

Writing Sight and Blindness in Early Modern England

by

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## ABSTRACT

“Writing Sight and Blindness in Early Modern England” explores two interlocking phenomena. First, I analyse the expressive power of non-normative visual conditions such as extreme visual acuity, partial sightedness, and blindness in texts ranging from Shakespeare to Milton. Second, I demonstrate how poetic language registers visual ability or lack, and how it changes in its systems of reference and at the structural level to bear and express variously-sighted creative aptitudes. This work draws on foundational concepts of contemporary disability studies (specifically that of disability as a kind of embodied knowledge) and current scholarship on the senses (especially sightedness) to contribute back to these fields and introduce to early modern studies a sense of the precise potential of patterned language to bear the weight of visual difference. As a historicist, I examine the cultural work performed by sight and blindness in early modern England; as a scholar of literature invested in the workings of language, I assess what it means to think of blindness in terms of language. The arc of the dissertation is from Shakespeare, a dramatic poet, imagining blindness, to Milton, a blind poet, imagining worlds. This is an arc from the limits of the sighted imagination, as compellingly owned and laid out by Shakespeare, to the capacities of the blind one, as evidenced by Milton.

I begin with Shakespeare. Blindness on the Shakespearean stage, I argue, is about the limits of vision, but also about the limits of knowledge and justice. Through an examination of the Simpcox episode in *2 Henry VI*, where an audience is made complicit within the discovery of a blind fraud, and *King Lear*, where scenes of extraordinary inhumanity are performed onstage, Chapter I

shows how this theatre calls extravagant attention to its own theatricality, and demonstrates that the arts of metaphor and language work as reparations in these blindingly violent worlds.

Chapter II contemplates a pivotal literary treatment of the *presence* of sight. I first use the three earliest witnesses of *The Temple* to assert George Herbert's orchestration of a visual assembly of textual meaning in his poetry. Then, I read Herbert's often troubled poetic constructions of sight to reveal the poet's desiring of a kind of blindness—for only in the visually withdrawn and introspective state is it possible for him to access God's regard.

I finally come to Milton and what I call his *blind language* (poetic language created while blind). In Chapter III, I read the shorter poems composed during Milton's approaching and final blindness to place the visual loss centrally within his poetic achievements, and to argue for his decisive accommodation of visual difference through poetic language. In Chapter IV, I read *Paradise Lost* for blind language. I identify five characteristics of blind language—the metaphorical, structural, cognitive, rhetorical, and affective—and show how it celebrates its own mnemonic power, commands its reader's participation, takes risks, and excavates words and concepts and linguistic formations that are darkness until made visible.

## Introduction

A startling image clinches John Milton's argument for the kind of free speech, thought, writing, and publishing that he wishes to advance in what would become one of the most consequential prose documents ever to be published in English, *Areopagitica* (1644). Milton's exquisite sense of argumentative climax is evident in the conclusion to a crucial section of this work as he asserts: "who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the sheerest elimination of reason is made possible by annihilating it in the primary and originary place of intellection and perception: the eye.

I begin with this passage for two reasons. First, for its acute indication of the equation between the eye—and by association, the function of the eye, sight—and intellectual ability. Early moderns inherited this equation between sight and intellection from antiquity and the medievals and ripened it into their own intense and complex ocularcentrism. That is, this passage allows us to see—in the full and weighty sense of that verb—the causal parallels drawn between the eye and sight, on the one hand, and on the other hand, between the eye/sight and knowledge/comprehension/reason. My second reason for beginning with this passage is the haunting power that Milton's statement achieves when we know that its author would soon lose both his eyes, over a long period of about eight years, and eventually proceed to compose the

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<sup>1</sup> *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 492. All citations from Milton's prose in this dissertation are from Don M. Wolfe and others, eds, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-1982).

defining epic of the English language. It therefore allows me to ask: in a world where to kill a good book is *to kill reason itself as it were in the eye*, what does it mean to not *have* a seeing eye, that ostensible place of image-making that is supposed to be the foundation for all reason, all reading, all thought, all understanding? What does it mean to find oneself in possession of a non-normative eye—or two? Thus, pulling back from, yet mindful of, the *image* at work here, what does it mean to see differently, or not see at all? And, pulling ahead from, yet mindful of, the *physicality* at the heart of non-normative sight, what does it mean to find language for these various visual experiences?

This dissertation is founded upon these questions, and it explores two interlocking phenomena. First, I analyse the expressive power of non-normative visual conditions such as extreme visual acuity, blindness, and gradual loss of sight in texts ranging from Shakespeare to Milton. Next, I demonstrate how poetic language registers visual ability or lack, and how it changes in its systems of reference and at the structural level to bear and express variously-sighted creative aptitudes. My work draws on some key concepts of contemporary disability studies (specifically that of disability being a body of a particular kind of knowledge) and current scholarship on the senses (especially sightedness) to contribute back to these fields and to introduce to early modern studies a sense of the precise potential of patterned language to bear the weight of visual difference. As a historicist, I examine the cultural work performed by sight and blindness in early modern England; as a scholar of literature intimately invested in the workings of language, I assess what it means to think of blindness in terms of language. Thus, the intellectual arc of the dissertation is from Shakespeare, a dramatic poet, imagining blindness, to Milton, a blind poet, imagining worlds. This Shakespeare-to-Milton trajectory is also about an arc from the limits of the sighted imagination, as compellingly and even compassionately owned and laid out by Shakespeare, to the capacities of the blind one, as evidenced by Milton.

In this introduction, I shall first discuss the pertinent historical context for the authors and texts I examine—and lay out briefly something of the ocular-obsessiveness of early modern England. I shall then describe this dissertation’s subtle yet serious indebtedness to and conversation with contemporary disability studies. My readings will consistently be anchored in early modern texts, and in particular, various kinds of early modern poetic language. But I reference this present-day critical school of thought for the conceptual work it allows current readers to do to recognise and recover the importance of variant creative aptitudes and conditions such as those negotiated by Milton, for instance. This is not to propose easy equivalences between the early modern period and culture and our time and place. But it is to recognise that long before scholars theorised disability as a field of inquiry, the lived realities of variously dis/abled lives compelled individuals to find language to articulate their positions with respect to the prevailing world around them. In the final section of this introduction, I shall provide a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

### **An Ocularcentric Early Modernity**

In science, in religion, and in the linguistic and literary inheritance of early modern England, there was no getting away from an equation between vision and intellection. In a world in which some of the most exciting scientific discoveries were related to optical technology, there was overwhelming general interest in the function of the eyes. Numerous pamphlets advertised spectacles, perspective-glasses, and prospect-glasses. In praise or as warning, the eye stood in for both physical sense and intellectual reason. With momentum gained from scientific advances in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the seventeenth century saw human vision extend to both worlds beyond worlds, and worlds within worlds. Galileo Galilei opened up the heavens to human eyes with *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610), which paved the way for human understanding of heavenly bodies, their movements, and their properties. And Robert Hooke’s exactly illustrated *Micrographia* (1665),

which presented the smallest of visible things in eerie magnification and therefore wonder, invited a larger public to the scientific community's excitement with microscopy.

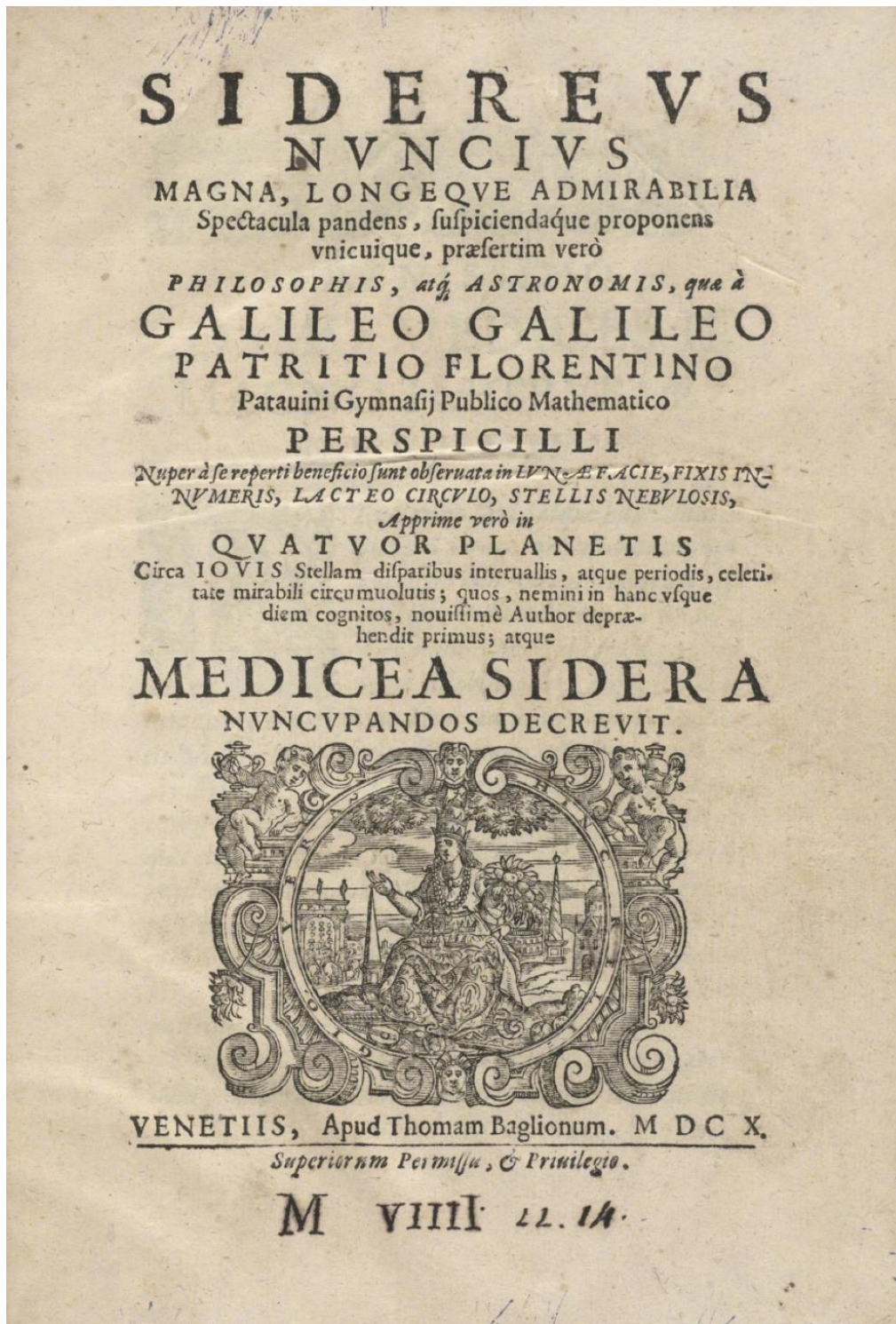


Figure 1. Title page of *Sidereus Nuncius* (Venice, 1610)

**MICROGRAPHIA:**  
OR SOME  
*Physiological Descriptions*  
OF  
**MINUTE BODIES**  
MADE BY  
**MAGNIFYING GLASSES.**  
WITH  
**OBSERVATIONS and INQUIRIES** thereupon.

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By *R. HOOKE*, Fellow of the **ROYAL SOCIETY.**

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*Non possis oculo quantum contendere Linceus,  
Non tamen idcirco contemnas Lippus inungi. Horat. Ep. lib. 1.*

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**LONDON**, Printed by *Jo. Martyn*, and *Ja. Allestry*, Printers to the  
**ROYAL SOCIETY**, and are to be sold at their Shop at the *Bell* in  
S. Paul's Church-yard. **M DC LX V.**

Figure 2. Title page of *Micrographia* (London, 1665)

Johannes Kepler's *Ad Vitellionem Paralipomena* (1604), elucidating the mechanism of sight, paved the way for possibilities of ameliorating physical vision. René Descartes's "Dioptrique"—dealing with light, refraction, retinal images, means of perfecting vision, lenses, telescopes, and methods of cutting lenses—in *Discours de la Méthode* (1637) was soon translated into English. Public lectures at Gresham College on scientific advances in England and the continent kept an interested audience informed of the new and exhilarating directions of optical technology. Use of lenses as vision-correctives reached the point where the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers received its Royal Charter from Charles I in 1629. And on the continent, by 1638, Galileo, who had spent a lifetime watching and depicting the heavens, was a blind man in house arrest for refusing to retract his stance that the universe was bigger than anyone's imaginings.

In a reflection of the availability of such physical in-sight and far-distance-sight, language carried the means of referring to intellectual and spiritual depravity in terms of ailment of the eyes. Correctives were prescribed in the terminology of the new optical technology.<sup>2</sup> David Lindberg, Geoffrey Cantor, and Mark A. Smith severally point out how well the new manifestation of light could be seen to conform with the discourse of contemporary natural theology: light and the eye were designed to suit one another, with the particles of light being so small as not to damage the eye, and the light of the sun being just right to sustain life.<sup>3</sup> God had designed well. The English language

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<sup>2</sup> There are extant, from the century, more than sixty pamphlets with titles containing explicit visual metaphors. For instance: the anonymous *Eye Cleard; or, A Preservative for the Sight* ([London], 1644); John Vicars, *A Prospective Glasse to Looke into Heaven* (London, 1618); John Floyd, *A Paire of Spectacles for Sir Humfrey Linde to See his Way Withall* (Rouen, 1631); Nathaniel Culverwell, *Spiritual Opticks* (Cambridge, 1651).

<sup>3</sup> The nature of light was still debated, but since Kepler's establishment of the mechanism of vision, the intromission theory of light (that external beams enter the eye from objects seen) had won out over the extramission theory (that visual beams are generated from the eye). Against this groundwork, Newton's *Optics* (1704) could consider light as "matter." See David Lindberg and Geoffrey Cantor, *The Discourse of Light from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Los Angeles: University



carried, then as now, words indebted to the visual function: “idea” (from the Greek *ἰδεῖν* to see), “theory” (from the Greek *θεωρία*, the action of viewing), “intuition” (from the Latin *intueri*, to look at, observe).<sup>4</sup> If until this point, in the thinking of the classical and medieval, light and sight had been considered important, visual ability now possessed an exclusionary potential. The lightless were, in a demonstrable sense, outside the realm of intellectual or spiritual development. Science provided sanction to the firmly-established religious idea of light as imperative for the visionary. Such a condemnation of those without access to physical light might seem unnecessary. After all, had Christ himself not absolved the man blind from birth of blame?<sup>5</sup> But the blind may recall that whenever Christ cured blindness, there occurred a reinforcement of the alliance of faith or favour with sight. If someone did not have sight restored to them, their spiritual condition or prospects only looked more desperate still. In this tradition of intense anxiety over the loss of sight, George Hakewill penned *The Vanitie of the Eye First Beganne for the Comfort of a Gentlewoman Bereaved of her Sight, and since Vpon Occasion Enlarged & Published for the Common Good* (Oxford, 1608). This volume claims to “console” a gentlewoman bereaved of her sight. Yet Hakewill succeeds only in laying out his own nervousness about what a lack of eyesight means in the world he inhabits. And it is a similar edginess that produces in Richard Standfast what is desperate of solace in *Blind Mans Meditations*

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of California Press, 1985), and Mark A. Smith, *From Sight to Light: The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> “Idea,” from classical Latin *idea* (in Platonic philosophy) eternal archetype, in post-classical Latin also form, image, likeness, image existing in the mind, from ancient Greek *ἰδέα* form, appearance, kind, sort, class, from the stem of *ἰδεῖν* to see; “theory,” from ancient Greek *θεωρία* action of viewing, contemplation, sight, spectacle; “intuition,” from late or medieval Latin *intuition-em*, noun of action from *intueri* to look upon, consider, contemplate, from *in-* + *tueri* to look. See [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

<sup>5</sup> “And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, ‘Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him’” (John 9:1-3). All citations from the Bible in English in this dissertation are from David Norton, ed., *The Bible: King James Version with the Apocrypha* (London: Penguin, 2006).

(London, 1684), a collection of verse through which this Bristol Rector attempts to come to peace with his own visual loss.<sup>6</sup>

In early modern England, where religion was a crucially important category for thinking about bodily well-being or its want, disability and suffering, with their inalienably intertwined connections with punishment and redemption, saturated the conscientious consciousness. Disabling impairment and affliction inaugurated and fuelled their own trains of endlessly circular inquiry into the connection between physical manifestation and inner reality. Which was cause and which consequence? Was a flawed physical shell the imperfect keeper of an inviolate soul? Or was it the manifestation of a profoundly corrupt inner being? Or, indeed, was it the giver of an earthly exercise in infirmity the better to prepare a pure soul for a purer hereafter? These questions, urgent with any bodily difference, gain further importance when considered for a culture where eyes enjoyed primacy over the other senses. As Stuart Clark summarises, “[a] kind of ocularcentrism was already prevalent in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European culture, in which the twin traditions stemming from the perceptual preferences of the Greeks and the religious teachings of St Augustine combined to give the eyes priority over the other senses.”<sup>7</sup> The classical bequest was already biased. In *Timaeus*, Plato called sight that “than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man.”<sup>8</sup> In the *Metaphysica*, Aristotle waxed eloquent on the love of the sense of sight

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<sup>6</sup> My future work will consider such authors, both canonical and uncanonical, who attempt to understand and find language for visual infirmity or loss, their own or of others around them.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 47, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 5 vols., trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), vol. III, 466.

because it “makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.”<sup>9</sup> Cicero, in *De Oratore*, claims that “acerrimum autem ex omnibus nostris sensibus esse sensum uidendi,” or “the keenest of all our senses is the sense of sight.” Consequently: “perceptions received by the ears or by reflexion can be most easily retained in the mind if they are also conveyed to our minds by the mediation of the eyes, with the result that things not seen and not lying in the field of visual discernment are earmarked by a sort of outline and image and shape so that we keep hold of as it were by an act of sight things that we can scarcely embrace by an act of thought.”<sup>10</sup> In this lineage, sight was the origin of knowledge, perception, and intellectual process, and in France and England respectively, anatomist Ambroise Paré and rhetorician Thomas Wilson were expressing the common consensus in elevating eyesight over all other senses. Thus the anatomist Paré: “For by this wee behold the fabricke and beauty of the heavens and earth, distinguish the infinite varietyes of colours, we perceive and know the magnitude, figure, number, proportion, site, motion and rest of all bodyes.”<sup>11</sup> And the rhetoric-expert Wilson: “eye sight is most quick, and containeth the impression of things more assuredly.”<sup>12</sup> Significantly, recent work on early modern tactility underlines the crucial place of sight, the vital sense in relationship to which the others—of hearing, taste, smell, and perhaps above all, touch—often sought to be defined. The works of Pablo Maurette and Joe Moshenska severally show the various ways in which the “pure immediacy” of touch was used to

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, *The Works of Aristotle*, 12 vols., trans. anon., ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908-52), vol. viii., 980a.

<sup>10</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2 vols., trans. E. W. Sutton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), vol. I, 468-469.

<sup>11</sup> Ambroise Paré, *The Workes*, trans. Th[omas] Johnson (London, 1634), 181-182.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The arte of rhetorique* (London, 1553), sig. 116r.

respond precisely to the period's inherited "epistemological primacy of sight."<sup>13</sup> As Stuart Clark points out, however, there was something even more at stake in vision, because "eyes were associated with the internal image-making processes that were deemed crucial for *all* thought. It was common in Greek, medieval, and early modern psychology to think of perception as a visual process, *whatever* the particular source of data" (my emphasis).<sup>14</sup> As Mary Carruthers explains, the "phantasm"—*seen* by the *eye* of the mind—that made its way into memory was a "final product of the entire process of sense perception, whether its origin be visual or auditory, tactile or olfactory."<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, blind Homer, epic poet of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, was revered as the poet of poets in early modern England. Blind Thamyras, another singer extraordinaire, shared some of Homer's renown. Homer's Tiresias sees what will be even as he cannot see what is. Sophocles's Oedipus asks his daughter to lead him by the hand at Colonus while the erstwhile king at once embodies the greatest abjection and the greatest absolution. But also in this early modern world, the God of the Old Testament continues to take credit for human sightlessness: "who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11; there is no body that

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<sup>13</sup> See Pablo Maurette, "Touch, Hands, Kiss, Skin: Tactility in Early Modern Europe," PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (2013), 1-86. Maurette's learned exposition of the affordances of tactility as used by early modern philosophers, scientists, and anatomist stops short, nevertheless, of probing blindness as a condition that often necessarily unites the senses of sight—or its lack and longing—and touch. Moshenska's *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) offers an important account of the heterogeneity of assessments that touch attracted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and unpacks these assessments through literary writings of the age. Significantly, however, Moshenska's chapter exploring Milton's preoccupation with "the various forms of contact of which living beings are capable: touch that was quiet, intimate, and habitual; touch that was momentous and literally earth-shattering; touch that creates relationships of both equality and subjection," never reflects on what (these different kinds of) touch might mean to a blind man. See the chapter on "Transported Touch: The Experience of Feeling in *Paradise Lost*," 245-283.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19.

God's hand does *not* mark). The Son of the New Testament mentions sightlessness as the site for God's wondrous intervention: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). In the 1611 King James Bible, Luke succinctly describes the function of the eye relative to the body: "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thy eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light" (Luke 11:34).

What, in this ocularcentric world—and in this world deeply willing to moralise and pathologize around visual variance—does it mean to think of non-normative eyes or vision, sight and blindness?

### Seeing Dis/Ability with the Early Moderns

Those with an enhanced sense of literary anachronism might first ask: what does it mean to think of non-normative eyes before even the invention of the norm, or the normal, let alone the normative? For, the reasoning goes, surely the social concept of the norm was not in currency until the nineteenth century?<sup>16</sup> Such a line of thought, however, does not take account of historicist disability studies scholarship that has discussed the genealogy and historical implications both of particular disabilities, and disability in general. Elizabeth Bearden, for instance, has done essential work to unpack how even scholars of contemporary disability studies might oversimplify premodern attitudes towards disability. Her work establishes that well before the currency of terminology pertaining to "norms" or the "normal," early modern England had distinct conceptions of bodily and cognitive regularity.<sup>17</sup> Julia Miele Rodas has shown that a culture's conventions used to represent

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in an Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988), 242-279, and *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France, 1974-1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003), 49-52, 55-79.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Bearden, "Before Normal, There Was Natural: John Bulwer, Disability, and Natural Signing in Early Modern England and Beyond," *PMLA* 132:1 (2017), 33-50. For work that Bearden

its blind reveals more about it than they do about the experience of blindness; her work thus implicitly argues for a responsibly transhistorical look at evolving conceptions of visual normativity.<sup>18</sup> Anchored in the American present but with a penetrating understanding of how representation works, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have done valuable work to place disability on the critical map as a potent hook on which writers hang all kinds of narrative threads.<sup>19</sup> Many of Mitchell and Snyder's arguments, even those that fail to align within specialised understandings of past cultures, continue to enliven historicist disability studies scholarship. Edward Wheatley, for instance, has drawn on Mitchell and Snyder's theoretical ground-making to do influential work on the constructions of blindness in medieval England and France.<sup>20</sup> Paul Longmore's activism-oriented

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implicitly argues against, see Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), 1-25. Davis argues that an earlier conception of human variance was pitted against the ideal, which was ever unrealisable, even if worthy of striving for. Similarly, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1-9.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Miele Rodas, "On Blindness," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3:2 (2009), 115-130. My own further work aims to address the scope and limits of such transhistorical work: to lay out what kinds of historicity (attending to differences as well as similarities) transhistorical work can manage, and what the payoff of such work is for the world we inhabit.

<sup>19</sup> See particularly David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) and *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010). Historian Irina Metzler's extensive study of medieval impairment similarly makes explicit her debt to current-day disability theory; she places impairment and disability side by side precisely because, as she demonstrates, both concepts are founded on difference from the usual or the norm. See her *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400* (New York: Routledge, 2006), *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and *Fools and Idiots?: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). Medieval disability studies is, indeed, an active and burgeoning field of academic inquiry. Julie Singer's work on blindness has explored the relationship between medieval medicine, rhetoric, and poetry. See her *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011). Joshua Eyler's edited collection has considered, with an overall historicist approach, somatic and sensory differences from disabling pregnancy to madness to deafness to old age. See *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010). In a recent

work has recognised the need to think historically about disability. The excellent questions posed in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* indicate the importance of scholarship that is anachronistic in the best way, in that such scholarship must explicitly look back *and* look around, and directly addresses concerns that remain urgent for us here and today, such as: How did past societies regard people with disabilities? What values underlay cultural constructions of disabled people's identities? What factors governed their social careers? How did people with various disabilities view themselves? In what ways did disabled people embrace or resist prevailing definitions of their identities? And what are the connections between all of these pasts and our present?<sup>21</sup>

Building on such questions, work by Allison Hobgood and David Wood has transformed the general intersection of disability studies and early modern studies. Their insistence on the productive examination of bodily and cognitive difference in the early modern period has made possible scholarly engagement with various early modern non-normativities that had thus far remained underexamined or entirely unstudied.<sup>22</sup> In another direction, Sujata Iyengar has presented formative work on what she calls Shakespeare's "Discourse of Disability," considering embodiment and selfhood in the present day and in the early modern period alongside each other, again with a

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analytical survey, Richard Godden and Jonathan Hsy provide a sense of ongoing and exciting conversations at the intersection of disability studies and medieval studies. See their "Encountering Disability in the Middle Ages," *New Medieval Literatures* (2013), 313-339.

<sup>21</sup> Paul K. Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, eds, *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013). See particularly the essays by Sara Van Den Berg, "Dwarf Aesthetics in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the Early Modern Court," 23-42, Lindsey Row-Heyveld, "Antic Dispositions: Mental and Intellectual Disabilities in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy," 73-87, Simone Chess, "Performing Blindness: Representing Disability in Early Modern Popular Performance and Print," 105-122. See also David Houston Wood, "Staging Disability in Renaissance Drama," in *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, eds Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas Warren Hopper (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017), 487-500.

historicist eye trained on the past.<sup>23</sup> I have written elsewhere about the unsettling power of feeling sight—the concept of feeling sight borrowed from the words of the blinded Gloucester, who in *King Lear*, says “I see it [the world] feelingly” (*The Tragedy of King Lear* 4.5.141)—both in the world of Shakespeare’s play and in the world in which the play is read, performed, and viewed.<sup>24</sup>

All of this scholarship operates by means of a post-medicalised understanding of disability. Scholars of disability studies rightly differentiate between physical impairment and disability by pointing out that the physical features of a variant body are a substantially different matter from the restriction or resistance of access, or the fraught disparity in social capital, that is a function of bodily difference.<sup>25</sup> The medical model of disability has for decades been suspect among those who wish to engage with non-normative bodies in ways that do not immediately or eventually pathologize them. In our day, the medical model is understandably critiqued even while we acknowledge its use in certain practical terms. The biggest contribution of the social model of disability, which distinguishes itself from the medical model, is that it enables us to see disability as a much bigger and more productive issue than individual bodily variation.

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<sup>23</sup> Sujata Iyengar, ed., *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Amrita Dhar, “Seeing Feeling: Sight and Service in *King Lear*,” in Sujata Iyengar, ed., *Disability, Health, and Happiness in the Shakespearean Body* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 76-92. In this dissertation, all citations from *King Lear*, unless otherwise specified, are from Jay L. Halio, ed., *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The *Tragedy* is based on the folio (F, from 1623) version of the play, but in this dissertation, I also use *The True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters*, which is based on the first published quarto (Q, from 1608) version of the play. When citing from the *History*, I use Stanley Wells, ed., *The History of King Lear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Lennard Davis, for instance, asserts that the disabled body “is never a single thing so much as a series of attitudes toward it.” See *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 22.



My work is foundationally informed by the social model of disability. In particular, I draw on the notion of complex embodiment as advanced by Tobin Siebers. Siebers asserts that “oppressed social locations create identities and perspectives, embodiments and feelings, histories and experiences that stand outside of and offer valuable knowledge about the powerful ideologies that seem to enclose us.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, “[m]inority identities acquire the ability to make epistemological claims about the society in which they hold liminal positions, owing precisely to their liminality.” Siebers therefore advances disability as “a social location complexly embodied,” with the experience at the heart of it being a constant matter of negotiating the position of access or command or belonging within a given society.<sup>27</sup> If many disabled people today debate whether to pass or not to pass for able-bodied, Siebers points out, it is because they have *become* bodies of knowledge—at the level of their bodies, they know and engage in practices concerning how a certain society or culture or environment functions, and how it can be negotiated.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes, indeed, these variant bodies are imperfect bodies of knowledge—in that they fail to pass, and become perceptible as those which need to attempt passing.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 14-16. For Siebers’s own mature and compelling enactment of the theory of complex embodiment—almost a decade after he first proposed it in *Disability Theory*—see his essay on “Shakespeare Differently Disabled,” in Valerie Traub, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 435-454.

<sup>28</sup> For the multifaceted kinds of passing that are used every day by the bodily and cognitively non-normative, see, for instance, Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson, eds, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Thus Siebers in the twenty-first century: “Passing, not coming out, defines the breathless moment when disabled persons first come to consciousness as disabled. The desire to pass is central to how disabled people think about their identity. There is no way to be ‘just’—and should I also add ‘justly’?—disabled in any world yet created. [...] Disabled people who pass recognize that in most societies there exists no common experience or understanding of disability on which to base their existence. If disability were accepted, passing would be unnecessary.” See “Shakespeare Differently Disabled,” 443-444.

Drawing on this theoretical groundwork, I offer that some of the most potent and generative critical moments of any given society reside precisely in its non-normative individuals' appreciation of and resultant talking or gesturing *back* to the existing discourses of disability surrounding them. Although my work is firmly housed in early modern studies, I aim to extend those aspects of contemporary disability studies that resist the use of disability as a marked category of self-evident otherness, now or in/of the past. As the title of my dissertation indicates, I consider sight and blindness along a continuum, thus considering not only the lack of sight, but also the *process* of losing sight, or as Georgina Kleege might encourage current-day readers to imagine, of gaining blindness.<sup>30</sup> Also, while a thematic or characterological focus on disability in literary critical work can be powerful in its own right, I ultimately aim to nudge disability studies conversations beyond the tropological or characterological affordances of disability.<sup>31</sup> Thus, I attend to the actual work of language towards registering, understanding, and expressing bodily difference, particularly visual difference. Indeed, an abiding goal of this project is to mark how the physical, sensory, sensuous, and even viscerally-imagined experiences of the body imprint the language that is produced by it.

It is in these respects that the writers and works considered in this dissertation make the early modern period luminous, resonant, and eloquent. For in inhabiting and imagining and composing within and around variously-abled visual aptitudes, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton respond to and interrogate early modern assumptions of vision, intellection, and reason-ability, thus

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<sup>30</sup> See Georgina Kleege, *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Scholars such as Michael Davidson have produced work similarly motivated to define the impact of disability on a formal rather than thematic level. See, for instance, his *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). However, most readings of disability still hinge on themes and characters—which, to my mind, ultimately limits the scope of disability studies scholarship.

making the values underlying cultural constructions of blindness perceptible across centuries. In their writings, we see how sight is figured not only in terms of intellection, astuteness, and faith, but also in terms of depravity, iniquity, and disgrace. Indeed, in a kind of reverse figuring, we notice how blindness can function as a site of spiritual privilege. We grasp how these very different thinkers and makers find language to trouble the reigning binary that equates vision with perceptiveness and divine grace, and blindness with moral and analytical degradation.

Similarly, in their own commitment to language patterned into metre and sound, these writers compel us to take measure of the deep carrying capacities and transformative powers of poetic language. We begin to see these authors' harnessing of the specific conventions and powers of the medium they are each working in—drama, lyric, and epic—and their considered manipulation of the implicit pacts between themselves and their viewers/readers/listeners. We confront, subliminally and overtly, the multifaceted ethical, aesthetic, and emotional claims these poets' *poiesis* (Greek *ποίησις*, the act of creating or making or bringing into being, which is the stem for the English "poetry") makes on their contemporary audience and spectatorship and on those who, like us, engage with their works several ages down the line. What these poets accommodate—to use a term that is significant for both premodern spiritual aesthetics *and* contemporary disability studies—into their several poetic media thus permits us to grapple with the nature of poetic accommodation itself.<sup>32</sup> We encounter, perhaps even knowing that we do so, the fitting-in, the looking-through, and

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<sup>32</sup> Theological accommodation refers to the principle that God, although unknowable to humankind in totality, is nevertheless humanly graspable through specific channels and means that render God's divinity and infinity comprehensible to human beings. In the disability context, accommodation refers to the ways in which society can or should change in order to facilitate complete and constructive participation by all, irrespective of bodily or cognitive abilities. The word gained prominence in disability theory and politics in the United States through legal discourse, and "reasonable accommodation" rightly remains a key component of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was passed into law in this country in 1990.

the working-through that is ever about creative and receptive processes as well as the self-referentiality that accompanies these processes.

Encountering the writers in their individual and social settings likewise makes possible our own sharpest engagement with the lived realities of the disabled lives imagined or dwelt within. I agree with Angelica Duran, who writes: “I have found that attending to one individual’s literary representation of his lived experience of embodiment, rather than focusing on a whole population, helps me minimize the sense of readerly distance. This intimacy is critical to maintaining the activist underpinnings of disability studies.”<sup>33</sup> The chapters of this dissertation are dedicated to following, with a kind of intimacy, the questions around visual acuity or loss posed and explored by three major poets of the early modern period. All of them know and assert and write about the value of eyes and sight. One of them, Shakespeare, writes from what he perhaps has seen in the world and would like those around him to see. One of them, Herbert, writes to joyously direct his readers’ vision across the page, even as his own writing often admits the ambiguousness of visual pleasure. One of them, Milton, writes well past his sighted days, blindly conjuring entire worlds for his readers and listeners.

### **Three Poets Writing Sight and Blindness**

I start with Shakespeare. In Chapter I, I consider blindness on the Shakespearean stage, which, I argue, is about the limits of vision, but also the limits of knowledge and the limits of justice. I analyse *2 Henry VI*, the Simpcox episode, where an audience is made complicit in the discovery of a blind fraud. Yet, the play leaves serious room for ambivalence about the discovery of this deceit and the punishment of the “Poore Man” who did it, as his wife confesses, for “pure need.” By the

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<sup>33</sup> Angelica Duran, “The Blind Bard, According to John Milton and His Contemporaries,” *Mosaic, a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* 46:3 (2013), 141-157.

time Shakespeare writes *King Lear*, he stages not only a *blindness*, but also the *blinding*. A scene of extraordinary inhumanity is performed onstage. Cornwall, I argue, tears apart the (represented) fabric of the world when he unmetaphors it with a terrifying promise—“See’t shalt thou never” (3.7.66)—and proceeds, eye by eye, to blind Gloucester. This broken world then finds itself at the cliffs of Dover, where all bets about the connection between sight and knowledge are off, where theatre calls extravagant attention to its own theatricality, and where theatre must pass or fail by the audience’s capacity for kindness. Here, after a fall from a non-cliff, it is a ragged exchange featuring one of the greatest speeches of imagination in English drama that puts the world back together, vision by fragmented vision. The arts of metaphor, language, and representation—sheer verbal artifice, we might say—therefore work as reparations in the blindingly violent world of the play.

Chapter II, on George Herbert’s poetry, contemplates a pivotal literary treatment of the *presence* of sight, even as it explores the edginess of vision as recorded by the poet. Once again, it is the craftedness, the patternedness of the poetry that allows our own insight into what is on one hand about pleasure, and on the other about a nervousness to that pleasure. In the first part of this chapter, I study Herbert’s leading of his reader’s eyes over “the picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul.”<sup>34</sup> I use the first three witnesses of *The Temple* to examine the ways in which Herbert’s poetry trains a reader’s eyes across the page for a non-negotiably visual assembly of textual meaning. We know that Herbert’s poetry is sensuous. Here, I argue a particularly visual dimension to that sensuousness, with illustrations of what in Herbert celebrates vision and makes explicit its joys (both thematically, but more compelling to me, textually), and enriches poetic form (with visual rhyme, for instance). In the second part of this

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<sup>34</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, in George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin, rev. edn (New York: Penguin, 2004), 311.

chapter, I study Herbert's nervous writing of his own and his God's eyes. This builds on my assessment of Hebert as an intensely visual poet, but turns that visual investment on its head with what is also, in Herbert's writing, deeply wary of sight. For just as the visual is a means to the divine, so too vision occasionally fails Herbert. With readings of Herbert's often troubled/non-conventional/problematic poetic constructions of sight, this second part of the chapter offers both Herbert's intense prioritisation of sight and what I might call his desiring of blindness. For sometimes, it is only in the visually withdrawn and introspective state that it is possible for him to get what he really wants: the sense of his God's regard.

I finally arrive at Milton, who started me thinking about blindness and representation in the first place. Chapter III uses Milton's shorter verse from his years of approaching and final blindness to introduce and formulate what I call his blind language: poetic language created in Milton's partial or total blindness. This is not to mark a distinction for blind language from other poetic language. It is, instead, to mark similarity and even continuity. It is to mark that Milton's sighted training in poetry constitutes as much of the foundation of his blind language as his blindness does. Today, neurologists explore and explain certain re-alignments of the brain to accommodate sensory loss, particularly visual loss.<sup>35</sup> But my work does not seek medical explanations of cognitive circumnavigations of absent senses. I am concerned with a particular poet's continued human engagement with literary language, verbal craft, and poetic creation. Thus, I show how Milton's blind language re-members itself, and similarly makes us participate in an exercise of recollection and renewal of language at its most fundamental. Beginning with the sonnet we now know as Sonnet 22, I use Milton's mature lyric compositions and translations from the Psalms to explore the relationship between blindness and poetic language. A brief biographical consideration of the poet in

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<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Oliver Sacks's *The Island of the Colorblind* (New York: Vintage, 1997), *The Mind's Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2010), and *Hallucinations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

his time—although my focus consistently remains on Milton’s writings—leads the discussion from a few of Milton’s lyric poems in the Civil War years to his only consistent poetic compositions in his years of approaching blindness, his psalm translations, to the two later sonnets in which he explicitly addresses his final and full loss of sight: “When I consider how my light is spent,” and “Methought I saw my late espoused saint.”

Building on the previous chapter, Chapter IV demonstrates an extended fulfilment of the metaphorical, structural, cognitive, rhetorical, and affective valences of Milton’s blind language in his epic *Paradise Lost*.<sup>36</sup> With Milton’s own deliberate leading away from rhyme, the conventional structuring of metrical language (as he makes explicit in the note on the verse of *Paradise Lost*), this long blind composition evidences the poet’s re-collection of language in rich oral/aural music, as well as his extended meditations on his visual disability and his place in the world as maker, and a maker of worlds. Thus, my readings of *Paradise Lost* show a blind man’s ownership and accommodation of his disability through his poetic language. Although scholars have always known of Milton’s biographical circumstance of blindness, we have so far taken insufficient note of the fact that the poetic labour behind the creation of the greatest epic composition in the English language is a blind labour. My work aims to emphatically acknowledge the blind condition of this colossal poetic effort, and thence introduce to twenty-first-century critical conceptions of poetry an affirmative sense of the extraordinary capacities of blind writing.

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<sup>36</sup> In future work, I intend to extend my readings to Milton’s two other and final blind compositions, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* (both published in 1670).

## CHAPTER I

### The Case of Eyes: Blindness on the Shakespearean Stage

This chapter will examine two particular blindnesses on the Shakespearean stage. In one of Shakespeare's very early plays, and possibly his earliest history play, a man referred to as Simpcox pretends a miraculously restored sight from congenital blindness, is shrewdly interrogated onstage and found out, and consequently chastised. This play has been dated plausibly to composition in 1591, for a 1594 quarto publication as the *First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster*.<sup>37</sup> In a play from near the end of Shakespeare's career, a peer called Gloucester is violently and punitively blinded onstage halfway through the play and spends the rest of his time in realisations that appear to supersede what he calls his erstwhile misjudgements. This play has a first recorded performance in the Christmas holidays of 1606 and was published in quarto as *The True*

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<sup>37</sup> *The Contention* (Q) was printed by Thomas Creede for Thomas Millington in London in 1594; Millington also entered it in the Stationers' Register on 12 March of that year. That it was composed and performed by 1592, and possibly earlier, is conjectured by scholars on the basis of Robert Greene's famous denigration of Shakespeare/"Shake-scene" as "an upstart Crow" in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* (London, 1592). (Greene died on 3 September 1592; we know that the plague closed theatres intermittently between 25 June 1592 and January 1594; so Greene's hearing or reading of the verse he parodies—which comes from what is now *3 Henry VI*, and which was composed, by all indications, as a continuation of *The Contention*, must have come from the summer of 1592 or earlier.) The now customary title of this play, *2 Henry VI*, derives from its appellation in the first folio (F) of Shakespeare's plays assembled by John Heminge and Henry Condell in 1623: *The Second Part of Henry the Sixt, with the death of the good Duke HVMFREY*. *2 Henry VI* is approximately a third longer than *The Contention*, a difference that still engenders textual debate. In this chapter, where a single episode from the first half of the play will engage our attention, we shall look at both Q and F versions. For citations from Q, I use signatures. For citations from F, I use the page numbers from the pertinent section of this first volume of Shakespeare's "Complete Works." The modern-day edition of this play consulted and cited from is edited by Ronald Knowles (London: Arden, 1999).



*Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters* in 1608.<sup>38</sup> In this chapter, I shall examine the manipulation of expectations of a majority-sighted audience through the two characters, Simpcox and Gloucester, who severally bring different kinds of blindness to the Shakespearean stage. What do these blindnesses achieve for the themes or plots of the plays of *2 Henry VI* and *King Lear*? What kinds of scepticism or empathy do these episodes enable for us, the plays' viewers and readers? How does theatre itself occupy the space of conjuring/acting/seeming what is not—particularly in relation to a majority-sighted, and in that respect normative, audience? Finally, what position of access or lack thereof does an audience hold in front of a medium for which the readiness to be manipulated by the senses is essential to its meaning?

In considering these questions, I shall draw attention to a certain redundancy of the two central episodes, in these two plays, through which we engage with blindness on the Shakespearean stage.<sup>39</sup> In *2 Henry VI*, the strange Simpcox affair that interrupts the affairs of state seems, ultimately, not to have any direct connection with the rest of the play. In *Lear*, the scene with Gloucester at the cliffs of Dover remains one of the best-known instances of theatrical apparition anywhere, but its relationship to the driving action of the rest of the play is arguably tenuous. In neither play would

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<sup>38</sup> From the Stationers' Register (26 November 1607), and from the title page of the first quarto (Q1, 1608), we know that the first recorded performance of this play was at the court of King James I on St Stephen's Day during the Christmas holidays in 1606. But it is likely that it was performed earlier at the Globe. The first folio version (F1) famously differs in significant respects from Q1. (Even at the level just of the names, it is worth noting that Q1 is a *History* and F1 a *Tragedy*.) In this chapter, I keep both versions in mind, but unless otherwise noted, all citations are from the modern-day edition of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. Jay Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Also: despite the recent and pertinent claims by Brian Vickers in *The One King Lear* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), arguing for but a *single* play, there is enduring richness to be experienced from allowing the Q1 and F1 versions their different authorities.

<sup>39</sup> The other significant—and comparable—depiction of blindness on the Shakespearean stage concerns the “sand-blind” Old Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600). Gobbo's son, Launcelot, goes ahead to “try confusions with him [Gobbo, the father]” (2.2.35-36). The resonances with Gloucester and Edgar are obvious, but the stakes of the blind “confusions” in *Merchant* are lower. That incident too is peripheral to the action of the play.

anything consequential change for the larger action if the blind men did not appear on stage. But the very fact that these episodes contribute little by way of “plot,” is reason to take them seriously in their explorations of loss, pain, and desire. The essential purpose served by the episodes of blindness, I argue, is to make perceptible the very frames and infrastructures of theatre that enable its aesthetic and ethical aspirations and achievements. In other words, these episodes enable us to see *that* the theatre is about images, the imagination, and an ethical bent to that imagination, and *how* it is about images, the imagination, and an ethical bent to that imagination.<sup>40</sup> As such, these episodes are poised to make us question what we see, in the unsettling knowledge that our pleasure in the theatrical medium can be complicit in and inalienable from the violence it allows us to witness. I also point—although not in any linear fashion, and certainly not biographically—to a progression of craft on the playwright’s part, and a willingness to open up the very mechanism of theatre through his use of these blind episodes.<sup>41</sup> The Simpcox incident, I offer, is Shakespeare’s tentative exploration of how to write a blind man—and finding out, perhaps even exhibiting, the essential injustice of that scripting. By the time he takes us with Gloucester to the latter’s blind-making home and then to the

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<sup>40</sup> For an examination of an apparently simple two-fold proposition (“some theatre appears to dramatise ethical questions,” and “the practice of theatre [itself] [...] might produce distinctive ways of thinking about ethics” see Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre and Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Critics have, of course, commented on this meta-theatrical function of Shakespearean theatre before, particularly with respect to *Lear*. “The trick Edgar plays on his father’s imagination is also the trick Shakespeare plays on ours—expect that here he means us to be conscious of everything that is happening, including the way in which our imagination is being made to work,” writes Jay Halio in his “Introduction” to *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21. Stephen Booth has similarly commented that in the course of this play, repeatedly, “an audience thinks in multiple dimensions—entertains two or more precise understandings at once, understandings that might, but do not, clash in the mind.” See his *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 33. Neither critic, however, discusses the particulars of how these meta-theatrical effects and understandings are achieved. My work is concerned with precisely those particulars.

<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that a staging of blindness is the only means by which to open up this meta-theatrical space for considering the mechanism and accomplishment of theatre, but as I shall show, it may be one of the most compelling.

surreal cliffs of Dover, theatre itself is on trial, and must pass or fail by its audience's capacity for kindness. What is at stake is our willingness to understand suffering from multiple angles, none of them fair, and still engage with sympathy, still engage as though what *is* fair is possible.

### **The Man of Pure Need**

Towards the beginning of *2 Henry VI*, a strange interlude interrupts the dealings of state, treachery, leisure, murder, strategy, ambition, and revenge that drive the action of the play. The king, Henry VI, his new queen, Margaret of France, and the nobles Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, Cardinal Beaufort, and the Duke of Suffolk are in the midst of an intrigue-filled falconing expedition when an unnamed "one" enters "crying 'a miracle.'" This "one" reports that a man blind from birth has miraculously gained sight after a visit to nearby St Albans shrine. What follows is an unfolding of the "miracle" until it is emptied of its claim, an on-stage demonstration of it as false, and its conclusion in something of a warning for anyone else, within or watching the play, who might similarly want to play blind.

As readers of any current edition of the play, we are primed to expect the incident through the naming of its episode ("The false miracle") and its actors (Simpcox, his wife, and others from the town of St Albans) in the prefatory "Persons of the Play." But when the incident is done playing out, and the play itself is done, there is no way to directly connect this apparently trivial episode to the rest of the play's action. It appears to have influenced nothing, and changed even less for the "plot" of the play. "One" need almost not have bothered. But the incident has tenacious life. By the time the play came to be printed in the First Folio (F, from 1623) as *The Second Part of Henry the Sixth with the death of the Good Duke Humphrey*, the initial quarto version (Q, from 1594) of this episode had undergone revision, refinement, and even a filling out in details, as though this inconsequential incident had somehow become even more deserving of attention than it was before. In this section,

I examine this episode closely, keeping both the quarto and folio versions in front of us, to understand precisely what it enables for the world of the play, and the world(s) in which it is viewed or read.<sup>42</sup> To do this, it is helpful to read the cues given to the “blind” actor onstage, and attend to the perceptions and anticipations generated by what we are presented with as the markers of Simpcox’s ocular condition.

When the nameless “one” runs into the courtly falconers’ gathering onstage to announce his miracle, the king receives the news with quick belief and approbation.<sup>43</sup> When the erstwhile blind man now comes on stage—seated on a chair and carried onstage, we note—the good-faith gullibility

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<sup>42</sup> On the whole, the episode has garnered limited critical attention. It has sometimes been read as a reflection of the play’s thematic or structural concerns, such as they can be identified: Ronald Knowles takes it as indication of the play’s fascination with credulousness, and Ralph Berry posits in it a preoccupation with the framing conceit of trial that operates throughout the play. See Ronald Knowles, “Introduction,” *Henry VI, Part II*, ed. Ronald Knowles (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999), 1-141 and Ralph Berry, *Shakespearean Structures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981). Alternatively, critics such as E. Pearlman have tried to uncover Shakespeare’s sources for the episode. See “The Duke and the Beggar in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI*,” *Criticism* 41.3 (1999), 309-321. More recently, Lindsey Row-Heyveld has examined the various retellings of this story across the Reformation—by Thomas More, Richard Grafton, John Foxe, and finally, Shakespeare—to lay out “how the turbulent religious climate of this period transformed early modern understandings of disability.” See “The lying’st knave in Christendom?: The Development of Disability in the False Miracle of St. Alban’s,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29.4 (2009), doi: <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i4.994>. For these previous accounts of this episode, see Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies and Matters of Religion* in vol. 6 of *Complete Works*, eds Thomas M. C. Lawler, German Marc’hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Richard Grafton, *An abridgement of the chronicles of England* (London: Richard Tottell, 1562); John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of these latter and perillous dayes touching matters of the Church, wherein are comprehended and deccribed the great persecutions [and] horrible troubles, that haue bene wrought and practised by the Romishe prelates, specialllye in this realme of England and Scotlande, from the yeare of our Lorde a thousande, vnto the tyme nowe present*. (London: John Day, 1563).

<sup>43</sup> This is impressive enough in the quarto with “And it please your grace, there is a man that came blinde/ to S. Albones, and hath receiued his sight at his shrine” (Q sig. C2r), but played up further in the folio with “Forsooth, a blinde man at saint Albones Shrine,/ Within this halfe houre hath receiu’d his sight,/ A man that ne’re saw in his life before” (F p. 126). The miracle is the more astonishing for having been achieved in so short a time, and for it having happened not to just a blind man, but to one who never had sight until now. The king says: “Goe fetch him hither, that wee may glorifie the Lord/ with him” (Q sig. C2r), or “Now God be prays’ed, that to beleeuing Soules/ Giues Light in Darknesse, Comfort in Despaire” (F p. 126).

of the king is striking. In the quarto, he greets the newly-sighted man with no hint of scepticism: “Thou happie man, giue God eternall praise,/ For he it is that thus hath helped thee” (Q sigs C2r-C2v). In the folio, he addresses the Cardinal to speak about this newly-sighted man: “Great is his comfort in this Earthly Vale,/ Although by his sight his sinne be multiplied” (F p. 126). In both texts, the king’s acceptance of the truth of the miracle is signalled unambiguously. As a result, those of us outside the play and watching/reading it, are also willing to accept, at the very least, the play-world’s acceptance of this miracle. In Shakespeare’s time or in ours, viewers/readers may raise their eyebrows at quite so miraculous a miracle. But then, we recollect that we are being entertained by a play. If the play can handle a miracle, so can we.

But the world of the play is not composed only of the king and the people of St Albans (all of whom appear to be believing of the miracle). There are also the queen and the peers. The subsequent interrogation and discovery they effect are worth reproducing in full, in both quarto and folio incarnations. It is as though the peers know something that we do not, and as though they are capable of deconstructing certain kinds of appearance or narrative in a way that we readers/viewers are not. A textual glance at the several stage directions and at the nomenclatures of the characters who populate the episode in the two versions is in order.

*The first part of the contention of the two famous*

For he it is, that thus hath helped thee.

*Humphrey.* Where wast thou borne?

*Poore man.* At *Barwicke* fir, in the North.

*Humph.* At *Barwicke*, and come thus far for helpe.

*Poore man.* I fir, it was told me in my sleepe,  
That sweet faint *Albones* should giue me my sight againe.

*Humphrey.* What art thou lame too?

*Poore man.* I indeed fir, God helpe me.

*Humphrey.* How cam'st thou lame?

*Poore man.* With falling off on a plum-tree.

*Humph.* Wast thou blind & woldst thou clime plumtrees?

*Poore man.* Neuer but once fir in all my life,  
My wife did long for plums.

*Humph.* But tell me, wast thou borne blinde?

*Poore man.* I truly fir.

*Woman.* I indeed fir, he was borne blinde.

*Humphrey.* What art thou his mother?

*Woman.* His wife fir.

*Humphrey.* Hadst thou bene his mother,  
Thou couldst haue better told.

Why let me see, I thinke thou canst not see yet.

*Poore man.* Yes truly maister, as cleare as day.

*Humphrey.* Saist thou so. What colours his cloake?

*Poore man.* Why red maister, as red as blood.

*Humphrey.* And his cloake?

*Poore man.* Why thats greene.

*Humphrey.* And what colours his hose?

*Poore man.* Yellow maister, yellow as gold.

*Humphrey.* And what colours my gowne?

*Poore man.* Blacke fir, as blacke as leat.

*King.* Then belike he knowes what colour leat is on.

*Suffolke.* And yet I thinke leat did he neuer see.

*Humph.* But cloakes and gownes ere this day many a  
But tell me fir, what's my name? (one.

*Poore man.* Alasse maister I know not.

*Humphrey.* Whats his name?

*Poore man.* I know not.

*Humphrey.* Nor his?

*Poore*

Figure 3. *First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster* Quarto (1594), sig. C2v

*Houses, of Yorke and Lancaster.*

*Poore man.* No truly sir,

*Humphrey* Nor his name?

*Poore man* No indeed maister,

*Humphrey* Whats thine owne name?

*Poore man.* Sander, and it please you maister.

*Humphrey.* Then Sander sit there, the lyingest knaue in Christendom. If thou hadst bene born blind, thou mightest aswell haue knowne all our names, as thus to name the seuerall colours we doo weare. Sight may distinguish of colours, but sodeinly to nominate them all, it is impossible. My Lords, saint Albones here hath done a Miracle, and would you not thinke his cunning to be great, that could restore this Cripple to his legs againe.

*Poore man.* Oh maister I would you could.

*Humphrey.* My Maisters of saint Albones,  
Haue you not Beadles in your Towne,  
And things called whippes?

*Mayor.* Yes my Lord, if it please your grace,

*Humph.* Then send for one presently.

*Mayor.* Sirrha, go fetch the Beadle hither straight,

*Exet one.*

*Humph.* Now fetch me a stoole hither by and by.  
Now sirrha, If you meane to saue your selfe from whipping,  
Leape me ouer this stoole and runne away.

*Enter Beadle.*

*Poore man.* Alasse maister I am not able to stand alone,  
You go about to torture me in vaine.

*Humph.* Well sir, we must haue you finde your legges,  
Sirrha Beadle, whip him till he leape ouer that same stoole.

*Beadle.* I will my Lord, come on sirrha, off with your doublet  
quickly.

*Poore man.* Alas maister what shall I do, I am not able to stand.  
After the Beadle hath hit him one girke, he leapes ouer  
the stoole and runnes away, and they run after him,  
crying, A miracle, a miracle.

*Hump.* A miracle, a miracle, let him be taken againe, & whipt  
through euery Market Towne til he comes at Barwicke where he  
was borne.

*Mayor.* It shall be done my Lord,

*Exet Mayor.*

*Suffolke.*

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Figure 4. First Part of the Contention of the Two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster Quarto (1594), sig. C3r

*Enter the Maior of Saint Albones, and his Brethren,  
bearing the man betweene two in a Chayre.*

*Card.* Here comes the Townes-men, on Proceſſion,  
To preſent your Highneſſe with the man.

*King.* Great is his comfort in this Earthly Vale,  
Although by his ſight his ſinne be multiplied.

*Gloſt.* Stand by, my Maſters; bring him neere the King,  
His Highneſſe pleaſure is to talke with him.

*King.* Good-fellow, tell vs here the circumſtance,  
That we for thee may glorifie the Lord.

What; haſt thou beene long blinde, and now reſtor'd?

*Simp.* Borne blinde, and't pleaſe your Grace.

*Wife.* I indeede was he.

*Suff.* What Woman is this?

*Wife.* His Wife, and't like your Worſhip.

*Gloſt.* Hadſt thou been his Mother, thou could'ſt haue  
better told.

*King.* Where wert thou borne?

*Simp.* At Barwick in the North, and't like your  
Grace.

*King.* Poore Soule,  
Gods goodneſſe hath beene great to thee:  
Let neuer Day nor Night vnhalloved paſſe,  
But ſtill remember what the Lord hath done.

*Queene.* Tell me, good-fellow,  
Can'ſt thou here by Chance, or of Deuotion,  
To this holy Shrine?

*Simp.* God knowes of pure Deuotion,  
Being call'd a hundred times, and oftner,  
In my ſleepe, by good Saint *Albon*:  
Who ſaid; *Symon*, come; come offer at my Shrine,  
And I will helpe thee.

*Wife.* Moſt true, forſooth:  
And many time and oft my ſelfe haue heard a Voyce,  
To call him ſo.

Figure 5. *True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters* Folio (1623), p. 126



*Wife.* Most true, forsooth:  
 And many time and oft my selfe haue heard a Voyce,  
 To call him so.  
*Card.* What, art thou lame?  
*Simp.* I, God Almighty helpe me.  
*Suff.* How cam'st thou so?  
*Simp.* A fall off of a Tree.  
*Wife.* A Plum-tree, Master.  
*Gloft.* How long hast thou beene blinde?  
*Simp.* O borne so, Master.  
*Gloft.* What, and would'st climbe a Tree?  
*Simp.* But that in all my life, when I was a youth.  
*Wife.* Too true, and bought his climbing very deare.  
*Gloft.* 'Masse, thou lou'dst Plummes well, that would'st  
 venture so.  
*Simp.* Alas, good Master, my Wife desired some  
 Dairnsions, and made me climbe, with danger of my  
 Life.  
*Gloft.* A subtile Knaue, but yet it shall not serue:  
 Let me see thine Eyes; winck now, now open them,  
 In my opinion, yet thou seest not well.  
*Simp.* Yes Master, cleare as day, I thanke God and  
 Saint *Albones*.  
*Gloft.* Say'st thou me so: what Colour is this Cloake  
 of?  
*Simp.* Red Master, Red as Blood,  
*Gloft.* Why that's well said: What Colour is my  
 Gowne of?  
*Simp.* Black forsooth, Coale-Black, as Iet.  
*King.* Why then, thou know'st what Colour Iet is  
 of?  
*Suff.* And yet I thinke, Iet did he neuer see.  
*Gloft.* But

Figure 6. *True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters* Folio (1623), p. 126

*Gloft.* But Cloakes and Gownes, before this day, a many.

*Wife.* Neuer before this day, in all his life.

*Gloft.* Tell me Sirrha, what's my Name?

*Simp.* Alas Master, I know not.

*Gloft.* What's his Name?

*Simp.* I know not.

*Gloft.* Nor his?

*Simp.* No indeede, Master.

*Gloft.* What's thine owne Name?

*Simp.* Saunder Simpcoxe, and if it please you, Master.

*Gloft.* Then Saunder, sit there,

The lying'st Knaue in Christendome.

If thou hadst beene borne blinde,

Thou might'st as well haue knowne all our Names,

As thus to name the feuerall Colours we doe wear.

Sight may distinguish of Colours:

But suddenly to nominate them all,

It is impossible.

My Lords, Saint *Albone* here hath done a Miracle:

And would ye not thinke it, Cunning to be great,

That could restore this Cripple to his Legges againe.

*Simp.* O Master, that you could?

*Gloft.* My Masters of Saint *Albones*,

Haue you not Beadles in your Towne,

And Things call'd Whippes?

*Maio.* Yes, my Lord, if it please your Grace.

*Gloft.* Then send for one presently.

*Maio.* Sirrha, goe fetch the Beadle hither straight.

*Exit.*

*Gloft.* Now fetch me a Stoole hither by and by.

Now Sirrha, if you meane to saue your selfe from Whip-

ping, leape me ouer this Stoole, and runne away.

*Simp.* Alas Master, I am not able to stand alone:

You goe about to torture me in vaine.

*Enter a Beadle with Whippes.*

*Gloft.* Well Sir, we must haue you finde your Legges. Sirrha Beadle, whippe him till he leape ouer that same Stoole.

*Beadle.* I will, my Lord.

Come on Sirrha, off with your Doublet, quickly.

*Simp.* Alas Master, what shall I doe? I am not able to stand.

*After the Beadle hath hit him once, he leapes ouer the Stoole, and runnes away: and they follow, and cry, A Miracle.*

*King.* O God, see'st thou this, and bearest so long?

*Queene.* It made me laugh, to see the Villaine runne.

*Gloft.* Follow the Knaue, and take this Drab away.

*Wife.* Alas Sir, we did it for pure need.

*Gloft.* Let the be whipt through euery Market Towne, Till they come to Barwick, from whence they came.

*Exit.*

Figure 7. True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters Folio (1623) p.

As we enter a discussion of the why—and the how—of the episode, here are a few things worth noting about it. First, there is the matter of amplified echoes with the Biblical events around the miraculous gaining of sight of “a man which was blind from his birth” (John 9:1) and who had erstwhile “sat and begged” (John 9:8). Between the briefer quarto and the fuller folio versions of this play, the references to the biblical incident become more explicit. The folio gains the assertion, for instance, that this is not just a blind man that we are talking about/seeing, but a man who never saw in his life before. The calling for the man’s parent(s) is present in both the quarto and folio versions, in resonance with the Bible’s narration.<sup>44</sup> And tellingly, in the folio assertion that the cured man’s sins are multiplied by sight, the pious king echoes the concluding verses of John 9.<sup>45</sup> By strange parallax, sight in this earthly vale can be interpreted to mean a persistence in sin.

I state these connections not to labour the obvious relationship of this theatrical incident to the biblical story, but to flag the ubiquitous inheritance of miracle narratives, at this time, from the Bible. For instance, popular ballads like “A New Ditty, shewing the Wond[erful Mira]cles of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he did while he remain[ed] on E[ar]th” make particular place, among other more spectacular miracles, precisely for Christ’s powers in curing damaged senses.<sup>46</sup>

And by his glorious power and might,  
 Unto the blind he gave their sight;  
 [...]
 The man who was both deaf and dumb,  
 which never heard nor spoke with tongue

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<sup>44</sup> “But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight” (John 9:18).

<sup>45</sup> “And Jesus said, ‘For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.’ And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, ‘Are we blind also?’ Jesus said unto them, ‘If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, “We see,” therefore your sin remaineth” (John 9:39-41).

<sup>46</sup> Published in London *c.* 1684; played to the tune of “Triumph and Joy.” My citation is from the Early Broadside Ballad Archive, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30389/>.

By Christ was heard when he did come,  
whose praise he then pronounced.

Other ballads might hinge on a subject's devotion as the trigger for a miraculous outcome. In "A Happy Damsel: Or, A Miracle of GOD's Mercy, signalized on Maria Anna Mollier," for example, the line of Biblical influence is both acknowledged and made indispensable.<sup>47</sup> The "youthful Maid" speaks:

*Nay, gracious Lord, I do believe,  
thou able art to cure me still,  
And I might soon my Limbs receive,  
if it were but thy blessed will.*  
These Words she had no sooner spoke,  
but Nerves and Bones did snap amain  
Thus God, who she did then invoke,  
in love her Limbs restor'd again.

Such examples could be multiplied, but all we need note is that those who are writing, listening, hearing, and disseminating these miraculous stories, are also rooting *for* the miracles. A big part of the legitimisation of these narratives is achieved specifically by circulating the stories. I point to these intertextualities not only to remind us of the living inheritance of the biblical narratives of miracles, but also to flag the real but slippery connections between observed truth (experiential) and mythical truth (that of the Book) that operate at the level of the play *and* for those who are watching/reading it. Depending on devotional or personal orientation, a viewer of Shakespeare's day—or in ours—might want the miracle to be true. Of course, such a reader/viewer would proceed to be "corrected" by what follows; this particular miracle is but a hoax. But the desire for the miracle to be true has

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<sup>47</sup> London, 1693; played to the tune of "Summer-time." My citation is from the Early Broadside Ballad Archive, <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20705/>.

implications for the tenor of our interaction with theatre itself, which is a joint function of sight and the ability to be persuaded by what is seen.

This willingness to be persuaded by what is seen relates to the second point: that as the scene progresses, we, its audience, are trained in a kind of scepticism. This starts simply enough, in the quarto: with Humphrey inquiring where he was born, this man who has reportedly just found his sight. In Barwick, comes the answer. But something now *happens* on stage, beyond the sight of the readers of the play, which prompts Humphrey to ask in what is possibly an echo of a question a *viewing* audience might have: “What art thou lame too?” Somehow, in front of his spectators’ eyes, the newly-sighted man has indicated that his mobility, too, is not normative. He says he is, indeed, also lame. Humphrey proceeds to ask how this, the lameness, happened. From climbing a tree and falling off it, comes the reply. He was climbing while blind?—Humphrey asks. Yes, while blind. His wife made him do it. Thus far, there are small variations in the folio, but the general thrust of the inquiry stays the same. The only significant difference is that in the folio, the man called Simpcox is more emphatically pushed to explain this business of climbing a plum tree while blind. The pressure works, and Simpcox explains, meanly implicating his wife: “Alas, good master, my Wife desired some Damsons, and made me climbe, with danger of my Life” (F p. 126). This is a fuller account than the quarto’s “My wife did long for plums” (Q sig. C2v), and more explicit in its punning on sexual dam-sons, or testicles. If, a minute ago, we had been encouraged to at least consider the possibility of a miracle, that has fast given way to an interlude that now has every indication of moving towards the revelation of a hoax. Almost to cinch it, Humphrey says: “A subtill Knave, but yet it shall not serve” (F p. 126) and proceeds to administer a peculiar visual test: “Let me see thine Eyes; winck now, now open them,/ In my opinion, yet thou seest not well” (F p. 126).

What are we, at this point, meant to be seeing? We have in front of us a man who obeys another of greater social clout. We know, as does the man being tested, that to disobey would not be

practical or smart. So, as told, he winks. That is to say, he closes his eyes, and presumably opens them again. Even as we might ourselves be doing as we watch/read. To most of us, this ability to close and open our eyes is mundane indication of their soundness. So mundane, indeed, that we don't stop to think about it. But Humphrey, in our very sight, decides that something about this action is indicative of Simpcox's *not* being able to see. It is worth noting here—even in our uncertainty about exactly what is happening—the enormous normative privilege in which Humphrey's words place most readers/viewers. What *does* Humphrey see that convinces him that Simpcox does *not*? We do not know, and it is perhaps essential that we must not know. The moment is fleeting, but we sense that Humphrey knows something. There is even a thrill about it—despite the clear double standard just made visible to us. By the time the second set of questions commences, about the colours and the names of the peers, there is no right answer that Simpcox can provide. Every correct answer he offers (the cloak is red, red as blood; the gown is black, black as jet) only serves to further indict him.<sup>48</sup> We watch a man answering “correctly” because he has no other option—and also because at least part of what he says is common enough in idiomatic vocabulary that these answers should mean nothing more than that he knows the quotidian uses of his language. (A man born blind may arguably not know what red is, but he may know very well that blood is red; he may not know what black is, but he may know that jet is black).<sup>49</sup> We are made complicit in what we begin to realise is a man's undoing of himself.

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<sup>48</sup> A director could, theoretically, unbalance everything here by presenting, for instance, a cloak that is not red, a cloak that is not black. But in practical terms, they are checked by what a normative viewership would expect to see, indeed, must see, for the hoax to work.

<sup>49</sup> Then again, a reader/viewer today may find herself thinking that even *those* things, Simpcox may know. His language might indeed be less pat half an hour after gaining sight, but in the view from 2018, there are those who can name in newly-gained sight what they blindly knew by situation, context, and language.

When Humphrey now proceeds to question Simpcox about the peers' names, Simpcox answers as best he knows. But at this stage, Humphrey can use against Simpcox whatever Simpcox says. Humphrey outs Simpcox as an imposter:

If thou hadst beene borne blinde,  
Thou might'st as well haue knowne all our Names,  
As thus to name the seuerall Colours we doe weare.  
Sight may distinguish of Colours:  
But suddenly to nominate them all,  
It is impossible.  
(Q sig. C3r; F p. 127).

We know even as we watch/read that Humphrey advances a false parallel, and an absurd claim. We know that knowing the peers' names—when, presumably, these peers don't spend much of their time in St Albans—is not the same as knowing the names of colours. We know too that even if Simpcox *had* been able to tell Humphrey the names of the peers, that would not have gone in his favour. We understand the appeal and disturbing power of the ableist, normative and even “scientific” thesis that Humphrey advances: that although the eye may distinguish colours, knowledge of their names so soon after gaining sight is not to be believed. So: where a few minutes ago we as audience and readers had been in a position to consider the miraculous, we now find ourselves in a position of “discovering” a deception. We participate in what the more cynical among us may call Humphrey's pragmatism, even if we understand the fundamental cruelty articulated by his wit: “My Lords, saint Albone here hath done a Miracle:/ And would ye not thinke it, Cunning to be great,/ That could restore this Cripple to his Legges againe” (Q sig. C3r; F p. 127). We grasp that what we could not see about the blindness, but thought we *could* see about Simpcox's lameness, we actually can *not*. We realise that just as we have been taken in by Simpcox's acting blind, we may also have been taken in about his acting—or not acting, since he had been carried in—lame. We are about to find out.

But here things get more interesting from a theatrical point of view. For a man may act lame on stage legitimately, and legitimately ask to be believed in his role of a lame man.<sup>50</sup> But the situation is very different if what we see onstage triggers anxieties about what we may see offstage and in life around us. At this moment, we watchers/readers uneasily comprehend that we might want to withhold—or at least offer with reserve—our credibility even as we go along with the spectacle we see/read. And sure enough, Humphrey’s cruel measure of calling in the Beadle to chastise what he has already decided is “the lyingest knave in Christendom” (Q sig. C3r; F p. 127) is effective. Asked to “leape me ouer this Stoolle, and runne away” (Q C3r; F p. 127) *or* endure a whipping, Simpcox, perhaps unsurprisingly, absents himself from the scene with what speed he can muster. We cannot know if it is Shakespeare’s joke on us that at this point the St Albans crowd follows Simpcox, again crying “A Miracle” (Q sig. C3r; F p. 127), or if it only serves the folio’s Queen, who says out loud, as almost a grotesque cue to us readers/viewers that “It made me laugh, to see the Villaine runne” (F p. 127).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Of course, this is not to justify ableist and lazy casting, now or in the past. In theatre—and now, film—history, the disabled have overwhelmingly often been considered too disabled to play disabled. My saying that a man may act lame and ask to be believed in his role as a lame man is not to justify casting a non-lame man in the role of a lame man. I simply recognise that plenty of lame parts have been played, and continue to be played, by non-lame actors.

<sup>51</sup> In a recent glance at this episode, Jeffrey R. Wilson has found it mirthful. “Shakespeare’s first depiction of disability was also his funniest,” he says. Recounting this incident, he continues: “We laugh. We even laugh heartily, but our laughter is tinged with uneasiness when we acknowledge some of the sadly standard features of disability as it is represented in Western literature.” See “The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37.2 (2017), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i2>. As I show here, however, there is more than the “sadly standard features of disability as it is represented in Western literature” that is disturbing here. I find myself unable to laugh at all, let alone heartily, in the face of the obvious imbalance of power that is staged. To read the incident fundamentally as an exercise in deception and a circumspect uncovering of it—and thus possibly inviting laughter—is to continue precisely in an obliviousness of the *need* for deception and circumlocution that is a reality for many of the most disenfranchised in the unequal world from which we inherit this narrative, and our own.



It is now that Simpcox's "Wife" explains in the folio what the quarto had already told us in its very nomenclature of the "Poore man" who is the subject and occasion of this incident.<sup>52</sup> "Alas Sir, we did it for pure need" (F p. 127), she says. But no one—either from St Albans, or from the king's company, or us, as we read/watch—has any time for her in the course of the play's progress. No one sharing the stage with her listens or acknowledges this plaintive appeal—not even to rebuke her for the deception that she and her male companion presumably planned together and performed. Her plea for lenience—and help—is absent in the quarto, and remains as only a quick line in the folio. It goes utterly unacknowledged even where it is uttered. As far as we can make out, it brings no mitigation whatsoever to the punishment that Simpcox and she are about to receive: in Humphrey's words, "Let them be whipt through euery Market Towne,/ Till they come to Barwick, from whence they came" (F p. 127). And if we as readers/viewers have been held to a twinge of pity in Wife's final artless articulation of her/their motives, it is gathered up amidst a pervasive contemporary anxiety about the "correct" use of charity—for by the time poor relief laws came to be codified in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, there was clear demarcation between the "deserving" (the disabled, the sick, and the elderly) and "undeserving" (able-bodied yet idle, or feigning) poor.<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare's depiction of this episode testifies to the gathering awareness of

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<sup>52</sup> It is only in the folio that the quarto's Poore man comes to be called Simpcox. At one point in the quarto, Humphrey addresses him as Sander (Q sig. C3r), and in the folio, he once refers to himself as Symon (F p. 126). For more on the name, see Scott McMillin, "Casting for Pembroke's Men: The *Henry VI* Quartos and *The Taming of a Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (1972), 141-159.

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the Law laid out *where* a deserving poor person was authorised to beg. An impotent person begging out of their authorised geography was punished with the stocks—before being sent back to where they were allowed to beg. An able-bodied beggar was, as we have seen in this play, whipped back to where they were born—or had last been known to live for three years. Significantly: neither by law nor by other means were there strong structures of help available to those who were able-bodied and presumably willing to work, but could not find employment. Lindsey Row-Heyveld helpfully unpacks some of the connections between visible disability, pilgrimage, and perceived deception prevalent in late medieval and early modern England. See "The lying'st knave in Christendom?: The Development of Disability in the False Miracle of St. Alban's," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29.4 (2009), doi: <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v29i4.994>. For

different legal and social structures around differently-abled-ness in his time, just as it reflects apprehensions over vagrancy, idleness, and able-bodied-mischief that will reflect in law over statutes in 1597 and 1601. But at this moment, we are not allowed to dwell on what we have just seen/read. The action rushes on: we are about to discover the fate of Eleanor Cobham, who has lately been caught indulging in treasonous witchcraft.

Once the play is done, however, it is worth considering a few reasons for the existence of this apparently inconsequential episode. We may, to start with, think of it as a premonitory mirror for the action that enfolds it: Eleanor Cobham's being found out as a dabbler in witchcraft, and her ensuing punishment. But if so, we must note too that the Cobham episode is in turn immediately mirrored and compromised by what precedes and follows it: the travesty of justice concerning Peter Thump and Thomas Horner. Secondly, we may see the Simpcox affair as a forerunner to the arbitrariness of harsh treatment of commoners by the ruling classes throughout this play; it appears to be common for the commons to be treated uncommonly badly. Third, we may receive this episode as a reflection of—and a kind of voice for—the redress-less-ness that was the fate of many in the Simpcoxes' position in Shakespeare's day.<sup>54</sup> We might therefore, as a fourth point, say that this episode initiates us into the pain and indignity that will be the dessert of many, across the power divide, before the play is over. The wrongs that this scene stages—a confession by cruelty (Simpcox must be whipped until he can leap over the stool and run away), and a deliberate unheeding of a real

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consideration of this matter on a longer historical arc, see Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995); A. L. Beier, *The Problem of the Poor in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (London: Methuen, 1983) and *Social Thought in England, 1480-1730: From Body Social to Worldly Wealth* (London: Routledge, 2016); Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); and Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> But here, we are also aware of the mindless violence travelling in the other direction: when Jack Cade and his followers think themselves powerful, they behave atrociously. In his promised rule, Cade offers his supporters nothing but the most dehumanising and rapacious powers.

confession which is also a cry for help (“Alas Sir, we did it for pure need”)—allow it to set up increasingly serious reverberations for what will follow. The human bodies that will be maimed, brutalised, and destroyed by the play’s contending forces are brought into prefigurative relief.<sup>55</sup>

But none of these reasons quite accounts for the unsettling prickliness and the unsettled “humour” of the episode. Its brittleness, its coarse laughter, and its confused pity persist like an irresolution. As I conclude this section, therefore, I offer a longer-term reason for this episode’s existence, and as such, advance something of the playwright’s aspiration towards deeper and more desperate explorations of injury, affliction, and craving that it embodies. Because paradoxically, I argue, this episode of false blindness is Shakespeare’s training himself in what it means to write a blind man, and his making visible the fallacies that surround it. For how *should* a blind man set about his way to convince those around him that he does not see? And what *is* a sighted actor supposed to do, particularly in the cue-and-perform practice of theatre in Shakespeare’s day?<sup>56</sup> *Can* he reverse-pass as blind? If—to think out loud about it—the actor is sightless, could he ever actually pass for Simpcox? And then, as in this play, can/should the theatrical medium be used to show the moral turpitude and social anxiety enveloping reverse-passing, or passing in the “other” direction? Shakespeare may not know yet. We don’t either. But when such things will come up again,

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<sup>55</sup> Humphrey, so cocky in his finding Simpcox out, will be smothered in bed (onstage in the quarto version, and offstage in the folio), his corpse displayed and described in gruesome detail designed to provoke fear—and revulsion not only for the corpse, but by association, also for what the living man had embodied in his inability to combine power, justice, and mercy. Suffolk’s bodiless head will serve to remind Margaret, the queen, of her “illegitimate” desire and at the same time punish her with the reminder of that desire. The wretched Lord Saye’s and his son-in-law’s bodiless heads will be taken through town in a grotesque “kissing” exhibition. And this is not even to go into the bloody end that those slain in battle will find: Somerset, or Humphrey Stafford, or Stafford’s brother.

<sup>56</sup> For the metaphysics of drama enabled by looking at the partial manner in which Shakespeare’s plays originally circulated, see Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Shakespeare will make sure to stage not only a *blindness*, but also the *blinding*: Gloucester, in *King Lear* (in both the 1608 quarto and the 1623 folio versions) will be violently blinded onstage, and see the remainder of his time on stage out “feelingly.” It is to that play that we must now turn.

### See’t Shalt Thou Never

One terrifying night, two old men who faithfully continue to serve another older man take leave of one another on a stormy heath. Thus Kent, as he tries to lead a drifting king into some shelter from wind and rain: “Things that love night/ Love not such nights as these. The wrathful skies/ Gallow the very wanderers of the dark/ And make them keep their caves” (*The Tragedy of King Lear* 3.2.40-43). Gloucester had wandered out after Lear’s enraged departure from the doors of the latter’s castle. Now, after meeting the itinerant party of the erstwhile king, Kent, and the Fool, Gloucester turns back homewards. But he does not know yet what awaits him there.

Another Shakespearean night asks the stars to hide their fires. An old king, Duncan, is visiting the house of one of his retainers. This retainer, Macbeth, contemplates terrible things and asks the universe not to look: “Stars, hide your fires/ Let not light see my black and deep desires;/ The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (*Macbeth* 1.4.50-53). Having done his dreadful deed, Macbeth is himself “afraid to *think* what I have done,/ *Look* on’t again I dare not” (*Macbeth* 2.2.48-49; my emphases), indicating that seeing by the eye is even more appalling than seeing by the mind’s eye. And seeing an appalling deed by the mind’s eye is bad enough. After his murder of Duncan, Macbeth finds it hard to even regard his own hands—because of what he knows of their actions. To Macbeth, the sight of his hands, in a curious textual nod to the pluckings of eyes promised and carried out in *Lear*, threatens to dislocate his eyes:

What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.  
Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.  
(*Macbeth* 2.2.57-61)

As the play unfolds, we see the truth of what Macbeth fears. For he is correct that there is no washing away of the innocent blood he has on his hands. Expressed in powerful metaphor, this human reality is at the heart of the play. But just as the visceral truth of Macbeth's realisation gives the play meaning, so too does the metaphorical frame of his statement provide an emotional and intellectual centre to it. Indeed, this superb blend of the visceral and the figurative, the material and the metaphorical, is key to what makes *Macbeth* work as theatre.

Back in *Lear*, in Gloucester's castle, language and metaphor are on their way to being eliminated. When Gloucester leaves on his errand of kindness to his old king, Lear's two eldest daughters and Cornwall learn of this from Gloucester's unfilial son Edmond. They also learn that in the impending battle with France, Gloucester intends to side with Cordelia's party, the invaders. Cornwall is furious. "Seek out the traitor Gloucester" (3.7.2-3; in *History* 14.3, "Seek out the villain Gloucester"), he says. "Hang him instantly" (3.7.4), suggests Regan. "Pluck out his eyes" (3.7.5), offers Goneril. These punishments are apparently proposed in the heat of the discovery that Gloucester's actions stand to endanger the kingdom of England against France. But soon, Cornwall utters what is close to being a premeditation, and cast in doubt the case of anger that he pleads for himself. In what he says is all the complacency and confidence of understanding that power can be unethical and yet power, and that although the taking of life is considered a charge of some gravity, inflicting mutilation, disability, pain, and suffering are not. He knows, as we do not yet, what he will do with Gloucester: "Though well we may not pass upon his life/ Without the form of justice, yet our power/ Shall do a curtsy to our wrath, which men/ May blame but not control" (3.7.24-27). That is, legal proceedings might be necessary to execute someone, but other forms of affliction and maiming can be meted out to the traitor Gloucester without serious consequence. Cornwall is

almost entirely right; but for a most unexpected and ultimately unavailing intervention, there is indeed nothing in the play to stay his hand. Soon, Cornwall expresses a horrible solicitousness towards the Earl's son. He suggests that Edmond should keep Goneril company and leave the castle, because "[t]he revenges we are bound to take upon your traitorous father are not fit for your beholding" (3.7.7-8). Registering Cornwall's concern for his own delicate regard, Edmond leaves his father to the Duke and his wife Regan.

