1618), 1.

and that sounds the Battail (that is, that puts us into a colluctation with our selves, with this world, with powers and principalities, yea into a wrastling with God himself and his Justice) the same trumpet sounds the Parle too, calls us to hearken to God in his word, and to speak to God in our prayers...<sup>172</sup> The purposes of forceful rhetoric here outlined are all linked to independent contemplation and private prayer, and yet all of those self-directed actions begin with rousing rhetoric, and all depend upon preacherly mastery.

Yet even while this forceful kind of appeal is more productive and efficacious than mere *musicum carmen*, or lovely song, since the battle-call, unlike the enchanting song, reminds the subject of his or her duties, encourages the performance of them, and most importantly “puts us into a colluctation with our selves,” it still offers no guarantee of compliance. Just as there can be no external rule against which to check one’s self-diagnosis, as Donne lamented in his letters to Goodyer, there is no measure by which understanding and obedience can ever be proven. Attentive listening is, by itself, a poor index of spiritual engagement; the very effortlessness of listening allows it to proceed without effecting any moral change. Such listening only operates on the level of sensation, leaving the soul untouched.

In making this point, Donne takes his cue from the verse just before the one upon which the sermon focuses: that passage describes the hypocrisy of the

<sup>172</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Ezekiel 33.32*, 6-7.

Israelites, who ‘come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness.’<sup>173</sup>

The force of the passage, Donne explains, is to condemn a person’s

coming to Church to hear the word of God preached, a pretence of cheerfulness and alacrity, in the outward service of God, yea a true sense of feeling of a delight in hearing the word; and yet for all this, an unprofitable barrenness, and (upon the whole matter) a despiteful and contumelious neglecting of Gods purpose and intention, in his Ordinance: for, Our voice is unto them but as a song to an instrument; they hear our words, but they do them not.<sup>174</sup>

The passage toys with the notion of authenticity which was such a pressing concern in Donne’s scenes of prayer. The auditory seems first to deserve scorn, since they come to church with “a pretence of cheerfulness and alacrity”; yet “pretence” here encompasses our contemporary sense of false appearance as well as an older suggestion of pure intention, without any attached connotation of deceit.<sup>175</sup> The auditory’s true intentions are obscured by this ambiguous term and complicated further by the next clause, which assigns them a “true sense of feeling of a delight in hearing the Word,” or an intuition of their own pleasure and edification. But in masterfully deferring any disclosure of the auditory’s real stance toward preaching, the passage suggests that these churchgoers do not know themselves whether they are benefitting from the sermon they hear. Like Donne

<sup>173</sup> Ezekiel 33:31, *The King James Bible* (New York: Penguin, 1974).

<sup>174</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Ezekiel 33.32*, 3.

<sup>175</sup> “pretence | pretense, n<sup>6</sup>.” *OED Online*, November 2010, Oxford University Press. 20 May 2010.

<<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/150932?rskey=Yjn51D&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

himself who, in his letter to Goodyer, bemoaned the fact that he could not achieve the self-knowledge necessary for moral improvement – and who, when failing at meditation and hardly aware of the cause of that failure, considered his soul’s very salvation in jeopardy – the auditory he describes is dangerously unselfconscious and incapable of fruitful self-examination. The result is a kind of complacent disobedience: “when all that [i.e., listening and delighting in the preaching] is done,” Donne continues a few lines later, paraphrasing Ezekiel 33:31, “nothing is done: they should hear willingly, but they do nothing of that which they had heard.”<sup>176</sup> By mistaking a “true feeling of delight” for a sign of moral edification, the auditory is lulled into complacency by its own enjoyment; and after the sermon is done, the audience cheerfully proceeds to ignore the sermon’s lessons.

The sermon, then, continually reminds us that the performance of Christian obedience is not enough; the duties of the Christian must extend to his private, independent, conscience-driven work, which cannot be forced upon him by a preacher, nor monitored by anyone else. Speaking of priestly mandates which are ignored because they are too difficult to be obeyed, Donne articulates a central tenet of this program of private prayer: “a repentance which hath all other formall parts of a true repentance, if it reach not to all the branches, and to all the specifying differences and circumstance of thy sins, so far as a diligent examination of they conscience can carry thee, is a voyd repentence.”<sup>177</sup> Couched

<sup>176</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Ezekiel 33.32*, 3.

<sup>177</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Ezekiel 33.32*, 13.

as one of a set of examples of *Duri sermones* or “hard sayings,” the passage in fact gets at the heart of the sermon’s concerns by distinguishing between outward or “formal” obedience and the invisible, unknowable work of the soul. Listening and understanding, as Donne is at pains to remind us, are quite different; and while the former may be a function of mere sensory enchantment, the latter depends on active engagement, on self-examination. Moreover, the function of rhetoric is not to facilitate such self-examination in any comprehensive way, but merely provide listeners with a first step in the process of independent discernment.

Perhaps Donne’s most complex exploration of the duties owed to oneself and to the Church, a sermon preached upon the death of King James is Donne’s attempt to promote private meditation while remaining emphatic about the institutional limits bounding the individual’s imagination. The sermon focuses on Canticles 3:11: “Goe forth ye daughters of Sion, and behold King Solomon, with the crown, wherewith his mother crowned him, in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart.” As Donne lays out the principles governing his theory of self-interpretation, he expands upon the contradiction which dominates his thinking about private experience: the gap between the emotional and intellectual submission which a subject owes to the Church’s authority and the necessity of looking inside oneself for spiritual improvement.

Donne begins by reading the passage as a representation of the relationship between Christ, the Church, and the community of believers. “The speaker, the Director of all, is the *Church*, the *spouse* of Christ, she says, *Go forth*,

*ye daughters of Sion*; and the persons that are called up, are, as you see, *The Daughters of Sion*, the obedient children of the Church, that hearken to her voice: and then lastly, the *person* to whom they are directed, is Solomon crowned, That is, Christ invested with the royall dignity of being *Head of the Church*.<sup>178</sup>

Having established these correspondences, Donne goes on to assert that the passage supports a vision of Christian obedience in which individual communion with God is impossible and criticism of the Church unacceptable: “neither are we to look, that God should speak to us *mouth to mouth, spirit to spirit, by Inspiration, by Revelation*, for it is a large mercy, that he hath constituted an Office, and established a Church, in which we should hear him.”<sup>179</sup> Soon after this repudiation of direct spiritual experience, however, Donne advises his auditory to embark upon a radical project of self-examination. The object of this passage’s exhortatory force is no longer King Solomon; nor his correlate, Christ; nor his worldly equivalent, King James, lying in state before the congregation. In a reversal which characterizes Donne’s views on self-knowing in general and Christian obedience in particular, the passage becomes an endorsement of private experience, commanding the auditory to introspection:

*Goe forth*, that is, *goe farther then thy selfe*, out of thy selfe; at least out of the *love of thy selfe*, for that is but a short, a giddy, a vertiginous walk; how little a thing is the greatest man? If thou have many rooms in thy selfe, many capacities to contemplate thy selfe in, if thou walke over the consideration of thy selfe, as thou hast such a title of *Honour*, such an Office of Command, such an *Inheritance*, such a pedigree, such a *posterity*, such an *Allyance*, if this be not a short walke, yet it is a round walke, a giddy, a

<sup>178</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Canticles 3:11* (26 Apr. 1625), 1-2.

<sup>179</sup> Donne, *Sermon Preached on Canticles 3:11*, 2.

vertiginous proceeding. Get beyond thine own circle; consider thy selfe at thine end, at thy death, and then *Egredere*, Goe further then that, *Go forth and see* what thou shalt be after thy death. That which we are to look upon, is especially *our selves*, but it is *our selves*, enlarg'd and extended into the *next world*..."<sup>180</sup>

While direct communion with God is impossible, and personal revelation rejected as imprecise and dangerous, *self*-communion is celebrated as the means by which to attain a sense of the futility of worldly concerns. It requires not only a rejection of worldly concerns, but a critical perspective on oneself; and it rejects the safe but limiting habits of mind perfected by daily repetition in favor of a radical stepping outside oneself in order to gain a comprehensive view of the soul's status and its fate after death – its transmigration, that is, the same subject which occupied the *Anniversaries*. What is more, the act of looking is combined with an imaginative effort which recalls the very meditation which the earlier passage seems to reject. If looking is, as the sermon on Ezekiel 33:32 suggests, the mode of superior moral discernment, Donne suggests an introspective practice analogous to reading, not merely to image-perception. Indeed, knowing oneself is a kind of exegesis, and the soul can, with practice, lie open to the astute observer:

Thou mayst know, that thou art the happiest of men, in this world, and yet not know thy self. All this life is but a *Preface*, or but an *Index and Repertory* to the book of *life*; There at that book beginnes thy study; To grow perfect in that book, to be dayly conversant in that book, to finde those marks, ingenuously, and in a rectified conscience, in thy selfe...