Thus, Gloucester returns to his castle and is surprised by Regan and Cornwall. He is tied to a chair and interrogated. What letters has he had from France? Where has he sent the king? To Dover? Wherefore to Dover? Again, wherefore to Dover? (3.7.42-54). At the third iteration of the question, Gloucester breaks into defiance and answer. His words betray anger, perplexity, and a strange, metaphor-laden ocularcentrism.

Because I would not see thy cruel nails  
Pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister  
In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs.  
[...]  
If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time,  
Thou shouldst have said, 'Good porter, turn the key:  
All cruels else subscribe.' But I shall see  
The wingèd vengeance overtake such children.  
(3.7.55-65)

As he sets Gloucester up for the most feeling sight of any of his characters across any of his plays, Shakespeare also gives Gloucester a frantic insistence on metaphor: Gloucester does not want to see Goneril and Regan pluck out Lear's poor old eyes; Gloucester does want to see the winged vengeance overtake such children as Goneril and Regan. Here, Cornwall takes his cue from Gloucester's words—to take the metaphor apart, to smash together the language and the action whose separation is what makes the medium of theatre possible. "See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair./ Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (3.7.66-67). Here Shakespeare breaks a

pact between the play and its viewers, for what follows Cornwall's fateful words is both an invitation to look and a challenge to it.<sup>57</sup> As Gloucester suffers the loss of an eye, he calls out for help, perhaps knowing that he is in fact helpless: "He that will think to live till he be old,/ Give me some help! O cruel! O you gods!" (3.7.68-69).

But even as the world of the play—the world of metaphor, of words, of representation and habits of thought—is in the process of being dismantled by the brutal actualisation attempted by Cornwall, there is intervention from an unlikely quarter. A Servant, who has in no way been part of the action until now, and a Servant unnamed and unrecognised by any other appellation save the label of his subservience, sees Gloucester's blinding feelingly. He responds to Gloucester's plea—but to the spirit of it, and emphatically not to its letter. Betraying that he must not be thinking to live till he be old, Servant intervenes: "Hold your hand, my lord./ I have served you ever since I was a child,/ But better service have I never done you/ Than now to bid you hold" (3.7.71-74). Servant's labour of sight, and his consequent impassioned intervention costs him his life. His challenge to Cornwall's authority is not pardoned. But when Servant says to Cornwall, "Nay then, come on, and take the chance of anger" (3.7.78), I take his words seriously, and understand that this is a very different kind of anger than Cornwall had claimed for himself a few minutes ago. Servant speaks because he cannot *not* speak. His delay in acting—*after* Gloucester has already lost one eye—and his driven-ness in acting out of turn, are indicative of high stakes. It is as though his responsibility towards the humanity he is part of fails him in his responsibility towards his own preservation. For those of us outside the play and viewing/reading it, our own perception is dramatically changed as a

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<sup>57</sup> In Peter Brook's version, for instance, Cornwall picks up some kind of kitchen implement before he walks over to Gloucester tied down to his chair; he reassures the old man with menacing quiet that the latter will indeed never see any cruel nails pluck out any poor eyes. The grotesque culinarity of Cornwall's "Out, vile jelly!" (3.7.82) is anticipated with frightening savagery. See Peter Brook, dir., *King Lear* (1971).

result our co-spectatorship with Servant—for we were watching what Servant was. In front of our eyes, we see spectatorship so selfless as to give up the self to defend the humanity of another. Yet the instrument of our transformed vision, Servant, is extinguished as he speaks.

SERVANT: Oh, I am slain. My lord, you have one eye left  
To see some mischief on him. Oh!  
CORNWALL: Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!  
(3.7.80-82)

The last nerve is snapped. The irresistible power of Servant’s feeling sight remains with us only as a memory of his profound, necessary, contingent, and mortal pity. It achieves not at all what it set out to achieve. “All [is] dark and comfortless” (3.7.84) for Gloucester, and eyeless, he is thrust out at gates to “smell/ His way to Dover” (3.7.92-93).

### The Case of Eyes

I read *King Lear* before I knew “what happens” in the play or had watched a performance of it.<sup>58</sup> The first time I read Act 4 Scene 5 of *The Tragedy of King Lear*, I struggled against a mounting terror as two ragged figures, one leading the other, conversed in a landscape I could not picture but which filled me with bewilderment and fear. I knew that we had reached the place we had been promised a little while ago: Dover, where “a cliff whose high and bending head/ Looks fearfully in the confined deep” (4.1.68-69).<sup>59</sup> But owing to an instinctive empathy with a newly-blinded man

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<sup>58</sup> I read it before I had the benefit, for instance, of Peter Brook imagining for me a landscape lashed with light and the repeated crash of waves upon the shore, as Gloucester and Edgar converse in what feels like the edge of the world.

<sup>59</sup> Simon Palfrey similarly senses the richness of fear and possibility that this place signifies. “The confined place is a borderland, a frontier, and a magnet. Beyond sight, beyond the verification of knowledge, this is the place to which they are unerringly headed, the very threshold of possibility: at once a public horizon, a metaphysical puzzle, and a deep inward journey.” See *Poor Tom: Living King Lear* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 168.



who wants to use acutely—at least as acutely as pain and disorientation will allow—all his remaining faculties, I found myself trusting Gloucester in his perception of the landscape much more than the apparently more reliable Edgar’s description of it.

GLOUCESTER: When shall I come to th’top of that same hill?

EDGAR: You do climb it now. Look how we labour.

GLOUCESTER: Methinks the ground is even.

EDGAR: Horrible steep

Hark, do you hear the sea?

GLOUCESTER: No, truly.

(4.5.1-4)

It was almost as if the two were travelling different landscapes. If they were both in the same place, one of them had to be wrong, or seeing things.

Today, I am struck by how the reader/viewer of this scene is placed with respect to the two figures we are meant to be watching: even for the sighted among us, our position is deeply allied to the blind Gloucester’s. For in a real way, Gloucester and we have nothing to go on *but* Edgar’s words.<sup>60</sup> Disconcertingly, we now watch/listen as Edgar attempts to unmoor the blind Gloucester even from the rest of his perceptive faculties. “Why, then your other senses grow imperfect/ By your eyes’ anguish” (4.5.5-6), he tells the blind man. The eyeless agrees: “So may it be indeed” (4.5.6). But Gloucester quickly notes: “Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak’st/ In better phrase and matter than thou didst” (4.5.7-8). Gloucester is right to notice his companion’s controlled iambic pentameter, a marked departure from his speech as Poor Tom of a little time ago. But Edgar insists otherwise. There is an odd sharpness to his urgency to convince Gloucester that the latter is incapable of deciding anything for himself anymore: “Y’are much deceived. In nothing am I changed/ But in my garments” (4.5.9-10). Gloucester persists: “Methinks y’are better spoken”

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<sup>60</sup> Again, as with the red and black cloaks, the director too is directed what to stage by the very lines of the text: Edgar’s lines. This is what we watch, as viewers.

(4.5.10). But when Edgar speaks now, it is to turn everything that Gloucester or we can *not* hear or see into evidence on his own behalf. In the process, Edgar proves Gloucester right—he *is* better spoken; so well spoken, indeed, that from his mouth come one of the most enduring speeches of sheer imagination in English drama—but we do not immediately have time to note this. We listen as the tables are turned on Gloucester and on us, the theatre and awe of the moment taking away all room for argument.

EDGAR: Come on, sir, here's the place. Stand still. How fearful  
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low.  
The crows and choughs that wing the midway air  
Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down  
Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!  
Methinks he seems so bigger than his head.  
The fishermen that walk upon the beach  
Appear like mice, and yon tall anchoring barque  
Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy  
Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge,  
That on th'unnumbered idle pebble chafes,  
Cannot be heard so high.  
(4.5.11-22)

Edgar's speech imagines and verbally images such a landscape as we are not equipped to dispute precisely because its details of vertiginous distance cling so desperately to it. From the top of the cliff, everything is so far away as to be at the limits of vision—and because Edgar claims he reports about those limits, we grant him all the vision in between.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Edgar says that he cannot bear to look on: "I'll look no more,/ Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight/ Topple down headlong" (4.5.22-24). There is nowhere to turn but away when the very object of vision threatens vision. But exactly at the place where we concede the reasonableness of the need to look

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<sup>61</sup> As Jonathan Goldberg puts it, "[v]ision depends upon blindness; it rests upon a vanishing point. These lines [spoken by Edgar to Gloucester], spoken for the benefit of a blind man, establish him as the best audience for a mode of vision." See "Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation: *King Lear* 4:6 in Perspective," *Poetics Today* 5.3 (1984), 542.

away, we fear for the blind man, who may not look at or away from anything or anywhere, now standing on the brink of such an “extreme verge” (4.5.26). Gloucester now wants to let go—even as he relies still on his hearing to make sure that he is alone at the edge of the world. “Let go my hand./ [...] Bid me farewell, and let me hear thee going” (4.5.27, 4.5.31).

In my first reading of this play, this was where I could almost read no further, for fear of what I thought I knew was coming. But Edgar said something that gave me pause—and continuation. “Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it” (4.5.33-34). Even in my anxiety, and although far from excusing Edgar for having brought his father to the cliff, I suddenly knew that no one had higher stakes in the destitute Gloucester than Edgar did. Gloucester was *his* father, his *father*, and he had had to see him with his “bleeding rings” (5.3.180) and lead him by the hand. Without knowing why, I unexpectedly trusted Edgar, trusted whatever he was doing—he must know something that I did not.<sup>62</sup> I still argued with Gloucester as he prepared to renounce the world (4.5.35). I wanted to tell him that either in my sight or in his gods’, he could not patiently shake his great affliction off (4.5.35-36), that that was just a contradiction in terms. I wanted to remind him of what he had said earlier—“O dear Son Edgar,/ The food of thy abusèd father’s wrath:/ Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/ I’d say I had eyes again” (4.1.21-24)—and therefore tell him that although he did not know it, he *had* acquired eyes by his own peculiar terms.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> This is not unlike the gradual revelation in the case of Humphrey and Simpcox. What sets this one affectively apart is our sense of the relationship of care between these two individuals.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Palfrey writes with characteristic tenderness of the wish of this moment: “Hear the optative plea at the start, addressed to he knows not whom; the modesty of ‘but,’ and its knowledge that to ask anything may be to ask too much; and then the triplet verbs, *live*, *see*, *touch*, ever more intimate, moving from the predicative and yet almost impossible gift (*but live*), to the central condition of his continuing existence, experienced now only as snapshots of memory (*see thee*), to the last remaining faculty, the only thing still his own, which is feeling (*in my touch*).” *Poor Tom*, 157.

I wanted him to know what I knew as reader and potential viewer, and to step away from the brink. But he was not listening. In a moment, he had fallen.<sup>64</sup>

The stomach-turning fear of this scene resides in two things. First, to our having been exposed to that smashing together of language and reality whose separation alone gives theatre meaning. Here, at Dover, we are effectively placed where we are not allowed to know where things are. Second, and related, this fear owes to our belief-against-disbelief in the inconceivable horror of a good man convincing himself that he must put an end to himself, and falling to his extinction. And another somehow standing by and allowing this to happen. But this visceral pity and fear enhance the aesthetic achievement of this episode, and of the play. While not directly consequential for the plot of the play—a blind man takes it into his head to die, and fails to do so—this episode remains crucial for the affective weave of the subplot with the plot, and for the savage intertwining of metaphors of vision and intellection that permeate the play.<sup>65</sup> If we are viewers of the play, something of the weight of interpreting this fall is lifted off us by the production we are watching. A director may play it for frightening laughter, or profound confusion, or any manner of other constructions or slippages of meaning.<sup>66</sup> But the most significant cues to us are still deployed by

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<sup>64</sup> The first quarto of the play (1608) here inserts a single, brief stage-direction: “He falls.” The first folio (1623) lacks even this, and it is left to a reader to carry on to find out that Gloucester falls and is consequently roused by Edgar. Modern editions, like the New Cambridge Shakespeare, maintain brief directions such as have come to be gradually included in editions of the play after 1623: “[Gloucester throws himself forward and falls]” (219).

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, the elegant discussions in Paul Alpers, “*King Lear* and the Theory of the Sight Pattern,” in R. Brower and R. Poirier, eds, *In Defense of Reading* (New York: Dutton, 1963), 133-152, and what is in part a response to Alpers, Stanley Cavell’s extended meditation “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*,” in his *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-123.

<sup>66</sup> Here are two instances of performance that stand out in my recent memory. At the Globe in 2014, Bill Buckhurst’s direction of a small ground fall—more like a thud, or a thump, or even a slump by Gloucester—drew nervous and uncertain laughter. This laughter died as Edgar’s efforts at reviving Gloucester became more frantic. The fall of the frail Gloucester in the National Theatre’s production in 2014, directed by Sam Mendes, moved to what was close to horror; there was

means of the man who at once enabled and disabled the fall: Edgar. If we are readers of the play, our eyes arrive quickly at the crux: Edgar's question, "Alive or dead?" But the entirety of Edgar's speech is worth our attention.

EDGAR:                   Gone, sir; farewell.  
[Aside] And yet I know not how conceit may rob  
The treasury of life, when life itself  
Yields to the theft. Had he been where he thought,  
By this had thought been past. – Alive or dead?  
Ho, you sir, friend! Hear you, sir? Speak!  
[Aside] Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives. –  
What are you, sir?  
(4.5.41-48)

The possibilities before us—and, I offer, before Edgar—are prodigious. Before the fall, Edgar hints to Gloucester that he is leaving, just as the blind man asked.<sup>67</sup> Then, he talks to us.<sup>68</sup> But he talks to us almost as though he is speaking to himself. Intimacy and desperation come together in a confession of unknowing, and a question that we can make figurative only in our "comfort" of knowing the story of events without fully attending to the story of causes. For at this moment in the play, Edgar's questions are real. We too cannot know how a terminal conceit/pretence/performance that its actors *entirely* subscribe to may do to them. Had Gloucester been where he thought, Edgar

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reassurance in knowing that the actor could not fall anywhere further than the "ground" of the stage.

<sup>67</sup> Palfrey is right that the blind man "Gloucester is never more fatherly than now. Indeed it is only now, we might say, that he becomes a father. A father should go before his son. He should do so with courage, leaving the son free from guilt or resentment or shame, lighter for the old man's passing. It is the least a father can do: and the most." *Poor Tom*, 188.

<sup>68</sup> Before he can, though, Edgar must find a way to convince Gloucester—and us—of his leaving, because Gloucester had also asked to "hear thee going." As he says "Now fare ye well, good sir" (4.5.32), perhaps Edgar walks audibly "away." Perhaps he tries to sound his voice as though he is at a distance. Perhaps we imagine our own manner of his "leaving" as we read, perhaps we watch him perform this "departure."

tells us—thus also confirming that Gloucester (and we) had *not* known just where he was—even his capacity for thought would have been a thing of the past by now. The displacement of the cliff from our view is as swift as it is dizzying. This might, at lower stakes, have led to an anti-climax. But here it does not, because we still do not have firm ground beneath our feet. The question remains: “Alive or dead?”

As viewers, we may at this point hold reasonable assurance that the “blind” actor’s life is secure. But as viewers *or* readers, we are less certain about Gloucester’s life. In a manner reminiscent of the gradual “discovery” afforded us of Simpcox’s physiological abilities, we are finding out now that we are not quite where we might have thought we are. For all the headlong rush of the view Edgar had plummeted us into, that edge is (thankfully) not where Gloucester had in fact been standing. By that had thought been past. But there is an extra turn of the screw here: if we did not know when we were not at the cliff, what do we now know about a fall from a non-cliff? In the regular world, if one falls from a high cliff, one dies. But what happens if one *wishes* one were on a high cliff, thinks they are on it, and falls from such a pinnacle of mortal desire? In the fraction of time that it takes Edgar to switch from his “aside” to urgent direct address of his father, in the space of the few breaths of the “blind” actor who has fallen, gravity and yearning collide to produce a radical shift in our allegiance and centre of knowledge. Suddenly, we are Edgar, asking in absolute earnest: “Alive or dead?” Whatever Edgar had been orchestrating, he is now inside. Whatever he had been performing, he wants, for and at this moment, to break. As for us readers/viewers, we remain at the edge of our seats, aware of the risks of both the worlds we straddle. In the world of the play, we cannot tell if a blind man lives, for all his son’s wish to “cure” his despair by mighty conjuration. We also cannot look away, if we want to find out what happens. Outside the world of the play and within the world in which it is performed or read, we know people we love to such

possible distraction. When standard communication breaks down but affection does not, we have nothing *but* performance and improvisation in our repertoire. What if they too fail?

Edgar's next sentences are choppy with worry. "Ho, you sir, friend! Hear you, sir? Speak!" A vestige of performance clings to this mounting tension—he is still playing a part, can still only call Gloucester "friend" and "sir"—and we as audience realise that he *hopes* his father lives, even as he does not know if he does.<sup>69</sup> A little while ago, when he had seen Gloucester for the first time after Cornwall and Reagan were done with him—"But who comes here?/ My father, parti-eyed?" (4.1.9-10)—Gloucester's injury and inability to see had shocked him, perhaps instinctively thrust him, into a position of caregiving for this now destitute man. By Edgar's construction, the sight that arrested him radically threatened reciprocity; even as the object of the greatest pity in the world, a blind man cannot look back. As Simon Palfrey says, "[t]he play is never more pitiless than right here: forcing Edgar to see his father like this, forcing him to stay, forcing him to remain hidden."<sup>70</sup> But to us, there is a violence also to this presumption, on Edgar's part, of Gloucester's incapacity to reciprocate care. Gloucester cannot return Edgar's regard, but that does not mean his inability to grasp an old affection or reciprocate in love. If proof were needed of this, we might say that Edgar has it when Gloucester prays, right before his jump: "If Edgar live, O bless him" (4.5.40). Yet, that invitation to recognition too may have been less than possible, for what is a man to do by way of

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<sup>69</sup> Between the quarto and folio versions, the implications of this non-revelation are played out in a stunning textual transformation later when Albany asks Edgar how Edgar had come to know of Gloucester's sufferings. Where Edgar answers Albany, the quarto reads: "met I my father with his bleeding rings/ (The precious stones new lost became his guide,/ Led him, beg'd for him, sau'd him from dispaire,/ Neuer (O Father) reueald my selfe vnto him" (sig. L2v). The corresponding passage in the folio reads: "Met I my Father with his bleeding Rings,/ Their precious Stones new lost: became his guide,/ Led him, begg'd for him, sau'd him from dispaire./ Neuer (O fault) reueal'd my selfe vnto him" (sig. ss2v). I have written about this change from "(O Father)" to "(O fault)" in "Seeing Feelingly: Sight and Service in *King Lear*."

<sup>70</sup> Palfrey, *Poor Tom*, 155.

revealing himself to his father only to tell him that the latter has wronged him? If, now, Edgar has to see his father's inability to see, he would then have to see his father's inability to see *him*, his son. He would have to witness grief that should not be. He would have to stand by and assure his father of something like forgiveness, knowing that the same pardon may be utterly out of reach for Gloucester to give himself. It is possible that Edgar has done what he could have. But like us, Edgar is allowed to wonder if he should have done differently. For this is where we find ourselves, at the bottom of a fall—and “[t]hus might he [Gloucester] pass indeed,” heavy with grief and helpless with hope for the son he is right beside yet immeasurably distant from. This is not blindness used simply for empathetic affect, just as it is also not a depiction only of the lived reality of blindness—powerful as each of those might in themselves be. This moment encompasses the agency and the vulnerability of both, thus allowing us to see/hear/perceive the binds in either direction, beyond our personal sympathies or identifications as children, parents, caregivers, cared-fors, or those in between.

As readers/viewers, we know that Gloucester lives when we hear Edgar's voice in relief: “Yet he revives.” This is immediately compromised by what in Gloucester is yet desirous of death: “Away, and let me die” (4.5.47). It is perhaps as uncertain to Gloucester as to us whom, exactly, he addresses here. In this space between falls, landings, and acknowledgment of either, all we know is that Gloucester speaks to the person who has just spoken to him.<sup>71</sup> But we cannot know yet who this is: not Poor Tom anymore, and possibly not the better-spoken man who had led Gloucester up

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<sup>71</sup> Thus theologian John Hull about his blind experience in our time: “When you are blind, a hand suddenly grabs you. A voice suddenly addresses you. There is no anticipation or preparation. There is no hiding around the corner. There is no lying low. I *am* grasped. I *am* greeted. I am passive in the presence of that which accosts me. I cannot escape it. [...] For the blind person, people are in motion, they are temporal, they come and they go. They come out of nothing; they disappear.” *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (New York: Random House, 1990), 95.



“horrible steep” ground.<sup>72</sup> The only thing evident in the wild invention of whoever Edgar now is, is his investment in convincing Gloucester that his, Gloucester’s, life is extraordinary.

EDGAR: Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,  
So many fathom down precipitating,  
Thou’dst shivered like an egg. But thou dost breathe,  
Hast heavy substance, bleed’st not, speak’st, art sound.  
Ten masts at each make not the altitude  
Which thou hast perpendicularly fell.  
Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again.  
(4.5.48-55)

Edgar’s attempted return of Gloucester to the mundaneness of gravity and human subjection to it is as gentle as it is full of wonder, perhaps his own that he is still holding his father, alive, in his arms. “Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air,/ So many fathom down precipitating”—*you were almost gossamer, feathers, air; you behaved like gossamer, feathers, air.* “But thou dost breathe,/Hast heavy substance, bleed’st not, speak’st, art sound”—*you are a man, a denizen of the human world, not the stuff of air; you are also a man of substance and of health.* “Ten masts at each make not the altitude/Which thou hast perpendicularly fell”—*yes, you did fall; you fell an almost inconceivable distance.* “Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again”—*let me prove to you [and to myself] that it is as I say; your life is wondrously preserved, and you can judge for yourself even as you utter the words I now invite you to speak.*

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<sup>72</sup> A very belated introduction is staged later: in the interim between Gloucester and Edgar’s exchange with Lear, and the appearance of Oswald. By then, Edgar calls himself yet another person, albeit unnamed—even as he owns his immediate history. By then, his “feeling sorrows” is itself a poignant echo of what we have heard his father say about seeing the world “feelingly” (4.5.143).

GLOUCESTER: Now, good sir, what are you?  
EDGAR: A most poor man, made tame to fortune’s blows,  
Who by the art of known and feeling sorrows  
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand;  
I’ll lead you to some biding.  
(4.5.211-214)

This time—unlike outside St Albans—having read/watched the miracle, we take it for what we too may call a miracle, but it operates for us at a multi-layered and possibly different register. It succeeds best where we allow it to function as evidence of our engagement. Gloucester's life is a miracle because we, like Edgar and also Gloucester, have been willing to go to the brink of theatrical conceit, and returned from it. The scene is a miracle of expectations set up and amazingly unfulfilled. It is a miracle of theatre for mantling and dismantling a grand and precipitous landscape, and allowing us to see it being done, even participate in it. At every stage, what is key is our willingness to be manipulated, our acceptance of the emotional and intellectual perils attending this manipulation, and our capacity for sympathy with the strangely conflicted positions of the people involved. Gloucester's blindness, which makes possible the summoning of visions and vistas that we have just witnessed (whether on the page or the stage), becomes theatre's thing itself: an energy and an invitation for us to understand improvisation and its need; grasp the last reaches of performance, right to the point where it almost fails; inhabit a place of radial empathy no less balanced for also being one of uncertainty.

But it is no miracle—yet—for Gloucester, and this too has consequences for us. “But have I fall'n or no?” (4.5.56) We may have the same vertigo: did what we think just happened indeed just happen? Edgar, dramaturge of the moment, hurries to assure: “From the dread summit of this chalky bourn./ Look up a-height: the shrill-gorged lark so far/ Cannot be seen or heard;/ Do but look up” (4.5.57-59).<sup>73</sup> Edgar's normative pleas for Gloucester to “look up” are as apparently tone-deaf for the moment as they are necessary for him to direct Gloucester's attention, yet again, to what he cannot and must not see or hear: in its absence, the flight-height of the invisible and inaudible lark fills in for the vertical measure of the chalky bourn from which Gloucester has fallen. Like us,

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<sup>73</sup> The quarto reads: “from the dread sommons of this chalkie borne,” (Q1 sig. I3r), thus layering the meaning of this line by bringing into play the terrible summon and allure of the abyss.

Gloucester knows the violence of this negation of all his sensible experiences, this dismissal, for that is what it amounts to, of all his agency.

GLOUCESTER: Alack, I have no eyes.  
Is wretchedness deprived that benefit  
To end itself by death? 'Twas yet some comfort  
When misery could beguile the tyrant's rage  
And frustrate his proud will.  
(4.5.60-64)

The bitterness of this moment spills from the man who has most reason for it, to the play itself, and over to us. In it is the play's interrogation of what it has just made possible. We watch/read in our awful appreciation of theatre for its stripping a blind man of his last agency. Yet, in our mindfulness of the vainness of this achievement, and in our awareness of the violence we have been implicated in, is something potentially affirmative. In this moment of meta-theatrical valence, it is again the man with some of the highest stakes who acts this out for us: his is a hand held out in help and stubborn hope. Thus Edgar, trying to help his father up: "Give me your arm. Up; so. How is't? Feel you your legs? You stand" (4.5.64-65). Perhaps Gloucester now does stand. Again Edgar, persisting in establishing the wonder of his father's life that he has claimed a few seconds ago: "This is above all strangeness" (4.5.66). Edgar has nothing to lose anymore, so he continues: "Upon the crown o'th'cliff what thing was that/ Which parted from you?" (4.5.67-68). What follows does not even attempt to refute Gloucester's answer that it was "A poor unfortunate beggar" (5.6.68). Instead, Edgar proceeds to describe what, again, neither Gloucester nor we could have seen. Only we know, by now, that he is inventing. Gloucester appears not to know. But at the end of his speech, under open cover of the idioms of common speech, Edgar will have called his father "father," only to be

quite unheard in that word of belonging.<sup>74</sup> And the blind man will vow, unrealy, to weary out affliction itself.

EDGAR: As I stood here below, methought his eyes  
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,  
Horns whelked and waved like the enragèd sea.  
It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,  
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours  
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.  
GLOUCESTER: I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear  
Affliction till it do cry out itself  
'Enough, enough', and die. That thing you speak of,  
I took it for a man. Often 'twould say  
'The fiend, the fiend!' He led me to that place.  
(4.5.69-74)

Here, between a non-cliff and a mad king, a blind man makes a promise we sense—maybe know—he cannot keep. (No one in the human condition can.) Whatever Gloucester says he remembers, he remembers from a reality that we do not have access to. He will soon be joined, onstage, by another man of different registers of memory and promise. And there will not be much his son—or we—can do about either of these old men and their regrets, their present and “feeling” negotiations of the world, and their occasional sharing of the world as we know it only to repeatedly step back from it. We might say, with Edgar: “I would not take this from report; it is,/ And my heart breaks at it” (4.5.136-137). But for all that, we might be too deep in by now to stop reading/watching.

Blindness on the Shakespearean stage, then, is about the limits of vision, and the limits of intellection/knowledge/certainty. But importantly, it is also, as I have shown, about the limits of justice, and for that reason, presents a refusal to excuse our implication within the pleasure of the

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<sup>74</sup> In a little while, Edgar will use it again. After Lear's appearance and his departure with the Attendants sent to look for him by Cordelia, Gloucester speaks in what is closest to a return to his former self: “You ever gentle gods, take my breath from me./ Let not my worser spirit tempt me again/ To die before you please” (4.5.208-210). To this, Edgar returns: “Well pray you, father” (4.5.210).

theatrical medium. But this is also where theatre becomes available and accessible *as* medium, its very scaffolding open to examination, its presumptions subject to unsettlement and readjustment. Somewhere between that taking apart and putting back of the framework of theatre, the work of hard and uncompromising empathy is required of us, the plays' readers/viewers. The seeming work of theatre—which rests on our willingness to be persuaded by what we have in front of us—cannot continue without our acquiescence to trust the medium despite what we have registered about its violence. That Shakespeare asks and receives this acquiescence of us speaks to the power of writing the *limits*—of vision, intellection, and justice, in their multivalent ways—that we have noted. Indeed, it is here, in this acknowledgment and record, by the playwright, of the limits of the medium itself that allows blindness on the Shakespearean stage to go beyond a sighted author's imagination of blindness for a majority-sighted audience. It is here, where it presents the limits of the sighted imagination, that this theatre continues to stimulate and energise.

## CHAPTER II

### Turn Their Eyes Hither: George Herbert

Following on the contemplation of staged blindness in the previous chapter, this one, which examines the lyric poetry of the devotional poet George Herbert, is engaged with an extraordinary literary treatment of sight. In the first half of this chapter, I shall use the three earliest witnesses of Herbert's collection of poems (which would eventually become *The Temple*) to examine its invitation and training of readers' eyes across the manuscript and printed page. Thus, I shall demonstrate Herbert's textual celebration of vision and its joys; his insistence on the visual assembly of textual meaning; his implicit assertion of the importance of not just reading his poems but also viewing them. In the second half of the chapter, I shall study Herbert's writing of his own and his God's eyes, and show the poet's awareness, paradoxically, also of the perils of vision. My assessment of Herbert's thematization of eyes and sight will continue to speak to the intensely visual qualities of the poet, but I shall note too the many instances recorded in his verse where vision troubles or even fails Herbert. Thus, I shall show how Herbert, in his spiritual yearning, both prioritises human vision *and* writes himself into a kind of desire for blindness. For just as the visual sense is, for Herbert, a conduit to the divine, so too does he sometimes need to hold back or close his eyes if he is to access his God's regard. As we have registered in Shakespeare with his depiction of blindness on stage and shall in the next chapters with Milton and his blind compositions, this desiring of physical blindness by Herbert (which this devotional poet almost regards as spiritual *ability* or potential), contributes to the poetic unsettlement of the equation of vision with intellection that otherwise looms so large in

ocularcentric early modernity. Despite Herbert's frequent celebration of vision and his exquisite attention to his readers' sight across the page, his gloriously crafted verse also indicates a deep nervousness about its own excellence of form and poise, and exhibits tendencies towards profound visual withdrawal.

### **This Little Book**

It is at the poet's deathbed, we learn, that "this little book" that was to become *The Temple* was handed over by George Herbert to Edmund Duncon for Nicholas Ferrar towards possible printing and publication. Isaak Walton's account of the poet's life tells how the dying Herbert charged Duncon with the task.

Sir, I pray you deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master; in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it; and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, in George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin, rev. edn (New York: Penguin, 2004), 311. Despite its suspect reliability as a record of Herbert's life, Walton's biography of Herbert is of value in indicating how Herbert's English poems made it to print, and for an appreciation of how Herbert was remembered some forty years after his death. For just critiques of the biography, see, for instance, John Butt, "Izaak Walton's Methods in Biography," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association XIX* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 67-84; David Novarr, *The Making of Walton's "Lives"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); and Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). Some details presented in Walton's biography of Herbert, are borne out by other sources. In this instance, John Ferrar's biography of his brother Nicholas Ferrar confirms that Nicholas did indeed receive the book and "which when N. F. had many & many a time read over, & embraced, & kissed again & again, he said, he could not sufficiently admire it, as a rich Jewel & most worthy to be in the hands & hearts of all true Christians." John Ferrar is quoted in John Drury and Victoria Moul's edition of Herbert's *Complete Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2015), xlviii. See also L. R. Muir and J. A. White, eds., *Materials for the life of Nicholas Ferrar* (Leeds: Leeds Philosophical & Literary Society, 1996). For a recent literary biography of Herbert, see John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

What survives of this exchange is a beautiful folio copy of whatever Herbert handed over to Duncon.<sup>76</sup> Once Ferrar determined that Herbert's musings in verse would potentially be of considerable profit and pleasure to many a dejected poor soul, he appointed scribes at his Writing Room at Little Gidding to make a fair copy of the poems in a manner designed to impress Cambridge University Press to publish the collection in 1633.<sup>77</sup> The 1633 production is a little book indeed: an unassuming duodecimo that has continued to delight, sustain, and inspire generations of readers.

Both the little printed book and its forerunner, the Little Gidding manuscript—now the Bodleian Manuscript of Herbert's poems, Tanner 307—carry in them a "Dedication" that primes anyone coming to the volume about how it should be approached. A poignant few lines addressed first to God and then tangentially to that peculiar god of writers, their reader, request in equal measure an attention, an acceptance, and a responsible choice. Significantly, there is extant one other little manuscript book: this one corrected in Herbert's own hand and dated by internal evidence to around 1623. This is the Williams Manuscript of Herbert's poems, Jones B62, and along with his English poems, it also contains Herbert's Latin poems *Passio Discerpta* and *Lucus* in his handwriting.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The poems are copied on 20 folio quires. But the sheets are significantly cropped, so that the quire signatures are sometimes missing.

<sup>77</sup> Below the "Dedication" on the "title-page" of the Bodleian Manuscript are the signatures of five men: the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, three heads of colleges, and a secretary. A subsequent owner of the manuscript book, William Sancroft, explains at the top of the "title-page" that the signatories were granting the license for the book to be printed. "The Original of Mr George Herbert's Temple; as it was at first Licenced for the presse."

<sup>78</sup> Herbert's biographer John Drury describes the manuscript thus: "On the fly-leaf of the notebook its eighteenth-century owner John Jones wrote (in abbreviated Latin which I translate) that he got it from 'the library of the famous and learned H.M. of Huntingdon who died in 1730.' 'H.M.' was Hugh Mapletoft, the son of Judith Collett who had been brought up in the religious community at Little Gidding: that extended family given to prayer, good works and the calligraphy that produced the surviving manuscript of *The Temple*." *Music at Midnight*, 140.



From this, we know that the “Dedication” existed also in at least one other manuscript incarnation. We have no evidence of any effort on Herbert’s part to publish his English poems in his lifetime.<sup>79</sup> But from the Williams Manuscript it becomes clear that the thought of presenting his poems to a wider readership did not dawn on Herbert on his deathbed. The “Dedication” in the Williams Manuscript—replicated in both the Bodleian Manuscript and the printed first edition in 1633—indicates that Herbert had been composing in English for a while.<sup>80</sup> It similarly establishes that he had long pondered to whom to bring his poems, how to present his work, and how he wanted others to engage with his verse.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> It is nevertheless probable that at least some of Herbert’s English poems must have been seen by other writers in his time. We know of Herbert’s friendship with John Donne, and Francis Bacon dedicated his translation of the Psalms to the poet as the finest contemporary judge of his own exercises in devotional text. We also note the reciprocity of creative criticism as indicated in Bacon’s dedication to Herbert: “The paines, that it pleased you to take, about some of my Writings, I cannot forget: which did put mee in minde, to dedicate to you, this poore Exercise of my sicknesse. Besides, it being my manner for Dedications, to choose those that I hold most fit for the Argument, I thought, that in respect of Diuinitie, and Poesie, met, (whereof the one is the Matter, the other the Stile of this little Writing) I could not make better choice.” Francis Bacon, *The Translation of Certaine Psalms into English Verse* (London, 1625), A3r-v.

<sup>80</sup> He calls the English poems that would go on to become *The Temple* his “first fruits.” If they are—or if the Williams Manuscript collection indeed contains—some of his first compositions in poetry, then they must be allowed to date back at least to before the writing and publication of his Latin and Greek verse. The *Musae Responsoriae* is now by scholarly consensus dated to the 1620s. Although there is no direct evidence for the dating of *Lucus*, a mini-sequence within it (poems 26-28, on Pope Urban VIII) is with good reason conjectured to be from soon after 1623, when the Pope was elected. *Passio Discerpta* cannot be dated with any certainty. We only know that like *Lucus*, this series of poems, comparable in subject matter to the English poem “The Sacrifice,” is contained within the Williams Manuscript in Herbert’s own hand. *Memoriae Matris Sacrum* was composed in tribute to his mother, Magdalen Herbert, later Lady John Danvers, soon after her death in 1627, and published later that summer—the only cycle of poems by Herbert in any language to have been published in its entirety in his lifetime.

<sup>81</sup> Within a few pages of the “Dedication” in *The Temple*, we come across a statement of the stakes Herbert placed in his English poetry. In the “Church Porch,” there is the open admission that this country parson in fact hopes, by verse, to “find him, who a sermon flies” (“Perirrhantierium,” 5). Leila Watkins points out how remarkable this claim of poetry’s greater efficacy is, coming from someone who is professionally and necessarily, at this time, a practitioner of the prose form of the sermon. See her chapter “Lyric Sequence and Emotional Life in George Herbert’s *The Temple*,” in “Forms of Consolation in Early Modern English Poetry” (University of Michigan, 2014). In this

*Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;  
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,  
And must return. Accept of them and me,  
And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.  
Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:  
Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.*<sup>82</sup>

Here are two extraordinary tussles, both reaching into the heart of Herbert's poetic efforts and accomplishments, and both in only their first of many manifestations in *The Temple*. The first tussle (1-4) is a riveting creative *agon* of inter-animated mutual authorship between Herbert and his God: the poetic fruits inscribed in the manuscript are Herbert's and yet not his; they belong to his Lord both through this Lord's greater creative power and through Herbert's submission of his work to him; the Lord is himself implicated in Herbert's poetic work by Herbert's writing him into being in dazzling warmth, contradiction, and affection; and the singing of the Lord's name is to be rewarded but by further *striving* on the part of the poet. Luminous with joy, pain, desire, and an intense inquiry into what it is to be an author while clearly owing one's own authorship elsewhere, this first tussle depicts the risks and rewards of a magnificent creaturely existence. But it is the second tussle (5-6) which concerns me here: the matter of the turning of the eyes. This final couplet

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context, Philip Sidney's assertions of the greater power of poetry to instruct and delight come to mind. See his *Apology for Poetry* (written c. 1579; published in 1595). (Sidney was related to Herbert through their greater families, and Herbert himself had obvious reasons not least because of his literary interests for paying attention to Sidney's works.) As Robert Ray makes clear, Herbert's verses did find a wide and devoted audience. They got copied into commonplace books, in turn worked into sermons, and became points of departure for other poetic imitations and adaptations. See his *The Herbert Allusion Book: Allusions to George Herbert in the Seventeenth Century*, a special issue of *Studies in Philology* 83.4 (1986).

<sup>82</sup> All citations from Herbert's poetry in this dissertation are from John Drury and Victoria Moul's edition of Herbert's *Complete Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2015). The italics in the Drury and Moul edition are possibly a function of how the type was set for the "Dedication" in the 1633 first edition. Although I do not cite from it, Helen Wilcox's excellent edition of *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) has been a constant point of reference. Similarly, *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945) edited by F. E. Hutchinson, has continued to be of value as an informed and well-glossed repository of all of Herbert's writings.

is presumably still directed at Herbert's Lord: that he make sure that only those who wish to make a gain attend to this poet's verse. Others should depart. Yet the slight setting apart of the final two lines argues the possible implication of also a human reader.