<sup>180</sup>Donne, *Sermon Preached on Canticles 3:11*, 6.

Toward the end of his life, then, Donne reconciles the competing spheres of independent contemplation and institutional instruction by consigning to each a particular role in the spiritual formation of the Christian subject. By promoting self-knowing as a kind of self-directed looking to be embarked upon under the supervision of the Church, Donne does not endorse inspiration, but does recommend to his auditory a disciplined mode of vigilance and a critical practice of self-directed exegesis. What is more, he ties together rhetoric and image-production, word and image, by suggesting to his auditory that they are themselves texts to be carefully analyzed. While only the subject can know his or her own faults, that knowledge must develop within the context of institutional oversight.

Donne's lifelong interest in the role of imaginative independence in moral reform helps to set the stage for the rigorous assertion of evaluation made by poets and critics during the latter half of the seventeenth century. While Donne's views on the interpretive powers of the self are not consistent, they do important work in depicting a judging subject pulled equally in the directions of self-assertion and institutional loyalty, interpretive freedom and exegetical instruction. When Milton tackles the question of readerly freedom a few decades later, it is with an endorsement of independent discernment far more radical than Donne's – yet informed by that poet's struggle to pin down the Christian subject's duties.

## Chapter V

### Knowledge, Opinion, and the Aesthetics of Taste in *Comus*, *Areopagitica*, and *Paradise Lost*

At a crucial moment in *Areopagitica*, Milton turns to Spenser. Arguing for the importance of free choice in the development of personal virtue, Milton draws upon *The Faerie Queene*:

That vertue therefore which is but a youngling in the  
contemplation of evill, and knows not the utmost that vice  
promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank vertue, not a  
pure; her whitenesse is but an excrementall whitenesse; Which  
was the reason why our sage and serious Poet *Spencer*, whom I  
dare be known to think a better teacher than *Scotus* or *Aquinas*,  
describing true temperance under the person of *Guion*, brings him  
in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bowr of  
earthly blisse that he might see and know, and yet abstain.<sup>181</sup>

As Ernest Sirluck first observed over half a century ago, Milton misremembers the scene of Guyon's descent into Mammon's cave: the Palmer does not in fact accompany Guyon at all. Instead, the knight must navigate the temptations of the material world on his own, unaided by the powerful reforming force of the holy man. Sirluck rightly points out that Milton's mistake reveals much about his

<sup>181</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 1006.

virtuous ideal: “When Milton calls upon his memory for Spenser’s Legend of Temperance, it emerges as he himself would have written it: with the personification of Reason present because always needed. . . . For Milton, choice, to be right, was always dependent on reason.”<sup>182</sup> If Spenser relies upon an Aristotelian conception of the morally protective force of habit, Sirluck argues, Milton by contrast believes that reason, allegorized as the Palmer, is the sole means by which to guarantee moral safety, to evade sin.

Yet Milton’s Spenserian moment is significant not only for its telling revisions. It also provides us with clues for understanding Milton’s views about learning in general and experiential knowledge in particular. I wish to suggest that it is the investigative character of the scene, and the particular mode of reception it depicts, that captures Milton’s attention; the scene’s central tension has less to do with moral fortitude than it does with the dynamics of curiosity. Guyon’s descent into Mammon’s cave is, above all, an *excavation* of sin: it is, first and foremost, an exploratory mission, not a moral trial.

Spenser frames Guyon’s visit to the Cave in terms of seduction: the Argument tells us that Guyon is “tempted” by Mammon to descend into the cave, as though the mountains of gold there prove irresistibly enticing. We later discover, however, that Guyon is in fact driven to the cave by pure curiosity: “What secret place,” asks Guyon, “can safely hold / So huge a masse, and hide

<sup>182</sup> Ernest Sirluck, “Milton Revises “The Faerie Queene.” *Modern Philology* Vol. 48, No. 2 (Nov., 1950), 96.

from heauens eye?”<sup>183</sup> Guyon desires not riches, but knowledge. He wishes to understand the practical dimensions of Mammon’s remarkable avarice: how is such tremendous wealth stored and kept safe?

Once inside the cave, Guyon seems scarcely tempted at all, indifferent to the parade of aesthetic seductions before him. He remains true to the position he articulates at the beginning of the Canto. “All otherwise...I riches read, / And deeme them roote of all disquietnesse ... Infinite mischeifes of them doe arize.”<sup>184</sup> What is more, Guyon’s objection to wealth is rooted not only in a principled distrust of acquisitiveness, but also in personal preference. Instead of worldly luxury, “Faire shields, gay steeds, bright armes be my delight,” Guyon explains – items whose value derives not from their status as objects d’art or as means of commercial exchange, as Mammon imagines, but rather from their ability to aid the knight in the larger project of glorious moral conquest.<sup>185</sup> All of this is to say that Guyon makes a poor victim for Mammon, and, instead of depicting a valiant moral struggle, the scene reveals that exploration has the power to reinforce beliefs and to fortify virtue.

Milton finds in the scene, then, not a dramatization of the dynamics of aesthetic self-denial, nor a straightforward allegory of the human struggle against immoral pleasures. Rather, the scene juxtaposes greed and virtue in order to depict the central importance of experience in a larger project of moral self-fashioning. In the Cave, Guyon performs what will become Milton’s preferred

<sup>183</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), II.vii.20.1-2.

<sup>184</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, II.vii.12.1-2, 6.

<sup>185</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, II.vii.10.8.

receptive stance: free of the burdens of temptation, Guyon looks critically at the realm of sin, engaging his senses in the process of discovery and finding, through it, more evidence to support his beliefs. Guyon is testing sin by carefully tasting it for himself.

What is more, while for Spenser the Palmer's presence is unnecessary – unlike the Bower of Bliss, the Cave of Mammon holds no real draw, and Guyon's temperance is never threatened – for Milton, recasting the scene so that the Palmer participates is a perfectly natural move. Throughout his career, Milton believes that the conscience plays a crucial role in the human project of learning. Whereas for Spenser the Palmer functions as a helpful guide, to be relied upon chiefly in dangerous moral situations, for Milton the reasonable conscience is the crucial means by which exploration can happen in the first place. The Palmer has a place in Milton's misremembered scene because he represents the very principle of choice itself.

The turn to Spenser in *Areopagitica* is just one example of Milton's abiding preoccupation with the experiential dimensions of knowledge-seeking. Just as Guyon enters the Cave of Mammon in order to investigate and sample sin, Milton's receptive subject acquires knowledge through a process of judicious testing, a process that engages the senses as well as the imagination. Because of Milton's focus on the role of sense-experience in the project of learning, *aesthesis* and its English equivalents, testing and tasting, become for Milton the central features of a critical posture through which knowledge can not only be accessed, but continually, productively amplified and revised. Unlike Spenser and

Puttenham, Milton does not consider aesthetic experience necessarily to entail a somatic acquiescence to the seductions of the sensible. Rather, Milton sees *aesthesis* in its highest form as the key act of the critical subject: testing and its emblematic fictive representation, tasting, are crucial means by which to evaluate truth-claims in a postlapsarian world. These concepts prove capacious and critically useful for Milton, encompassing not only the productive process of learning but also – in *Comus*, for example – the dark seductions of appetite and the dynamics of moral trial, the test that lies at the heart of all human temptation.

For Milton, aesthetic testing opens up to the subject a realm of free judgment, allowing for the exercise of personal choice. Yet because aesthetic experience is supremely private, subjective, and irreproducible, it resists evaluation by sources of moral authority. Thus Miltonic subjects are constantly running up against an epistemological quandary: divested of any infallible moral guidance after the Fall, they must supply their own truths. Because access to God's will has been severely restricted, the process of intuition, by which a subject can acquire divinely-granted wisdom – as opposed to unverifiable knowledge – has lost the primacy it held before the Fall. Thus the tasting/testing of *aesthesis* must fill the void left by God's postlapsarian absence; the perfect wisdom guaranteed by God's proximity has been replaced by the imperfect knowledge that results from human evaluation. While the contingent, unverifiable nature of human experience contains for Milton the richest possibilities for moral development, the process of independent knowledge-seeking is fraught with dangers. Milton is at once anxious about the moral

slippage that can ensue when an independent subject negotiates the material, perceptible world without an infallible guide and yet attracted to the educative possibilities of experiential testing.