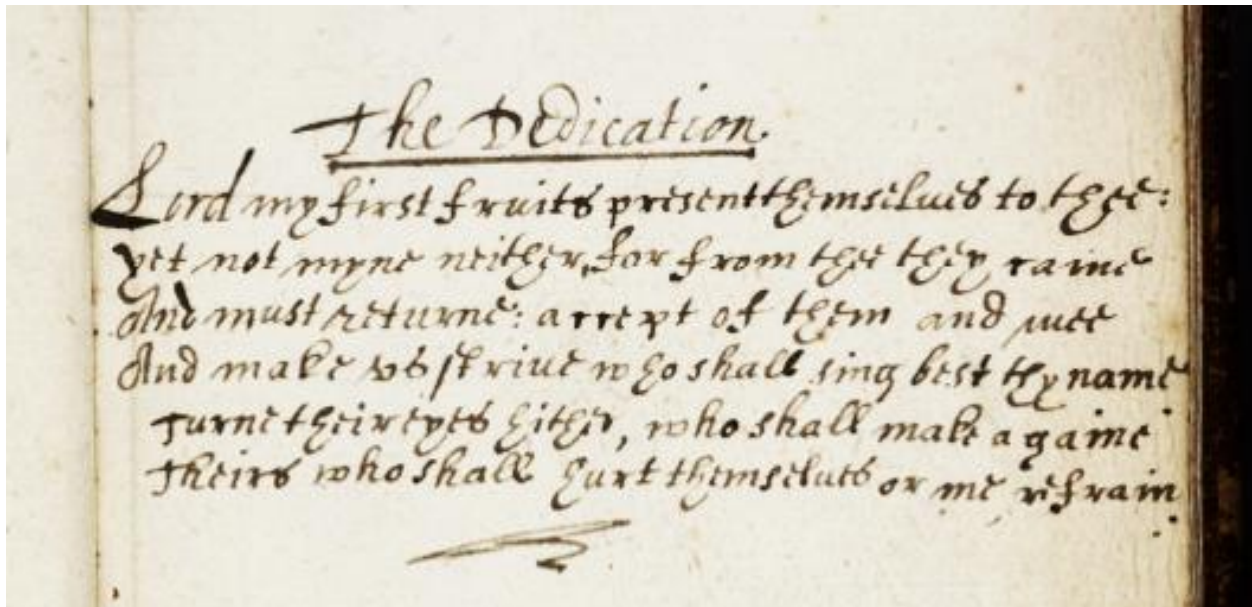


Figure 8. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. iiii

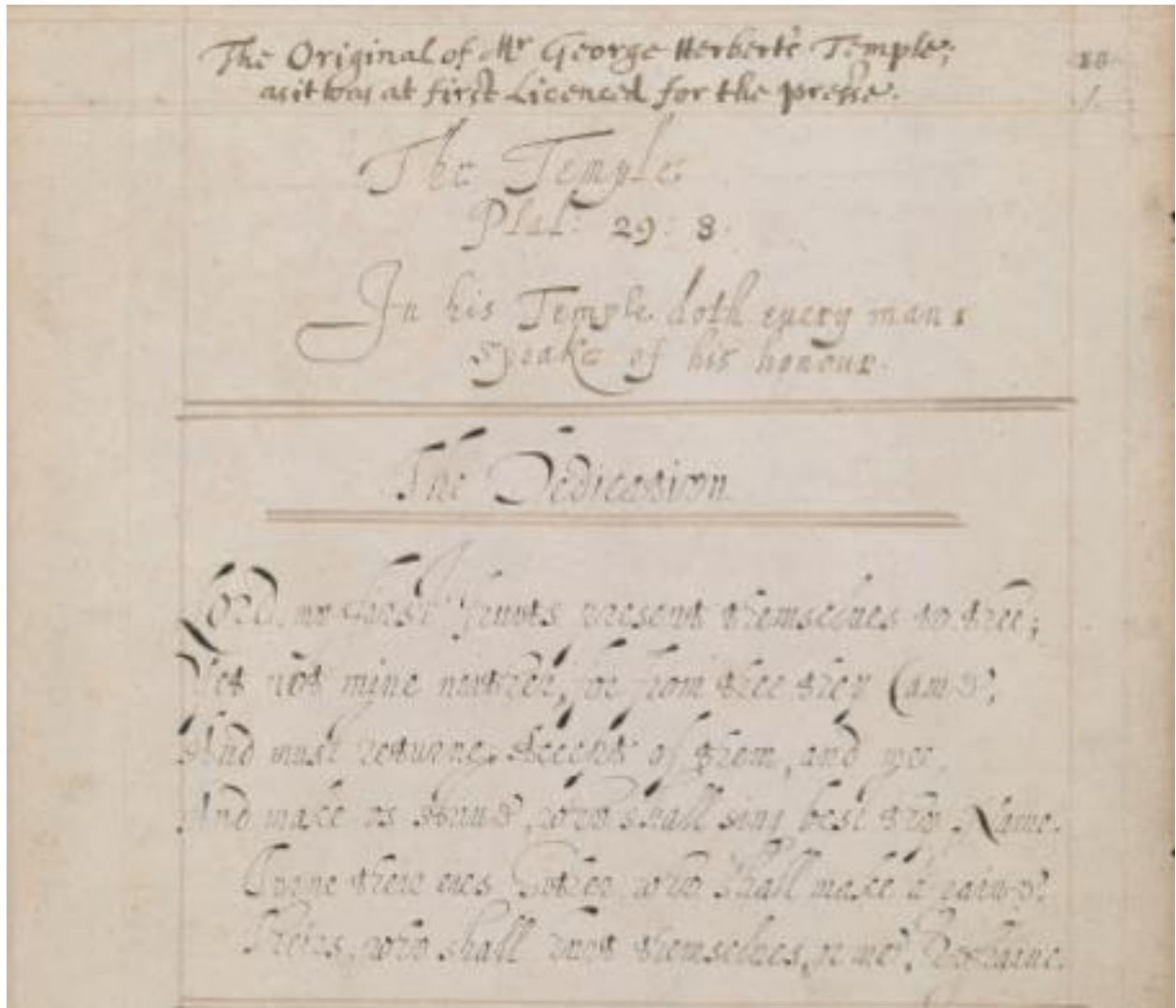


Figure 9. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 1r

This human reader must decide for herself whether she is the right sort of person for these poems. If she wishes to engage productively with what is in front of her, she must step into “The Church-porch” and then “The Church” itself. If not, she had best refrain.

Despite the delicate formal construct and metaphorical leaning onto church architecture, Herbert's lines are intensely aware of their own fundamental status as text and of the necessary

means of access that a human reader must inevitably bring to them.<sup>83</sup> The access is in the eyes of the reader. How, when, to what extent, and where, these eyes are turned, whether by godly or human agency, means profoundly more than scholars of Herbert have so far taken note of within the context of visual joy and exploration, aesthetic pleasure and the visual crafting of the text, and deep indebtedness to and regulation of the senses that are, I offer, the very substrate of Herbert's poetry.

The strong and sustained sensual dimension of Herbert's poetry has been justly noted and even celebrated in Herbert scholarship. To a twenty-first century reader, Herbert is not—if he ever was—a straightforwardly serene and pious devotional poet. If Chana Bloch noted the biblical Songs of Songs as a precedent for Herbert's treatment of divine love in human terms yet effectively disavowed any intentional sexual imagery on Herbert's part, Michael Schoenfeldt successfully engaged with Herbert's use of the erotic and the sacred to read for the physiological groundedness, and thence visceral power, of Herbert's poetry.<sup>84</sup> If Janis Lull read in "Love (3)" an ultimate rejection of sexuality as an image of humanity's love-relationship with God, Celestin John Walby stressed the poem's crucial hinging on seeing, touching, tasting, and eating to emphasise just such a prospect.<sup>85</sup> Many-voiced examinations of Herbert's voluptuous language as sacred parody continue to endure.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> This textual awareness is also betrayed by the explicit naming of the "Superliminare" immediately succeeding the "Perirrhantierium." "Superliminare" denotes an inscription on the lintel above a threshold.

<sup>84</sup> Hanna Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), particularly 111; Michael Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>85</sup> Janis Lull, *The Poem in Time: Reading George Herbert's Revisions of The Church* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990); Celestin John Walby, "'Quick-ey'd Love': Regenerate Eyes and Spiritual Body in Herbert's 'Love' (III)," *George Herbert Journal* 21 (1997/1998), 58-72.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); Rosamond Tuve, "Sacred 'Parody' of Love Poetry, and Herbert" in *Essays by Rosamond Tuve: Spenser, Herbert, Milton*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 207-251; Bruce Wardropper, "The Religious Conversion of Profane Poetry," in *Studies in the Continental Background of Renaissance English Literature:*

But so too do discussions of the sheer continuities between the sacred and the profane in Herbert.<sup>87</sup> Some marked the sensory implications of Herbert's sacred poems; Warren Liew sensitively explored Herbert's affirmation of the spiritual regard for fallen sexuality and textuality.<sup>88</sup> David Thorley has commented upon Herbert's poetic uses of periods of illness.<sup>89</sup> Holly Nelson and Laura Ralph have written on William Cowper's psychologically charged reading of Herbert in his own negotiation of suffering.<sup>90</sup> And although he sometimes unduly overstates his case for sound and hearing in Herbert's world, Gary Kuchar does useful work to round up the emphasis on aural "hearkening," or active listening, in Herbert's poetry.<sup>91</sup> Clearly, the word and the flesh are no mutually exclusive

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*Essays Presented to John Lievsay*, ed. Dale B. J. Randall and George Walton Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977), 203-221; Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Anthony Martin, "George Herbert and Sacred 'Parodie'" *Studies in Philology* 93.4 (1996), 443-470.

<sup>87</sup> See, for instance, Anne-Marie Miller Blaise, "'Sweetnesse readie penn'd': Herbert's Theology of Beauty," *George Herbert Journal* 27 (2003), 1-21. See also Terry Sherwood, *Herbert's Prayerful Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), particularly the chapter on "Tasting and Telling Sweetness," 57-76.

<sup>88</sup> See Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd, eds, *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995). For broader discussions of the poetry in its world, see also Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954); Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975); Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1983); and Ramie Targoff, "George Herbert and the Devotional Lyric" in *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 85-117.

<sup>89</sup> David Thorley, "'In all a weak disabled thing': Herbert's Ill-Health and its Poetic Treatments," *George Herbert Journal* 34:1 (2010), 1-33.

<sup>90</sup> Holly Faith Nelson and Laura E. Ralph, "'Upon the Rack': George Herbert, William Cowper, and the Hermeneutic of Dis/ability," *George Herbert Journal* 32 (2008/2009), 54-67.

<sup>91</sup> Gary Kuchar, "Sounding *The Temple*: George Herbert and the Mystery of Harkening," in Ineke Bockting, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec, and Cathy Parc, eds, *Poetry and Religion: Figures of the Sacred* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), 71-89. Kuchar's point about active listening is well taken, but his essay does not clarify why hearing assumes the importance it does in these poems written for a predominantly visual and literate readership.

things, as far as Herbert is concerned. But in all our explorations of Herbert's language of physicality, we have not looked adequately at eyes—with their fraught desires, extravagant abilities, great privileges, appalling failures, and terrible dangers—in Herbert's poetry.

The implication of eyes with sexuality, seduction, and temptation in early modern discourses of desire have been well noted. Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) unambiguously asserted the ocular origins of erotic melancholy: “by often gazing one on the other, they [lovers] direct sight to sight, and ioyne eye to eye, and so drinke and sucke in loue betweene them, for the beginning of this disease is the Eye.”<sup>92</sup> Critics have commented on the extensive use of ocular imagery in love poetry of the time. Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky suggests the duplicity of the (often eroticised) eye's status in the period's anatomical and literary texts.<sup>93</sup> But even scholars who note the importance of eyes in Herbert's work only do so for narrow sections of it. The overwhelming majority of this attention has in fact been paid to “Love (3)” and its quick-eyed protagonist. Greg Crossan points out the strong erotic connotations of the way in which Love, who takes the narrator's hand in the poem, continues also to make “eyes” at him.<sup>94</sup> Celestin John Walby offers a plethora of valuable associations between the Biblical book of Genesis, Augustine's commentary on it, and Herbert's poem, to suggest the poet's looking forward to a spiritually “regenerate” sight.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1621), p. 561 (pt 3, sec. 2, mem. 2, subs. 2).

<sup>93</sup> Sergei Lobanov-Rostovsky, “Taming the Basilisk: The Eye in the Discourses of Renaissance Anatomy,” in David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds, *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 194-217.

<sup>94</sup> Greg Crossan, “Herbert's ‘Love’ (III),” *Explicator* 37 (1978), 41.

<sup>95</sup> Celestin John Walby, “‘Quick-ey'd Love’: Regenerate Eyes and Spiritual Body in Herbert's ‘Love’ (III),” *George Herbert Journal* 21 (1997/1998), 58-72.

As this chapter shows, however, eyes have a far greater presence, frequency, and urgency in the Herbert corpus than the prevailing scholarship would indicate. Despite the necessary involvement of directed visual energy in the appreciation of his works, and despite the verve and potency of recurrent ocularcentric vocabulary in his writings—across genres and languages—there still exists no wide-ranging consideration of the many kinds of vision that Herbert’s verse prays for, writes for, writes up, writes out, runs from, and embraces. This chapter excavate the tropes of vision and blindness in Herbert’s verse and link these tropes to the important ways in which Herbert uses them to advance his visual relationships to textuality and theology. As an affirmation of the tropological power of vision, Herbert’s poetry provides this dissertation a case-study of superbly accomplished metaphorical and literary deployment of the figures of sight, blindness, and the states of vision in between and without. In Herbert, I argue, eyes are inalienable and crucial points of access into the world and into text. They are for that reason points of possibly dangerous ingress, and like all human senses, need to be regulated with care, precision, and responsibility. Sight makes for joyous celebration, textual pleasure, and great spiritual nervousness. The turning of the eyes is, therefore, no mean matter—just as ceaselessly exigent for Herbert and his readers, too, is the question of how these eyes, and the lines on which they rest or run, should work.

### **A Picture of Many Spiritual Conflicts**

It is almost as though Herbert heard Walton writing out, years later, what he was supposed to say at his deathbed: about his little book containing “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul.” This is no idle image. *The Temple* abounds in text that arrests our visually-programmed senses in ways that make them crucial to the full cognition of the words that constitute the verse. Layout, clustering, picture poems, visual puns, and simple ocular wandering all play their part to make this collection a place both of refuge and challenge for its reader’s eyes.



Just as Herbert's lexically magnificent "Altar" must be seen for the poem to be appreciated in its full dimensions of meaning, so too, for instance, must the yearning flight of his "Easter-wings," and the reordered order of "Anagram."

Although *The Temple* plays host to several such occasions for the eye to make its discoveries, and although, as I shall show, there is a peculiar and strong and definite author-ising of pictorial readings of the poems by the Cambridge University printers Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel in the first printed edition of 1633, it has been pointed out that the printed version actually underplays the visual scope of the manuscript collection of poems that Herbert must have transmitted. Lillian Myers examines the Williams Manuscript to demonstrate how in it the visual and the thematic reinforce each other, and shows the general consistency with which it uses an open-page verso-and-recto layout as a unit of poetic meditation. "Herbert was a very visual poet. This is clear from the layout of individual poems, [...] but is also evident in his layout of the collection as a whole [...]. [He] seems to use facing pages to define a unit of thought [...]"<sup>96</sup> She examples how, owing to possible reasons of economy, the copyists of Little Gidding compromised on the layout suggested by the Williams Manuscript, and the way in which this new alignment already impacts a reader's confrontation of "The Sacrifice" in the Bodleian Manuscript. "It seems that the copyists of the Bodleian manuscript were trying to present 'The Sacrifice' as Herbert intended, writing the refrain in full at the beginning of each verso page and not at the top of the recto pages. Yet in order not to waste paper, an expensive commodity in the seventeenth century, they wrote 24 lines to the page rather than 20 in the Williams manuscript. They evidently missed the significance of the layout of the final two sets of facing pages, disrupting the end positioning of the climactic line "Never was

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<sup>96</sup> Lillian Myers, "Facing Pages: Layout in the Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems," *George Herbert Journal* 21 (1997/1998), 73-74.

grief like mine” on the penultimate opening.”<sup>97</sup> She also reveals what she calls a sequential “embedding” within the subject-led clusterings that all readers of *The Temple* encounter. An embedding is a set of poems following a logical unit of thought that is set inside a larger unit of thought or a bigger set of poems, almost as parenthesis or exploration or explication. Thus, “[t]he five church building poems, clearly connected by title, comprise a second sub-sequence embedded within the liturgical week that is itself positioned within the ‘Antiphon’ sequence.”<sup>98</sup> From a second angle, away from manuscript, and examining the material decisions behind the printed first edition in 1633, Ramie Targoff argues that the “complex thematic affinities between *The Temple* and the church liturgy [of the time] find material confirmation in the physical texts themselves.”<sup>99</sup> She argues from the presentation of the printed title-page of *The Temple*, the size and format of the book, the volume’s decorative ornaments, the book’s use of pilcrow as a divider between poems, and most importantly, from the history, thus far, of Cambridge University Press (which had only in 1629 won the right to print the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the metrical Psalter), that the volume was purposefully designed by the Press to visually approximate contemporary liturgical texts and to thus participate in that specific market.<sup>100</sup> The visual thus forms as much of Targoff’s analysis of the

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<sup>97</sup> Myers, 74-75.

<sup>98</sup> Myers, 79. In closing her essay, she proposes a thought experiment cum editorial intervention. “It is to be hoped that a future editor of *The Temple* will take into account the layout of the poems in the Williams manuscript, and estimate the positioning of the later poems according to the precedents set in the early manuscript. This would produce an edition of the poems that reinforces significant themes visually as it seems Herbert intended.” Myers, 80. Despite my reservations about an edition of poems quite as she suggests, I share her wish to see a more involved conversation between the layout of the Williams Manuscript and that of the larger body of Herbert’s poems.

<sup>99</sup> See Ramie Targoff, “Poets in Print: The Case of Herbert’s *Temple*,” *Word and Image* 17 (2001), 140-152. See also Kathleen Lynch, “Devotion Bound: A Social History of *The Temple*,” in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, eds Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 177-197.

<sup>100</sup> Targoff points out, for instance, how in the title page of Herbert’s volume, the author’s name is fully but modestly printed, so that the contents become a simple offering of prayers by one man. She

printed first edition as it also constitutes the kind of attention she urges of present readers of the book. From yet a third angle, *The Digital Temple*, a recent online edition of Herbert's little book published by the University of Virginia Press, invites agreeable visual scrutiny of both the main manuscripts we have of Herbert's poems, and the first 1633 printed edition of *The Temple*. It is time, the editors Robert Whalen and Christopher Hodgkins tell us, for a luxuriously zoomed-in and close-up look at Herbert's English poems. As such, they have put together an intuitive online "Versioning Machine" equipped with text-encoding and high-resolution photographs of the poems. This Versioning Machine, they hope, will soon turn into a generative "visioning machine" for scholars.<sup>101</sup> With the edition's digitally-enabled parallel versioning of the poems, and a reader's resultant awareness of the intertextuality of how this verse marks that, and both do make a motion unto a third, they summon a layered visioning of Herbert's poetry; a contemplation of Herbert's verse as a

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also makes the case that the duodecimo was dominantly reserved for devotional texts that could be pocketed and carried around and pulled out quickly at times of a devotee's spiritual need. Finally, she shows how Herbert's volume's decorative elements had just been used by the Cambridge edition of the Book of Common Prayer.

<sup>101</sup> "The amazingly interactive search capacities of this electronic engine—including literally telescoping powers of textual magnification—bring into startling focus many of Herbert's configurations that have previously been little noticed, and allow us to see his storied constellations in deep and brilliant new ways. [...] [W]e also believe that in the years and decades to come this Versioning Machine will become a 'visioning machine,' enabling others to make discoveries that we cannot yet imagine." Robert Whalen and Christopher Hodgkins, "Textual Introduction," to *The Digital Temple* (University of Virginia Press, 2012), <http://digitaltemple.rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/Poems/textIntro.html>. All photographic reproductions of the manuscripts presented here come from this online edition. For a handheld experience of comparable "versioning," the older print facsimiles of the Williams and Bodleian manuscripts nevertheless still remain invaluable. See *The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems: A Facsimile Reproduction*, introd. Amy M. Charles (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977); *The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems: A Facsimile of Tanner 307*, introd. Amy M. Charles and Mario A. di Cesare (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1984). See also George Herbert, *The Temple: A Diplomatic Edition of the Bodleian Manuscript (Tanner 307)*, introd. Mario A. di Cesare (Binghampton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995).

convergence between seventeenth-century manuscript and print cultures; and a mind's-eye-picture of multiple significant witnesses to any line, verse, and poem.<sup>102</sup>

Keeping such clustering, embedding, liturgical aspiration, and prospective visioning in mind, I shall in this section look at the visual—indeed, pictorial—edge of several of Herbert's poems. The 1633 *Temple*, the first printed version, will remain an inevitable focus. But I shall also look at the Williams and Bodleian manuscripts as I map some of the movements of the eyes that wrote, read, arranged, re-read, edited, copied, and pondered over the verse that came to inhabit *The Temple*. I shall show how Herbert's poems invite a visual intimacy and ocular play.

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<sup>102</sup> “[E]ven though a good critical print edition accounts for all variants, its single transcription cannot avoid favoring one authoritative source over another wherever they differ. On the other hand, parallel display of multiple witnesses in a digital environment foregoes the (perhaps unintentional) rhetorical illusion of an absolutely stable text in favor of an (albeit equally rhetorical) emphasis on difference and negotiations. That the manuscript scribes and Cambridge printers are ontologically inseparable from the poems conceived and composed by George Herbert resonates with Jerome McGann's social-text theory of editing. Drawing a sharp distinction ‘between a work's bibliographical and its linguistic codes,’ McGann argues that ‘as the process of textual transmission expands, whether vertically (i.e., over time) or horizontally (in institutional space), the signifying processes of the work become increasingly collaborative and socialized.’ This collaborative process includes not only readers of texts but those who produce them: authors, amanuenses, printers, publishers, composers, book designers, etc. One need not embrace Roland Barthes's *mort d'auteur*—a Brechtian vision of the author ‘diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage’ (a vision which, after all, often serves the ideological end of author-izing the critical theorist)—to acknowledge that Herbert's poems are artifacts with a history, an ontogeny that can enrich our understanding of their meaning. While Herbert's text is nowhere near as ‘unstable’ as Crashaw's (with its repeated manuscript and print revisions), let alone Shakespeare's (for which, famously, no manuscripts exist), parallel access to the three earliest sources in their entirety allows us to see Herbert's poems not as pristine objects but rather as evolving, wordy things—and as things nevertheless yearning towards coherence and truth and beauty. [...] [W]e are not attempting to replace holistic and reflective codex reading with disintegrative hyper-analysis. There is no substitute for the deep and appreciative reading of poetry—in the eye, mouth, and ear, and on the pulses—and we present this latest (albeit high-powered) lens in the hope and confidence that the clearest available view of the originals will provide not just data, but knowledge, and ultimately, great pleasure.” Robert Whalen and Christopher Hodgkins, “Textual Introduction,” *The Digital Temple*. See also Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).

An early poem in *The Temple*, “The Altar” is an obvious place to begin, with its chiselled lines always-already giving the lie, or at least ambiguity, to the speaker’s claim that “no workman’s tool hath touch’d the same” (4) save the hand of his Lord.<sup>103</sup> Other workmen’s tools do what they may, this poet’s pen enacts the tussle that the “Dedication” hints towards: that of authorship and agency between the poet and his Lord. We no longer have Herbert’s own drawing of his poem, but the Williams Manuscript gives us what Herbert’s eyes went over. The Bodleian copy reflects the change Herbert made in his own hand in the Williams Manuscript: the crossed out “onely” sacrifice becomes the “blessed” sacrifice (15). In 1633, the printers’ devices encase the words of the poem to strongly suggest the outline of an altar.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Unless, that is, Herbert literally wishes to present that his Lord is his alter-ego.

<sup>104</sup> By the time of the third edition (1634), the poem on the page acquires even a dainty outline of an altar.

The Church.

The Altar.

A broken Altar Lord thy servant starts  
Made of a Hart and rimented w<sup>th</sup> tears &  
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame  
No workmans tools hath touch'd y<sup>e</sup> same

A Hart alone  
Is such a stone  
As nothing but  
Thy power doth rull  
Wherfore each part  
Of my hard hart  
Met in thine frame  
To praise thy name

That I have hand to hold my part  
Thy saints to praise thee may not taste  
O let thy <sup>blest</sup> sacrifice be mine  
And sanctifie this Altar to be thine

Figure 10. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. 15v

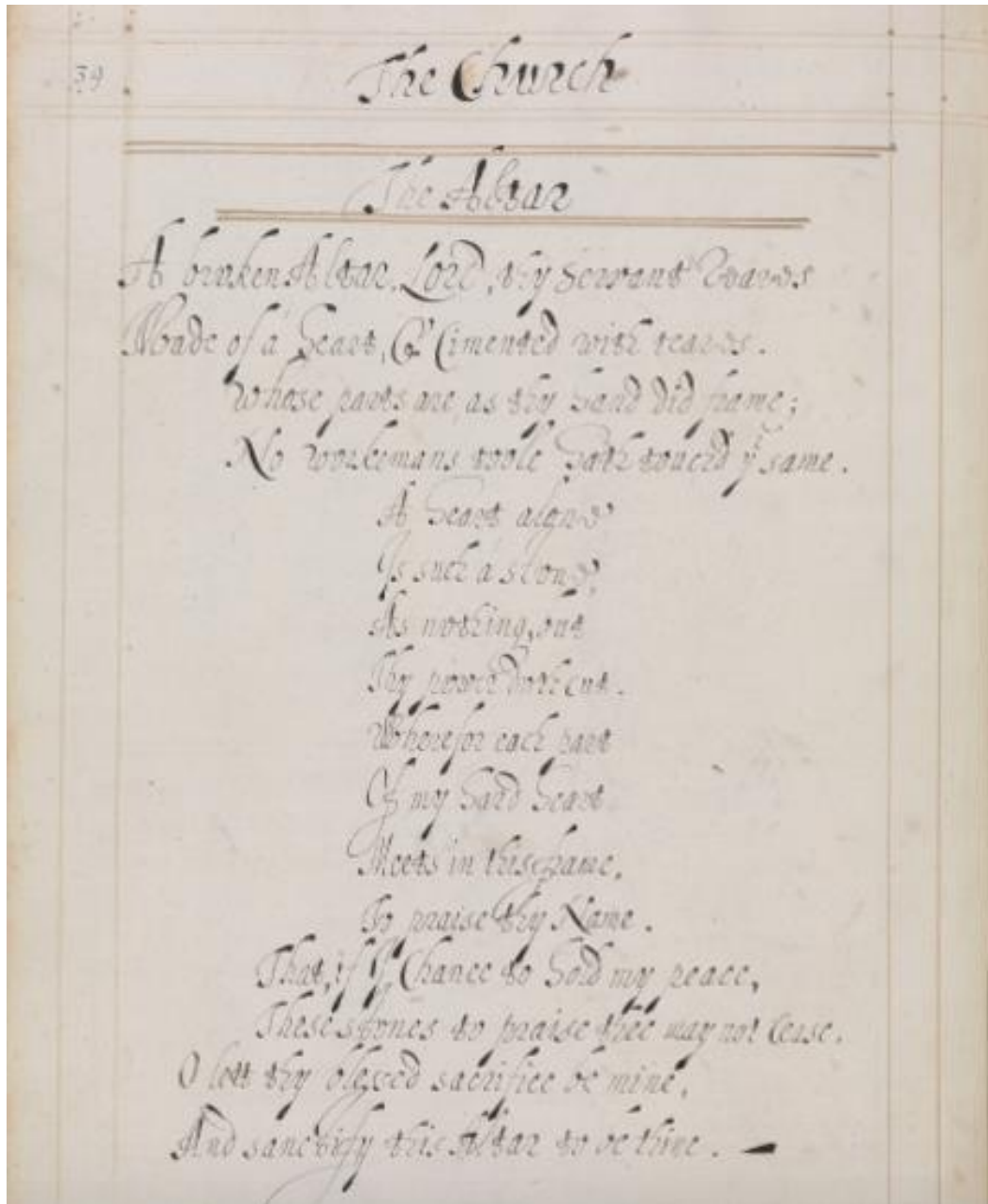


Figure 11. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 15v



### The Altar.

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant re-  
 Made of a heart, and cemented with te-  
 Whose parts are as thy hand did frame,  
 No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

A H E A R T alone  
 Is such a stone,  
 As nothing but  
 Thy pow'r doth cut.  
 Wherefore each part  
 Of my hard heart  
 Meets in this frame,  
 To praise thy name.

That if I chance to hold my peace,  
 These stones to praise thee may not cease.

O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mi-  
 And sanctifie this A L T A R to be th-



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Figure 12. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 18



George Puttenham, in his *Art of English Poesy* (1589), describes the form of the figure poem: “so called for that it yields an ocular representation, your metres being by good symmetry reduced into certain geometrical figures, whereby the maker is restrained to keep him within his bounds, and showeth not only more art, but serveth also much better for briefness and subtlety of device.”<sup>105</sup> Herbert, writing a few decades after Puttenham, could hardly have found a subtler way of making sure that his own “maker is restrained to keep him within his bounds.” For the praise that the poet of “The Altar” claims he wishes to perform to his Lord is by no means a straightforward exercise. Only “if *I* chance to hold my peace” (my emphasis; 13), says the author of a poem taking up the full page in the shape of a massive capital “I,” will that praise be possible. Should “I” speak, or hold his peace? The poet is fully aware that if “I” did not speak, there would be no poem. “I” therefore holds his peace only so far as it allows him to be both an altar shaped by his creator *and* the emphatic assertion of the self that the shape of the poem indicates.<sup>106</sup> The two are inseparable. The page-size perpendicular pronoun dominates the reader’s reception of the poem, and the visual puns contained within the text now strike with a shock of discovery.<sup>107</sup> The “HEART” alone—with its capital letters—alone, all one, all alone yet all in place, inhabits the central pillar of the poem. The energy of the compaction of the verse is made evident in the quick succession of the dimeters that culminate

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<sup>105</sup> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, eds Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 179-190. See also Milton Klonsky, ed., *Speaking Pictures: A Gallery of Pictorial Poems from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Harmony Books, 1975).

<sup>106</sup> See also M. Thomas Hester, “Altering the Text of the Self: The Shapes of ‘The Altar,’” in Mary Maleski, ed., *A Fine Tuning: Studies of the Religious Poetry of George Herbert* (Binghampton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989), 95-116.

<sup>107</sup> The “I” stayed page-size for several decades of *The Temple* past 1633.

in the firm “frame.” And even the “hard”-ness of the poet’s heart is suddenly a positive quality because it now helps towards the sheer weight that this “Altar” must necessarily bear. “Wherefore each part/ Of my hard heart/ Meets in this frame,/ To praise thy name” (9-12). In the final couplet, the “SACRIFICE” is placed perfectly above the “ALTAR.”

As is evident from running our eyes over the three witnesses, the capitalisations of these full words do not exist in the Williams or Bodleian manuscripts. The Cambridge printers Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel capitalised the two “ALTAR”s, “HEART,” and “SACRIFICE” in the 1633 first edition in a publishers’ intervention. In a spell of textual fastidiousness and perhaps lamentation for this change between the manuscript versions to the printed ones, we might bemoan this upstart move on the part of the printers. But that would be to miss the point. Their interposition speaks to just the kind of invested readerly attention and visual care that the Williams and Bodleian manuscripts train their readers towards. Herbert’s printers Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel were readers who found it fit to thrust their hearts into Herbert’s lines, and in so doing, left their mark on them. In fact, Buck and Daniel were not the only ones to do so. In the seventeenth century, riding the great popularity of *The Temple* (the book went through some eleven editions by 1695) other publishers similarly commissioned and supplied suggestive devices to help a reader’s viewing-reading of the poems. By 1674, for instance, the church-entrance poem “Superliminare” and “The Altar” had both received elaborate illustration, visual architecture, and text-insetting.

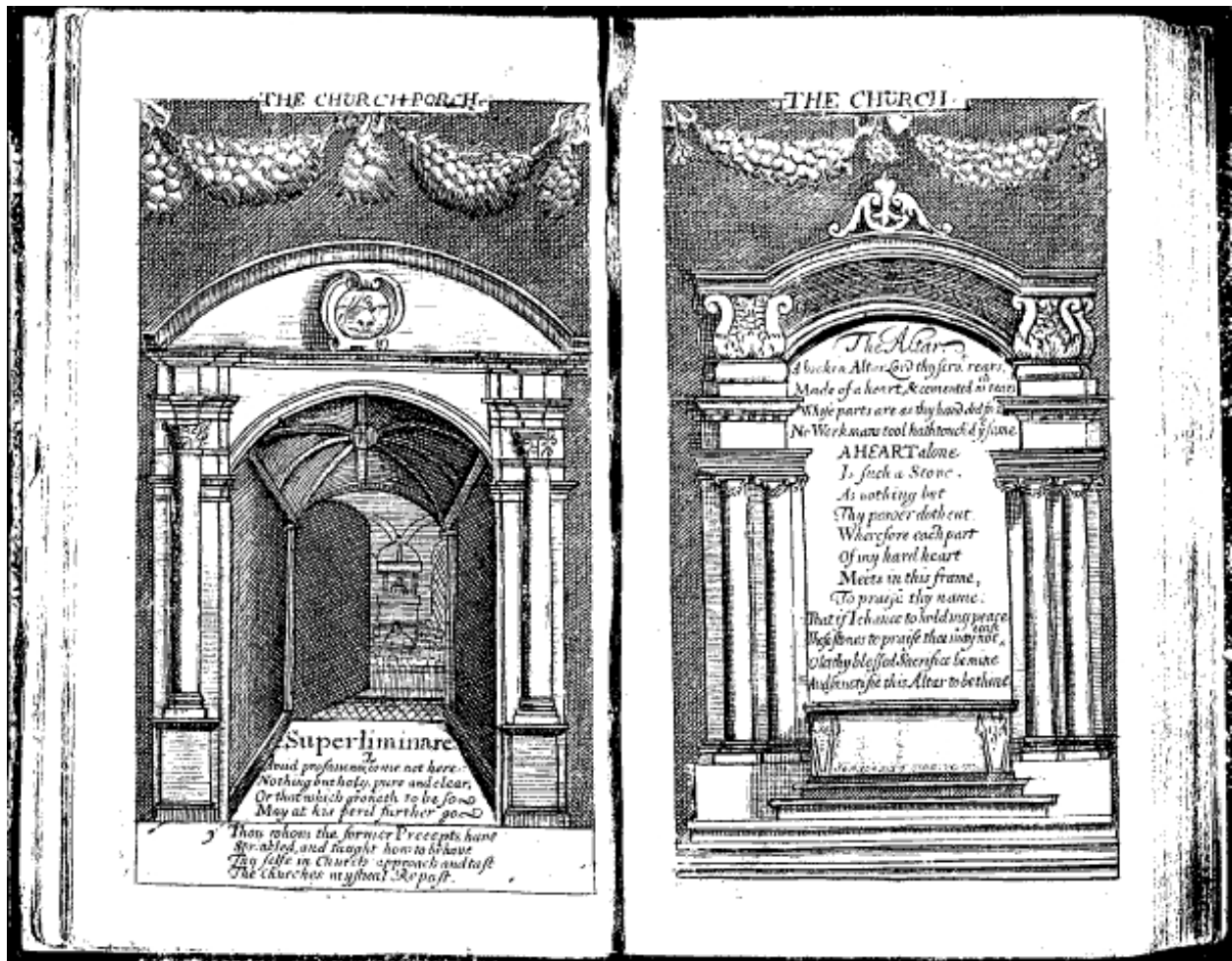


Figure 13. George Herbert, *The Temple* (London, 1674), pp. 16-17

In the 1633 first edition, even the simple convention of signaturing appears to reinforce the onward pull from “The Altar” to “The Sacrifice.” After the pleasure of the visual athletics of “The Altar,” here is reason for terrible pause. This poem speaks in a voice whose identity is betrayed by the brief borrowing from Lamentations 1:12.<sup>108</sup> It addresses the reader to tell her that for all her

<sup>108</sup> “Is it nothing to you, / All ye that pass by? / behold and see if there be any sorrow / like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, / wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me / in the day of his fierce anger.”

acuteness in decoding text in the previous poem, her reading is a function of profound blindness to what is truly consequential.

*O, all ye, who pass by, whose eyes and mind  
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blind;  
To me, who took eyes that I might you find:  
Was ever grief like mine?<sup>109</sup>*  
(1-4)

The directness of the lines weaves into pity for the ostensible “speaker” written into being. The sharp visual appreciation that was a moment ago cause for spiritual and artistic gratification to Herbert’s reader now withdraws into doubt or shatters into pain. The reader is invited to consider that all the sharpness of her sight to worldly and even aesthetic things is worth nothing in the face of the overwhelming injustice of the first cause whereby she has life, eyes, and intellection. It takes a moment, and a resumption of reading, for the reprimand of the first verse of “The Sacrifice” to turn into both metrical and visual poetry. If rhyme and rhythm are functions of patterned repetition, there is no shying away of the eyes, now, from the merciless visual configuration of reiterated “grief” over the next few pages and a total of 63 stanzas.

Some ten leaves off from the start of “The Sacrifice,” in another ingenious exhibition of one poetic workman’s tools, four wings assemble startlingly on a single open-page layout. The invitation to gaze and admire is potentially as persuasive as the solicitation to read and interpret. This is no imposition; we should be hard put to find another lyric in the English language that combines form and content with such simplicity as “Easter-wings.” The vulnerability of the poetic voice (whose “tender age in sorrow did begin”), the fragility of the moment that turns loss into regeneration (“With thee,” and again “With thee”), and the gentleness of the wings linked one upon another (so

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<sup>109</sup> The italics owe their origin to Buck and Daniel’s typesetting in the 1633 first edition. They do not exist in either the Williams or the Bodleian manuscripts.

that “[a]ffliction shall advance the flight in me”) only catch up with the reader upon perusal of the verse. But if gazing happens by instantaneous reflex and induces admiration, interpretation opens into surprise at the inter-coupled sense and metre.

The verse-components of “Easter-wings” famously exist in different incarnations of relative place and design across different textual forms. Between the two manuscripts and the 1633 first edition, the very orientation of the text changes, thus creating significant consequences for the order of reading.<sup>110</sup> In the Williams Manuscript, the curves of the wings are minimal to the right, and the flight of the wings, even if we can detect one within the essentially right-hand-justified lines of the verse of “My tender age,” is towards the right. In the Bodleian Manuscript, the curves are more accentuated. The flight, therefore, is more assured. By the time the lines make it to print, two things happen. They change direction, and there is no longer any justification on either side. As so many of Herbert’s readers have noted, this gives the poem a crisis of progression—does “My tender age” come first, or the poet’s reflection on the general state of “man in wealth and store”? Also, this clockwise turn moves the curves of the wings to the other side of the lines themselves. Now, instead of the most pronounced curves—and therefore the lag of the flight—belonging to “Lord,” “Though,” “Decaying,” etc., the rather more defined curves shift to the line ends of “store,”

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<sup>110</sup> Randall McLeod has valuably pointed out, too, the generative editorial problems supplied by the publication, in 1633, of two “lookalike” versions of *The Temple*. In some copies of the second edition of the book (also published in 1633; *The Temple* was on its way to becoming an excellent seller), the “mixed-up” stitching of the duodecimo resulted in p. 35 (recto; “My tender age”) succeeding p. 32 (verso; the ending sestet of “Redemption” and the whole of “Sepulchre”). In the first edition, the stitching of the book made p. 35 (recto; “My tender age”) “properly” follow p. 34 (verso; “Lord, who createdst man”). What should a reader with the “mixed-up” sewing of the pages make of their two “Easter-wings” poems? Is their version “incorrect,” although the manner and order of the poem’s/poems’ presentation make for a strong readerly experience? What have editors been doing with them for the last few hundred years? What should an editor today do with the wings? Can editorial theory and practice respond adequately to such a poem, where shape, order, placement, and metrics all carry such consequence? See Random Cloud, “FIAT /LUX,” in Randall M Leod, ed., *Crisis in Editing: Texts of the English Renaissance* (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 61-172.

“same,” “more,” etc. As the reader’s hands hold the open book, the picture of the wings now implies a flight “up”-wards, with the diptych itself suggesting the fold of the book multiplying on itself to release not just two but four page-wings. There is necessarily no resolution, in the first edition, to the question of whether to read about “Lord, who createdst man” first (as the logic of the codex would suggest, with the verso being read before the recto) or about “My tender age” first (as the logic of the open-page text would suggest, with the “topmost” text being read first). Despite most contemporary editors’ attempted neatness of conflating manuscript order with codex logic (they make the text “upright” again with “Lord, who createdst man” preceding “My tender age”), some of the irreducible power of this poem resides precisely in the potential risk of the sheer validity of either order. The printers Buck and Daniel have left us a legacy of indeterminacy of precedence of verse that now layers the afterlife of *each* flight of the “Easter-wings,” thus making flight itself a recurrence and a process. As readers, we appreciate that while the fall’s furthering of the flight in a human subject is a thing to be devoutly wished (“Then shall the fall further the flight in me”), there is no guarantee of affliction not following after (“Affliction shall advance the flight in me”). Solace, in that event, is in the acceptance of travail, for that alone can at that point further the flight. Alternatively, even the divine provision of a supported wing—“For if I imp my wing on thine,/ Affliction shall advance the flight in me”—does not and cannot pre-empt human decay and poverty. It is then only the fall itself that the human subject can fall back on in order to further her flight; “Then shall the fall further the flight in me.”

The labour of these hopes is relentlessly hinged to the visual. The blanks on the page turn a reader’s eyes to where the text is threatened with extinction, only to grow again. Through her watching, her reading, her fall and rise of voice or breath, the reader participates in the renewal that the poem enacts. In the printed edition, there is also no way to read the poem—whatever order a reader might decide for the verses—without either craning the neck or turning the book “up,” in a

curious manual enactment of impending flight. The wings, handheld, heretofore closed like a book, now free into flight. It is here, in this quiet ability to soar, that the great, sudden, and tremulous power of these wings rests. The poem's project of renewal functions as strongly in our day as in Herbert's: a reader at her most thin, most poor, can simply hold in her hands the unfurled wings of the poem in order to experience lightness, hope, and flight; regardless of actual perusal, the pictorial enactment of regrowth acquires a fierce tenacity. In such a moment of spiritual or emotional or physiological predicament where the breath tightens and the mind imprisons itself and pain hunts his cruel food through every vein, recuperation must act at a primal and urgent level. Herbert's poem, I contend, is designed by its pictorial logic—which enfolds a winged image of the pivotal power of loss—to provide just such support to those at their most thin and most poor.

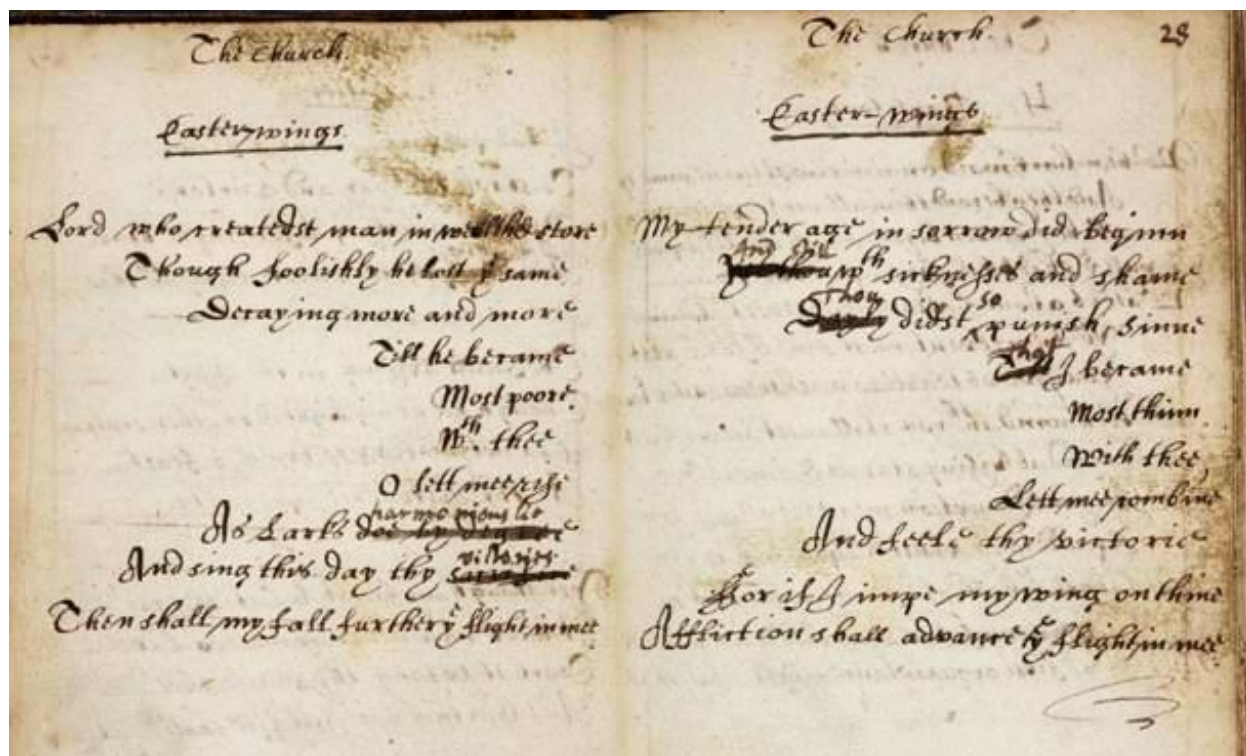


Figure 14. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sigs 27v-28r

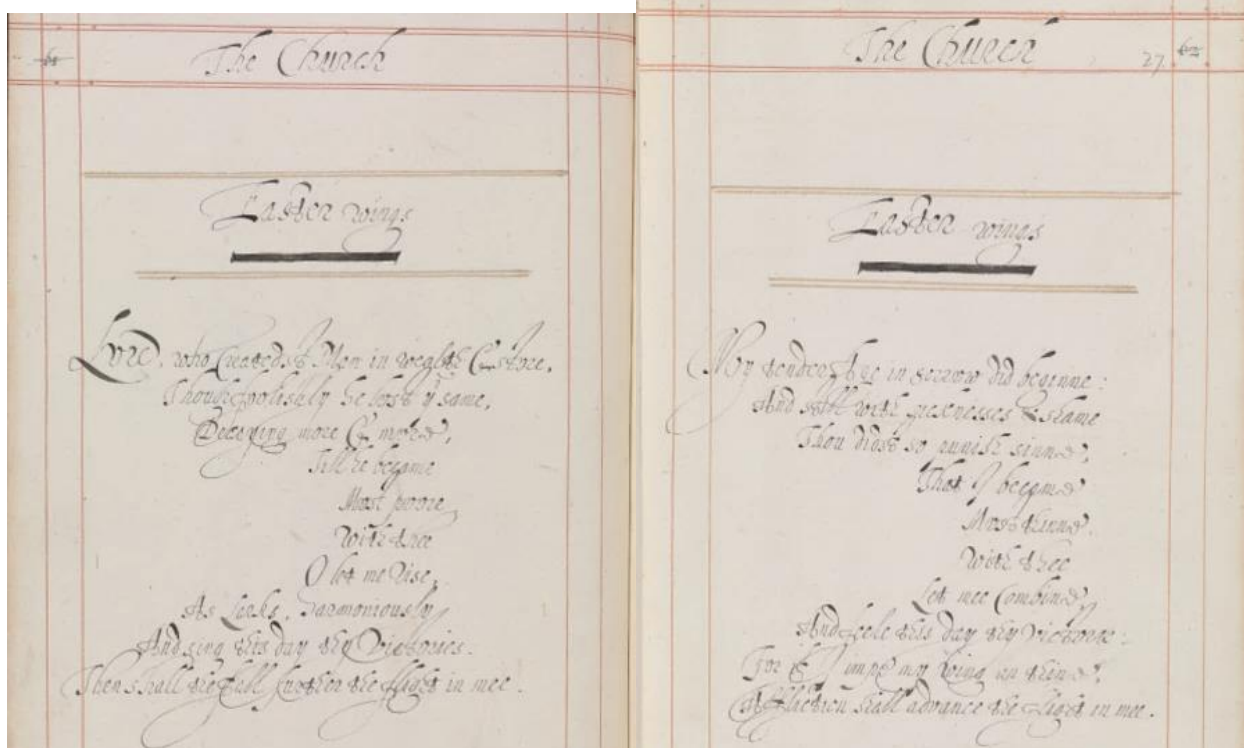


Figure 15. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 26v-27r



## ¶ Easter wings.

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and flowe,  
 Though foolishly he lost the same,  
 Decaying more and more,  
 Till he became  
 Most poore:  
 With thee  
 O let me rise  
 As larks, harmoniously,  
 And sing this day thy victories:  
 Then shall the fall further the flight in mee.

Easter

## ¶ Easter wings.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne;  
 And fell with sicknesses and flame  
 Thou didst so punish fance,  
 That I became  
 Most thinne,  
 With thee  
 Let me combine,  
 And feel this day thy victorie:  
 For, if I imp' my wing on thine,  
 Affliction shall advance the flight in mee.

H. Ba

Figure 16. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), pp. 34-35

Significantly, “Easter-wings” can work not just as a single poem of two stanzas, but as two separate poems, each telling of distinct injury and renewal. In fact, in a substantial departure from how we are guided by most current-day Herbert editors, there is internal evidence from all three major witnesses to suggest that the two verses are actually discrete poems in their own right. For in neither manuscript, nor in the 1633 first edition, does any single poem ever receive a running title.

(The only running titles we have are for the *sections* of *The Temple*: “The Church-porch,” “The Church,” and “The Church Militant.”) The fact that in this instance both stanzas are titled (albeit with the same two words) in all three witnesses indicates that each “stanza” is, in fact, its own poem.<sup>111</sup> But as with the order of the stanzas, so here with the individuality or otherwise of the poem or poems. To a reader, the value of such parsing is not simply in a celebration of ambiguity. Her payoff is subtler and more intense: in the ocular and interpretative play that these many positions make possible. Such play is inevitably tied to her own positions of solace, anxiety, consolation, unrest, and belonging. The generosity of the wings is both immense and direct: they are able to make place for her in all her moods of need or vindication.<sup>112</sup>

The quiet intimacy of the writing moment that will then become the reading moment is used again and again by Herbert towards a penetrating visual labour. But if he is good at figure poems, he is similarly gifted at a particular kind of concentrated textual wit. The writing rewards a viewing reader; legibility announces itself as a function of surprise, joy, and even confirmation of responsible choice. Sight and poetic intellection reciprocate and complement each other in ways that enrich both. As elucidation of this visual gathering of textual meaning, and no less importantly, as treats for

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<sup>111</sup> The indexing in the 1633 editions supports this. Just as “Affliction” has five page numbers next to it, and “Prayer” two, and “Love” three, among others, so does “Easter-wings” have two separate page numbers next to it. (As scholars of Herbert know, giving numbers to repeated titles in the book is a much later editorial phenomenon.) Incidentally, Thomas Buck’s meticulousness as a printer gives us this first instance of an index of titles to a book of poems in English. It also indicates the design the book has on its reader. In prayer or reflection, she can look up a poem or poems based on subject—“Affliction,” “Prayer,” “Love”—and spend time with it or them. In the same way in which, today, a word-cloud digitally works to identify a central subject of a stretch of text, the index to *The Temple* gives its reader a quick glance into the main concerns and inspirations of the book.

<sup>112</sup> In this breath, there is another story worth telling. The writer Vikram Seth, the current keeper of what used to be Herbert’s cottage in Bemerton, wrote his collection of essays and poems, *The Rivered Earth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011) in no small measure of indebtedness to his home’s long-ago occupant. For our present purposes, it is significant how profoundly Herbert’s pictorially charged poems appear to have acted on him, influenced him, and inspired him. For an excellent reworking of the main image of “Easter-wings,” see his poem “Oak” of the double hour-glasses.

our own eyes, I want to lay out some examples. Through them, I shall demonstrate not only Herbert's insistence on his reader's visual labour, but also the significance of that labour. For in the encouragement towards his reader's visual work is Herbert's incitement to a collective culling from a beautiful visible world its further beauty, its deeper meaning, its profounder joy.

The riverine ebb and tide of "Holy Baptism (2)" give form to the swell and flow of the waters that make possible, the poet tells us, his passage through the all-important "narrow way and little gate" (2) to God. The meandering image of the water also functions as an image of life as the poet outgrows his infancy and youth and consequently has to learn to fit his measure to that of his creator. "Let me be soft and supple to thy will" (8), he says in an ample pentametric spread.<sup>113</sup> But this spread then leads into a growing back and drawing in; the poem ends in a dimeter, and with the simplicity, compactness, containment, and health of "Childhood" (15).

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<sup>113</sup> The other lines of the poem are smaller: dimeters and tetrameters.

H. Baptisme

Since Lord to thee  
A narrow way & little gate  
Ib all the passage on my Infancie  
Thou didst lay hold & antedate  
My faith in mee.

O lett mee still  
Write thee Great God & mee a child  
Lett mee be soft and suple to thy will,  
Small to my self, to others mild,  
Be either ill.

Though y<sup>t</sup> by stealth  
My flesh gett on; yett lett her sister  
My soule bidd nothing, but keep hir first wealth;  
The growth of flesh is but a blister  
Childhood is health.

Figure 17. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. 29r

L. Baptisme

Since God to thee  
A narrow way & little gate  
Is all the passage, on my infant's  
Thou dost say God, is ancedate  
My first in mee.

O let mee still  
Write thee great Gods name  
Let mee be soft & supple to thy will  
Small to my selfe, to others mild,  
Behuthee ill.

Although by death  
My flesh shall ceasse, yet let mee see  
My soule do nothing, but preserve her weake  
The growth of flesh is but a lease  
Chastity is death.

Figure 18. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 28r

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¶ H. Baptisme.

**S**ince, Lord, to thee  
A narrow way and little gate  
**I**s all the passage, on my infancie  
Thou didst lay hold, and antedate  
My faith in me.

O let me still  
Write thee great God, and me a childe:  
**L**et me be soft and supple to thy will,  
Small to my self, to others milde,  
Behither ill.

Although by stealth  
My flesh get on; yet let her sister  
**M**y soul bid nothing, but preserve her wealth:  
The growth of flesh is but a blister;  
Childhood is health.

Figure 19. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 36

“Anagram” provides another short but sharp instance of Herbert’s visual wit. This poem only exists in manuscript in the Bodleian copy—we can therefore only guess what it looked like before—and gets reworked in the print edition with what we now recognise as a characteristic Buck and Daniel highlighting. The manuscript’s “Mary” and “Army” both acquire capital letters in the

1633 first edition, and are placed squarely within two brackets that break up, and thus explain and annotate, the word “Anagram.”<sup>114</sup>



Figure 20. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert’s Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 44v

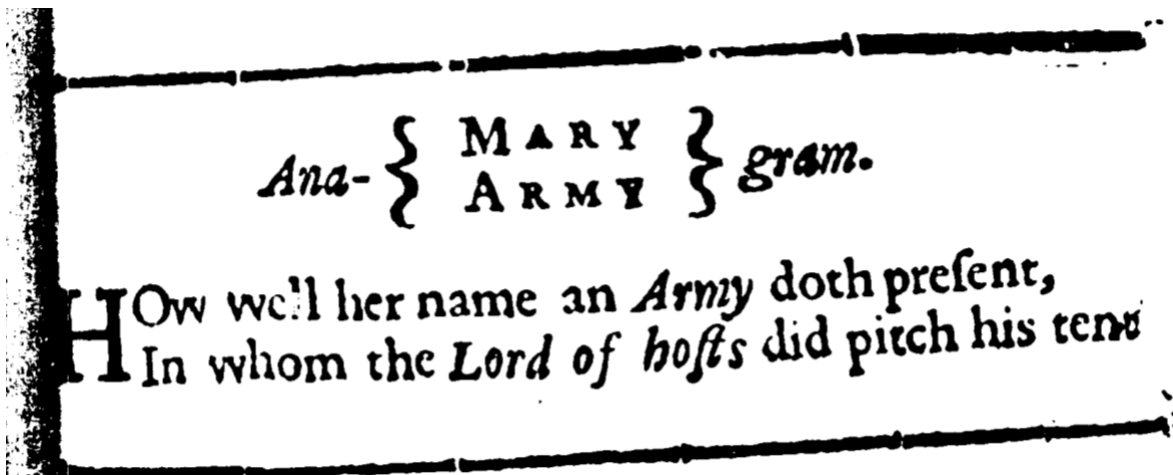


Figure 21. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 69

<sup>114</sup> In the 1633 edition, the poem is also moved from between its manuscript placement between “Church-music” and “Church-lock and key,” possibly because of thematic proximity with “To all Angels and Saints.”

“Coloss. 3:3” invites a roving ocular play of its reader’s eyes across the page. This poem lays out in words staggered across its ten lines the relevant part of the relevant verse of the Bible—while managing at the same time a lucid commentary on the biblical verse. The subtitle of the poem provides the reader with a hint as to what she may look for.<sup>115</sup> As an illustration of the obliquely-bent trajectory of his inner life, Herbert’s “hidden” yet direct and concise utterance of faith in Christ supplies the strand that weaves the poem together and gives it meaning. The serious ambivalence of the poet’s, and possibly our own, attitude to what is closely-held—a desire to keep something cherished intimately hidden *and* to display it with joy and pride—is brilliantly demonstrated across the witnesses of the poem. In the Williams Manuscript, the words that serve the double syntax are clearly set apart with a slightly larger size and capital letters to their starts. The scribes of the Bodleian copy, however, “hide” the words by thoroughly integrating them within the larger style of the writing. In this manuscript, the “one eye/ [which] Should aim and shoot at that which Is on high” (8), has its work cut out for it in order to achieve a complete reading of this poem. In the 1633 first edition, Buck and Daniel use italics to spell the verse that emerges from a diagonal leading down of the eye across the lines of the poem—thus making explicit, as the scribe in the Williams Manuscript had, the dual mode of reading and of living the mindful life around the “sun”/son (2).

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<sup>115</sup> “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”



Coloss. 3. 3.  
Our life is hidde w<sup>th</sup> Christ in God  
My words & thoughts doe both express this notion.  
That Life hath w<sup>th</sup> y<sup>e</sup> Sunn a double Motion  
The first Is strait, & our diurnal friend,  
The other Hidd, and doth obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapt In flesh & tends to earth  
The other winds towards Him, whose happy birth  
Taught me to swee here so, That still one eye  
Should aime & shoot at y<sup>e</sup> w<sup>th</sup> Is on high.  
Quitt'ing w<sup>th</sup> dailly labour all My pleasure,  
To gaine at Harvest an eternal Treasure.

Figure 22. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. 60r

COLOSS. 3. 3.  
One life is hid with Christ in God.

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My words & thoughts doe both expresse this notion,  
That life hath both y<sup>e</sup> sunne & double motion.  
The first is secret & our diuine friend,  
The other hid, & both obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapt in Christ, & tends to rest:  
The other winds towards Him, whose happy rest  
Tapest mee to live here so, that still one eye  
Should aime at that, w<sup>ch</sup> is on high:  
Quitting with daily labour all my pleasure  
To gaue at last an eternall treasure.

Figure 23. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 58v

*The Church.*

77

Coloff. 3. 3.

*Our life is hid with Christ in God.*

**M**r words & thoughts do both expresse this notion,  
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.  
The first *Is* straight, and our diurnall friend,  
The other *Hid*, and doth obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth.  
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth  
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye  
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:  
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,  
To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure*.

Figure 24. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 77

“*Tesu*” literally enacts a visual assembly of textual meaning. This poem stages a rebuilding, letter by graphic letter, of the poet’s ease and succour. Following a “great affliction [that] broke the little frame” (3) of his heart, the pieces of the erstwhile whole, and the letters engraved therein, are soon recovered by the poet.<sup>116</sup> But his real relief occurs when he sits down to put the pieces back

<sup>116</sup> The Bible gives Herbert precedent for this cordial inscription. 2 Corinthians 3:2-3: “Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to

together. In the ongoing Herbertian preoccupation with text, he attempts the re-joining by spelling the parts back into completeness. Meaning, assistance, and repose are immediate, and come complete with a bequest, here onwards, of potentially every utterance of “Jesu” by the poet or his reader—whether in prayer or pain or confidence—now carrying the reassurance of reconstruction, support, and comfort. Absent in the Williams Manuscript, this poem’s occurrence in the Bodleian copy argues Herbert’s continued investment in the ocular collection of poetic meaning. By the time the poem reaches Buck and Daniel, small emphases are enacted, with the found letters all acquiring upper case, and there being a definite transfer of meaning between the one-leading-to-the-other but not-quite-interchangeable “I ease you” and “Jesu.”

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be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tablets of stone, but in fleshy tablets of the heart.”

Jesus.  
Jesus is in my heart, His sacred name  
Is deeply carved there. but the other were  
A great Affliction broke y<sup>e</sup> little frame.  
Even all to pieces, w<sup>ch</sup> I went to seeke.  
And find I found the corner, where was I,  
After, where, I s, & next y<sup>e</sup> <sup>where</sup> was granted.  
When I had got these peeces instantly  
I satt mee downe to spell them, & perceived  
That to my broken heart. He was, I ease you.  
And to my wife is Jesus.

Figure 25. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 79r

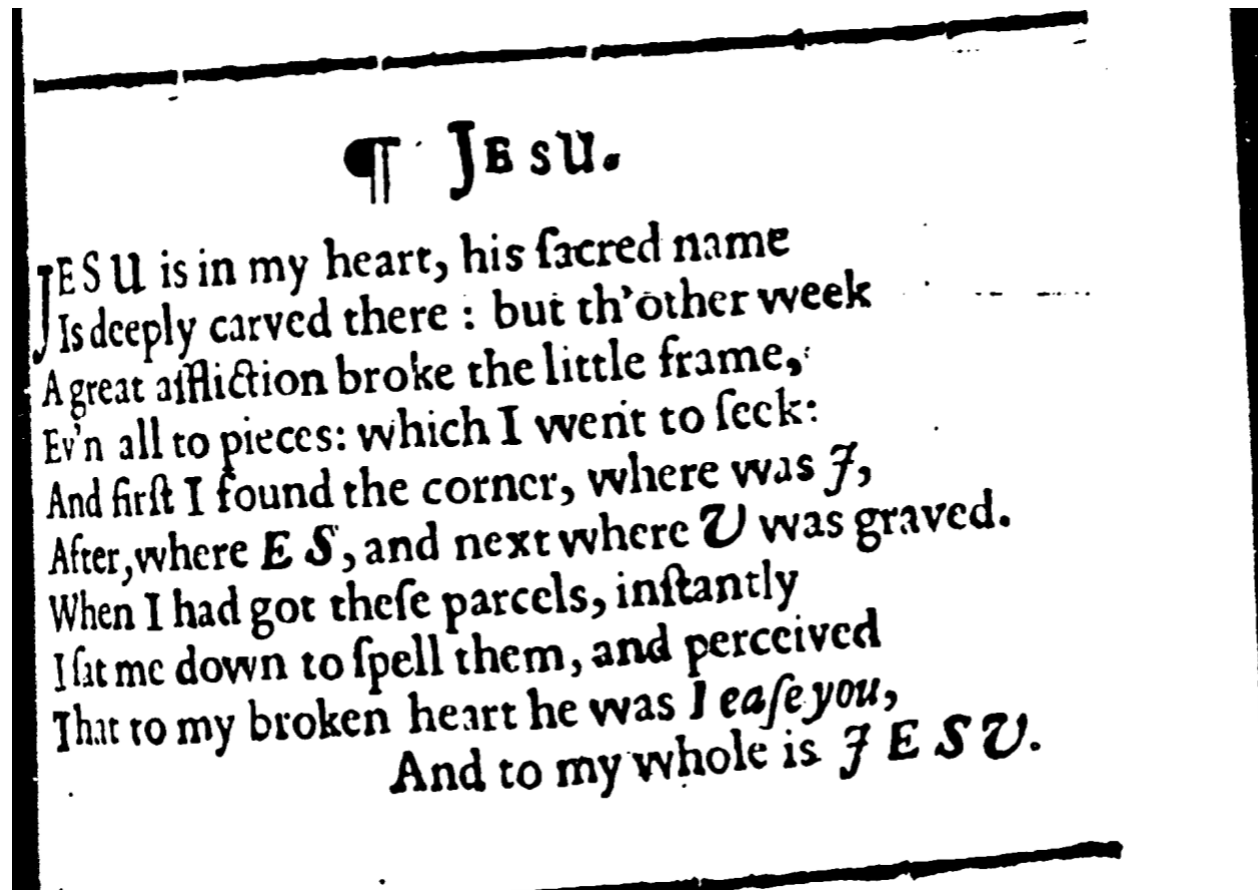


Figure 26. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 105

“Love-joy” even more explicitly thematises sight as it offers its reader an invitation into visual agility and meaning-making. The poem opens on a homely parable-like note. “As on a window late I cast mine eye” (1), the poet reads the letters J and C on bunches of grapes dropping from a vine. Apparently oblivious to the grapevine being a figure of the Christ in John 15:1, but responding instinctively to the fruition and gladness of the image, the poet somewhat avuncularly tells “one standing by” (3) that “the body [of the picture] and the letters both (6) appear to him to belong to “Joy and Charity” (7).<sup>117</sup> His interlocutor approves, and reconciles the poet’s secular

<sup>117</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman” (John 15:1).

reading with its religious significance. “Sir, you have not missed” (7), he says, “It figures Jesus Christ” (8). As we might by now have come to expect, Buck and Daniel leave their participatory mark on the first edition version: “Joy” and “Charity” gain italics for emphasis, and the all-important proper noun that fills out the crucial letters is spelt in all capital letters.

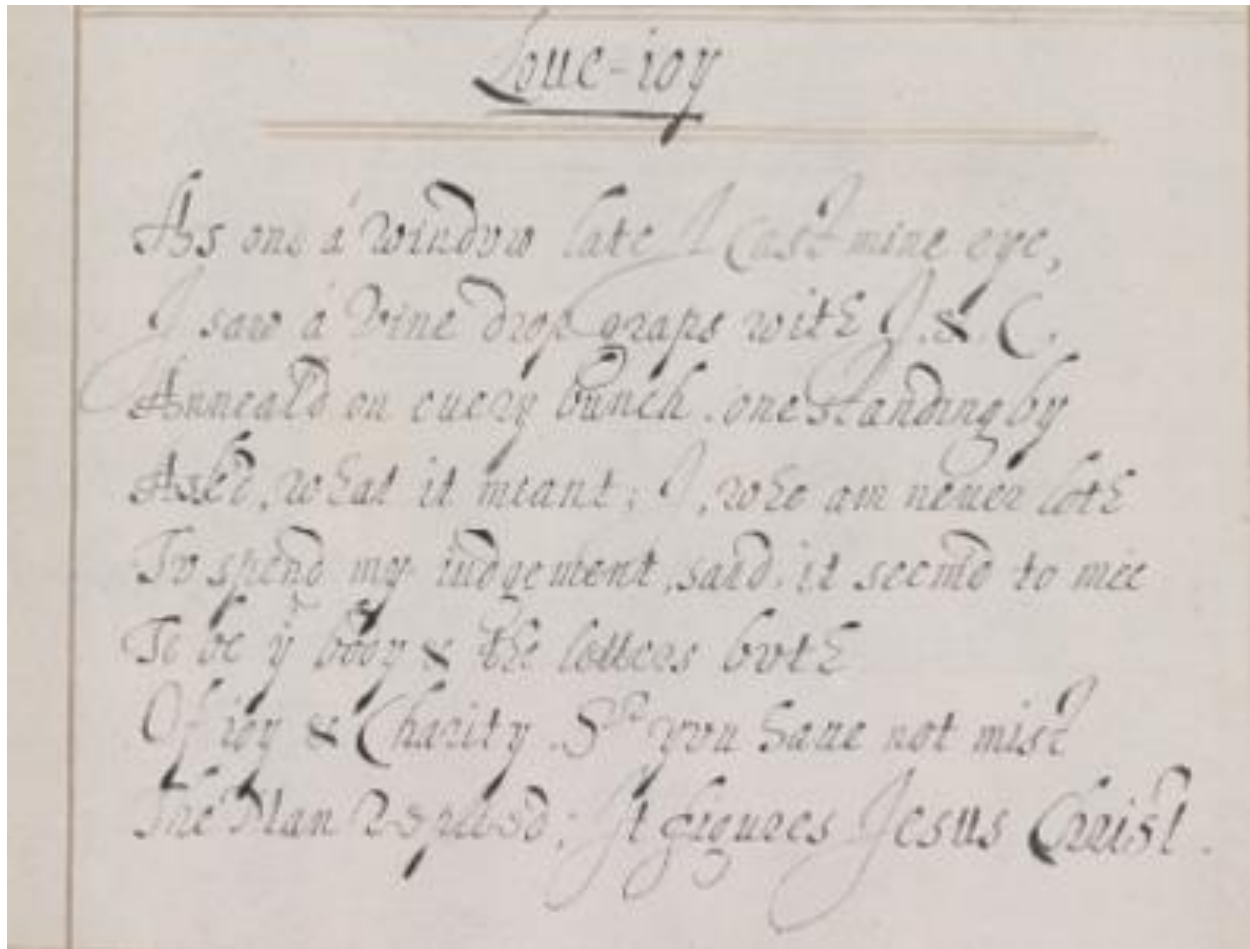


Figure 27. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 82r

¶ Love-joy.

**A**S on a window late I cast mine eye,  
I saw a vine drop grapes with *J* and *C*  
Anneal'd on every bunch. One standing by  
Ask'd what it meant. I (who am never loth  
To spend my iudgement) said, It seem'd to me  
To be the bodie and the letters both  
Of *Joy* and *Charitie*. Sir, you have not miss'd,  
The man reply'd ; It figures *JESUS CHRIST*.

Figure 28. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 109

In a visual afterlife to this poem that the contemplative observer in Herbert would enjoy, one standing by today on a visit to Salisbury Cathedral (close to Bemerton, where “Love-joy” was most likely composed; it does not exist in the earlier Williams Manuscript) and looking up at the commemorative George Herbert window will find the poet regarding just such a vine with just such grapes with just such letters on them.





Figure 29. George Herbert window of Salisbury Cathedral

Photograph from the *Dead Anglican Theologians Society* blog,  
<http://datsociety.blogspot.com/2012/10/13-george-herbert-1593-1633-finest.html>

Herbert kneels and looks up at the vine. I look up at Herbert looking up at the vine: the watcher watched. The value of deciphering from the obviously visible world and obviously visible text its further meaning, and the visual work that must necessarily go into such “reading,” is laid out on the window as a story of pleasure, discovery, and endorsement.

In another poem which only exists in manuscript in the Bodleian copy, progress has a clear and concise end. “Paradise” visually enacts the point of the poem. It writes out the growing down, cutting back, letting go, and sharp confidence of brevity and stillness that is its ostensible message. Wholesome enclosure, wise paring, and rich pruning are textually laid out in a virtuoso display of the gratifying surprises of vocabulary, rhyme, and meter. Well aware of the pictorial sharpness of the trimming and snipping and lopping and clipping to the crucial line-ends of the poem, Buck and Daniel, in the 1633 first edition, set type with meticulous selection of majuscules for the final words in each line, and also a scrupulous care to their sitting in exact rows one above the other. This allows a striking exhibition of how letters in the words above go “missing” in order to supply a new word that both fulfils and extends the sense of the previous line. But it is worth noting that despite Herbert’s prayer for himself to be cut to size by his divine gardener, his own parings of the end-words of his lines are decidedly poetic, active, and assertive. What needs to go for the verse to grow goes, the rest stands in letters that display the verse’s thriving development. If he does both “fruit and order owe” (3) to his Lord, and if he does not wish to “want thy hand and art” (9), he nevertheless only allows this Lord to dictate so much of the pruning as suits his verse. Perhaps, indeed, the poet wishes to show how well he is capable of taking on this essential task himself. But the end of the poem is as gracious as it is assured. The reader’s eye, pulled on by its visual pleasure on the page, is compelled to follow through on both the paradox and the fulfilment.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> For an inspired following in these pared footsteps, see Vikram Seth’s “Lost” in *The Rivered Earth*.

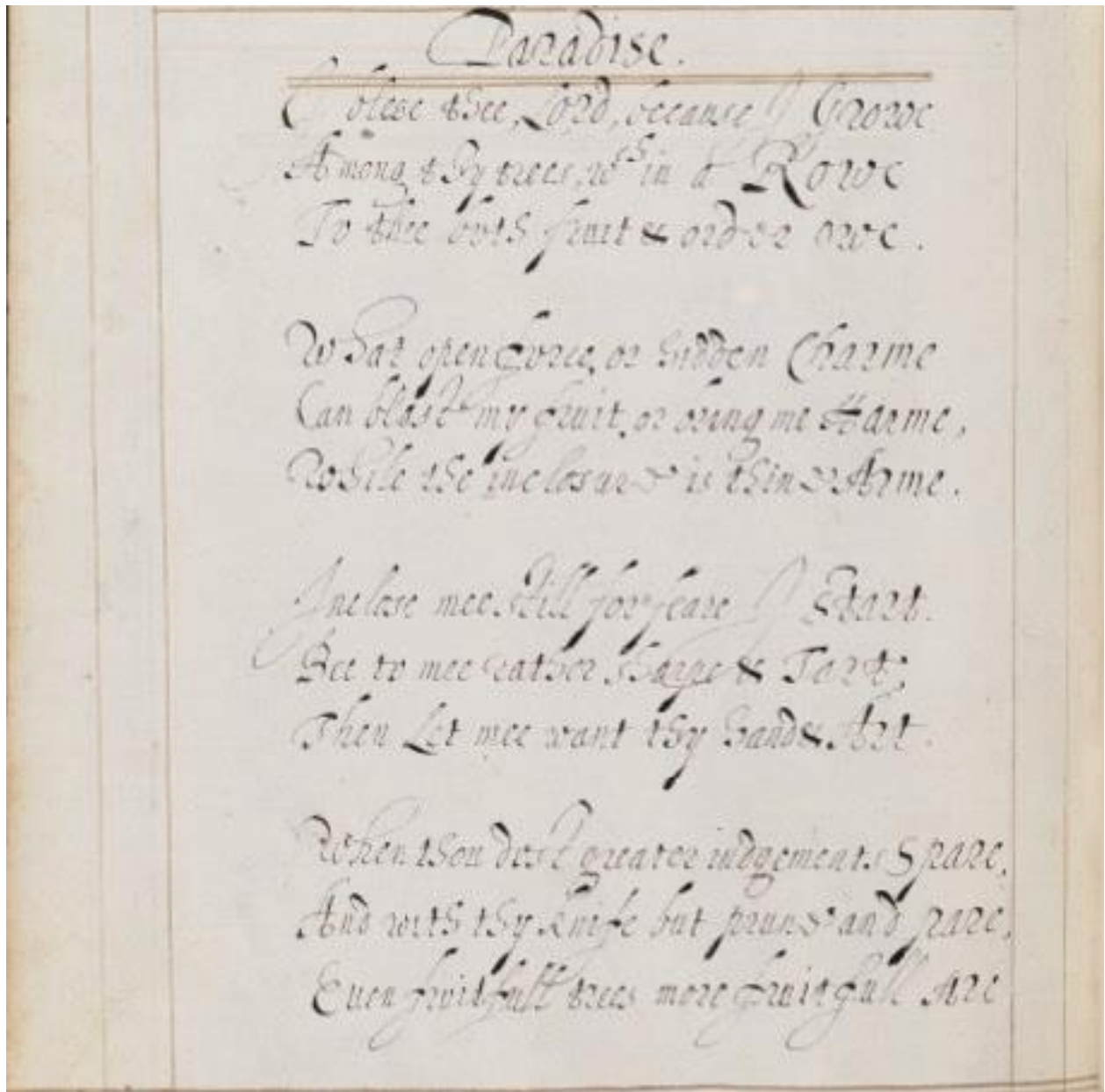


Figure 30. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 95v

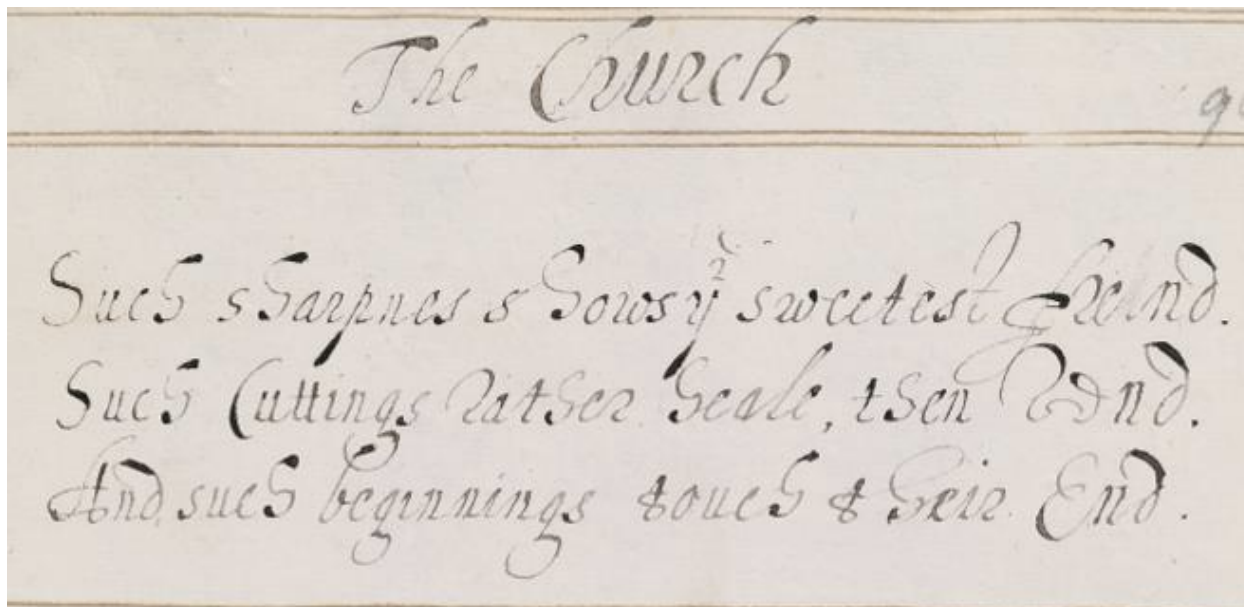


Figure 31. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 96r

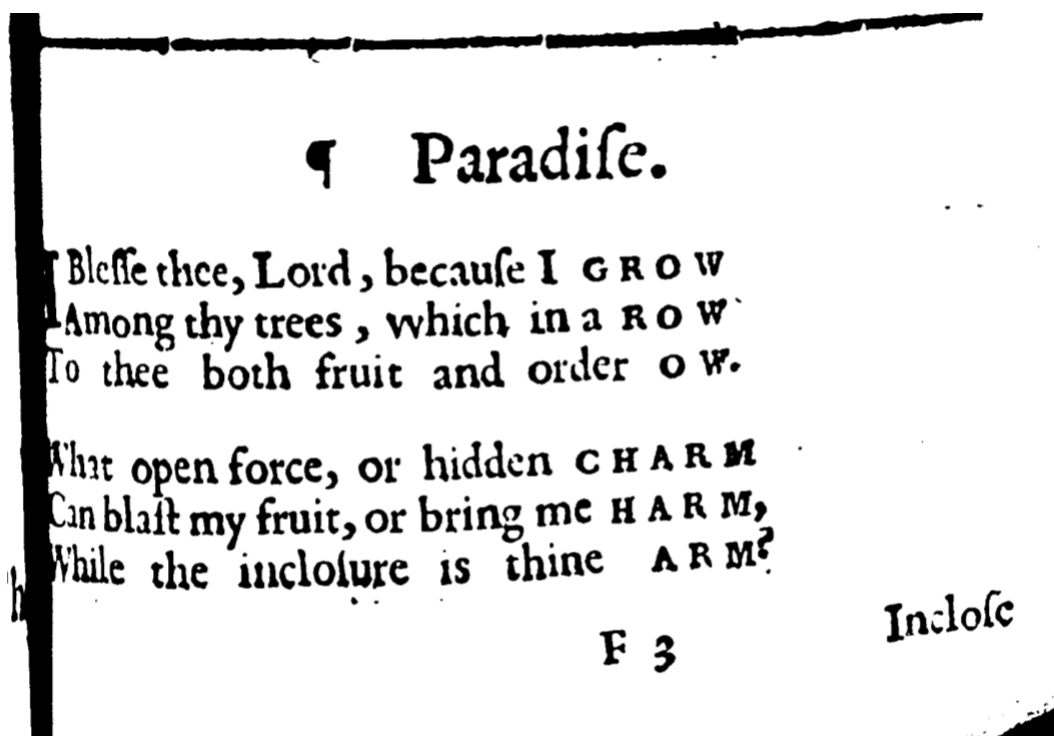


Figure 32. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 125

126

*The Church.*

Inclose me still for fear I **S T A R T**;  
Be to me rather sharp and **T A R T**,  
Then let me want thy hand & **A R T**.

When thou dost greater judgements **S P A R E**,  
And with thy knife but prune and **P A R E**,  
Ev'n fruitfull trees more fruitfull **A R E**.

Such sharpnes shows the sweetest **F R E N D**:  
Such cuttings rather heal then **R E N D**:  
And such beginnings touch their **E N D**.