Much scholarly work has been done on Milton's interest in modes of wisdom and knowledge, and most of that work is built on the premise that Milton favored wisdom as a privileged kind of understanding. John Reichert's sustained treatment of Milton's attitudes toward learning, *Milton's Wisdom*, argues that Milton re-appropriated the morality-play character Wisdom in the service of *Paradise Lost's* sophisticated moral system. After the Fall, Reichert observes, Adam and Eve "must replace the knowledge of things seen with faith in things unseen."<sup>186</sup> In *The Logic of the Fall*, Richard Arnold posits that two modes of reason obtain in *Paradise Lost*: the "pure reason" that functions independently of God's guidance and is thus an insufficient mode of encountering the world; and the superior "right reason" by which divine truth can be accessed. Before the Fall, Arnold argues, Adam is endowed with "right reason": "he was form'd for 'contemplation' and 'valor'.... But he did not 'hold his place' because he gave up wisdom for knowledge," rejecting God's instruction in favor of the insufficient knowledge gleaned through independent investigation.<sup>187</sup> Going against the grain of these arguments, Gordon Teskey sees in Milton's ambivalence about divine guidance a desire to be an independent poetic maker: faced with the force of God's dictates, Milton possesses a "need to be a creator (not just a creature) in

<sup>186</sup> James Reichert, *Milton's Wisdom: Nature and Scripture in Paradise Lost* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 229.

<sup>187</sup> Richard Arnold, *The Logic of the Fall: Right Reason and (Im)pure Reason in Milton's Paradise Lost* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 91.

his own right.”<sup>188</sup> Finally, in “Milton and Solomonic Education,” Douglas Trevor examines Milton’s use of King Solomon as an exemplary figure of learning: in *Paradise Lost*, Trevor argues, “instances of learning and disobedience pivot on the Solomonic distinction between divinely granted wisdom and humanly acquired knowledge and the dangers that emerge when the two are confused.”<sup>189</sup>

Despite the scholarly attention given to Milton’s uses of wisdom and knowledge, little work has been done on Milton’s complex views about aesthetic experience and the challenges inherent in a subject’s independent engagement with the sensible world. I argue that Milton sees in the split between wisdom and knowledge a distinction between two ways of negotiating the world: by means of intuition, on the one hand, and through experiential testing, the best route to knowledge, on the other. The two spheres of learning are linked, however, by their similar demands on the subject: departing from a conceptual heritage which held that intuitive or noetic wisdom renders doubt impossible, Milton instead suggests that even the information gleaned by intuition must be, in a postlapsarian world, an object for evaluation and analysis.

Classically, *aesthesis* was a broader category than the aesthetic is today; while post-Enlightenment approaches to aesthetics have focused on the realm of the beautiful, for Plato the term meant all of the engagements of the senses, broadly conceived. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes the powers which fall under the purview of the *aesthesis*, or the aesthetic capacity: “sight, hearing,

<sup>188</sup> Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>189</sup> Douglas Trevor, “Milton and Solomonic Education,” in *Milton and the Jews*, ed. Douglas Brooks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86.

smell, the sense of the cold and the hot... pleasure and pain, desire and fear: and there are a great many more, of which many have names and of which an infinite number have none at all.”<sup>190</sup> Even to call aesthetics the realm of the sensible requires a revision to our modern understanding of sensation: aesthetics was, for Plato as for his philosophical successors, the arena of all subjective experience. As David Heller-Roazen puts it, “the sensitive soul in the classical doctrine encountered nothing if not by contact,” that is, by *aesthesis*.<sup>191</sup>

In the *Timaeus*, Plato explains that *aesthesis* and *noêsis* are distinct capacities of the receptive subject, two divergent ways of approaching the world. In distinguishing the noetic from the aesthetic, Plato begins by describing two categories of knowledge: that which always exists, and that which never exists *but* is in a perpetual state of coming into being. The difference between them is explained in a famous passage:

What is that which is Existent always and has no Becoming? And what is that which is Becoming always and never is Existent? Now the one of these is apprehensible by thought with the aid of reasoning [*noêsis*], since it is ever uniformly existent; whereas the other is an object of opinion with the aid of unreasoning sensation [*aesthesis alogos*], since it becomes and perishes and is never really existent.<sup>192</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* 156, cited in Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch* (Zone Books, 1997), 23. Heller-Roazen argues that early modern thinkers seized upon the classical preoccupation with sensation and “sought to conceive of ‘the difference between perception and sense’ not as an opposition but as a threshold, not as a fixed barrier but as a porous membrane, which both joined and disjoined the senseless and the sensate” (178). As I hope to show, Milton’s work gestures toward a theoretical separation of *aesthesis* and *noêsis*, yet never succeeds in making that separation complete or permanent.

<sup>191</sup> *The Inner Touch*, 30.

<sup>192</sup> *Timaeus* 28a2-4, trans. R.G. Bury (Harvard, 1966), 49.

The category of “that which is Existent always and has no Becoming” – the universal, eternal, and unchanging – is available only to the *noêsis*, or understanding, which is receptive to rational persuasion. “What becomes and never is,” the sphere of falsehood and illusion, is also the sphere of *doxa*, or conviction and belief, and is thus available to the non-reasoning perceptual capacity, the *aesthêsis alogos*. For Plato, then, the aesthetic is the realm of the automatic, the uncritical, the *alogos* or anti-*logos*; it is the realm of frank encounter unmitigated by any rational engagement. The noetic, by contrast, is the means by which truth – *logos* – can be located and understood.

In *Comus*, *Areopagitica*, and *Paradise Lost*, Milton transforms the Platonic emphasis on different categories of *knowledge* into a distinction between *modes of knowing*. For Milton, that is, the aesthetic and the noetic are not merely distinct capacities of a perceiving subject but rather divergent ways of locating meaning, routes to interpretation. Therefore Milton turns Plato’s distinction between *logos* and *aesthesis* into a distinction between wisdom and knowledge: between intuitive, God-granted truth on the one hand, and experiential and unverifiable information on the other. Aesthetic knowledge-seeking is the postlapsarian subject’s best response to the permanent condition of epistemological uncertainty. It is the very challenge inherent in aesthetic reception that, Milton believes, lies at the heart of postlapsarian experience. And while Milton gives us many examples of aesthetic choice gone wrong – Eve’s act of tasting being the most important – he retains a conviction in the *possibilities* of

aesthesis; its dangers are necessary and inevitable aspects of independent human endeavor, requisite parts of the project of knowledge-seeking.

If knowledge-seeking, in its highest form, entails a careful consideration of the merits and moral value of a concept or course of action, the apprehension of wisdom makes fewer demands on the critical subject. While *noesis* is Plato's term for intuition, the Latin legacy of the English term encompasses a range of meanings. Derived from *intuitus*, "the act of looking into," the concept began as a way to express a mode of seeing ("viewing, gazing"), was transformed by medieval philosophers into a kind of apprehension ("the vision of a thing immediately present to the eye," "the act of mentally looking at"<sup>193</sup>), and eventually became, in the Enlightenment, an "act of consciousness": Kant's *Anschauung* is a singular mode of immediate, specific knowing.<sup>194</sup> William Davidson notes that these divergent concepts of intuition all "imply an act of attention, they all deal with the singular or individual, they all regard the knowledge derivable from intuition to be direct, immediate, or presentative, and so, beyond the reach of doubt or question."<sup>195</sup> For Milton, who never uses the term but who is deeply invested in its many senses, the process of intuiting wisdom might seem to preclude testing: ideally, that is, intuitive learning happens automatically, bypassing the individual's powers of critique. Yet for Milton even postlapsarian intuition is subject to doubt, because the conscience, too, can err.

<sup>193</sup> "intuition, n<sup>2</sup>." *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. 1989, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. 6 April 2011 <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>

<sup>194</sup> See William L. Davidson, "Definition of Intuition," *Mind* 7:26 (April, 1882), 304-310.

<sup>195</sup> Davidson, "Intuition," 306.