Figure 33. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 126

“The Water-course,” also exists only in two witnesses. This poem makes its clearest sense when we understand its argument—or rather its complementary but irreconcilable arguments—to be for the eye. At the end of each stanza, utterly sufficient to the occasion and in rhyme with one another, are two words that radically contradict each other. The choice is in where the eyes dwell. The poem unfolds as an invitation to contemplate not only the proximity yet distance between the outcomes in each case (‘Life’/‘Strife’ and ‘Salvation’/‘Damnation’; 5, 10), but also, within the flow of the narrative, to recognise how neither of the first choices can completely preclude either of the second. Instead, the poet solicits another kind of ocular involvement. A reading subject must “rather turn the pipe” (6) in her own favour, thus gaining the “water’s course/ To serve thy sins, and furnish thee with store/ Of sov’reign tears, springing from true remorse” (6-8). Thus purged, washed, cleaned, and water-coursed, she may “in pureness [...] adore” (9) where the decision lies, although

the final pronouncement is not theirs to influence or know. The all-important final word is less a choice, the poem discovers to us, than what is given to the human poet and the human reader by one who can and does according to his own measure see different outcomes for different individuals. On the page, in each case, the apparent possibility of *one* choice, paired with the impossibility of actual erasure of the other, plays out the human dilemma of unknowingness yet absolute mysterious certainty that is at the heart of Christian predestination. This metaphysical dilemma is accomplished by means of visual play on the page. Herbert closes his poem without further elucidatory commentary, and without taking sides on the theological debate active in his time.

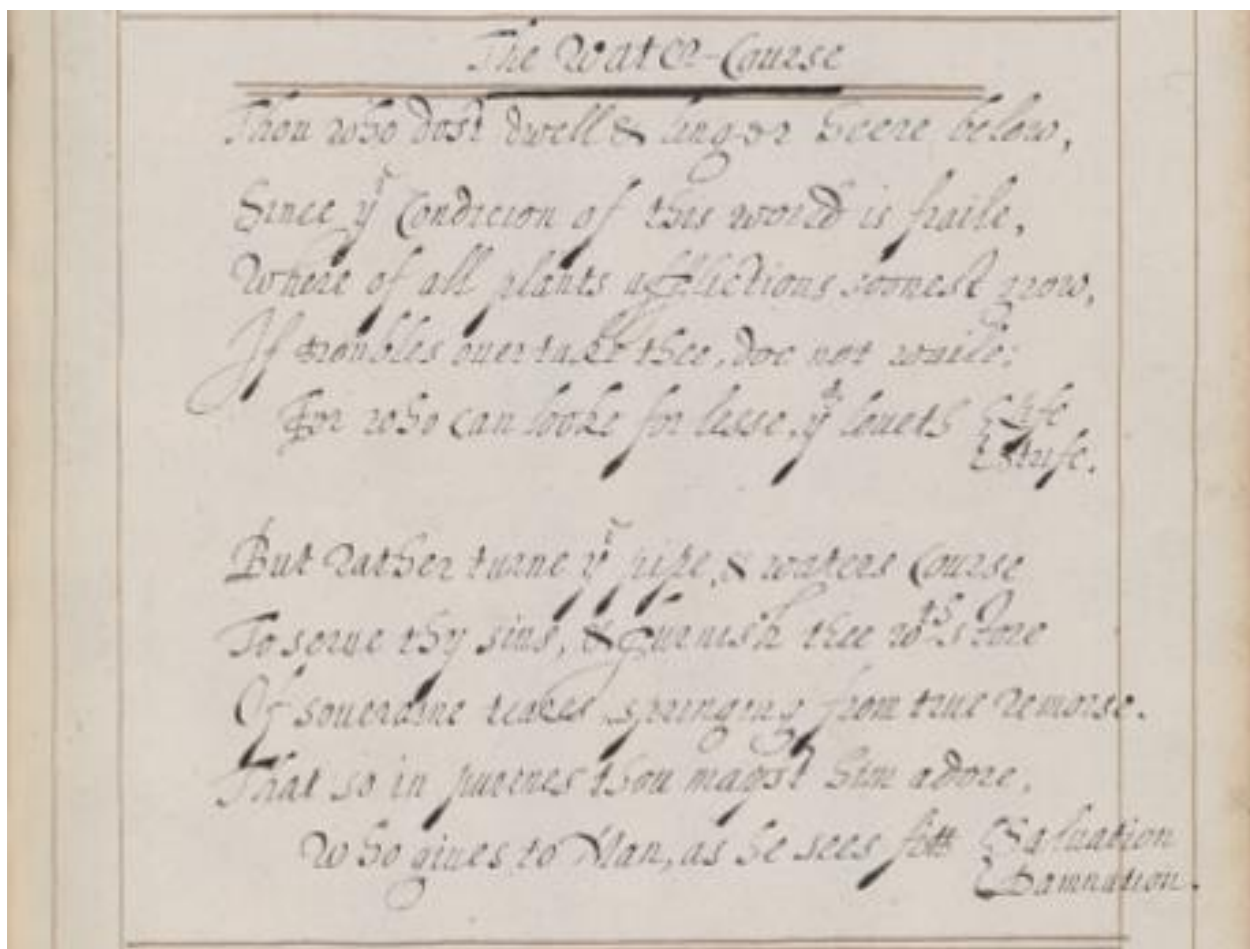


Figure 34. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 125r

## ¶ The Water-course.

**T**Hou who dost dwell and linger here below,  
Since the condition of this world is frail,  
Where of all plants afflictions soonest grow;  
If troubles overtake thee, do not wail:

For who can look for lesse, that loveth } Life.  
} Strife.

But rather turn the pipe, and waters course  
To serve thy finnes, and furnish thee with store  
Of sov'raigne tears, springing from true remorse:  
That so in purencie thou mayst him adore,

Who gives to man, as he sees fit } Salvation.  
} Damnation.

¶ Self.

Figure 35. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 164

“Heaven” succeeds as a place where the visual, aural, and textual come together. The possible loneliness of the first question asked in the poem is dissolved into companionable interlocution by an echo that appears to come both from within and without. No matter how difficult a question, there is no answer to it that is utterly unknown to the questioner. The final words of each question are pared—just as the final words of each line in “Paradise” were—into the always-already contained responses that nevertheless stand for entirely new worlds of possibility.

Slowly, too, in front of our eyes, what started as a void, and was then a wood of trees, becomes leaves of a book, and then a book of light. In this progressive revelation of what it is we are seeing, and in reflecting its own textual materiality, the poem—in both its manuscript and printed homes—draws attention to the hands, the eyes, and the transport of reading that make possible the intellectual and spiritual comprehension of the “Light, joy, and leisure” (19) that are its ends. In a professed reference outward to its own claimed inspiration in the Bible and its images of divine light, the poem audaciously folds into itself a comparable pleasure and custody of the eyes.<sup>119</sup> In the third major witness, Buck and Daniel leave their reception and their mark on the poem with italics added to each “Echo” and echo. In her immediate handheld “Heaven”—reminiscent of the unfolded wings of Easter—the reader is now directed to the primary holy leaves. But our eyes linger for a while in the poem’s perfection of prayer and prosody even as the answers to some of our greatest queries echo back to us as parts, parcels, and reciprocities of human and poetic language.

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<sup>119</sup> For images of divine light, see among many other verses, Psalm 27:1; Matthew 4:16; John 1:5; and John 8:12.



Heaven.

O who will show me those delictes on hie?

Ertho. J.

Thou Ertho, thou art mortal, all men know

Erth. No.

Went thou not borne among y<sup>e</sup> woods & Leaub?

Erth. Leaub.

And are there any Leaub, w<sup>th</sup> still abide?

Erth. Bide.

What Leaub are they? impart y<sup>e</sup> matter wholly

Erth. Holy.

Are Holy Leaub y<sup>e</sup> Ertho then of Bliss?

Erth. Yes.

Then tell me, what is y<sup>e</sup> supreme Delight?

Erth. Light

Light to y<sup>e</sup> mind; what shall y<sup>e</sup> will enjoy?

Erth. Joy.

But are there rarets & burynes w<sup>th</sup> y<sup>e</sup> pleasure?

Erth. Leasure.

Light, Joy, & Leasure, but shall they persever?

Erth. Ever.

Figure 36. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. 79r

SCAM 32.

O who will's know mee & these delights on Earth?  
 Techo.                    I.  
 Thou Techo, & thou art mortall, as I know.  
 Techo:                    No.  
 Wert & thou not borne among y<sup>e</sup> trees & leaves?  
 Techo:                    Leaves.  
 And are & there any leaves, y<sup>e</sup> shall abide?  
 Techo:                    Bide.  
 What leaves are & they? impart y<sup>e</sup> matter wholly?  
 Techo:                    Soly.  
 Are Soly leaves y<sup>e</sup> Techo & Son of Christ?  
 Techo:                    Yes.  
 Then tell mee, what is & that supreme delight?  
 Techo:                    Light.  
 Light to y<sup>e</sup> mind what shall y<sup>e</sup> will enjoy?  
 Techo:                    Joy.  
 But see & this Care & business with y<sup>e</sup> pleasure?  
 Techo:                    Nature.  
 Light, Joy, & leavee, but shall they converse?  
 Techo:                    True.

Figure 37. The Bodleian Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Tanner 307, sig. 139r

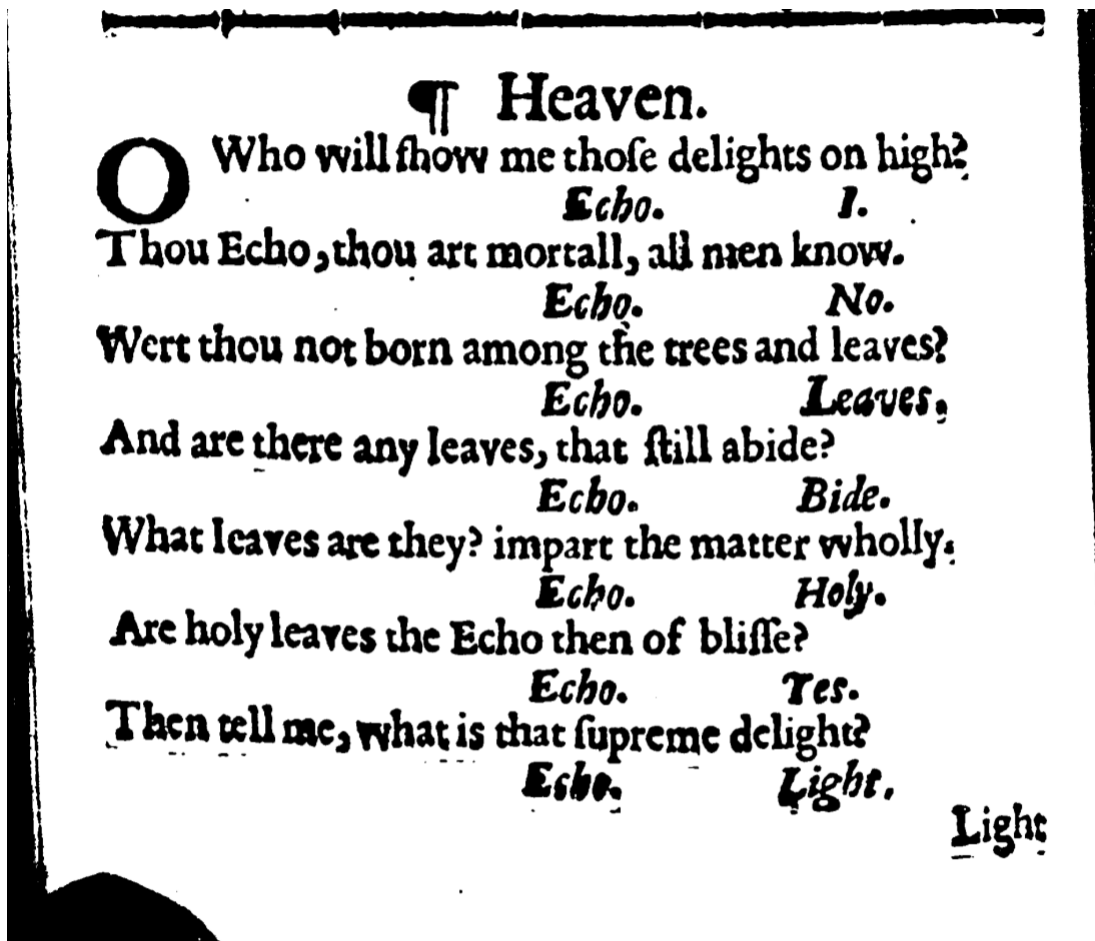


Figure 38. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 182

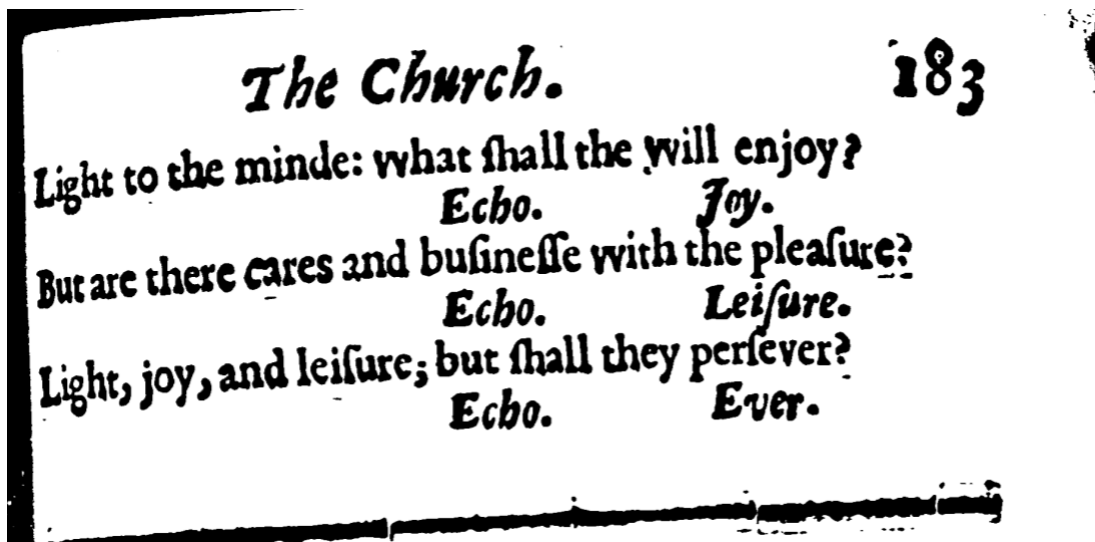


Figure 39. George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), p. 183

Scholars of Herbert know the poet's incredible facility with verse forms: the challenge and pleasure of his inventions and negotiations of numerous rhyme-schemes; diverse permutations and combinations of poetic figures; and loading and unloading of light and heavy syllables to lines and stanzas to magnificent effect. *The Temple* could serve as a primer for rhetoric and prosody all by itself, so varied are the metrical forms in use, and so expertly are they harnessed. As I have shown, however, these exercises in metrical multiplicity and prosodic skill are meant as much for the dwelling, nourishment, enjoyment, and leading of the eye as for any abstract intellection or even straightforward aural/oral appreciation. It is only in the process of reading-viewing-remembering-referring that we can engage with these poems in their complete playfulness, daring, and rewarding complexity.

But if Herbert appears to be a man absurdly in love with the gymnastic possibilities of text, a poet with an inordinate fondness for word-games, and a writer quite unable to pass by a suggestive visual arrangement, we must also remember this poet's nervousness with form, poetry, and fine wit. Some of his best-known works—the “Jordan” poems, “Frailty,” “The Forerunners,” “The Posy,” to name a few—play out the agony of this poetic talent. These poems make for shattering and exuberant reading. But one early poem carries more heartbreak and vulnerability than any other—and it never even made it to the “little book” responsible for the Bodleian copy and therefore for the printed editions.<sup>120</sup> It is to this self-aware, terrified, terrifying, and gorgeous little poem, existing in only one of the three main witnesses we have for Herbert's English poetry (the Williams Manuscript), to which I now turn. I offer that Herbert's achievement with poetic form, pictorial and metrical, is all the more remarkable for the huge questions that consistently underlie it. I also use this

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<sup>120</sup> No one knows why it got excluded, or when, indeed, it dropped out from being copied by Herbert even for himself. There is no reason to think that it made it to the “little book”—but that somehow the scribes of Little Gidding left it out of the Bodleian copy.

poem to end this section and lead into the next because many of the questions of divine accessibility and the poet's deserving of the divine regard that I shall pick up in the next section will keep circling back to the concerns articulated in this poem.

“Perseverance”—the name is ironic yet suggestive for a poem that dropped out of its author's most significant collection—once belonged within “The Church.”<sup>121</sup> The poet tells his God, with a strange blend of humility and pride, that the poet's verses carry his expressions of his love for his God. Either as results of his own authorship, or of his authorship influenced by God, these verses are now offered to God. Only, the poet does not know what will come of these peculiar presents. In a remarkable expression of something near fatalism and an odd courage, he contemplates his persistence with poetry as a possible help to others while becoming his own condemnation.

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<sup>121</sup> It is noteworthy that this poem in the Williams Manuscript does not have any reworking or corrections in Herbert's hand. It is likely that it did not need any reworking; it has a strength equivalent to some of his best. But the absence of Herbert's pen on the copy nevertheless speaks of something beyond poetic satisfaction. It is as though once having composed it, Herbert did not look back on it. Although he also did not disown it.

Firste veraine.

My God y<sup>e</sup> poore expressions of my Love  
 W<sup>th</sup> warme thest lines & strowe them up to thee  
 Not so, as for the present I did moue  
 Or rather as thou moudest mee.

But what shall issue whether these my words  
 Shall help another, but my iudgment bee;  
 As a burst fouling-pettr doth saue y<sup>e</sup> birds  
 But kill the man, is seald w<sup>th</sup> thee.

For who can tell though thou hast dyde to winne  
 And wedd my soule in glorious paradise.  
 Whether my many rymes and use of sinne  
 May yet forbid the bands and blisse.

Onely my soule hangb on thy promises  
 W<sup>th</sup> face and hands i'clinging vnto thy breast  
 Clinging and crying, crying w<sup>th</sup> out a case  
 Thou art my rock, thou art my rest.

Figure 40. The Williams Manuscript of George Herbert's Poems, Jones B62, sig. 76r

Here is the poem in modernised spelling:

My God, the poor expressions of my Love  
Which warm these lines, and serve them up to thee  
Are so, as for the present I did move,  
Or rather as thou movèdst me.

But what shall issue, whether these my words  
Shall help another, but my judgement be;  
As a burst fowling-piece doth save the birds  
But kill the man, is seal'd with thee.

For who can tell, though thou hast died to win  
And wed my soul in glorious paradise;  
Whether my many crimes and use of sin  
May yet forbid the banns and bliss?

Only my soul hangs on thy promises  
With face and hands clinging unto thy breast,  
Clinging and crying, crying without cease,  
Thou art my rock, thou art my rest.

The terms of the image in the second stanza make for a disturbing puzzle. While a burst fowling-piece does save the birds, an intact one aids the wielder of the fowling-piece while inflicting damage on the birds. Is Herbert's comparison, then, of intact verse with broken fowling-piece? Or broken verse with an intact fowling-piece? Broken *or* intact, could Herbert's poetry—sent into the world to comfort dejected souls—ever be deployed to make prey of readers? Is verse a trap? If so, for whom? In the “Perirrhanterium” and “Superliminare,” in all three witnesses, the poet had issued a serious warning: “Avoid, Profaneness; come not here:/ Nothing but holy, pure, and clear,/ Or that which groaneth to be so,/ May at his peril further go” (5-8).<sup>122</sup> After all the regulation and stern “former

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<sup>122</sup> A kind of parallel from *The Countrey Parson* by Herbert is worth drawing attention to here. Words always have power for Herbert. His poems in “The Church” might just be comparable to his sermons. “He [the parson] tells them [his congregation] that Sermons are dangerous things, that none goes out of Church as he came in, but either better, or worse; that none is careless before his Judge, and that the word of God shal Judge us.” *A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson His Character, and Rule of Holy Life* (London, 1652), 23. Nineteen years after Herbert's death, Barnabas

precepts” (1) of the “Church-porch,” here is shadow of a vague menace. It is as though the contents of the book—the poems—can *never* have inherent worth. Their value for a reader is only in what the reader brings to them. If, and only if, a reader brings to them what is holy, pure, and clear, or that which groans (a very Herbertian word) to be so, can the contents be of use. But otherwise, there is possible peril in both form and content of what follows.

Disquietingly, persistently, Herbert of “Perseverance” perhaps knows that he worships best in verse—while knowing that he should not need the verse to love his creator. Part in love with and part frightened of his own poetic creativity, he wonders if his “many crimes and use of sin” (11) will allow even his God, who “died to win/ And wed my soul in glorious paradise” (9-10) to consummate their divinely conjugal “banns and bliss” (12). The final stanza breaks into an image of both trust and anguish. In its doubleness of meaning, “Crying, crying” (15) allows weeping to turn into dearest address—even as we have no way of knowing if the distressed speaker actually gets to say the vital words that end the poem to his cherished God as he is overwhelmed with tears. In the ambiguity surrounding the utterance of the final words as the poet cries without cease, there is only the last line of the poem to present his crucial position of subjection, dependence, and repose. Herbert hopes God reads. But that brings us back to Herbert’s profounder ambivalence about what his exquisitely crafted verse means to his God. For all the ways in which this poet can extravagantly direct his readers’ eyes, can he work towards his own tears being heeded? To come back to the question that is always hovering at the edge of Herbert’s and perhaps our vision as we read these poems: should one need poems to address one’s creator? Are these superb achievements of poetic craft means of subjection to God or extravagant assertions of spectacular authorship that ultimately make the poet unentitled to his God’s regard? It is in this background of radical irresolution, this

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Oley, a Fellow of Clare hall, Cambridge, published Herbert’s prose work. In the title he used, Oley capitalised on the immense success of *The Temple*.



intimacy of poetic craft alongside irrepressible doubt and grief, and this unseemly angst that is nevertheless collected into commanding verse, that I wish to ask the questions that remain for our assessment of visual energy in Herbert's verse. How did a theologically alert life consistently wary of the brave sights afforded by "brave language, braver deeds" ("Frailty," 14) cope with the human exhilaration of poetry?<sup>123</sup> How did this poet regulate his points of access, the eyes, to this brave textual/literary world? How did he write about eyes, anyway?

### **Eyes: To Take up, Lift Up, Seal Up, Look**

Not long separated from the time of both of "The Holy Scriptures," Herbert pondered an image of astronomical visitation and penetration that would survive into the combative reciprocity of his later poem "Artillery."<sup>124</sup> *Lucus* 5, "In S. Sripturas," writes out the appalling knowingness of

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<sup>123</sup> Izaak Walton's biography of Herbert tells us that in his first year at Cambridge (1610), aged sixteen, Herbert wrote to his mother with a new year's gift: two poems. "My meaning is in these Sonnets to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in Poetry, shall be all, and ever consecrated to God's glory." Walton's *Life* in the John Tobin edition of Herbert's *Complete English Poems*, 274. The two sonnets, "My God, where is that ancient heat towards thee," and "Sure, Lord, there is enough in thee to dry," are of a somewhat prudish disposition—surprisingly, for they were meant to be for his mother, also perfectly seventeenth-century misogynistic in their metaphors and comparisons—and act out a queasy and hassled saturation with the themes of love and refinement and invention that were standard for lyric poetry in his time. It would appear that Herbert decided early in his life to steer clear of such things and aim towards devotional poetry. But the anger and hectoring in the poems are arguably more than a juvenile straight-laced-ness. If this is a backlash and reaction against something, then that something got under his skin. The timing is also noteworthy. John Donne had sent Magdalen Herbert his own *La Corona* not long ago. Herbert's resolution and missive shortly after Donne's might not be entirely coincidental.

<sup>124</sup> "In S. Sripturas" belongs in a collection conjectured to be from around 1623. *Lucus* itself belongs within the Williams Manuscript, which contains both "The Holy Scriptures" poems. "Artillery," which only exists in manuscript in the Bodleian copy, compares very closely with "In S. Sripturas." The similarity is indicated in the first lines: "As I one ev'ning sat before my cell,/ Methoughts a star did shoot into my lap" (1-2). The poem then engages in a mutuality of barrages—and the shooting of stars and tears and prayers. It finally ends in a linguistic truce. "Yet if thou shunnest, I am thine:/ I must be so, if I am mine./ There is no articling with thee: I am but finite, yet thine infinitely" (29-32).

the holy scriptures of the ways and byways of the poet's inmost heart and recesses. There is a considerable agitation, he finds one day, deep within him.

Heu, quis spiritus, igeúsque turbo  
Regnat visceribus, meásque versat  
Imo pectore cogitationes?  
(1-3)

Alas, what spirit, what fiery whirlwind  
Rules in my insides, and stirs my  
Thoughts deep in my breast?  
(1-3)<sup>125</sup>

The other evening, he sucked in a flying star: 'stellam vespere suxerim volantem' (5). Now he is pierced, taken, tumbled. Could it be that the star is trying to find a way out of its now base habitation, the poet's (unclean) breast? But realisation soon hits. He knows what it is that got into him, and why it has such unprecedented access everywhere.

Imò, me nec apes, nec astra pungunt:  
Sacratissima Charta, tu fuisti  
Quae cordis latebras sinúsque caecos  
Atque omnes peragrata es angiportus  
Et flexus fugientis appetitûs.  
(10-14)

No – neither bee nor star has wounded me:  
Most holy scriptures, it's you who have,  
You who have travelled through the hiding places of the heart,  
Its blind alleys, all its narrow lanes  
And the byways of desire even as it flees.  
(10-14)

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<sup>125</sup> All translations from Herbert's Latin verse, unless otherwise specified, is from Drury and Moul's edition.

Startled but nevertheless aware of the reason for his humbling transparency before the “Sacratissima Charta” (11), Herbert admits that this should be no surprise, for “[q]uae vis condidit, ipsa nouit aedes” (17). That is, who can know the house better than they that built it?

In Herbert’s later English poems, “The Holy Scriptures,” the Word is figured as an ocular necessity, implicated in a thorough exchange of cerebral grasp, spiritual fulfilment, and physical health. In Herbert’s understanding, the holy scriptures magisterially write out their ability not only to read or influence or direct a person, but to nourish and even constitute their reader. In a model of essential mutuality, the scriptures emerge into meaning and mend their reader when the reader is in most need of such help. In “The Holy Scriptures (1),” reading is figured as a fierce ingestion, reminiscent of the sucking in of a flying star that we have just seen. This image is consistent with Herbert’s own advice about a parson’s relationship with the Bible. “[T]he chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the holy Scriptures. There he sucks, and lives.”<sup>126</sup> There is no way to suitably read the scriptures save to absorb them, visually and viscerally; visually, because the eyes are crucial for the first step, the reading, and viscerally, because this deep reading cannot and must not stop at the eyes.

O Book! Infinite sweetness! Let my heart  
    Suck ev’ry letter, and a honey gain,  
    Precious for any grief in any part;  
To clear the breast, to mollify all pain.  
[...]  
                    this is the thankful glass,  
That mends the looker’s eyes: this is the well  
    That washes what it shows.  
(1-4, 8-10)

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<sup>126</sup> *The Country Parson*, 10.

Charlotte Otten refers to Dutch physician Levinus Lemnius's *De Miraculis Occultis Naturae* to point to a contemporary understanding of a looking-glass as an instrument to recoup visual "spirits" and thus restore eyesight.<sup>127</sup> Significantly, and in keeping with the Herbertian preoccupation with text, Lemnius talks about a restoration of such eyes as have been glazed over by too much *reading*: "How a Looking-glasse represents objects, and what good the polished smoothnesse, of a Looking-glasse, can do Students and such as tire their eyes in reading, and how it may restore a dull sight."<sup>128</sup> Such a glass is undeniably "thankful" for its user, and serves well as the image for such textual perusal as rejuvenates the eyes instead of exhausting them. The Holy Scriptures, as Herbert would make us see, allow inexhaustible reading because they make for inexhaustible invigoration, not least of the visual kind, and inexhaustible gratification. Finally, "[h]eav'n lies flat in thee" (13), the sonnet ends, "[s]ubject to ev'ry mounter's bended knee" (14). In a brilliant image of holding intimately close what is infinite, and openly admiring the dimensional change of the cosmic into everyday, legible, and even portable measure, the poem achieves a joyous close and celebration of mutuality. Subjection turns and turns again—from a reading subject's submission to the text, to the text's fundamental openness and accessibility—until it culminates in a contented subjecthood for the reader.

"The Holy Scriptures (2)" announces its affiliation with textual pleasure even more markedly. (As often with Herbert, textual pleasure is deeply intertwined with visual pleasure.)

Another image, accessible in both its homeliness and its evocation of the conscientiousness of an engaged student, lays forth the creation and dependence of textual memory on the visual, aural, and material.

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<sup>127</sup> *De Miraculis Occultis Naturae*, published in 1654, was translated into English as *The Secret Miracles of Nature* in 1658. Lemnius's writings were widely circulated in England in Herbert's time.

<sup>128</sup> This is the heading of chapter XXXIII, Book II, of Lemnius's *The Secret Miracles of Nature* (London, 1658), 144-145. See Charlotte F. Otten, "'The Thankfull Glass/ That Mends the Lookers Eyes' in Herbert's 'The Holy Scriptures I,'" *Notes and Queries* 38.1 (1991), 83.

O that I knew how all thy lights combine,  
    And the configurations of their glory!  
    Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,  
But all the constellations of the story.  
This verse marks that, and both do make a motion  
    Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie:  
[...]  
                                for in ev'ry thing  
    Thy words do find me out, and parallels bring,  
And in another make me understood.<sup>129</sup>  
(1-6; 10-12)

The bibliophilic exuberance that marks this poem is constituted in no small measure by visual joy, the joy in “Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,/ But all the constellations of the story.”

These scholarly and ocular pleasures are in part functions of the textual vibrancy of the moment of the poem’s composition.<sup>130</sup> For our purposes, it is important to register an integral association of sight with literacy and textuality, and of all of these with intellection and spiritual profit.<sup>131</sup> Textual

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<sup>129</sup> Theologically speaking, and from experience, Herbert also extols light in other ways. “Another old Custome there is of saying, when light is brought in, God send us the light of heaven; And the Parson likes this very well [...]. Light is a great Blessing, and as great as food, for which we give thanks: and those that thinke this superstitious, neither know superstition, nor themselves.” *The Country Parson*, 159.

<sup>130</sup> “The Bible had become increasingly available and affordable in the later sixteenth century. The Geneva translation of 1560, in roman type, quarto and octavo format, with illustrations and copious notes, enjoyed widespread sales and popularity. In 1611 it was joined by the Authorized or King James translation, which gradually overtook it. In Herbert’s time English bibles were common reading, new enough to be exciting: anyone who could read had the oracles of God for himself.” Drury and Moul, 397.

<sup>131</sup> Herbert himself glosses this in another poem. “Discipline” is about the divine need for love. God has not learnt yet to “[t]hrow away thy rod” (29) and to “[t]hrow away thy wrath” (32). But Herbert wants him to. He lays claim on his God’s “gentle path” (4) because: “Not a word or look/ I affect to own,/ But my book,/ And thy book alone” (9-12). Earlier, Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* had similarly gestured towards a spiritual confluence of the arts of the hand, eye, and mind even with secular poetry: “Other sorts of Poetry almost have we none, but that lyricall kind of Songs and Sonnets: which, Lord, if he gave us so good mindes, how well might be imployed, and with howe heavenly fruite, both private and publike, in singing the prayeses of the immortall goodnes of the God who gyveth us hands to write, and wits to conceive; of which we might well want words, but never

comprehension will continue to be figured, even in Milton, with sight, which is the apparently simple ability to perceive and process light. In this world, Milton's poignantly-phrased "book of knowledge fair" is not altogether metaphorical.<sup>132</sup> It is deeply desirable to be able to see the book of the world and read it.

It is no surprise, then, that Herbert takes his textual encounters seriously: both in what he must receive and in what he can present. Early in "The Church-porch" he is unambiguous that "[t]his book of stars" ("The Holy Scriptures (2)," 14) must be approached with a fundamental preparedness. The eyes must themselves be ready to take in what is in front of them. "How dare those eyes upon a Bible look,/ Much less towards God, whose lust is all their book?" (11-12) If lust is all the book(s) the eyes are equipped to see, then they are unfit to look upon the Book. (We note how just as the book of knowledge and the world are fair things, so too are the unfair ones pictured, in the Herbertian imagination, as filthy texts, or texts that exist in a mutually sullyng relationship with a reader's eyes.) The homiletic "Charms and Knots," almost entirely full of the kind of sayings that populate Herbert's posthumous *Outlandish Proverbs*, presents a now predictable means of keeping the health of the eyes.<sup>133</sup> "Who read a chapter when they rise,/ Shall ne'er be troubled with ill eyes" (1-2). Clearly, the health of the eyes is to be maintained with the right kind of reading. And in the

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matter; of which we could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new-budding occasions."

<sup>132</sup> *Paradise Lost*, III.47.

<sup>133</sup> Some of these proverbs are noteworthy to us because of how deeply ocularcentric they are in their metaphors and meanings, and how important they clearly remained for Herbert. For instance, proverb 126: "Better to be blinde, then to see ill." Or 157 and 158, both saying the same thing, with slightly different phrasing. "Jest not with the eye or with Religion" and "The eye and Religion can beare no jesting." Or 556: "The blind eate many a flie." Or 959: "The eyes have one language every where." *Outlandish Proverbs, Selected by Mr G. H.* (London, 1640), A6r, A7r, C4v, E1r. See also "He that hath but one eye, must bee afraid to lose it." *Jacula Prudentum or Outlandish Proverbs, Sentences, &c. Selected by Mr George Herbert* (London, 1651), 64.

confrontational vein of “The Thanksgiving,” one possible means of getting back at God is precisely through reading, grasping, and perhaps writing back his terrible love.

Nay, I will read thy book, and never move  
    Till I have found therein thy love;  
Thy art of love, which I'll turn back on thee,  
    O my dear Saviour, Victory!  
(45-48)

This does not ultimately succeed, of course. Herbert cannot keep up with his God; how could he humanly compete with divine passion? But the poem stands at the limit of a poet's vision of how far he can turn things back on God, how far text can go. As in so much of Herbert, it is an expression of his uneasy intuition that poetry is where he comes closest to his God's authorial genius. From his own experience, he knows that poetic language is where he is nearest the means that could do any justice to his subject.<sup>134</sup> So, he keeps trying. “Then for thy passion – I will do for that –/ Alas, my God, I know not what” (49-50). In the giving over is the characteristic holding on. Herbert knows not what he will do for the passion save write about it—in a poem complete with an affectively superb and summative final couplet, *and* his confessed incompleteness of purpose, design, and achievement. The more resolved “Obedience” gently but surely admits the value of his “writings” (1).

On it [this writing] my heart doth bleed  
    As many lines as there doth need  
To pass itself and all it hath to thee.  
    To which I do agree,  
And here present it as my special deed.  
(6-10)

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<sup>134</sup> In another poem, in the Williams Manuscript called “Poetry” and in the Bodleian Manuscript “The Quiddity,” he differently approaches and acknowledges what poetry does for his God, and almost more importantly, for him. “My God, a verse is not a crown,/ No point of honour, or gay suit,/ [...] It cannot vault, or dance, or play;/ [...] It is no office, art, or news,/ Nor the Exchange, or busy Hall;/ But it is that which while I use/ I am with thee, and *most take all.*” The words italicised by Buck and Daniel follow the slight stylistic setting apart given to them by the Williams Manuscript.

The conceit is that of a legal deed, but the deed in fact accomplished is a poem that invites the most serious reading of, immersion in, and even ownership of Herbert's poetry.

How happy were my part,  
If some kind man would thrust his heart  
Into these lines; till in heav'n's Court of Rolls  
They were by winged souls  
Ent'red for both, far above their dessert!  
(41-45)

As we know, his Cambridge University Press printers Thomas Buck and Roger Daniel indeed did their part to own and shape and promote and make versatile Herbert's lines.<sup>135</sup>

But neither vision nor interpretation is untroubled in Herbert. Vision is edgy business. Not everything the eyes can or would see is good for them. In the present world, they must be regulated—as every sense must be, although the stakes here are arguably greater, with sight being the site of epistemological primacy—and their use redirected as necessary. The following examples illustrate the many perils the eyes are capable of being in and inviting. Eyes need to be watched—and where necessary, closed or guided. In “The Church-porch,” while advising on many things under the sun, Herbert emphatically instructs:

In time of service seal up both thine eyes,  
And send them to thine heart; that spying sin,  
They may weep out the stains by them did rise[.]<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> As we have also seen, some of their interpolations are now incorporated within the current visual and intellectual lives of these poems. Given Herbert's self-proclaimed commitment to finding readers for whom verse might turn delight into sacrifice, there is reason to think that Herbert would have been pleased. For other reworkings and adaptations by invested readers, see Robert Ray's *The Herbert Allusion Book*.

<sup>136</sup> However, the parson in front of the congregation should—presumably, in Herbert's own example, does—perform a devotion well worth watching. “The Countrey Parson, when he is to read divine services, composeth himselfe to all possible reverence; lifting up his heart and hands, and eyes, and using all other gestures which may expresse a hearty, and unfeyned devotion.” Even as the parson performs his sincere devotion, he proceeds to alertly watch his congregation. “When he preacheth, he procures attention by all possible art, both by earnestnesse of speech, it being natural



(415-417)

In “The Discharge,” the poet addresses his heart to ask it to stop behaving like a greedy and lustful eye.

Busy inquiring heart, what wouldst thou know?  
    Why dost thou pry,  
And turn, and leer, and with a licorous eye  
    Look high and low;  
    And in thy lookings stretch and grow?  
(1-5)

The poet’s heart needs to understand that it and the poet have a secure and careful keeping in God. It is best not to pry around, as lecherous eyes do that cannot trust or hold faith. In fact, the heart might be best off being as unlike an eye as possible, if all it can do is model itself after a lewd and faithless one. In “Perfection” of the Williams Manuscript (which is “The Elixir” in the Bodleian copy), a resonant mindfulness of the optical technology of his day makes Herbert opine anew about how eyes *should* be used. The point is to gather from the visible world what it offers, but also seek beyond.

A man that looks on glass,  
    On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
    And then the heav’n espy.  
(9-12)

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to men to think, that where is much earnestness, there is somewhat worth hearing; and by a diligent, and busy cast of his eye on his auditors, with letting them know, that he observes who marks, and who not [...].” There is much watching at church: from the spectacle of the cross to registering the parson’s devoutness, to the looking to one’s own correct exhibition of piety. Peripherally, but no less importantly in the larger context of the parson and his work, “[i]f he [the parson] be married, the choyce of his wife was made rather by his eare, then by his eye; his judgement, not his affection found out a fit wife for him [...].” *The Countrey Parson*, 17, 22, 37.

Indeed, the revisions that made “Perfection” into “The Elixir” are instructive, and offer a glimpse into how the ocularcentric vocabulary of the verse quoted above influenced the later version of the poem. Perhaps more potently to suggest the optic figure (of the glass through which one may “the heav’n espy”), the first stanza of “Perfection” underwent a telling change to create the first stanza of “The Elixir.” In “Perfection,” the first stanza read:

Lord, teach me to refer  
All things I do to thee  
That I not only may not err  
But also pleasing be[.]  
(1-4)

In “The Elixir,” indeterminate referring was changed to something more explicit, exact, and emphatic: seeing.

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for thee[.]  
(1-4)

The revised and bettered reference to God is literally visual, even as the momentum of the poem continues to build towards a seeing-to-see-beyond.

In “The Pearl (Matt 13:45),” similarly, a worldly speaker realises true value when he sees it.<sup>137</sup> “I know the ways of learning” (1), it begins, and “I know the ways of [worldly] honour” (11), just as “I know the ways of pleasure” (21). He knows because “My stuff is flesh, not brass; my senses live” (27). But then, the poem turns, again hinged on seeing beyond physical sight. A more intense other-

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<sup>137</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” Matthew 13:45-56.

worldly sight is what informs this man’s lucid decision-making, and he is the first to admit that the clarity of his vision is ultimately not his own, but his maker’s making it possible for him.

I know all these, and have them in my hand:  
 Therefore not sealed, but with open eyes  
 I fly to thee, and fully understand  
 Both the main sale, and the commodities;  
 And at what rate and price I have thy love;  
 With all the circumstances that may move:  
 Yet through these labyrinths, not my grovelling wit,  
 But thy silk twist let down from heav’n to me;  
 Did both conduct, and teach me, how by it  
   To climb to thee.

(31-40)

Ocular risk clearly does not give over even with an understanding of visual dangers, even with an awareness that the eyes must strive to look beyond the immediately visible. The pity of the human condition seems to be precisely that even the most acute sense can and often does miscarry. With striking regularity, eyes in Herbert are figured in searches—some more desperate than others. To parse extensively the yearning images of these near-ubiquitous eyes in *The Temple* would unrealistically stretch this chapter, but a quick laying out of examples will provide a sense of how time and time again, for a range of reasons, vision fails Herbert.

“Ungratefulness” records what the poet, in yearning piety but in his too too solid flesh, cannot ultimately access.

The statelier cabinet is the Trinity,  
   Whose sparkling light access denies:  
   Therefore thou dost not show  
   This fully to us, till death blow  
   The dust into our eyes:  
 For by that powder thou wilt make us see.

(13-18)



Most gently, a downcast look—eyes that feed on earth—is raised with the promise that saviour and mirth are both on their way. The implicit promise of the verse is of sights more splendid than earth thus far ever held.

“Dullness” reiterates the prayer for the right kind of poetic eyes and mind but ends with an admission of the drastic human inability to take sight—and sighted composition—beyond this immediate world.<sup>138</sup>

Lord, clear thy gift, that with a constant wit  
I may but look towards thee:  
*Look* only; for to *love* thee, who can be,  
What angel fit?  
(25-28)

The poet longs for a sharp dulling of his poetic wit—for only then will he achieve the constancy, the wit, that matters. That is presumably also when he might hope to have the eyes that see right. Then he will be able to see his God. But there is longing and a very real unfulfilment yet to this ability to look, for it is emphatically not to be able to love his God. He will “[*look* only” for “to *love*” asks more. Indeed, the poem leaves the suggestion hanging in the air, it might never be possible to look and love at the same time; love is (or will have to be undertaken) blind.

“The Search” is an attempt to work through overwhelming sorrow at the perceived absence of one long longed for. The exquisite verbal economy that conveys the posture of the disconsolate poet successfully bears the sense of an individual sadness become wide as earth.

My knees pierce th’earth, mine eyes the sky  
And yet the sphere  
And centre both to me deny

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<sup>138</sup> It may be pointed out that even this looking is not for real. The poet asks to be able to look *towards* his God. Whether he can actually look *at* or *on* God is not revealed. The italics are from the 1633 first edition, not the Bodleian Manuscript. (The poem exists in manuscript only in the Bodleian copy.)

That thou art there.

(5-8)

The sharp, local, and heavy absence felt as pain in the searcher's knee is countered only by the unbearable sense of expanse and emptiness that meets the searcher's eyes. If the knees ground to earth and feel the weight of loss, the eyes hurt from an absence of encounter, from finding nothing to rest on.

The result is "Grief." In normal ocular terms (that is, of sight), in textual terms, and in poetic terms, there is no dealing with this utter void. Eyes are only good for weeping, and inadequate even at that.

O who will give me tears? Come all ye springs,  
Dwell in my head and eyes: come clouds, and rain:  
My grief hath need of all the wat'ry things,  
That nature hath produc'd. Let ev'ry vein  
Suck up a river to supply mine eyes,  
My weary weeping eyes too dry for me  
[...]  
Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise  
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumb and mute,  
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,  
And keep your measures for some lover's lute,  
Whose grief allows him music and a rhyme:  
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.  
Alas, my God!

(1-6, 13-19)

Verses are good for nothing—except to give deliberate form to the unmanageability of heavy sorrow. Yet, to give form to sorrow is not to alleviate it. The poet almost wonders why his poetry cannot very well just let be; if it did, his eyes might assume some of the running, and that way he might at least weep and purge himself. But poetry keeps getting in the way. The final line of the poem, metrically unmatched and unrhymed, dramatizes how even music and poetry will not help the poet in his profound privation.

Tellingly, the lack of the prized reciprocity that Herbert is perennially after is often figured in terms of being hidden from God's sight. Two poems in two languages, both possibly composed around the same time, cry out in a plea for attention and a turning of God's eyes. God remains in "Denial." Indignation and heartbreak break out in gorgeous, arresting complaint.

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue  
    To cry to thee,  
And then not hear it crying! all day long  
    My heart was in my knee,  
    But no hearing.

    Therefore my soul lay out of sight,  
    Untuned, unstrung:  
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,  
    Like a nipt blossom, hung  
    Discontented.

(16-25)

Vision here functions as a place where *several* senses converge. Twice over. To have been unheard of God is to have been unseen, unregarded, therefore untuned. This, in turn, means that the poet too now cannot look or write right. "Ad Dominum," *Lucus* 35, is similarly clamorous and unabashed in its priorities of soliciting the divine regard. The rising desperation—culminating in an audacious challenge that is also a hope—is worth citing in full.

Christe, decus, dulcedo, & centum circiter Hyblae,  
    Cordis apex, animae pugnâque paxque meae,  
Quin, sine, te cernam; quoties iam dixero, cernam;  
    Immoriârque oculis, o mea vita, tuis.  
Si licet, immoriar: vel si tua visio vita est,  
    Cur sine te, votis immoriturus, ago?  
Ah, cernam; tu, qui caecos sanare solebas,  
    Cùm te non videam, méne videre putas?  
Non video, certum est iurare; aut si hoc vetuisti,  
    Praeuenias vultu non facienda tuo.

I offer a literal English translation to afford us a look into the slipperiness of concepts related to sight with those pertaining to discernment, acumen, discrimination, and even worth, substance,

merit. Such a rendering also allows us to see the fundamental inter-animation of concepts of looking, the visual, the visage, and the eyes.

Christ, brightness, sweetness, and a hundred Hybla's [honeyed-ness],  
Apex of my heart, my soul's battle and peace,  
Why, grant that I should see you; as I have already often said, I should see you;  
And die in your eyes, o my life.  
If allowed, die: or if your face is life,  
Why, without you, on the verge of death in my vows, do I keep going?  
Ah, I should see you; You, who were wont to heal the blind,  
When I don't see you, do you think I can see [at all]?  
I don't see, it is possible to swear; or, if you have forbidden this [swearing],  
Forestall [my doing so] with your face/visage/expression/look.  
(translation mine)

My English “see” for the verbal stem of the recurrent “cernam” is a sobering reminder of the near-interchangeability of many words signifying vision and comprehension both in Herbert’s world and our own.<sup>139</sup> But in an examination of Herbert’s Latin deployment, parallel to his English, of motifs of vision, blindness, life, and death, it is also worth pausing at the nervous balance of a particular kind of desired sight and the avowal of a lack of actual sight that is repeatedly taken up as a conceit in this poem.<sup>140</sup> What opens with a prayer to see Christ quickly becomes a wish for a very particular circumstance of death. “Immoriárque oculis, o mea vita, tuis” (4). It is unclear whether the poet wishes to die at some point in the pacific future when he is securely beheld of Christ, or whether the desire to see Christ is a more immediate wish, in that the divine regard will be a means of happy death. The speaker also evokes Christ’s curing of the blind to issue what is close to a rebuke: does he

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<sup>139</sup> Victoria Moul, who translates Herbert’s Latin poetry for the Drury and Moul edition of the *Complete Poetry*, also uses “see” here.

<sup>140</sup> See also W. Hilton Kelliher, “The Latin Poetry of George Herbert,” in J. W. Binns, ed., *The Latin Poetry of English Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).



who cures the blind not understand where *real* human blindness lies? Does he not register that when the poet cannot see *him*, he cannot see at all? Christ is both the object of vision and its reason. His look, his countenance, his face, his regard count for everything. Where Christ looks, there is no further need. Theological, cultural, and poetic preoccupations—across early modern English and Latin—with God as light, and light as final life, conflate into and confirm one another.

A later English poem—existing in manuscript only in the Bodleian copy—continues this exploration with a persistent refrain and resultant visual rhyme. At “Home,” achingly, in a world of absence, a single couplet addressed to Herbert’s Lord forms the end to thirteen melancholy stanzas. “O show thyself to me,/ Or take me up to thee!” Is this an equivalence? Or the anticipation of one? Verse after verse culminates in this prayer, even as the poet spells out at the end of the poem the literal derangement of peace and sense and rhyme that overtakes him when home is all he can think or write about. A glance at three stanzas from the start, middle, and end of the poem illustrates how visual and metrical rhyme is finally and perfectly broken.

Come, Lord, my head doth burn, my heart is sick,  
     While thou dost ever, ever stay:  
 Thy long deferrings wound me to the quick,  
     My spirit gaspeth night and day.  
     O show thyself to me,  
     Or take me up to thee!

[...]

O loose this frame, this knot of man untie!  
     That my free soul may use her wing,  
 Which now is pinioned with mortality,  
     As an entangled, hampered thing.  
     O show thy, & c.

[...]

Come dearest Lord, pass not this holy season,  
     My flesh and bones and joints to pray:  
 And ev’n my verse, when by the rhyme and reason  
     Thy word is *Stay*, says ever, *Come*.  
     O show thy, & c.

(1-4, 53-56, 63-67)<sup>141</sup>

Almost as direct counterpoint to these instances of pain and absence, Herbert also writes of eyes that can be powerful beyond measure. The unreasonableness of their power is not of the poet's doing, but his God's. But he will take it. Possibly because God wills it to be, his eyes can *talk* to God. "Prayer (2)" revels in the intimacy, assurance, and warmth of an unqualified responsiveness: "If I but lift mine eyes, my suit is made:/ Thou canst no more not hear, than thou canst die" (5-6). When vision *works*—by human initiative or divine—it is magnificent. "Faith" is either an enhancement of sight, or its redundancy: the exultant evidence of things not seen and not necessary to be seen. "[W]hen man's sight was dim" (2), God brought "by Faith all things to him" (l. 4). The effect is extreme and scattering bright.

That which before was dark'ned clean  
With bushy groves, pricking the looker's eye,  
Vanisht away, when Faith did change the scene:  
And then appear'd a glorious sky.  
(37-40)

In presence, reciprocity, and comfort, it feels as though all that ever has been and ever can be—in vision or poetry or invention—is just another version of "Love (2)."

Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain  
All her invention on thine Altar lay,  
And there in hymns send back thy fire again:  
Our eyes shall see thee, which before saw dust;  
Dust blown by wit, till that they both were blind:  
Thou shalt recover all thy goods in kind,  
Who wert disseisèd by usurping lust:  
All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise,  
And praise him who did make and mend our eyes.  
(6-14)

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<sup>141</sup> This poem exists in manuscript only in the Bodleian copy; the italics are from the 1633 first edition.

When poetry and invention surrender themselves at God's altar—never minding how much the “Altar” in Herbert's volume looks like a large perpendicular pronoun potentially referring back to the poet—then the poet's eyes will see. When blind (poetic) wit falls, true and devout wit will rise. This nervous poet might even say: when God mends the looker's eyes from their erstwhile blindness, the poet will finally be able to return praise instead of poetry.

Herbert's nervousness about his poetic proficiency might have been absurd but for the high stakes involved. “The Cross” brings those stakes into relief. This poem is one of the few instances in Herbert's poetry where intense visuality and poetic confidence eventually come together in something like peace and even interdependence. It all begins, for Herbert, with a grotesque spectacle that is essentially incomprehensible. The very familiarity of the image—and the love it stands for—simultaneously challenges him to look and defies him to turn away.<sup>142</sup>

What is this strange and uncouth thing?  
To make me sigh, and seek, and faint, and die,  
Until I had some place, where I might sing,  
    And serve thee; and not only I,  
But all my wealth, and family might combine  
To set thy honour up, as our design.  
(1-6)

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<sup>142</sup> Once, Donne had had a comparable quandary. “Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see/ That spectacle of too much weight for me” (“Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward,” 15-16). Milton, famously, began to write about Jesus on the cross and stopped not long after his heading of “The Passion.” Michael Schoenfeldt provides a rich discussion of what it means, in these poems and for these poets, to attempt to look at this spectacle, or to be unable to apprehend it and yet to write about it. “*Passion* is in this context an enormously rich and elusive term, designating both the enormous agony of Jesus and the swirl of emotions that this suffering instills in the individual believer. What becomes for these poets the central subject of the Passion, then, is not the tortured body of Jesus but rather the ethical, intellectual, and finally emotional difficulty of accepting unequivocally the extravagant mercy achieved by the extravagant agony at the center of the Christian dispensation. By looking at the suffering Jesus, these writers confront the excruciating paradox of a religion of love whose central symbol is an instrument of torture and death.” See “‘That Spectacle of Too Much Weight’: The Poetics of Sacrifice in Donne, Herbert, and Milton,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.3 (2001), 561-684.

To sing is to serve, and notwithstanding the first shock at finding what is in front of him, the poet is almost relieved that he has at least and at last been able to get on with his poem. But still, “things sort not to my will” (19). Soon, the power to serve is taken away, his abilities untuned, his designs confounded, and his grand and fierce threatenings about what he will do to grasp the cross are laid down in an exhibition of the radical inequality of his situation (9-12). The poet is unmade in health, spirit, and authorial ability.

One ague dwelleth in my bones,  
Another in my soul (the memory  
What I would do for thee, if once my groans  
Could be allow'd for harmony):  
I am in all a weak disabled thing,  
Save in the sight thereof, where strength doth sting.  
(13-18)

A physical ague deep in his bones tires him out. But another messes with his soul: the maddening memory of what he could do, what he would do, if only his inarticulate groans could be made to harmonise into actual devotion. At this point, he enters into a knotted pair of metaphors for his present and potential conditions. First, entirely humanly, he is a weak and disabled thing. But second, he is so *except* in the *sight* of what he is presently beholding. This sight tells of the inhuman strength of the man who climbed the cross, and it stings someone viewing it, such as this poet, with something approaching that same strength. Vicissitudes by no means melt away, but the poem now concludes with what is as much submission as assertion, and as much creative borrowing as creative authority.

Ah my dear Father, ease my smart!  
These contrarieties crush me: these cross actions  
Do wind a rope about, and cut my heart:  
And yet since these thy contradictions  
Are properly a cross felt by thy Son,

With but four words, my words, *Thy will be done*.<sup>143</sup>  
(31-36)

The cross-actions of lift and throw, assistance and abandonment, inspiration and rejection (19-30) cut his heart.<sup>144</sup> But then he remembers, for he looks still at the cross, that it is the Son who is in fact implicated in this suffering. A confident mutuality ensues; the poet matches with his maker to take on four utterly familiar words given to him for prayer, and proceeds with great poise and gentleness to make them his own, in the service of his poem, his rhyme, his conceit, yet all of these in the service of the dying man who still and always remains on the cross and haunts his eyes.

Beyond the sacrifice on the cross and in its very real ever-after, morning after morning is a function of light. As a beneficiary of this light, the poet wonders about this generosity in “Matins.”

I cannot open mine eyes,  
But thou art ready there to catch  
My morning-soul and sacrifice:  
There we must needs for that day make a match.  
[...]  
My God, what is a heart,  
That thou shouldst it so eye, and woo,

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<sup>143</sup> In this poem, which also exists in manuscript only in the Bodleian copy, the italics are from Buck and Daniel's first printed edition.

<sup>144</sup> A similar image of being painfully borne high and low, and a resultant falling into poetry had been explored in “The Christian Temper” in the Williams Manuscript, which is “The Temper” in the Bodleian Manuscript.

O rack me not to such a vast extent;  
Those distances belong to thee:  
The world's too little for thy tent,  
A grave too big for me.  
Wilt thou meet arms with man, that thou dost stretch  
A crumb of dust from heav'n to hell?  
[...]  
Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:  
Stretch or contract me, thy poor debtor:  
This is but tuning of my breast,  
To make the music better.  
(9-14, 21-24)

Pouring upon it all thy art,  
 As if that thou hast nothing else to do?  
 [...]

Teach me thy love to know;  
 That this new light, which now I see,  
 May both the work and workman show:  
 Then by a sunbeam I will climb to thee.  
 (1-4, 9-12, 17-20)

The poet is caught in a happy and practical sort of immortality.<sup>145</sup> He wakes up (every day) to find a(nother) beautiful day. God eyes the human heart to woo it with all his art—as if he had nothing else to do. As it did the singer of Psalm 8:3-4, it puzzles this speaker.<sup>146</sup> God’s work cannot be improved upon. But deeply aware of how God’s work behoves him, as poet and singer, to “make a match” (4) for the day he finds himself in, he nevertheless tries. Poetry takes the form of real questions. What is this human heart that God so dearly desires, watches over, and wants for his own? What is this divine yearning, this unreasonable care, this unabashed affection? In the ubiquitousness of God’s poetry around him is such an effective courtship of the newly-opened eyes of the poet that he begins to see not only the work of the day, but the workman behind it. It is as though God’s eyes, with their deep longing, have themselves translated into light—which now the poet sees by. An unbearable lightness of action then ends the poem: once the poet learns to know God’s love, just a sunbeam will suffice to take him to the desired divine presence.

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<sup>145</sup> In a musical discussion of “Matins,” Richard Hooker comes to mind. Hooker expounded “the admirable quality which music hath to express and represent to the mind, more inwardly than any other sensible mean, the very standing, rising, and falling [...] whereunto the mind is subject [...] there is also that carrieth as it were into ecstasies, filling the mind with an heavenly joy and for the time in a manner severing it from the body.” See Hooker’s *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (London, 1593), V. xxxviii.

<sup>146</sup> “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,/ the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;/ what is man, that thou art mindful of him?/ and the son of man, that thou visitst him?” (Psalms 8:3-4).

At “Evensong,” it is time to take measure of the day.<sup>147</sup> Its opening is heavy with eyes.

Blest be the God of love,  
Who gave me eyes, and light, and power this day,  
Both to be busy, and to play.  
But much more blest be God above,  
Who gave me sight alone,  
Which to himself he did deny:  
For when he sees my ways, I die:  
But I have got his son, and he hath none.  
(1-8)

God is the God of love by his gift of eyes, light, and power to the poet. Or possibly love *is* all those things. Despite the questioning that will soon follow—“What have I brought thee home/ For this thy love? have I discharg’d the debt,/ Which this day’s favour did beget?” (9-11)—this gift of “sight alone” now allows the poet to undertake a benediction that is as simple as it is bold. He verses a blessing to God—as though in memory of how dearly God wants his heart, as though he knows that his words count, and as though it is the most ordinary thing in the world to bless the beginning of all blessings. Who can bless God, if not a poet? But this serenity does not last. Ranging both diligence and play, the poet’s eyes appear to be intensely conscious that at this moment, sight is theirs alone. If and when God sees him, he will surely die. The note of hopefulness about this (reminiscent of “Ad Dominum”) is decidedly intermixed with a vague sense of shame and even peril. Maybe God does not look his way precisely because the poet has given him nothing to look at. “I ran, but all I

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<sup>147</sup> While “Matins” exists in all three major early witnesses, “Evensong” exists in manuscript only in the Bodleian copy. It is possible that Herbert wrote this poem later to round out “Matins.” The verse-form in the Bodleian Manuscript—with four discursive eight-line stanzas—is preferred and retained by most editors. Between “Matins” and “Evensong,” in both the Bodleian Manuscript and the 1633 first edition, is “Sin,” as though that somehow took over some part of the day. The Bodleian Manuscript almost suggests that “Evensong” might be the prayer concluding a(nother) “Sin”-ful day.

brought, was foam/ Thy diet, care, and cost/ Do end in bubbles, balls of wind” (ll. 12-14). There is nothing worth anything in what he has to show as return for the day.

Yet still thou goest on.  
And now with darkness closest weary eyes,  
Saying to man, *It doth suffice:*  
*Henceforth repose; your work is done.*  
Thus in thy ebony box  
Thou dost enclose us, till the day  
Put our amendment in our way,  
And give new wheels to our disorder’d clocks.  
(17-24)

Herbert’s God looks on with patience and forbearance. His dark and intimate protectiveness throws the poet into his own mind. The poem ends:

I muse, which shows more love,  
The day or night: that is the gale, this th’harbour;  
That is the walk, and this the arbour;  
Or that the garden, this the grove.  
My God, thou art all love.  
Not one poor minute ’scapes thy breast,  
But brings a favour from above;  
And in this love, more than in bed, I rest.  
(35-42)

The verse acts out a nocturnal rumination that yields back to the poet what he drowsily registers he may have known all along: that by day or night, he counts on love. With God watching over, it is time to rest.

Another later poem takes up here, at this agreeable benevolence of the divine gaze. But with a sensuous turn, it also probes further into the capacity of eyes to express feeling and even act out physical solace and radical restoration. The memory and the anticipation of “The Glance” is full of pleasure.

When first thy sweet and gracious eye



Vouchsaf'd ev'n in the midst of youth and night  
To look upon me, who before did lie  
                                  Welt'ring in sin;  
          I felt a sug'red strange delight,  
Passing all cordials made by any art,  
Bedew, embalm, and overrun my heart,  
                                  And take it in.  
(1-8)

A faint scent of a masturbatory bed lingers in these opening lines. But the weltering sin of youth and night is no sooner mentioned than a sweet and gracious eye takes over to bring the poet a sugared and strange delight. No cordials of any art could match such pleasure. No other bedewed embalmment could compare with how this eye overran the poet's heart and took it in.

          Since that time many a bitter storm  
My soul hath felt, ev'n able to destroy,  
Had the malicious and ill-meaning harm  
                                  His swing and sway:  
          But still thy sweet original joy  
Sprung from thine eye, did work within my soul.  
And surging griefs, when they grew bold, control,  
                                  And got the day.  
(9-16)

Long after that first encounter, the poet can feel the far-reaching restorative power of that gaze. This leads the poet to wonder what it must be like to never be removed from it.

          If thy first glance so powerful be,  
A mirth but open'd and seal'd up again;  
What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see  
                                  Thy full-eyed love!  
          When thou shalt look us out of pain,  
And one aspect of thine spend in delight  
More than a thousand suns disburse in light,  
                                  In heav'n above.  
(17-24)

The shock of uncovering a multi-sensual pleasure at being held in gentle eyes animates the final stanza. This gaze is capable of action at its most tender and most insistent: it is the means through which pain is dissolved. The poet will now have to find a way to see love full-eyed; he knows that this will mean nothing less than meeting glances with what is comparable to a thousand suns. But if he wants this powerful visual mirth not to be opened only to be sealed up again, he will have to leave home. That destination and end is “Love (3).” In closing this chapter, I shall look at the lines of sight and resistance that allow this final poem in “The Church” to function as a passage into Herbert’s poetic silence and as an unequal and unusual mutuality of regard between the poet and his creator.

A host of kindnesses takes the poet by surprise at Love’s feast.<sup>148</sup> Love sees everything, from the arrival of the poet at the feast, to his subsequent reserve, to his attempt to withdraw himself. When Love approaches the guest, what ensues is a rapid set of questions and answers that threatens

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<sup>148</sup> Such hospitality is reminiscent of the tables that Margaret Newport and Magdalen Herbert put together for visitors high and low in their homes. Edward Herbert, George’s brother, would later recall his grandmother Margaret Newport’s great warmth and generosity which “exceeded all either of her country or time; for, besides abundance of provision and good cheer for guests, which her son Sir Francis Newport continued, she used ever after dinner to distribute with her own hands to the poor, who resorted to her in great numbers, alms in money, to every one of them more or less, as she thought they needed it.” *Autobiography* (London: John Nimmo, 1886), 19. John Donne, preaching at the funeral of Magdalen Herbert (at the time of her death, Lady John Danvers), similarly recollected her cordial welcome to all: “from that Worthy family, whence shee had her originall extraction, and birth, she suckt that love of hospitality (hospitality, which hath celebrated that family, in many Generations, successively) which dwelt in her, to her end.” Donne continued: “though she never turn’d her face from those, who in a strict inquisition, might be call’d idle, and vagrant Beggars, yet shee ever look’t first, vpon them, who *labour’d*, and whose *labours* could not overcome the *difficulties*, nor bring in the *necessities* of this life; and to the *sweat of their browes*, shee contributed, even her *wine*, and her *oyle*, and any thing that was, and any thing, that might be, if it were not, prepar’d for her owne table. And as her house was a *Court*, in the conversation of the best, and an *Almeshouse*, in feeding the *poore*, so was it also an *Hospitall*, in ministring releefe to the *sicke*.” *A Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvers, Late Wife of Sr. John Danvers* (London, 1627), 138, 149-150.



The lines of sight and interaction referred to in the poem have a curious near-mirroring in the lines of the verse as it appears on the page—as though each time Love asks the poet’s eyes up (generally speaking, the longer line; lines 1, 3, 5, and so on), his and our eyes drop (to the line below, the shorter line; lines 2, 4, 6, and so on). This movement is then repeated. In the poem, Love’s visual acuteness sees into the very soul of the poet as he draws back, “guilty of dust and sin.” Love’s generous noticing of this retreat makes the host approach the guest with a special welcome, a particular reassurance. When asked, the poet explains that he dares not raise his eyes to Love, for he has been “unkind, ungrateful”—as though proper gratitude and spiritual regeneracy is ultimately the ability to see one’s benefactor. In his dust-laden, sin-laden human condition, this poet lacks gratitude that could ever adequately answer the love he has received. Thus, he contends, he lacks eyes that would enable him to see Love, even in Love’s presence. But when the poet turns away or lowers his eyes—“I cannot look on thee”—his quick-eyed host intervenes, takes his hand, and reminds him that he looks but with the eyes of his host. There is nothing that the guest can see that does *not* implicate his host. (The guest notes that Love speaks this “smiling”-ly. The poem does not reveal if this is because the guest has been able to raise his eyes and look at Love, even momentarily. If, that is, he has seen Love’s smile. Or if he has simply heard the smile in her voice.) According to Love, the host and the guest share eyes—and thus potentially share visual capacities. Yet the poet turns away again: he knows that he has Love’s eyes, but he knows too that he has tarnished them. If these eyes were once capable of looking at Love—from *being* Love’s eyes, if nothing else—they are not now what they used to be. Today, the guest indicates, the host and the guest do not have the same visual abilities even though they share eyes. At this, “And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?” Love indicates full knowledge of the imperfection of the guest’s eyes. But Love also owns those faults and imperfections, as though Love knows both *what* those visual *or* ocular faults are or have been, and what kind of rest, healing, and sustenance the eyes now need: “You must sit down,

says Love, and taste my meat.” The poem leaves unresolved whether this is food that will mend the eyes, or food that will make mortal eyes unnecessary. The verse winds down: “So I did sit and eat.” There is no discussion anymore of the guest’s looking at his host, meeting Love’s eyes, or looking at all. This journey into nourishment is a journey into a kind of blindness. The poem closes where the poet senses Love’s regard without feeling the need to return it.

## CHAPTER III

### Writing Blind: John Milton 1

John Milton is half answering questions, half wondering aloud, as he returns to a subject that occupies him inescapably these days. It is 1655 or 1656, if we are to believe Milton's marking of his own time; Milton's poem that we know as Sonnet XVIII begins with a direct address to Cyriack Skinner, a younger contemporary, friend, and possibly erstwhile student. It is three years now, the blind Milton tells "Cyriack," that "[b]ereft of light," his fair and outwardly flawless eyes have forgotten their seeing (Sonnet XVIII, 1-3).<sup>150</sup> True to the ocularcentrism of the period and culture that Milton inhabits, "[s]ince light so necessary is to life,/ And almost life itself" (*Samson Agonistes*, 90-91), there are consequences to such deep forgetting. This chapter will explore and interrogate, for Milton and for us, the greatest of those consequences for a man of letters, that of language—language within a blindness that takes over an overwhelmingly sighted and literate training and temperament, changes it, and makes it blindly and profoundly generative.

Scholars and readers of John Milton know of the poet's biographical circumstance of blindness, just as they are familiar too with Milton's writings about his visual condition, most notably in his sonnet "On His Blindness," in the invocations of Books I and III of *Paradise Lost*, and in *Samson Agonistes*. But readers of Milton's poetry have not yet adequately considered Milton's

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<sup>150</sup> All citations from Milton's poetry are from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, rev. 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2007) and John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, rev. 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2007).

blindness in terms of language.<sup>151</sup> In this chapter, I shall read Milton's shorter verse from his years of approaching and final blindness to explore in them the relationship between blindness and poetic language, and to introduce and formulate what I call the beginnings of Milton's *blind language* (poetic composition in partial or total blindness). It is language produced by a blind man after decades of intense sighted learning, writing, and politicking, and because it owes its existence to a lack, a want, an absence, a memory, and a longing, it is symptomatic of and holds together a depth of mnemonic power and emotional charge. In Milton's case, the necessary rearrangement of the furniture of the mind that bodily infirmity causes comes through in the language used to talk about it—or to refuse to talk about it. In remembering that Miltonic deployment of language is always studied, serious, and passionate, this chapter will read some of his poetry from his years of going blind, to explore the relationship he crafts between blindness and language, and to demonstrate both a peculiar expressive potential of Milton's acquired affliction and a significant capacity of patterned language to bear the weight of the poet's visual difference.

In my reading of Milton's verse from his years of approaching and complete blindness, I begin with Sonnet XVIII, which expresses the poet's fraught and powerful self-image alongside his understanding of his affliction relative to a world of friendship, learning, and local and international duty and community. Thence, a brief biographical consideration of the poet in his time—although

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<sup>151</sup> The first book-length consideration of the subject was in a work of philosophy entitled *Milton's Blindness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934) by Eleanor Gertrude Brown, herself blind but carrying admittedly vivid memories of "the red-gold of the sun, the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, and the light of the firefly" (Preface). This book undertook a survey of possible causes of Milton's blindness and his references to his visual loss, and concluded that "Milton's blindness affected his life and poetry spiritually and philosophically" (138). Recent work by Gordon Teskey and William Poole have agreed with Brown's conclusion, with each scholar deepening it in a different direction. For Teskey, the "transcendental engagement" of Milton's final long verse is informed by the poet's blindness, and for Poole, the visual loss is a major intellectual and emotional hinge towards the making of *Paradise Lost*. See *The Poetry of John Milton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) by Teskey, and Poole's *Milton and the Making of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

my focus will consistently remain on Milton's works—will move the discussion into his only consistent poetic exercises in the years of transition from sight to blindness, Milton's psalm translations. These translations mark Milton's entry into a language learning to work with and within blindness (after many years of intense sighted study), and we shall take account of its proper powers and characteristics. Finally, I shall discuss the two later sonnets in which the poet explicitly addresses his final and complete loss of sight: "When I consider how my light is spent," and "Methought I saw my late espoused saint." This consideration of Milton's verse exercises from his years of approaching and newly-final blindness—verse that is variously furious, collected, playful, presumptuous, regular, irregular, and affecting—will lead, in my next chapter, to a discussion of Milton's greatest poetic work, *Paradise Lost*, as a blind composition evidencing Milton's extended meditations on visual debility and his reflections on his place in the world as a poet, a maker, even a maker of worlds. But before the epic are the precursors to it. It is in Milton's shorter lyric verse, composed in his years of *going* blind, that I locate Milton's first ownership and accommodation of his visual difference through his poetry, and the peculiar expressivity of his blindness on behalf of poetic creation.

This chapter will also show how despite centuries of difference from our time and place and despite Milton's innocence of our present-day critical field of disability studies, his work enormously enriches and deepens the field with those aspects of his writing that allude to his visual affliction and final loss. His attempts to combat, his enraged acceptance of, his avowedly if nervously calm embrace of, his talking back to, and his sustained working through his blindness are indicative of his appreciation of the personal costs and social impact of his condition. Given the range of attitudes on offer, there is something intensely moving in his repeated attempts to write about his encroaching and ultimately complete blindness—in his letters, his psalm translations, and his last great poems—to have it make sense for himself and for those around him. We shall see how even when he does



not thematise his visual difference, he continues to work through the terms of his disability; how even when he is not explicitly writing *about* his approaching or actual blindness, the visual loss remains part of an in-form-ing compositional strategy. Milton's is an evolving and ever-in-process body of knowledge about his blindness. His struggle involves a kind of rage at yet also a manner of justifying the ways of God to men and, in particular, one man, himself—or of finding himself unequal enough to the task that he has to return to it again and again.

### Forgetting Seeing

Sonnet XVIII is a quiet conversation with a trusted companion. In its extant manuscript incarnation the poem is inscribed in a non-authorial hand. The voice is Milton's, the writing is not. Here is the poem as it appears towards the end of the Trinity Manuscript of Milton's poems (Manuscript R.3.4 in the Trinity College Library of Cambridge). After many pages in his characteristically neat writing—pages filled with “Lycidas,” for instance, or “A maske,” or notes on “Adam Unparadiz'd,” in planning for what would become *Paradise Lost*—here Milton's hand is conspicuous by its absence.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> In the corrections carried out, there is evidence of the poet's continued engagement with the piece. But Milton's hand is responsible for neither the writing nor the corrections.

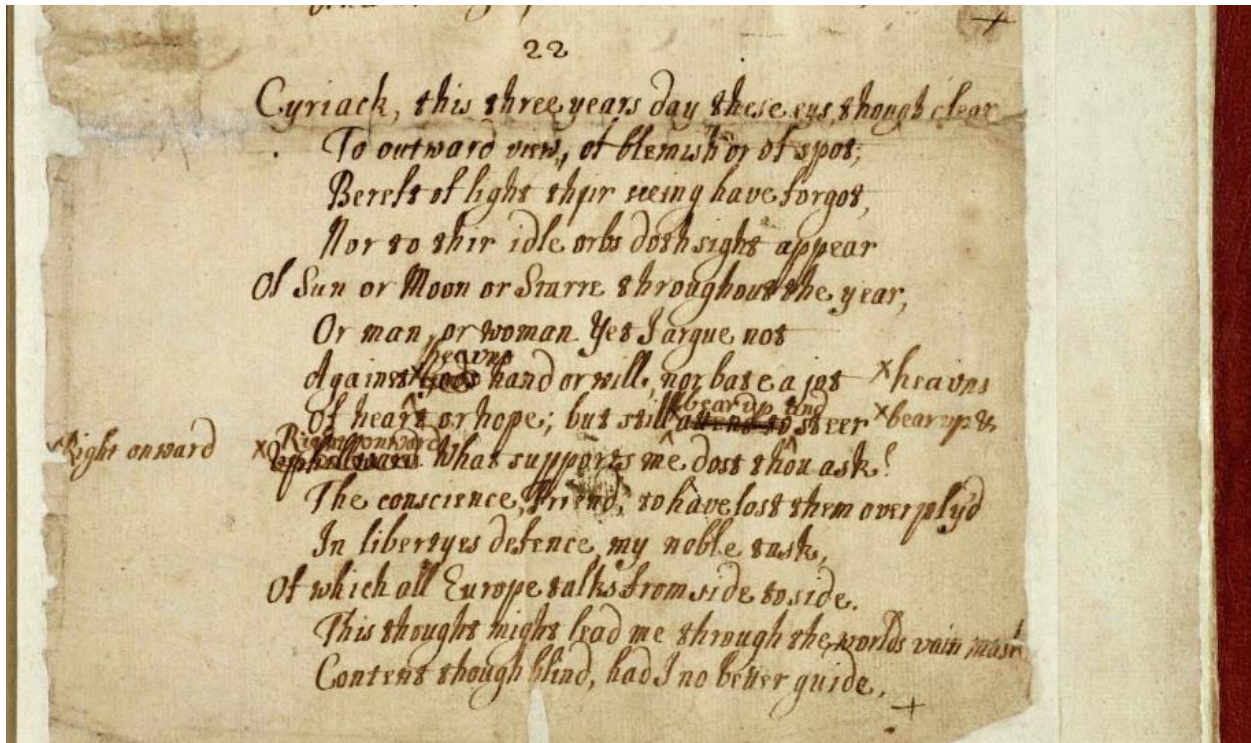


Figure 41. The Trinity College Manuscript of John Milton's Poems, R.3.4, p. 49

Reproduced from the Trinity College Library Virtual Manuscript, [http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r\\_3\\_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1](http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r_3_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1)

A verbal sigh inhabits the words of a blind writer.

Cyriack, this three years' day these eyes, though clear  
 To outward view, of blemish or of spot,  
 Bereft of light their seeing have forgot,  
 Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear  
 Of sun or moon or star throughout the year,  
 Or man or woman.  
 (Sonnet XVIII, 1-6)

Milton tells of time as he knows it, and reports without fear of contradiction something that *he* in turn can only have had through other report. Without direct access to anyone's appearance, including his own—an interesting experience for anyone for whom seeing is also being seen—he

tells his friend that his eyes are “clear/ To outward view, of blemish or of spot.” Everything looks fine, he says, at this point, unseeingly.

He has defended his appearance in the past, in the *Second Defense of the English People* (May 1654), and the present sonnet seems to be a simple statement of facts that he has earlier had occasion to lay out in public. He recapitulates the damning description of himself as it had appeared in *The Cry of the Royal Blood to Heaven* (1652): “A monster, dreadful, ugly, huge, depraved of sight.” Predictably quick to pick up the reference from *The Odyssey* in which Polyphemus was blinded by Odysseus, Milton writes in his *Second Defense*:

Never did I think that I should rival the Cyclops in appearance. [...] Although it ill befits a man to speak of his own appearance, yet speak I shall, because here too there is reason for me to thank God and refute liars, lest anyone think me to be perhaps a dog-headed ape or a rhinoceros, as the rabble in Spain, too credulous of their priests, believe to be true of heretics, as they call them.<sup>153</sup>

The dig at the monstrous coexists with the dig at the credulous of Spain, and Milton moves on to refute point by point his opponent’s claims about his appearance. He has never been considered ugly by anyone.<sup>154</sup> He is not tall, but he is not short. He had learnt duly and ably the use of a sword and “thought myself equal to anyone, though he was far more sturdy, and I was fearless of any injury that one man could inflict on another.” Indeed, he remains the same person. “Today,” he says, “I possess the same spirit, the same strength.” But with one difference. He has everything he used to have, “but not the same eyes.” And there follows what is peculiar in being both a

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<sup>153</sup> *A Second Defence of the English People*, trans. Helen North, *Complete Prose Works*, vol. IV pt 1 (1966), 588.

<sup>154</sup> We do not just have to take Milton’s word for it, either. Thanks to his early biographers, we have other records. For instance, John Aubrey writes that “He was so fair that they called him the Lady of Christ’s College,” and “His harmonically, and ingeniously soule dwelt in a beautiful & well proportioned body—In toto nusquam corpore menda fuit.” See Aubrey, *Minutes of the Life of Mr John Milton* (1681), in Helen Darbishire, ed., *The Early Lives of John Milton* (London: Constable, 1932), 3, 4.

repudiation and a confession, and either with qualified ease: “And yet they [the eyes] have as much the appearance of being uninjured, and are as clear and bright, without a cloud, as the eyes of men who see most keenly. In this respect alone, against my will, do I deceive.”<sup>155</sup> The author of the *Second Defense* is a man taking considerable pride in his general ability and appearance, but it is almost as if he would have liked to have his eyes reflect their very real deficiency—if only to prevent him from looking like what he is not.<sup>156</sup> He deceives against his will: he cannot look, and cannot prevent himself from looking like he looks.

Sonnet XVIII records that it is three years, now, that it has been this way: *bereft* of light, he writes, summoning the full accusatory power of the verb, his eyes have *forgotten* their seeing. Memory enters into the equation to remember that the eyes were *meant* to see, but all it does now is remind Milton that everything that used to be common sight survives only as recollection. In a couple of lines echoing the invocation to the “holy light, offspring of Heav’n first-born” at the opening of Book III of *Paradise Lost*, Milton lists the ordinary, everyday, familiar things that used to compose his visual world but do so no more.<sup>157</sup> The idle orbs only accentuate that the sights of “sun or moon or

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<sup>155</sup> *A Second Defence of the English People, Complete Prose Works* vol. IV pt 1 (1966), 588.

<sup>156</sup> Thus describes his biographer John Phillips: “Hee was of a moderate Stature, and well proportion’d, of a ruddy Complexion, light brown Hair, & handsom Features; save that his Eyes were none of the quickest. But his blindness, which proceeded from a Gutta Serena, added no further blemish to them.” Darbishire, 32. See also *Paradise Lost*, where Satan pretends to be a “stripling cherub” (III.636) and deceives Uriel as he enters the new created world. The epic narrator’s admonition of a misleading appearance, and the misleading words that complement it, is absolute. “So spake the false dissembler unperceived/ For neither man nor angel can discern/ Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks/ Invisible, except to God alone” (III.681-684).

<sup>157</sup> Thus with the year  
Seasons return, but not to me returns  
Day, or the sweet approach of ev’n or morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer’s rose,  
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine  
(*Paradise Lost*, III.40-44)

star throughout the year,/ Or man or woman” (Sonnet XVIII, 5-6), because they are so quotidian and common and for most human beings so ordinarily available, are much to have lost. The fulness of the loss is also underlined by its latitude: from sun or moon or star to man or woman, from the cosmic to the earthly, from the celestial to the affective and relational. Using this deeply remembered, inescapable, and disconsolate forgetting, Milton weaves together vision, desire, and memory inseparably to mark his want. Bereft of light, his perfect eyes have forgotten their seeing.

“Yet I argue not,” he continues.