Milton's approach to the conscience is crucial to his theory of aesthetic learning, because for Milton, as for many of his contemporaries, the conscience was the most powerful interpretive tool in a Christian subject's arsenal, capable of straddling the divide between ethics and transcendent moral law. A classical and medieval heritage held that the key power of the well-developed conscience is its ability to pass judgment on the self. A medieval distinction between *syntaresis*, “the spark of conscience” inherent in every individual, and *conscientia*, a sophisticated moral self-awareness, established reflection as the hallmark of the fully-developed conscience. This distinction persisted well into the early modern period: the Puritan William Perkins called *conscientia* “a little God sitting in the middle of men’s hearts,” an arbiter of moral value; *synteresis* was a kind of index of morality, an “innate library of the moral law” implanted by God.<sup>196</sup> In his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Richard Burton explains that “Synteresis, or the purer part of the conscience, is an innate habit, and doth signify a conversion of the knowledge of the law of God and Nature, to know good or evil. And (as our Divines hold) it is rather in the understanding than in the will.... The conscience is that which approves good or evil, justifying or condemning our actions.”<sup>197</sup>

Yet despite the moral authority supposedly held by the conscience, interpreting its dictates still required an exercise of independent analysis that could never be performed with absolute confidence. If God's will really is accessible to every Christian subject – a point of view that was by no means

<sup>196</sup> James Dougal Fleming, *Milton's Secrecy* (Ashgate, 2008), 33.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. A. R. Shilleto, 189-190, cited in John S. Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy*, (Routledge, 1990), 11.

universally accepted – then how to distinguish it from false illusions? As Joan Bennett sums up the problem, “In the absence of intrinsically authoritative external laws, how can one know when one’s decision to act is based on the direction of God’s spirit dwelling in one’s heart and when it is based on personal desire?”<sup>198</sup> This problem called for a deepening and refinement of the introspective capacities of the individual, and even then left the subject in a state of continual doubt. Milton’s sense of the unattainability of absolute truth and his simultaneous confidence in the *existence* of a sphere of ultimate moral arbitration combine to suffuse his endorsement of the possibilities of postlapsarian intuition with an abiding sense of dissatisfaction.<sup>199</sup>

Milton’s discomfort with the intuitive realm and his sense instead of the necessity of the process-based, experiential mode of learning offered by aesthesis makes his view proto-phenomenological, anticipating the approach taken by twentieth-century phenomenologists, especially Husserl, to intellection and perceptual experience. Husserl drew upon Plato’s distinction to theorize the category of the *noema*, or the “object-as-perceived.” The *noema* represents not the transcendent reality of a perceived object, but rather its actuality as recognized by the perceiver. While *noêsis* is, for Husserl, the process by which perception takes place, it is also a key mode of knowing, even if the knowledge that results is inevitably unverifiable. Though Milton’s approach is suffused with a Puritan

<sup>198</sup> Joan Bennett, “Go: Milton’s Antinomianism and the Separation Scene in *Paradise Lost*, Book 9.” *PMLA* 98:3 (May 1983), 389.

<sup>199</sup> When the Son of God explains to Satan in *Paradise Regain’d* that God “sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell / In pious Hearts, an inward Oracle / To all truth requisite for men to know,” he is describing a perfected conscience or “inner light,” yet not touching on the problem (which, presumably, the Son himself does not face) of interpreting its dictates (I.462-464).

conception of the dangers of sin and dependent upon a Protestant notion of an overseeing conscience, it is yet an innovative approach to reception that moves beyond the skeptical philosophical investigations of medieval and early modern figures such as William of Ockham and Henry of Ghent.<sup>200</sup> For Milton, the tested object *is* the object-as-perceived, a highly contingent creation of the critical subject. Yet the contingency of the perceived object does not detract from its utility or power. Rather, Milton considers the unverifiability of all human experience to provide humankind with its most important challenges – the challenges of discernment, free choice, discrimination, fruitful wages of the Fall. Even in *Comus*, one of his earliest works, Milton reveals that surmounting those challenges is necessary for the cultivation of virtuous power: when untested, virtue is weak, incomplete, an ineffectual participant in scenarios of moral combat.

### *Comus*

*Comus*, Milton's parable of chastity threatened, is at the same time an examination of the possibilities and limits of *aesthesis*. The masque's most pervasive anxiety concerns the ways in which the body negotiates the temptations

<sup>200</sup> Anita Gilman Sherman gives an illuminating account of the skeptical tradition in *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Citing the rise of early modern skepticism in the wake of the publication in 1562 of a translation of Sextus Imperius' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sherman argues that Donne and Shakespeare enact strategies by which they can manage their "dissatisfaction with the conditions of human knowledge," either by "exacerbating feelings of doubt and uncertainty" or by "fostering common ground and consolation" (39). While I am reluctant to label Milton a "skeptical" poet, his investment in exploring the limitations of human knowledge-seeking does bear important similarities to a skeptical tradition characterized, as Sherman puts it, by a sense that "misalignment is always already built into the transactions of perception...the skeptic's investment in misalignment and misprision delivers a *frisson* of pleasure" (xiv).

of the world, and its key act – the act that defines Comus, turns Comus’ followers from men into beasts, and threatens the Lady’s bodily integrity – is *tasting*. From the very start of the masque, the distinction between those who taste and those who abstain is crucial: the Lady and her Brothers are self-aware and free, not having tasted Comus’ “orient liquor”; Comus’ band of followers, all of whom have sampled the elixir, are transformed into creatures divested of self-knowledge and humanity. As a creature of unbridled aesthetic desire, who seeks to touch, sample, and experience all that attracts him, Comus is the exemplar of aesthesis gone horribly wrong. While the Lady is, by contrast, sustained by an abiding intuition of virtue, never revising her faith in its strength, that intuitive knowledge proves woefully insufficient to guarantee her safety. When Comus tests the protective utility of her beliefs – and constructs a moral trial in which tasting plays a major role – he is removing her from the realm of static intuition and forcing her instead to engage with the world through *aesthesis*. The trial ends in a stalemate that suggests the importance of experiential knowledge: if testing sin entails risk, the safety that is acquired by resistance is useless in protecting the body and the faculties of sensation from an aesthetically sophisticated coercive force.

Critical attention to *Comus* has most recently focused on issues of political and historical context, most notably the Castlehaven scandal and the juristic activities of the Earl of Bridgewater.<sup>201</sup> Other treatments of the masque have

<sup>201</sup> See Barbara Breasted, “*Comus* and the Castlehaven Scandal,” *Milton Studies* 3 (1971): 201-24; John Creaser, “Milton’s *Comus*: The Irrelevance of the Castlehaven Scandal,” *Notes and Queries* 31 (1984): 307-17; William B. Hunter: *Milton’s Comus: Family Piece* (Troy:

argued that it is an allegorical text influenced by the morality play tradition; have focused upon the work's relevance to radical politics and Puritanism; and have examined its ties to early Welsh folk traditions, debt to Neoplatonism, and connections to the genres of closet-drama and masque.<sup>202</sup> Instead of teasing out the conditions of *Comus*' production, its political engagements, or its experiments in form, I wish to approach the masque as an early and succinct experiment in modes of knowing, in *aesthesis*-as-testing – an experiment which prefigures in important ways the more complex treatment Milton gives the question of knowledge in *Paradise Lost*.

The masque opens with a powerful depiction of the perils of tasting. Imprudent ingestion can result in total moral impairment, and careless interaction with the seductive materials of the world can disable the very mechanisms of free choice. *Aesthesis* is the only means by which Comus can negotiate the world, and it is shown here in the worst possible light. When Comus is first attracted to the Lady, drawn in by her “divine enchanting song,” the moment has the force of the inevitable: a creature of pure aesthesis, he is committed to the pleasure that

Whitson, 1983); and Rosemary Karmelich Mundhenk, “Dark Scandal and the Sun-Clad Power of Chastity: The Historical Milieu of Milton's *Comus*” *Studies in English Literature* 15 (1975): 141-152.

<sup>202</sup> See Leah Marcus, “Milton's Anti-Laudian Masque,” *The Politics of Mirth: Johnson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago, 1986); Violet O'Valle, “Milton's *Comus* and the Welsh Oral Tradition” *Milton Studies* 18 (1983): 25-44; John Arthos, “Milton, Ficino, and the *Charmides*” *Studies in the Renaissance* 6 (1959): 261-274; Cedric Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments* (Cambridge, 1985); and Donald Friedman, “*Comus* and the Truth of the Ear,” in “*The Muses Common-weale*”: *Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1988), 119-134.

sensory experience affords and to the promise of greater knowledge that it contains. Importantly, while the seductions of the aesthetic are here conducive to good interpretation – “Sure something holy lodges in that brest,” Comus correctly concludes – such interpretation does not guarantee moral reform. Indeed, Comus’ inference serves only to encourage him in his violent plans: the ability to *recognize* virtue here is radically distinct from *intuiting* virtue. Comus’ knowledge of goodness is based upon aesthetic testing and holds no suasive or regulatory power beyond piquing his desire.

The Lady, on the other hand, rejects aesthetic testing entirely, and as a result is an unsophisticated reader of the world. While her chastity may grant her access to the super-sensible, to “things no gross ear can hear,”<sup>203</sup> she is remarkably inept at engaging the ordinary mechanisms of sensation to good effect. Even at the masque’s climax, when Comus dares her to perform a morally perilous act of tasting, she can respond only by citing her intuition of a probable outcome. The dynamics of the conflict between Comus and the Lady, then, are not simply the dynamics of struggle between attacker and victim. The tension between them is, more fundamentally, a tension between two modes of negotiating the world: the extreme aestheticism of Comus, for whom tasting is the supreme driving force, on the one hand; and the Lady’s reliance on intuitive wisdom, which entails a fidelity to abstract principles, on the other. Underscoring the slippage between these two apparently disparate modes of engagement with

<sup>203</sup> The Elder Brother uses this phrase during his extended celebration of the benefits of chastity; Donald Friedman sees in the passage an instance of the privileged yet contested status of hearing in the masque (Milton, *Comus* l. 458).

the world, the Attendant Spirit's play on the word "virtue" at the masque's opening unites the realms of *aesthesis* and wisdom in a fertile pun. When he introduces Comus, the Spirit explains that human beings "Strive to keep up a frail, and Feaverish being / Unmindfull of the crown that Vertue gives / After this mortal change."<sup>204</sup> The wordplay turns on the ambiguity of "virtue": the term could mean "the power or operative influence inherent in a supernatural or divine being" as well as "chastity, sexual purity" and the broader "conformity of life...with the principles of morality."<sup>205</sup> Is the Spirit referring here to the "virtue" extolled by classical philosophers and Christian theologians, a power of moral integrity? Or is he offering a sly warning about the enchanting power of the orient liquor – and about the coercive potential of all aesthetic experience? As Comus continues his pursuit, the transcendent virtue of God's wisdom continually runs up against the charming "virtue" of aesthetic seduction. When he first encounters the Lady, Comus underscores this slippage by playing on the ambiguity of the term: "When once her eye / Hath met the vertue of this Magick dust," Comus believes, the Lady will deliver herself to his clutches – a surrender predicated upon the rejection of transcendent virtue, which guarantees to its possessor imaginative and spiritual independence, in favor of the disabling charms of aesthetic experience.

Yet the independence guaranteed by virtue reveals itself to be *purely* imaginative and spiritual: the Lady's body is a contested site, never fully under

<sup>204</sup> Milton, *Comus*, l. 9-11.

<sup>205</sup> "virtue *n.* <sup>1a, 2a, 2c</sup>" *OED Online*, November 2010, Oxford University Press, 10 January 2011. <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/223835?rskey=1HR4Xq&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

her control or under the control of Comus. In its anxiety about somatic vulnerability, the masque pays particular attention to the boundaries of the Lady's body; despite her frequent assertions to the contrary, the Lady's commitment to chastity does not ensure her safety. As Debora Shuger points out, female virtue is not, unto itself, sufficient to secure the body against rape: sexual violence, by definition, precludes the victim's consent.<sup>206</sup> Keeping this fact in mind invites us to read carefully the Attendant Spirit's description of the invulnerability of transcendent virtue. "Vertue may be assail'd, but never hurt / Surpriz'd by unjust force, but not enthralled," he explains, in a statement that sounds like a resounding endorsement of the protective power of chastity.<sup>207</sup> Yet the lines in fact turn on a precise and subtle distinction between intrusion and corruption, compliance and consent. While virtue itself cannot be degraded, debased, or corrupted, the body in which the virtuous spirit is contained *is* subject to such offenses. The problem for the Lady derives not from any deficiency in her virtue but, instead, from her inability to use that virtue to protect her body. When the Lady's brothers cite her virtuous indifference to sin as proof of her security, they, too, get it wrong. The Elder, paraphrasing Plato, calls the chaste body the "unpolluted temple of the mind," free of the influences of the sensible world. The Younger Brother responds by likening philosophy itself to an idealized aesthetic realm: it is "musical as Apollo's lute, / And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,

<sup>206</sup> Shuger makes the important observation that, while male chastity entails merely the renunciation of sexual activity, female chastity depends not only upon the woman's own virtue but upon the virtue of those around her: rape is an ever-present threat. She goes on to argue that, by suggesting that female virtue is self-sufficient, Milton is relying upon a "male" conception of chastity. Debora Shuger, "'Gums of Glutinous Heat' and the Stream of Consciousness: The Theology of Milton's Maske," *Representations* 60 (Autumn, 1997), 1-21.

<sup>207</sup> Milton, *Comus*, l. 589-590.

/ where no crude surfet reigns.”<sup>208</sup> Yet these observations are useless in the face of the threat of violence. The masque reveals that the powers of virtue and the guarantees of invulnerability are sharply distinct: the Lady’s commitment to chastity does little to protect her from the advances of a creature bent on rapacious *aesthesis*.

When, at the climax of the masque, the Lady is glued to her chair by Comus, unable to move yet unwilling to taste, the vulnerability of her body and the uselessness of her ideals are dramatized most powerfully. At this point, three things might happen: the Lady might taste the elixir and be transformed, as Comus’ previous victims have been; she might taste it and find that her moral strength is sufficient to sustain her mental independence, and that she remains unchanged; or she can do nothing, refusing to taste at all, and remain paralyzed. By choosing the last of these possibilities, she is again relying on a fallacious notion of the protective benefit of preference: “That which is not good, is not delicious / To a wel-govern’d and wise appetite,” she tells Comus. But she cannot choose without testing first. She is attempting to bypass the principle underlying aesthetic interaction with the world, the principle that knowledge and opinion must derive from experience and trial. Unlike Guyon in the Cave of Mammon, who tests out and then refuses Mammon’s proffered riches, the Lady attempts to assert the power of a free choice that is unearned. Without testing, the Lady cannot claim any notion of taste. She is, as Milton writes in *Areopagitica*, “but a youngling in the contemplation of evil”; her virtue is “but a blank vertue, not a

<sup>208</sup> Milton, *Comus*, l.704-705.

pure; her whitenesse is but an excrementall whitenesse,” her innocence too brittle to withstand moral battle.<sup>209</sup>

That the Lady’s refusal is based upon an untested intuition only strengthens the position of Comus. As tasting’s exemplar, a creature of *aesthesis* to his very core, Comus is attempting to weaken the transcendent kind of virtue by recourse to the enchanting variety. When the Lady responds by affecting a preference she cannot actually have, she is revealing herself to be an inexperienced aesthetic subject, unfamiliar with the moral strength that real testing can confer. Sustained only by an abstract wisdom, the Lady finds that Comus cannot, indeed, “touch the freedom of my mind”: yet that imaginative freedom is narrow, and by closing the body off as a site through which experiential knowledge can be gained, the Lady cannot achieve somatic freedom or autonomy.

The result of the Lady’s wholesale rejection of *aesthesis* may reveal the power of virtue to refuse, but that power is, in the end, an unproductive one. When Sabrina steps in, the act of un-charming she performs represents a kind of failure. Were the Lady in possession of a critical mode by which she could at once taste and remain unmoved – were she a subject free enough, and safe enough, to engage in aesthetic experimentation – she could better negotiate the trial Comus forces upon her; she could fall back on the strength conferred by genuine free choice, earned through dangerously intimate interaction with the world. Possessed instead of a hollow confidence in the protective benefit of well-

<sup>209</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1006.

governed desire and intuitive virtue, and closed off from the means by which knowledge can be acquired, the Lady remains physically captive and, more significantly, caught in a moral impasse from which she cannot independently escape.

### *Areopagitica*

If *Comus* presents the conscience as a static protective force, capable of shielding the virtuous mind yet not of engaging dynamically with the world, *Areopagitica* considers the conscience instead to be a powerful means by which to regulate creativity. More explicitly than in any of his other works, Milton treats *textual* reception in *Areopagitica*, rather than the perceptual encounter broadly conceived. In its focus on the moral possibilities offered by reading, *Areopagitica* conceives of the process of textual interpretation as a phenomenological encounter: it requires evaluation and decision-making, yet it, like all receptive experience, withholds from the reader any possibility of absolute certainty about his or her conclusions. What is more, the rhetorical force of the text appeals to the judging capacity inherent in all worthy readers: a capacity not only to absorb but also to create a kind of meaning which bypasses questions of ultimate verifiability by holding within itself the persuasive power of independent conclusion. Milton considers the *process* of discernment inherent in good reading to be reception's highest goal, and *Areopagitica* endorses three routes to the acquisition of knowledge: seeing, seeking, and choosing. These activities, occupying in the

rhetoric of the tract the uncertain space between metaphor and directive, are the principal activities through which claims can be assessed and truth constructed.

In her discussion of *Areopagitica*, Lana Cable argues that “affective indeterminacy” is the central means by which Milton ensures that his readers engage actively and independently with his text. *Areopagitica*, Cable suggests, never fully discloses a single meaning, proceeding rather through a series of evocative analogies, creating a receptive indeterminacy that requires work on the part of the reader in order to craft meaning from the text’s ambiguous images. I suggest a revision to Cable’s account. Rather than endorsing an aesthetics of affect, Milton in *Areopagitica* is engaging in an exploration of knowledge-production, of the limits of certainty, and of the mechanisms of self-awareness. To that end he is utilizing not only the productive indeterminacy of a provocative text, but emphasizing the more fundamental indeterminacy at the heart of all human knowledge. By suggesting that no truth can be available to a perceiver outside the transforming container of his or her mind, encumbered inevitably by limitations and biases, Milton is also underscoring the necessity of self-evaluation and of independent discernment to all intellectual endeavor. Milton’s reader, that is, experiences the text as Husserlian *noema*: its particular truth is constructed in the tension between private mental experience and the material of the experiential world. Still, even as it reminds us of the imperfection inherent in all knowledge-seeking, *Areopagitica* is a celebration of the power of the verbal image and a masterful performance of rhetorical skill. By asserting the importance of independent discernment while at the same time offering itself up as a work of art

capable of engaging sensuously with its readers, *Areopagitica* makes a case for an aesthetics of free choice and discernment, and for a receptive process predicated upon an intimate act of testing.

Written in response to the Licensing Order of 1643, *Areopagitica* is a defense of free press whose deepest interest lies in defending the individual conscience. Arguing that Parliamentary oversight should be replaced by the dictates of conscience, Milton enjoins Parliament to grant its citizens the freedom to pursue truth, a freedom which is the ground of all intellectual freedoms: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”<sup>210</sup> As we shall see, the conscience in Milton’s scheme is the force underlying all reception, all interpretation; but he does not then consider conscience-driven work to be infallible or unerring. On the contrary, while Milton finds the processes of seeing, seeking, and choosing to be, by necessity, regulated by the conscience – as all moral and ethical choices should be – he also finds a productive instability in the shifting engagements of the mind and senses, whose predilections cannot be fully controlled by an overseeing internal authority.

The process of seeking is, for Milton, the highest form of learning. In an image often misread, Milton likens the process of truth-seeking to Isis’ search for the pieces of Osiris’ mutilated body: “The sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl’d body of *Osirus*, 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...Suffer not these licencing

<sup>210</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1002.

prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking.”<sup>211</sup> The force of the passage lies not in any confidence in the feasibility of reconstructing truth as a whole and complete body. Rather, it depicts knowledge-seeking as the practice of deliberate testing. Seeking, rather than finding, is the essential principle, and seeking requires, in turn, the deployment of the powers of choosing which are most important to the aesthetics of reception – discernment, judgment, and evaluation. The “sad friends of truth” are, above all, truth-testers, committed to sampling the materials of the created world.

The power of the image, a power which *Areopagitica* itself wields expertly, is a power which is not restricted to the sensible, but which is, in its highest forms, inextricably bound up with reason. Verbal images are not misleading or oppressive objects of veneration, but rather liberating forces. “Who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye,” Milton asserts, revising the very category of the image.<sup>212</sup> Here God’s image, encapsulated in the text of the worthy book, is a dynamic force, rather than a static icon; it is a power, rather than a quantity. The image-text demands not readerly acquiescence but rather the reader’s engagement in the processes of seeking and choosing, crucial to all knowledge-acquisition.

“Reason is but choosing,” Milton declares midway through his tract. And choosing requires, necessarily, the judgment of the conscience, whose ethical

<sup>211</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1018.

<sup>212</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 999.

directives undergird the dictates of reason. At the same time, reasoned choosing entails an engagement with the aesthetic, with the seductions of the image-text, whose productive potential Milton explains in a passage with striking similarities to the passage equating books with the Image of God and, in turn, with reason. Here Milton tackles the problem of the image more explicitly in terms of aesthetic seduction: “God therefore left [Adam] free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence.”<sup>213</sup> The “provoking object,” the Tree of Knowledge, is too a kind of text holding within itself the promise of moral wisdom, predicated as it is upon a knowledge of goodness’ opposite, a knowledge which, for Milton, is crucial for virtue’s exercise. The Tree of Knowledge is, then, a dark corollary to the provocative book in which reason is enclosed and which necessitates a productive mode of textual engagement. Adam and Eve’s seminal act of disobedience establishes the crucial relationship between human intellection and truth, predicated as it always is upon choosing.<sup>214</sup>

For Milton, choosing rightly requires a careful negotiation of the temptations not only of sin but also of convention, opinion, *doxa* – categories of information that, rather than existing forever outside the boundaries of truth, can be marshaled to the service of truth by a process of prudent discernment. Opinion exists on a continuum with truth, capable of being transformed into knowledge by

<sup>213</sup>Milton, *Areopagitica* 1010.

<sup>214</sup> Timothy Rosendale reads the Tree of Knowledge as “a pure and transcendent sign...it finally refers to nothing but absolute difference. Between God and even prelapsarian humanity there is an unbridgeable and inexpressible gulf, and the very arbitrariness of the sign insists upon this.” (Milton, Hobbes, and the Liturgical Subject.” *Studies in English Literature* 44:1 (Winter 2004), 128.) Yet I see the Tree-as-sign is, rather than transcendent and static, an encapsulation of the dynamic of moral choice.

the creative power of the reader-as-maker: “Where there is much desire to learn,” Milton explains, “there of necessity will be much argument, much writing, many opinions; for *opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.*”<sup>215</sup> Indeed, the slippage between opinion and knowledge is crucial to the story Milton tells of Dionysius of Alexandria, whose own endorsement of intellectual freedom and sense of the importance of open access to contrary ideas was inspired by a revelation from God. Warned by a colleague not to read “defiling volumes,” Dionysius “fell into a new debate with himself what was to be thought; when suddenly a vision sent from God, it is his own Epistle that so everrs it, confirm’d him in these words: Read any books what ever come to thy hands, for thou are sufficient both to judge aright, and to examine each matter.”<sup>216</sup> The passage is an elegant dramatization of Milton’s receptive principles, a depiction of exemplary receptive engagement with the world. Dionysius’ revelatory vision, couched in the language of somatic apprehension and aesthetic seduction, gives way not to certainty but rather to a deeper and more sustained process of discernment than was possible before the revelation occurred.

Indeed, the revelation not only explicitly endorses deliberation and a critical approach to texts but, as a text itself, demands such investigation. Dionysius’ acceptance of the revelation is, we learn, predicated upon its correspondence to established evidence and to the dictates of reason: “To this revelation he assented the sooner...because it was answerable to that of the

<sup>215</sup> Milton, *Areopagtica*, 1015; italics mine.

<sup>216</sup> Milton, *Areopagtica*, 1005.

Apostle to the Thessalonians, Prove all things, hold fast to that which is good.”<sup>217</sup>

Not only does Dionysius seek corroborating evidence against which to test his vision; he also finds in the evidence itself a repeated injunction to approach all perception with a critical attitude. The command to “prove all things,” circles back upon itself, requiring Dionysius to test not only the validity of earthly texts but of God’s text, as well, measuring it against the considerations of conscience as well as of reason. As an illustration of the extraordinary demands made upon the receptive subject – demands that apply equally to divine revelation as to textual products of the human imagination – the story of Dionysius sums up the challenges inherent in Milton’s notion of reception.

The Dionysius passage, by including even divine revelation within the purview of legitimate human evaluation, calls our attention to the phenomenological attitude that characterizes Milton’s receptive system as a whole. The demands of being-in-the-world call for an approach to knowledge which does not reject the image, or the sphere of the revelatory and the divinely granted; yet, keenly attentive to the challenges of unverifiability, Milton places perceptible knowledge at the heart of a moral imperative to seek truth. The three principles of reception in *Areopagitica* – seeing, seeking, and choosing – are founded upon necessity, forged out of the uncertainty of all perceptual knowledge in the wake of the Fall. Yet they together form a receptive system that is rigorous

<sup>217</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1005.

in asserting the centrality of the human imagination, the power of aesthetic testing, and the power of discernment to a larger project of truth-seeking.

In Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, Eve tries to convince Adam of the advantages of working separately in Eden: they will be more efficient that way, she argues, because when the two work in close contact, “Looks intervene and smiles, or object new / Casual discourse draw on, which intermits / Our days work brought to little.”<sup>218</sup> When Adam replies that by staying together they grant each other spiritual strength, Eve counters with an argument that might have come straight out of *Areopagitica*:

And what is Faith, Love, Vertue unassaid  
Alone, without exterior help sustaind?  
...Fragile is our happiness, if this be so,  
And *Eden* were no *Eden* thus exposed.<sup>219</sup>

Eve’s endorsement of choice in the separation scene is a sign of things to come: it is part of a gradual shift in *Paradise Lost*’s middle books away from a prelapsarian realm of certainty, toward an acknowledgement of the epistemological doubt which must plague all of mankind after the Fall.<sup>220</sup> Eve’s *Areopagitica* moment is a crucial preliminary to sin, and a necessary antecedent for the invention of a postlapsarian mode of knowledge-seeking.

<sup>218</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9. 223-225.

<sup>219</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.335-336, 340-341.

<sup>220</sup> Joan Bennett suggests that Adam is engaged in “noetic” reasoning in the separation scene: he “reasons largely noetically by arranging axioms in their natural hierarchy...Eve resorts to the more tedious method of syllogisms.” (*Milton’s Antinomianism*, 198.) I differ with Bennett both in my understanding of *noêsis* and in sense that the crucial tension in the scene lies not in Adam and Eve’s divergent habits of mind. Rather, I wish to show that the scene gestures toward a postlapsarian mode of deliberation while remaining comfortably within the strictures of a divinely-sanctioned moral universe.

### *Paradise Lost*

What happens when truth, once as omnipresent and accessible as water or air, becomes suddenly unattainable? The habits, rules, and methods governing perception, learning, and belief must all be revised, and Books 8 and 9 of *Paradise Lost* depict just such a revision. The two books together chart the emergence of a postlapsarian *aesthesis*, a mode of critical perceptual engagement crafted out of necessity after Adam and Eve's radical alienation from God. Before the Fall, perception and knowledge are closely linked: a subject can possess innate knowledge, supplied by God, or is granted the opportunity to learn through discursive exchange with God himself or with his angelic messengers. Yet epistemological uncertainty is one of the wages of the Fall, and the imperfect *aesthesis* with which Adam and Eve must suddenly encounter the world is fraught with problems. The emergence of postlapsarian *aesthesis* – and the linked activities of seeing, seeking, and choosing which are its key features – shatters the prelapsarian conflation of perception, belief, and knowledge, radically separating them. That separation consigns mankind to eternal doubt but allows, at the same time, for the development of a sophisticated mode of self-knowing.

At the very beginning, Adam tells us, perception *was* knowledge. In the first moments of his creation, as Adam recalls in Book 8, perception and knowledge were so closely enmeshed as to be virtually indistinguishable. To see was to name, and to name was to know. Adam may not have known himself even after a conscientious self-examination – “My self I then perus'd, and Limb by

Limb / Survey'd...But who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not."<sup>221</sup>

Yet he can, somehow, identify the world around him. "To speak I tri'd, and forthwith spake, / My Tongue obey'd and readily could name / What e're I saw. Though Sun, said I, faire Light, / And thou enlight'nd Earth, so fresh and gay, / Ye Hills and Dales, ye Rivers, Woods, and Plains"; he effortlessly names them all. The passage is a fantasy of effortless and naïve knowledge-seeking, a seeking that culminates always and automatically in knowing. Naming the animals at God's behest a few lines later, Adam is once again on steady epistemological ground. "I nam'd them, as they pass'd, and understood / Thir Nature, with such knowledg God endu'd / My sudden apprehension."<sup>222</sup> Again perception and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. This is the kind of intuition that obtains in the first hours of Adam's creation: what Plato in a fanciful moment might have called *noêsis alogos*, knowledge obtained intuitively and outside of the strictures of reasoned striving. In these first moments of creation, then, Adam is not haunted by illusory perception, nor troubled by the ethical demands of epistemological uncertainty. Those problems will arise only later.

Adam's first dream hints at a dark alternative to the easy perceptual knowledge of his first consciousness. For the first time, the problem of verifiability intrudes upon the system of effortless perceptual correspondence of word and thing. Falling asleep – described as a melting-away of consciousness,

<sup>221</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.267-272.

<sup>222</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.352-355. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Milton explains that Adam is "endowed with natural wisdom, holiness and righteousness...Moreover he could not have given names to the animals in that extempore way, without very great intelligence." (1.7)

“passing to my former state / Insensible, and forthwith to dissolve”<sup>223</sup> – Adam is thrust into the realm of unverifiable perception:

When suddenly stood at my head a dream,  
Whose inward apparition gently mov’d  
My fancy to believe I yet had being,  
And livd: One came, methought, of shape Divine,  
And said, thy Mansion wants thee, Adam, rise...<sup>224</sup>

The dream operates in the sphere of fancy and belief, and throws into question the mechanisms of perception which, just moments before, provided Adam with knowledge of his surroundings. The hazy language of perceptual uncertainty hangs around the description, suffused as it is with an anxiety about the boundaries between illusion and reality – an anxiety missing from Adam’s first moments of consciousness and his early discovery of the automatic correspondence of signifier and signified. When Adam wakes, troubled by a hunger for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, we are again in a world of unquestioned reality: “I wak’d, and found / Before mine Eyes all real, / As the dream had lively shadowd.”<sup>225</sup> Yet the dream has introduced to Adam the particular seduction of aesthetic, sense-based knowledge, whose attractions would prove increasingly powerful.

The extended conversation Adam holds with Raphael at the end of Book 8 is dominated by a mode of knowledge-acquisition quite different from the kind of effortless intuitive perception that characterized the early moments of Adam’s consciousness. This discursive mode, possible only in a prelapsarian context in

<sup>223</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.289-290

<sup>224</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.291-296

<sup>225</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.309-311.

which Adam and Eve have direct access to the realm of the divine, grants Adam the opportunity to test out a burgeoning critical power. Adam's experience of knowledge has up to this point been confined to the intuitive and the unquestionable, and now he finds himself not only a curious but a critical reader of Raphael's instructions. Perhaps the most famous of these moments of disagreement comes at the end of Book 8, when Raphael offers his Neoplatonic account of perfected love:

In loving thou dost well, in passion not,  
Wherein true Love consists not; love refines  
The thoughts, and heart enlarges; hath his seat  
In Reason, and is judicious...<sup>226</sup>

In Adam's reply, he expresses his dissatisfaction with what seems, to him, to be an idealized, unrealistic account of love, countering with an admission of his erotic desire:

Harmonie to behold in wedded pair  
More grateful then harmonious sound to the eare.  
Yet these subject not; I to thee disclose  
What inward thence I feel, not therefore foild,  
Who meet with various objects, from the sense  
Variously representing; yet still free  
Approve the best, and follow what I approve.<sup>227</sup>

Adam's reply is at once an endorsement of sensual love and an acknowledgement that such sense-based experiences do not impinge on free choice. What is more, it simultaneously defends and performs evaluative work. As a rejection of Raphael's Neoplatonic account, Adam's response is a mitigated, yet unmistakable, assertion of interpretive independence. As a defense of aesthetic

<sup>226</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.587-590

<sup>227</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.604-610.

experience, it depicts sensible pleasure as fundamentally compatible with free evaluation, hinting at a notion of aesthetic testing and critical taste. Indeed, Adam's account is consistent with the system of seeing, seeking, and choosing presented in *Areopagitica*, yet without the anxiety and doubt fundamental to the postlapsarian receptive stance. Adam's rejection of Raphael's description of love is the first act of a critical subject who already favors experiential truth over the views of another mind.

While the first moments of Adam's creation depict a fantasy of perceptual knowledge, and his conversation with Raphael illustrates the interpretive possibilities granted by discursive exchange, it is not until Book 9 that we are shown the full force of the aesthetic, and plunged, with Adam and Eve, into the kind of phenomenological uncertainty which is central to postlapsarian perception. By pushing aesthetic experimentation to its moral limit and disobeying God, Eve paves the way not merely for Edenic expulsion but also for the epistemological uncertainty which is, outside of Eden at least, the hallmark of all human knowledge-seeking. The Fall ushers in a new mode of perceptual encounter, revising the parameters of knowledge and interpretation by underscoring the importance of subjective, experiential learning. Such an approach to knowledge moves beyond the previously-established categories of natural-intuitive (such as Adam possesses at the first moments of his consciousness) and discursive learning, carving space out for a new *aesthesis* predicated upon the linked activities of seeing, seeking, and choosing, and infused with an abiding sense of doubt.

Even the moments before the Fall seem to foreshadow the epistemological doubt that follows it; the Serpent's first conversation with Eve differs crucially from previous modes of human discourse. Satan himself sets the tone at first. Benefitting from the endorsement Eve makes to Adam of a radical moral inclusiveness, Satan's first speech to Eve piques her curiosity by its very existence:

What may this mean? Language of Man pronounce't  
By Tongue of Brute, and human sense exprest?<sup>228</sup>

As her questions continue, we find that Eve considers the Serpent's origins and intentions to be legible in just the way that the story of Adam's creation, or Raphael's explanations of the universe, are explicable and accessible to human understanding:

Redouble then this miracle, and say,  
How cam'st thou speakable of mute, and how  
To me so friendly grown above the rest  
Of brutal kind, that daily are in sight?<sup>229</sup>

Using the same discursive method that served Adam well in his conversations with Raphael, Eve asks Satan directly for an explanation of his existence, and, bolstered by the success of Adam in gaining discursive knowledge, she is inclined to believe him when he tells her that his power of speech derives from his encounter with the fruit of the Tree. Satan's reply is bold as it conflates, for the first time in human history, aesthetic desire and pleasure with knowledge: the Serpent claims to be drawn not only by a craving for the fruit but by the beauty

<sup>228</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.553-554.

<sup>229</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.562-565

and fragrance of the Tree; the “strange alteration” he experiences is at once available to his perception and to his newly-evolved reason alike:

Sated at length, ere long I might perceive /  
Strange alteration in me, to degree /  
Of Reason in my inward Powers, and Speech  
Wanted not long...<sup>230</sup>

Satan’s account, calculated as it is to persuade Eve, depicts a transition from aesthetic seduction to self-knowledge: a transition whose particular appeal derives not merely from the Serpent’s apparently remarkable transformation from unreasoning and nonlinguistic creature to rational conversationalist, but more fundamentally in the moment of self-perception. “Ere long I might perceive / Strange alteration in me” – it is the promise of this self-knowing that attracts Eve (already in possession of speech and reason herself) most powerfully to the fruit.

The promise of this self-perception, this sophisticated mode of introspection, changes the epistemological landscape for Eve. Even deciding whether or not to eat requires a new weighing of possibilities and options – a radically indeterminate mode of choosing. While Satan’s shimmering rhetoric holds its own seductions, the temptation scene’s deepest interest is not in the pitfalls of rhetorical persuasion but rather in the invention of a new mode of critical, self-directed thought. Eve’s private deliberation here is an analysis not only of the choice itself but of her own desires and needs. The monologue gives us a glimpse of postlapsarian *aesthesis*, characterized as it is by the weighing of options, the careful examination of possible truths:

For good unknown, sure is not had, or had

<sup>230</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.598-600.

And yet unknown, is as not had at all.  
In plain then, what forbids he but to know,  
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?<sup>231</sup>

By questioning the very premises of Eden's ethical code, Eve is removing herself from the discursive circle in which she and Adam found ready answers for their questions in the explanations of God and his angels. She is, for the first time, an independent critical subject, plagued by uncertainty. Eve considers God's edict to be merely one truth-possibility among many – just as in *Areopagitica* Dionysius checked his revelation against his prior knowledge and his own beliefs. Eve is caught in the quintessential human quandary despite her unmediated access to God's Word: truth is now not merely to be considered and questioned within the context of discourse. Instead, Eve has become radically alienated from any sphere of explication.

The moment of the Fall is a moment of supreme tasting: drawing the fruit to her lips, Eve enacts the quintessential task of the postlapsarian investigator, sampling the morally perilous materials of the world. Eve is drawn in initially not only by the promise of the knowledge the fruit will supply but also by its fragrance, visual beauty, and imagined flavor, and she describes the moments after her Fall in terms of sensation – a kind of sensation linked, just as Satan's was, with self-knowing: "I feel," she exclaims,

...not Death, but Life  
Augmented, op'nd Eyes, new Hopes, new Joyes,  
Taste so Divine, that what of sweet before  
Hath toucht my sense, flat seems to this, and harsh."<sup>232</sup>

<sup>231</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.755-758

<sup>232</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 983-987

Even in the first moments of her Fall Eve is judging, making distinctions. As the climax of Eve's aesthetic transaction, this moment re-makes the boundaries of sensual pleasure by giving Eve a new standard by which to evaluate all other sensations. This new power of independent evaluation, shown by Eve's enthusiastic use of subjective terms like "feeling" and "seeming," takes the place of the certainty promised by the discursive activities of asking and knowing. Even by this point Eve's doubting habit of mind has passed to Adam like a contagion. Upon hearing Eve's account, Adam questions the truth of God's promise:

Perhaps thou shalt not Die, perhaps the Fact  
Is not so heinous now, foretasted Fruit,  
Profane'd first by the Serpent, by him first  
Made common and unhallowed ere our taste;  
Nor yet on him found deadly, he yet lives.<sup>233</sup>

The move away from certainty, towards an aesthetic, test-based mode of engagement with the world, then, has begun – it began even before the Fall itself, during Eve's first moments of deliberation – and there is no turning back. The qualities Adam and Eve now adopt are the very qualities of critical inquiry itself. By seeking in the seductions of the aesthetic the key to a deeper knowledge, Eve is operating under the premises of a postlapsarian system of knowledge-seeking, characterized by a valorization of experiential knowledge and an approach to the subjective which acknowledges its value in a world of epistemological uncertainty. By performing the essential tasks of seeing, seeking, and choosing, Eve establishes herself as a postlapsarian subject, troubled by doubt yet

<sup>233</sup>Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 927-933.

undeterred in the project of independent inquiry. Those qualities are the unmistakable hallmarks of Milton's receptive subject, alienated from God yet seeking always the fulfillment, however partial, of a never-diminishing desire for truth.<sup>234</sup>

Taken together, the work of Spenser, Puttenham, Sidney, and Donne tells the story of a cultural anxiety: an anxiety about the parameters and limitations of the receptive body, the capacities of the readerly imagination, and the instructive potential of language. Yet the continual revisions, re-conceptualizations, and theoretical shifts performed by these poets both within and around their poetry also demonstrate the depth and richness of a receptive discourse still under development. As they struggled to pin down the nature of subjective experience, the poets we have considered invented new ways in which to think about the self.

The contribution of Milton, the final poet in our study, to this discourse was both complex and profound. By foregrounding the importance of the subjective and experiential in a program of aesthetics, and by valuing, at the same time, the infallibility of received knowledge, Milton's work grapples with a tension between two modes of learning: knowledge, whose essential act is *aesthesis* or testing, and wisdom, which can be intuitively known but never verified by the senses. Milton is attracted at once to the educative possibilities of

<sup>234</sup> Though *Paradise Regain'd* will depict a series of temptations that echo the emblematic temptation of Eve and the Satanic testing which all mankind must endure, Milton's shorter epic has less to say about the problem of doubt. An exemplary chooser, the Son of God is untroubled by the doubt that plagues ordinary human beings: possessed of a wisdom withheld from fallen Man, the Son of God finds no struggle in the process of discernment, and though he is, like a postlapsarian subject, enjoined to evaluate the materials of sin, he is at the same time fully in control of the moral scenarios with which he is presented.

experiential testing and repelled by the contingent, unverifiable nature of human experience; he valorizes the sphere of wisdom, divinely-granted and unquestionable, yet worries about the tendency of God's Word to crystallize into a static icon. In attempting to strike a balance between the spheres of knowledge and of intuition, of testing and of belief, Milton places discernment at the heart of a readerly aesthetics, yet gestures continually toward the moral possibilities of intuition.

The decades following *Paradise Lost* saw an expansion of the critical powers of the subject and an embrace of the independent, unverifiable perceptual encounter as a valuable way of experiencing the world. The reader became a newly autonomous arbiter of literary value. Enlightenment theories of aesthetics sought to integrate the processes of private critical examination and aesthetic response, and taste gradually emerged as a core value in a newly-ascendant system of critical evaluation. The re-invention of the receptive subject in the decades after Milton brought with it the invention, too, of new modes of self-understanding which acknowledged and even embraced the doubt that must necessarily underlie all belief – doubt which Milton, an early advocate for the critical subject, exposes as the dynamic force driving all human inquiry.

This move toward critical reception achieved its full flowering in the century after Milton: Ernst Cassirer called the eighteenth century the “age of criticism,” and the rise of aesthetics as an area of philosophical inquiry brought

questions of critical apprehension to the fore.<sup>235</sup> Over a hundred years after *Paradise Lost*, Kant offers a celebration of aesthetic choice in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. In that work, Kant emphasizes the importance of the radically private receptive encounter:

For the judgment of taste consists precisely in the fact that it calls a thing beautiful only in accordance with a quality in it by means of which it corresponds with our way of receiving it. Moreover, it is required of every judgment that is supposed to prove the taste of the subject that the subject judge for himself, without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others and first inform himself about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the same object, and thus that he should pronounce his judgment not as imitation, because a thing really does please universally, but *a priori*.<sup>236</sup>

The key power of this Kantian subject, the “judgment of taste,” is a subjective power with an objective aim. It requires self-evaluation, an ability to separate out the private aesthetic encounter from social consensus, and it considers the subjective experience of sensation to be a mode of judgment, yet it has as its goal the establishment of a universal standard of quality.

I have attempted to show that the roots of such a conception of the aesthetic encounter lie in early modern debates about the nature of reception, which sought to interrogate the parameters of the human body and the nature of the imagination, and to reframe subjective experience in universal terms. These debates took place within poetry, not just outside it; the theoretical flexibility offered by the fictive sphere gave early modern poets the freedom to explore a

<sup>235</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, tr. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 255.

<sup>236</sup> Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 162-163.

range of questions about the relationship between audience and art without committing themselves unilaterally to any one position. Along the way, they invented not only new modes of receptive practice but new modes of subjectivity itself, theorizing the readerly imagination in the productive tension between aesthetic object and receptive body.

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