Against Heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a jot  
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer  
Right onward. What supports me dost thou ask?  
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied  
In liberty’s defence, my noble task,  
Of which all Europe talks from side to side.  
This thought might lead me through the world’s vain mask  
Content though blind, had I no better guide.  
(Sonnet XVIII, 7-14)

In the only end of the argument that we get to hear, Milton argues that he argues not. It is heaven’s hand, he claims, that has made his eyes useless—although in 1654 this realisation had in no way prevented him from asking his Athenian friend Leonard Philaras to forward to the French physician François Thévenin all his ocular signs and symptoms in the desperate hope that something about his sight may *yet* be salvaged.

[I]t was you who addressed me most kindly by letter, though far distant and knowing me only by my writings; and afterwards, arriving unexpectedly in London, you continued that kindness by going to see one who could not see, even in that misfortune which has made me more respectable to none, more despicable perhaps

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It cannot be asserted with absolute certainty when, with respect to this poem, Book III of *Paradise Lost* was composed. But regardless of whether Sonnet XVIII looks back or forward to the epic, Milton’s similarity of the images of light and darkness and his return to the subject of blindness underscores his occupation with it.

to many. And so, since you tell me that I should not give up all hope of regaining my sight, that you have a friend and intimate in the Paris physician Thévenot (especially outstanding as an oculist), whom you will consult about my eyes if only I send you the means by which he can diagnose the causes and symptoms of the disease, I shall do what you urge, that I may not seem to refuse aid whencesoever offered, perhaps divinely.<sup>158</sup>

When Milton says that his affliction has made him “more despicable perhaps to many” without making him more respectable to anyone, he diplomatically understates his case. *The Cry of the Royal Blood* had been only one, if one of the most vocal, of personal attacks against him, calling his blindness a visitation and divine punishment for his being a regicide and a divorcer and a heretic. There would have been considerable social and influential capital to be gained from gaining his sight back, even if he were willing to overlook the use of his eyes for visual access to the seasons or sun or moon or star or human face divine. But in 1655/56, Milton asserts that all that is part of the past. Now he argues not.

Unseeingly, he steers right onward. Even as he speaks these words, however, he seems to sense the regard of his companion on him; it must be a curious sight to see a blind man steer right onward. Milton anticipates and asks on Skinner’s behalf a question big enough for it to be his own. How *does* he steer right onward? “What supports me [...]?” (9) Milton appears to suggest that the answer is both simple and important: “The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied/ In

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<sup>158</sup> See “Letter 24, Milton to Philaras, September 28, 1654” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. IV pt 2 (1966), 868-69. The letter understates the hostility Milton is by then surrounded by. In 1653, Cyriack Skinner’s aunt, Anne Sadleir, wrote to Roger Williams that she refused to read *Eikonoklastes* (published in October 1649) on grounds that Milton was obviously a divorcer who had deserved God’s punishment of blindness. In January 1660, his blindness was ridiculed in *The Outcry of London Prentices*. Of Roger L’Estrange’s many abrasive publications, *No Blind Guides* (April 1660), written against Milton’s recent *Brief Notes Upon a Late Sermon* (1660), derisively drew attention to Milton’s handicap. An anonymous broadside *The Picture of the Good Old Cause* (July 1660) called Milton’s blindness his reward for the anti-monarchical tracts. For more instances of the public nature of contemporary derision for Milton and his blindness, see Gordon Campbell, *A Milton Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 144-145, 187, 189, 191.

liberty's defence" (10-11). Those who, like Claude Saumaise, a French scholar celebrated in the seventeenth-century in his own right, take issue with Milton, say that Milton neither quite understands the concept of liberty nor that he has defended it with any efficacy. But Milton is sticking to his story. Indeed, he is going so far as to say that he has lost his sight *because* of his participation in the battle defending liberty.<sup>159</sup> Readers like us, who have a few centuries of hindsight, may ask if, in Milton's lifetime, liberty was defended in the way he wanted it to be, or if the poet's blindness was indeed caused by his labours on its behalf. He is correct, however, that all Europe talks about his work. And in holding that he has lost his eyes "overplied" in liberty's defence, Milton seems to draw a strange consolation towards a peace that is both tenacious and tenuous. The very "thought" (13) of having undergone his loss of eyesight in the interest of, as it were, a greater sight for the world around him, "might lead me through the world's vain mask/  
Content though blind, had I no better guide" (13-14). It is unclear in the poem if Milton *has* a better guide than this curious thought to lead him through the world. And if the thought is all he has, it is a strange guide indeed, because for all the liberty that Milton has been able to defend in the world, the world, he says still, is a vain masque. The mention of the masque is itself resonant—Milton, after all, was the able composer of one at a moment when he was trying to establish his poetic credentials.<sup>160</sup> But now, in his time of profound political and social instability and ocular deprivation, the emphatically visual genre of the masque is declared unequivocally "vain." Perhaps the eye has vanities the sighted cannot see.

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<sup>159</sup> Citing the authority of Milton's early reader "Mr Abr. Hill," Aubrey writes: "his sight began to faile him at first, upon his writing against Salmasius, and before 'twas fully completed one eie absolutely failed; upon the writing of other books after that his other eie decayed." Aubrey in Darbishire, 15.

<sup>160</sup> See *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (first performed in 1634; published anonymously in London in 1637).

In the final peculiar avowal of ambiguous thought over denied light—“This thought might lead me through the world’s vain mask,/ Content though blind, had I no better guide”—Milton’s carefully attempted peace implodes upon itself in ways that are both fantastic and familiar to his readers: appearance and reality merge and separate; life seems hardly worth living without light and then seems to be quite independent of it; and affliction and ability are at one moment held in exquisite balance only in the next to fall apart in a manner that is itself a gorgeous reminder of how great a poise was imagined possible. In the final line of the sonnet, the poet asserts himself content *though* blind, the sentiment of this tautly established and just-a-bit-too-protected serenity already weighted with the normative and ocularcentric position of standard contentment that has no need to refer to its sighted state because it is by default sighted. This poet tells us that he is content though blind—and he has felt the need to and explained why. It is almost relief, the poet’s *and* his readers’, that Milton has the thought he has, of having worked his eyes away in the cause of liberty, in the cause of greater vision for the world around him.

It is here, in the context of poetic assertion, tension, and the search for appropriate registers of discussing his blindness and its implications that we must engage with Milton’s verse from his years of going blind, and read his blind language. At the start of his blindness and the poetic strategies he develops, at the very heart of it, is a boy with his books, his candles, and a mind that he thinks he can never fill. Before our plunge into Milton’s blind verse, we must therefore note the contributing components of a lifetime’s evolving training, education, and exercise in language that would eventually master an oral/aural integrity and compositional harmony. My next section will lay out the strange and inalienable connections, in Milton’s life, between study, poetic vocation, music, and importantly, a compulsive understanding of learning as something of profound personal pleasure that nevertheless should be employed to serve a greater and even public good. The man



who would eventually lay the loss of his eyes at the door of his labours on liberty's behalf early believed in and long wanted to both write and live (as) what he called "a true poem."

### A True Poem

Many years later, after Milton's death, the antiquary and writer John Aubrey would gather from conversations with Milton's surviving friends and family—including widow Elizabeth Minshull and brother Christopher Milton—that Milton was a poet by the age of ten. A peculiar simplicity hangs about what may otherwise be called Aubrey's deliberate hero-making of a significant older contemporary: "Ao ~~aetatis~~ Dm 1619, he [Milton] was ten years old, as by his picture: & was then a Poet."<sup>161</sup> Thus Aubrey on the authority of Milton's younger brother Christopher:

When he [Milton] went to Schoole, when he was very young he studied very hard and sate-up very late, commonly till 12 or one a'clock at night, & his father ordered the mayde to sitt-up for him, and in those yeares composed many Copies of verses, which might well become a riper age.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Aubrey in Darbishire, 2.

<sup>162</sup> Aubrey in Darbishire, 10. See also Edward Phillips: "*John* our Author, who was destin'd to be the Ornament and Glory of his Countrey, was sent, together with his Brother, to *Paul's* School, whereof Dr. *Gill* the Elder was then Chief Master; where he was enter'd into the first Rudiments of Learning, and advanced therein with that admirable Success, not more by the Discipline of the School and good Instructions of his Masters [...] than by his own happy Genius, prompt Wit and Apprehension and insuperable Industry; for he generally sate up half the Night, as well in voluntary Improvements of his own choice, as the exact perfecting of his School-Exercises [...]" Darbishire, 53-54. And thus the anonymous biographer now considered to be Cyriack Skinner: "through the pregnancy of his Parts, & his indefatigable industry (sitting up constantly at his Study till midnight) hee profited exceedingly; and early in that time wrote several grave and religious Poems, and paraphras'd some of Davids Psalms." Darbishire, 18.

The detail astonishes for its immediacy and claim.<sup>163</sup> A child falls so in love with his young learning that he cannot look away from it. Indeed, the first sense of entering an ongoing, old, and gratifying intellectual exchange is so strong that it triggers a creative urge: the boy is moved from simply reading verse to trying his hand at it, to participating in the literary arts as creator.

In a strange channelling or retelling of this story, several of Milton's earliest biographers would come to talk about the young Milton's dedication to study. Remarkably, in the hands of these chroniclers, the "fact" of the boy's sense of purpose or pleasure with text would come to be intertwined, sympathetically and inseparably, with the man's later blindness. The anonymous biography earlier conjectured to be by John Phillips and now considered as Cyriack Skinner's lays it out in no uncertain terms:

While hee was thus employ'd [in the composition of the *Defensio pro se*] his Eysight totally faild him; not through any immediate or sudden Judgment, as his Adversaries insultingly affirm'd; but from a weakness which his hard nightly study in his youth had first occasion'd, and which by degrees had for some time before depriv'd him of the use of one Ey: And the Issues and Seatons, made use of to save or retrieve that, were thought by drawing away the Spirits, which should have supply'd the Optic Vessells, to have hasten'd the loss of the other. Hee was indeed advis'd by his Physitians of the danger, in his condition, attending so great intentness as that work requir'd. But hee, who was resolute in going through with what upon good consideration hee at any time design'd, and to whom the love of Truth and his Country was dearer than all things, would not for any danger decline their defense.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> This, despite the clear indication of social and financial privilege. Here is a boy with no want, indulgent parents, and obliging household help.

<sup>164</sup> Skinner in Darbishire, 28. See also the account by Edward Phillips: "[H]is second marriage was about Two or Three years after his being Wholly depriv'd of Sight, which was just going, about the time of his Answering Salmasius; whereupon his Adversaries gladly take occasion of imputing his blindness as a Judgment upon him for his Answering the King's Book, &c. whereas it is most certainly known, that his Sight, what with his continual Study, his being subject to the Head-ake, and his perpetual tampering with Physick to preserve it, had been decaying for above a dozen years before, and the sight of one for a long time clearly lost." Darbishire, 71-72.

Skinner's narrative evokes powerfully the account of personal-visual-loss-for-collective-greater-gain that we have already seen a version of in Sonnet XVIII, and which Milton had already himself advanced in his *Second Defense*.

My father destined me from a child to the pursuit of literature; and my appetite for knowledge was so voracious, that from twelve years of age, I hardly ever left my studies, or went to bed before midnight. This primarily led to my loss of sight. My eyes were naturally weak, and I was subject to frequent head-aches; which, however, could not chill the ardour of my curiosity, or retard the progress of my improvement.<sup>165</sup>

Yet, this too is an old story. For Milton had written decades ago, in 1642, of his own reader-ly journey into being "confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy."<sup>166</sup> Thus, the young and idealistic Milton holds that it is simply not possible to write of honourable things without being able to carry comparable and consequential honour in deeds and actions in the living world. The circularity of created agency is worth noting: it is Milton the reader who thus concludes about Milton the-writer-to-be. Presumably, this self-aware writer can then make

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<sup>165</sup> *Complete Prose Works* vol. IV pt 1, 612. See also Milton's imaginative projection of the contemplative man in the early lyric "Il Penseroso":

Or let my lamp at midnight hour,  
Be seen in some high lonely tower,  
Where I may oft outwatch the Bear,  
With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere  
The spirit of Plato to unfold  
What worlds, or what vast regions hold  
The immortal mind that hath forsook  
Her mansion in this fleshly nook:"  
(85-92)

<sup>166</sup> *Apology for Smectymnuus*, *Complete Prose Works* vol. I, 890.

sure a similar lineage of honour for his readers, some of whom are surely future writers. When Skinner's 1681 biography effectively builds Milton up as a citizen and leader of the "Commonwealth of Learning" he may as well be confirming Milton's status of "himself" as true poem.<sup>167</sup> If in 1637, a youthful Milton had written to his closest friend about aspiring fame unto nothing short of immortality—"Listen, Diodati, lest I blush; and let me talk to you grandiloquently for a while. You ask what I am thinking of? So help me God, an immortality of fame. What am I doing? Growing my wings and practising flight"—in 1681, his biographer consciously aims to return both the dream and the achievement to their subject.<sup>168</sup> The story returns to the boy and his influences.

If there is something severely unusual, and even unsettling, about a child's applying himself to his scholarship with such assiduity as Milton and his biographers argue for him, we might remember that the nine languages of expertise that Milton would later write about (in almost shy gratitude to his father), needed to have started somewhere. Indeed, the training must have begun early. By his early twenties—in all likelihood, around the time of the gorgeously measured sonnet on his "hasting days" past his "three and twentieth year" (Sonnet VII, 2-3)—he was aware enough of his privileged position to address his keeper and provider with an exposition of his talent. "Ad Patrem" is dedicated to the senior John Milton.<sup>169</sup> Like other classically influenced and precociously

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<sup>167</sup> For a discussion of the "Commonwealth of Learning, see Skinner in Darbishire, 21. See also Skinner's assertion: "That Hee who is the subject of this discourse made it his endeavour to bee thought worthy of that high Character, will, I make no doubt, appear to the impartial Reader from the particulars, wch I shall with all sincerity relate of his life and Works." Darbishire, 17.

<sup>168</sup> For the letter to Charles Diodati, see *Complete Prose Works* vol. I, 327.

<sup>169</sup> Hoc utcunque tibi gratum pater optime carmen  
 Exiguum meditatur opus, nec novimus ipsi  
 Aptius à nobis quæ possint munera donis  
 Respondere tuis, quamvis nec maxima possint  
 Respondere tuis, nedum ut par gratia donis  
 Ess queat, vacuis quæ redditur arida verbis.  
 (6-11)

learned poems—such as his Latin elegies—that Milton undertook and executed around this time, “Ad Patrem” demonstrates Milton’s ease with the classical language, and betrays the delicacy with which he needs to handle the topic of his life-decisions, his belatedness with worldly achievements, and his learning, which *he* knows is a means towards action and magnitude in the world, but which, so far, he has not had occasion to display to society in any substantial undertaking or achievement. In the end, therefore, the son pleads that simply acknowledgment and indebtedness must serve for thanks to his father.

At tibi, chare pater, postquam non æqua merenti  
Posse referre datur, nec dona rependere factis,  
Sit memorâsse satis, repetitaque munera grato  
Percensere animo, sidæque reponere menti.  
(111-114)

[As for you, dear father, since I am powerless to repay you as you deserve, or to do anything that can requite your gifts, let it suffice that I have recorded them, that I count up your repeated favours with a feeling of gratitude, and store them safely away in my memory.]<sup>170</sup>

But Milton’s final address in “Ad Patrem” is to his verse itself: an indirect exposition of filial obligation merged with an assertion of poetic talent, and a tenacious holding on to the idea of immortality through such means of study and composition as he is embarked upon.

Et vos, O nostri, juvenilia carmina, lusus,  
Si modo perpetuos sperare audebitis annos,  
Et domini superesse rogo, lucemque tueri,  
Nec spisso rapiant oblivia nigra sub Orco,

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[Whether you approve or not, best of fathers, she [my Muse] is now engaged on this poem—this little offering—and I do not know what I may give you that can more fittingly repay your gifts to me. In fact, though, even my greatest gifts could never repay yours, much less could that barren thanks which is paid in empty words make up for the things you have given me.]

<sup>170</sup> Translation reproduced from John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, rev. 2nd edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2007).

Forsitan has laudes, decantatumque parentis  
Nomen, ad exemplum, sero servabitis ævo.  
(115-120)

And you, my youthful poems, my pastimes, if only you are bold enough to hope for immortality, to hope that you will survive your master's funeral pyre, and keep your eyes upon the light, then perhaps, if dark oblivion does not after all plunge you down beneath the dense crowds of the underworld, you may preserve this eulogy and my father's name, which has been the subject of my verse, as an example for a far-off age.

As we register the contributing components of Milton's training towards his "true poem"—ultimately, his blind poems, with their remarkable command over the oral/aural—we note too the older John Milton's other significant role in Milton's life: as musician. Once a chorister at Christ's Cathedral in Oxford, the senior John Milton continued to compose music throughout his life.<sup>171</sup> John Milton the younger would arguably have had many occasions to absorb—or be "pierced" by, as Milton so often liked to say—the charms of "linked sweetness long drawn out" ("L'Allegro," 140).<sup>172</sup> Or to submit to "sweetness, [that] through mine ear,/ [can] Dissolve me into ecstasies,/ And bring all heaven before mine eyes" ("Il Penseroso," 164-166). Despite the reservation inherent within the image of heaven brought before one's eyes—for it argues that the eyes belong but to an outsider of heaven—the transporting power claimed for music is unmistakable. Indeed, the image is strangely fitting for its time in the mature years of Reformation England, of which a commonplace

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<sup>171</sup> At the Eleventh International Milton Symposium held in Exeter in 2015, the Tallis Scholars performed some of the senior John Milton's music in Exeter cathedral. I remember an evening of aural deliciousness, and in particular one superb devotional lyric, where a prayer rose "like a bird" to the stone sky of the cathedral, until the notes broke out into the quiet evening beyond.

<sup>172</sup> Milton is aware of the penetrating quality of music. In "L'Allegro," the happy/cheerful man projects: "Lap me in soft Lydian airs,/ Married to immortal verse/ Such as the meeting soul may pierce/ In notes, with many a winding bout [...]" (136-139). "At a Solemn Music," the poet similarly entreats the "Blest pair of sirens" that they "Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ/ Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,/ And to our high-raised phantasy present,/ That undisturbed song of pure concent [...]" (1-6).

view is its theology's transference of emphasis from vision to hearing, but where the more complex reality is a profound inter-animation of sound with sight.<sup>173</sup> The poet who will many decades later command his "heavenly Muse" unambiguously to "Sing" (*Paradise Lost* I.6), and who will write, in eschewing rhyme, of aiming towards a "true musical delight" (note prefacing the verse of *Paradise Lost*, added in 1668 in the fourth issue of the first edition), even as a young writer projects communion as melodic harmony:

O may we soon again renew that song,  
And keep in tune with heaven, till God ere long  
To his celestial consort us unite,  
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.  
("At a Solemn Music," 5-28)<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> William Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 28-29.

<sup>174</sup> Milton's exercise in university oratory "De Sphaerarum Concentu" had earlier focused on the music of the spheres. These ideas also informed Milton's "Arcades." Simon Jackson writes helpfully about *musica speculativa* and its contribution to Renaissance ideas about the harmony of the world, *harmonia mundi*, which informs Milton's conjectures and projections in his oratorical exercise and his poems: "Speculative music theory developed from the experiments of Pythagoras in the sixth century BC. Pythagoras, passing a blacksmith's shop one day, is supposed to have heard the sound of several hammers beating out a piece of iron, and noticed that each hammer created a different note when it hit the anvil. Inspecting the hammers, Pythagorus recognised that one hammer, half the size of another (that is, the ratio 1:2), produced a note an octave higher than the second (eight notes apart - the interval between two Cs on a piano). Further experiments with gut strings - like those on a violin - confirmed the relationship between music and mathematical ratio: he discovered that the intervals of the perfect fifth (between C and G five notes higher) and perfect fourth (the interval between C and F) also corresponded to the neat ratios 2:3 and 3:4 respectively. These precise details are of little importance here, but it is important to recognise that Pythagoras' experiments forged the connection between music and abstract mathematics, the founding principle of *musica speculativa*. Music came to stand for much more than simple entertainment: it held within it the key to understanding the construction of the universe. From these experiments into the mathematical nature of music, Pythagoras and his followers derived a musical model of the universe. Inheriting the idea of the earth surrounded by concentric spheres, Pythagoras suggested that the spheres created musical sounds as they moved, corresponding proportionally to their size and position." See "Milton and Music," <http://darknessvisible.christs.cam.ac.uk/music.html>.

Milton's early biographers similarly discussed his musical inclinations. Thus Aubrey: "He had a delicate tuneable Voice & had ~~great~~ good skill: his father instructed him: he had an Organ in his house: he played on that most."<sup>175</sup> And thus Skinner: "Hee had an excellent Ear, and could bear a part both in Vocal & Instrumental Music."<sup>176</sup> To us, a recognition of the peculiarly ambitious yet, by all indications, genuine gratitude held by son for father makes the fanciful but nevertheless gentle nineteenth-century visual representation of "Milton playing to his daughters" (title page to *Paradise Lost: A series of twelve illustrations etched by William Strang*) ever more poignant, and images for us something of what Milton might in turn have given to the next generation.

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<sup>175</sup> Aubrey in Darbishire, 6. On this subject, see also Milton's Sonnet XIII, "To Mr H. Lawes, on his Airs," in which Milton applauds the quality of the composer's setting of words to music. Having possibly collaborated with Lawes while working towards *Comus*, Milton would know.

<sup>176</sup> Skinner in Darbishire, 32. See also Sigmund Gottfried Spaeth, *Milton's Knowledge of Music: Its Sources and Its Significance in His Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1913), and Erin Minear, *Reverberating Song in Shakespeare and Milton: Language, Memory, and Musical Representation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).



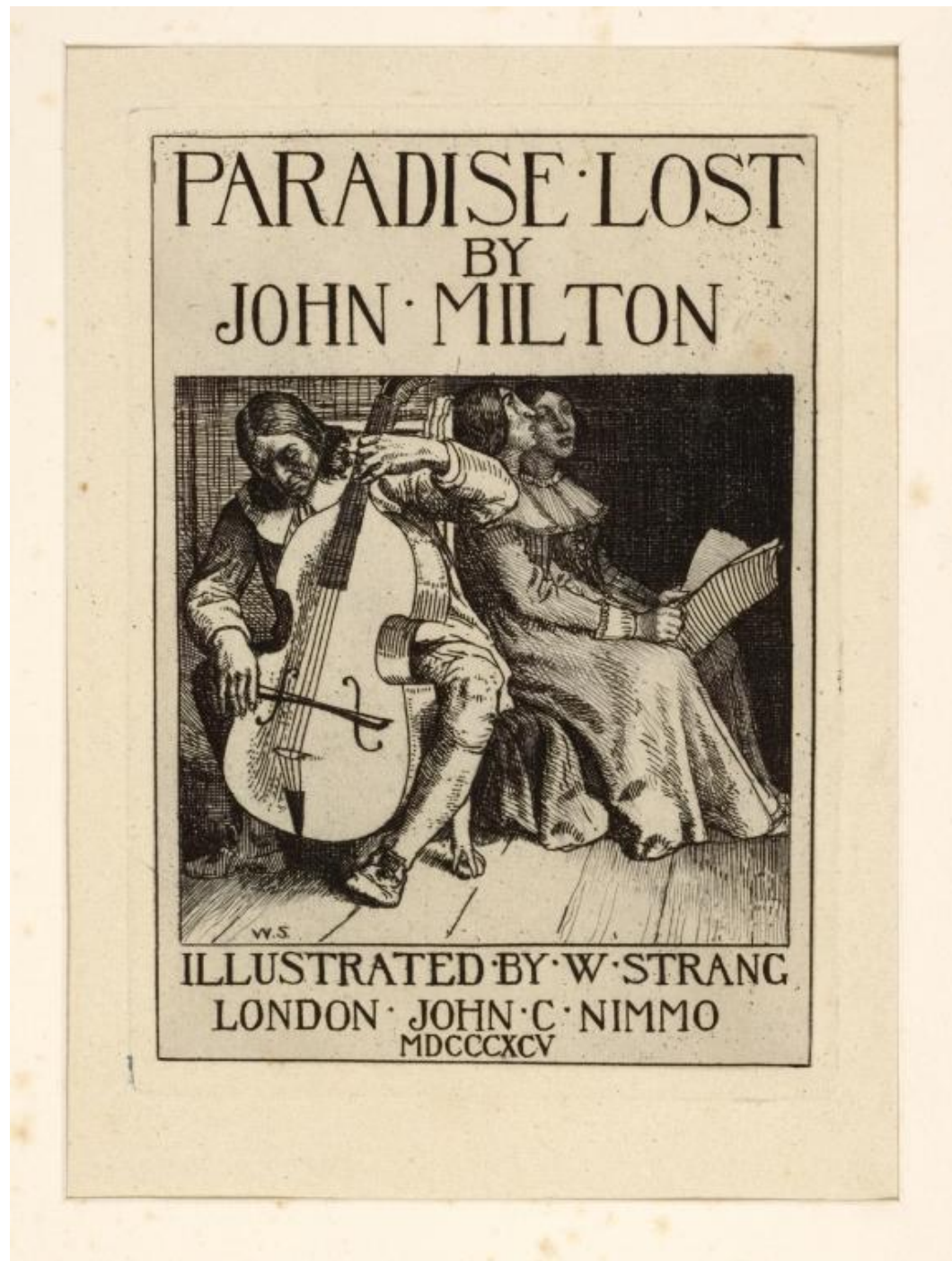


Figure 42. William Strang, “Milton playing to his daughters,” title page of *Paradise Lost: A series of twelve illustrations etched by William Strang* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1896)

Reproduced from the New York Public Library Digital Collections,  
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/paradise-lost-by-john-milton-a-series-of-twelve-illustrations>

Milton's love affair with aural pleasure remained long-term and served as background music for what would become his blind writing. But if, as we have seen, "Ad Patrem" youthfully pleaded an earnest poetic exceptionalism, Milton's Sonnet VIII would later, in the midst of the political turmoil of the mid 1640s and the fear of an advancing Royalist army into London, plead that distinction anew and stronger.<sup>177</sup> Before entering a discussion of Milton's years of going blind, I want to stop at this poem composed during Milton's sighted years to note the strange blend of desire, courage, self-reflexivity, and uninhibited hope that ultimately animate Milton's blind language. These are important to mark because comparable themes and compositional strategies—of choice, unreserved pleas for aid, of a positing of poetry as a consequential maker of worlds, of hard intellectual awareness of loss and of harder hope—will resurface in the blind poetry of Milton's later years.

The seriousness or possible jest of Sonnet VIII has long divided critics.<sup>178</sup>

Captain or colonel, or knight in arms,  
 Whose chance on these defenceless doors may seize,  
 If ever deed of honour did thee please,  
 Guard them, and him within protect from harms,  
 He can requite thee, for he knows the charms  
 That call fame on such gentle acts as these,  
 And he can spread thy name o'er lands and seas,  
 Whatever clime the sun's bright circle warms.

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<sup>177</sup> In "Ad Patrem," see: "Nec tu vatis opus divinum despice carmen,/ Quo nihil aethereos ortus, et semina caeli,/ Nil magis humanam commendat origine mentem,/ Sancta Prometheae retinens vestigia flammae," or "Do not despise divine poetry, the poet's creation. Nothing shows our celestial beginnings, our heavenly seed, more clearly: nothing better graces by its origin our human intellect, for poetry still retains some blessed trace of the Promethean fire" (17-20).

<sup>178</sup> E. R. Gregory and Peter Goldstein see irony in the final line, for the Athenian walls were in fact reduced to bare ruins. See Gregory's "Lift not thy speare against the Muses bowre?: Essay in Historical Explication," *Milton Quarterly* 11:4 (1977), 112-113; and Goldstein's "The Walls of Athens and the Power of Poetry: A Note on Milton's Sonnet 8," *Milton Quarterly* 24:3 (1990), 105-108. But John A. Vance and Robert Thomas Fallon plead for earnestness. See Vance's "The Sestet of Milton's Sonnet VIII," *Milton Quarterly* 13:2 (1979), 48-49 and Fallon's "Milton's 'defenseless doors': The Limits of Irony," *Milton Quarterly* 13:4 (1979), 146-151.

Lift not thy spear against the muses' bower,  
The great Emathian Conqueror bid spare  
The house of Pindarus, when temple and tower  
Went to the ground: and the repeated air  
Of sad Electra's Poet had the power  
To save the Athenian walls from ruin bare.  
(Sonnet VIII)<sup>179</sup>

Tentatively dated to 1642, the poem is remarkable for the simplicity and audacity of its vision—as also for the self-aggrandisement of the poet, who is at this moment made up much more of aspiration than achievement.<sup>180</sup> It almost matters not what the martial man in power is called: captain, or colonel, or knight at arms—but the poet writes to him on the entrance to his own quarters. As the imagined captain or colonel approaches, he is brought up short in front of the poet's "defenceless doors" by a poem: *this* poem. The poem is a serious injunction. If he can read, and if ever deed of honour did him please, the captain must, the poem tells him, now understand what it is he stands in front of and in power of. A Miltonic circularity surrounds the captain: the captain's ability to understand what is honourable must now prevent him from demolishing his own chance at long-lived honour. He must guard and protect the poet, who lives behind these doors, "for he [the poet] knows the charms/ That call fame on such gentle acts as these." Gentleness is, in a single stroke, made a matter more of choice than of birth or circumstance or background. The sphere of the poet's verbal power and influence spreads along the lines of the poem and the globe like the rays, effortless, of the "sun's bright circle." The captain's own martial weapon's radical radial

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<sup>179</sup> This sonnet is nameless in the 1645 or 1673 *Poems* (just "Sonnet VIII"), but carried, in Milton's hand in the Trinity Manuscript, the title "On his dore when ye Citty expected an assault." This was later corrected by an amanuensis to "When the assault was intended to the City." Barbara Lewalski calls this poem the beginning of the political sonnet in the English tradition. See *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 158.

<sup>180</sup> The manuscript has the date of 1642, although, like the first title, the date was later crossed out. In 1642, Milton is an ambitious but relatively unknown schoolmaster in London.

containedness haunts the next line. He must not lift his spear—the word carrying a near-echo of the sphere of the poet’s influence—against the muses’ bower.<sup>181</sup> The captain or colonel or knight at arms is given a spear/sphere of influence in a line infused with the necessary after-image of “the sun’s bright circle.” And the captain must use this spear/sphere of influence carefully—indeed, in a beautifully-timed opening up of the vowel sound, to “spare” (in the next line) what is vulnerable yet strangely mighty—if he intends to extend his own honour beyond the immediate moment of his lifetime, for the poet’s reach is greater than his own. In Milton’s later verse in his blind writing, such priming of the ear to hear near-hidden meanings and words will come up again and again.

Like the best of Milton’s poems, this sonnet presumes much and offers more. If the poet knows his poetry and his history, he remembers that even Alexander spared the house in which Pindar used to live.<sup>182</sup> And that in defeated Athens, the hearers of the first chorus of Euripides’s *Electra* refused to destroy the city in which such extraordinary poetry had been made.<sup>183</sup> Thus, in Milton’s poem, the fundamental inequality of power between the poet and the captain is both acknowledged and potentially overturned. The reading captain, the thinking captain, the

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<sup>181</sup> This use of associative verbal memory anticipates the evocative almost-echo of the opening of a much later poem, “The Waste Land,” whose author read his Milton well. In “The Waste Land,” I always hear, because I somehow expect to hear from the context of the lines, as much “pain” as “rain” in the fourth line. “April is the cruellest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain.”<sup>181</sup> Spring rain is not an entirely different matter from spring pains of birth and renewal, either, which is part of the point. And if “rain” is aurally anticipated with the “r” of “spring,” so is “pain,” with its “p.” But of course I don’t and can’t hear the “pain” until I hear the “rain” in that fourth line. This is the achievement of the verse: that it gives its reader one word that opens irresistibly into another. In Milton’s sonnet, too, the ear is instructed with memory and desire. See T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

<sup>182</sup> See Plutarch, Alexander II and Pliny vii 29. When Alexander’s army sacked Thebes in 335 BC, the house once occupied by Pindar was spared.

<sup>183</sup> See Plutarch, Lysander 15. When the Spartans, with their allies from Thebes and Corinth, defeated Athens in 404 BC, Erianthus, a Theban, proposed a total destruction of the city. But a man from Phocis was heard singing the lines of the first chorus from *Electra*.

compassionate captain, the captain who wishes to be both gentle and famed, will not destroy the house of the poet. As readers of Milton know, however, this poet's interest is never so much in the overturning of power itself as in the moment of choice, the instant of greatest potential.<sup>184</sup> If Milton knows his poetry and his history, he knows that the Athenian walls are but ruins bare even as he writes. That is, there is no guarantee whatsoever that the captain will read what the poet has nailed to his door, or that he will heed it even if he does read. But to Milton, the point and the power of the situation is in the sheer fact of Euripides's lines being sung by the man from Phocis in a defeated Athens.<sup>185</sup> Milton's song—most likely penned at a time of real fear of the Royalist army's ingress into London in 1642—is ultimately for what *could* have been. And therefore for the counterfactual yet seriously imagined what could *yet* be. The capacity to register possibility is a form of power; the ability to understand the probability of failure *yet* strive is a form of power; the aptitude to stay composed and continue to compose through crisis is a form of power. These powers, as we shall see, will become for Milton both *matters* of his blind composition (that is, its multifarious themes) *and* its intimate and informing energies (that is, the very source, together with the anger and resolve, that makes the blind composition possible in the first place). A placement of these fraught energies—which I assert as Milton's blind compositional strategies, for it is through them that Milton decides and strategizes *to* compose, *to* write, in and through his blindness—within Milton's life and the ocularcentric world he inhabited is the concern of the next section of this chapter.

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<sup>184</sup> Perhaps most famously in Milton's works, this prioritisation of choice is evident in Milton's placing in the mouth of God, in *Paradise Lost*, an explanation for the creation of a reason-able creature, man: "reason also is choice" (III.108). The point of humankind is that they will have to *choose* to serve God.

<sup>185</sup> It is worth noting that this "fact" too is poetic. We know of this incident from Plutarch. This is "history" closer to what we call poetry, and which Milton would similarly have known to interrogate and posit in a different register than what he reserved for chronicles. After all, this is a man who did not write the history of Britain because it read too much like myth.

## Blind Blinded More

A select survey of the biographical and cultural conditions surrounding Milton's journey into blindness enables us to take measure of the personal and intellectual weight carried by the poet as his visual condition set him on a path of physical, physiological, and psychological difference from many around him. Milton's eyes—left, then right—slowly failed through personally and politically frantic years, from 1645 to 1652. In this time, his first wife Mary Powell come back to him after a period of separation, his father died, he changed houses four times, and saw the births of three of his children. Already by 1645 in the thick of public debate, he entered political polemic in 1649. He was appointed to an administrative post in the Commonwealth Council of State—a job he retained through and after total blindness. All this while, he worried about his eyes. Milton's nephew Edward Phillips reports his uncle's "perpetual tampering with Physick to preserve [his sight]."<sup>186</sup> From Milton's repeated mentions of illness in his correspondence from this period, his biographer Gordon Campbell is surely right to fear the worst: "The ill-health may have been caused or exacerbated by the horrific treatments that [he] was receiving for his failing eyesight."<sup>187</sup> By March 1652, the time for even unavailing treatments was over, and the Council of State recalled the

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<sup>186</sup> Edward Phillips in Darbishire, 72. What records we have from Milton's day of "Physick" to preserve the eyes indicate fearful things. For instance, a widely-used Benvenutus Grassus ointment was to be prepared thus: "Collect the juice of [...] twelve herbs [...]. Mix them, and slowly add the urine of a chaste youth. Pour this mixture into a mortar with some grains of pepper; add two spoonsful of Attic or prepared honey and such additional urine as will bring them, when well ground, to the consistency of an ointment. [...] This powerful ointment is useful as an application in all forms of ocular disease." See *Beneventus Grassus of Jerusalem: De Oculus, Eorumque Egritudinibus et Curis*, trans. Casey Wood (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1929), 82-3. See also: André Du Laurens, *A discourse of the preservation of the sight: of melancholike diseases; of rheumes, and of old age*, trans. Richard Surphlet (London, 1599).

<sup>187</sup> Gordon Campbell, *A Milton Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 126. See also the biography by Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns: "His physician of the time (c.1650) tried treating him with a seton stitch; this may well have hastened his visual demise." *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2008), 212.

previous Secretary for Latin, Georg Rudolph Weckherlin, to assist Milton in his duties regarding foreign affairs. In May 1652, Mary gave birth to the couple's third daughter, Deborah. When Mary died three days after, the blind father was left in primary charge of their children Anne (six), Mary (almost four), John (one), and days-old Deborah.<sup>188</sup> Little John died soon after, in June. In February 1653, in the wake of Milton's indirect but unmistakable admission to John Bradshaw of the limitations imposed on him by his physical condition, he was formally relieved of several charges at office, and Philip Meadows was appointed his assistant.<sup>189</sup>

Milton's only sustained exercises in verse during this period are his translations from the Psalms. In their repeated meditations on vision, darkness, pain, light, and death, they become a textual exercise for Milton through which to process and assimilate his blindness. They are the beginnings of his blind language—language that registers an encroaching and frightening physical condition; language that tries to defy the contingent reason for its existence and fails to do so; language that begins to take leave of some of its most beloved dependencies. Milton's psalm translations appear in sequence in his 1673 collection of *Poems*. The notes alongside clarify that Psalms LXXX-LXXXVIII were translated in April 1648, and Psalms I-VIII on almost successive

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<sup>188</sup> A present-day reader would do well to remember the labour of Milton's servants, who would have been responsible for taking care of the children. Indirectly but significantly, the work of these unnamed individuals also informs the creation of the blind poetic language that would result in *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

<sup>189</sup> Milton as good as asked for Andrew Marvell for assistant in his letter to John Bradshaw on 21 February 1653: "If upon the death of Mr Wakerley the Councill shall thinke that I shall need any assistant in the performance of my place (though for my part I find noe encumbrances in that which belongs to me, except it be in point of attendance at Conferences with Ambassadors, which I must confesse, in my Condition I am not fit for) it would be hard for them to find a Man soe fit every way for that purpose [...]" See "Letter 22, Milton to Bradshaw, February 21, 1653" in "Milton's Private Correspondence," *Complete Prose Works*, vol. IV pt 2 (1966), 860. See also Skinner: "Nor did his Darkness discourage or disable him from prosecuting, with the help of Amanuenses, the former design of his calmer Studies. And hee had now more leisure, being dispens'd with, by having a Substitute allowd him, and sometimes Instructions sent home to him, from attending in his office of Secretary." Darbishire, 29.

days from 8 to 14 August 1953. The two sets of translations, from 1648 and 1653, operate in different moods. The 1648 translations, carried out over a severely failing left eye, claim to have any departures from the Hebrew marked in italics: “Nine of the Psalms done into meter; wherein all but what is in a different character, are the very words of the text, translated from the original.”

Wherever Milton judges his departure from the Hebrew too free, the translations carry marginal notes with the original Hebrew or an accepted Latin rendition or full literal English. In contrast, the 1653 translations, carried out after total blindness, appear not to be weighed by equal textual fastidiousness. The verse forms are varied and experimental, and substantive departures are silently absorbed. The 1648 exercises incorporate some of the last sighted scholarly pleasures of research, visual orientation, comparison between versions, and—in providing glosses of the original Hebrew alongside the translation—invitation to another reader to enter into and continue the conversation. These are luxuries that the 1653 translations can no longer afford.

Both sets register the idiomatic baggage carried by contemporary vocabularies of light and vision, in which light is seen as imperative for the visionary. Milton’s own diction reflects this bias. In a long career of public battles, Milton received—and offered—varied and powerful aspersions. For sheer force, the early “Blind mouths!” of “Lycidas” (119) is remarkable. The ferocious rapacity and greed built into the image of the gaping, gluttonous, even violent mouths is intensified by the insult’s being directed at pastors and guides, who should oversee, care, and protect.<sup>190</sup> The visual

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<sup>190</sup> Years later, an associated image will return, with Satan’s vaulted entry into the garden of Eden.

“At one slight bound high overleaped all bound  
Of hill or highest wall, and sheer within  
Lights on his feet. As when a prowling wolf,  
Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,  
Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve  
In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,  
Leaps o’er the fence with ease into the fold:  
[...]



affliction is thus endowed with a sinister power: blindness feeds and multiplies itself on an individual's merits or shortcomings. The more powerful one is, the more blind one can potentially be, and the greater one's capacity for mischief. The blind guide, in particular, was a dangerous and despicable creature.<sup>191</sup> Pieter Bruegel's 1568 painting is reminder of the trope's wide recognisability.



Figure 43. Pieter Bruegel, *The Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind* (1568)

Reproduced from the *Web Gallery of Art*,  
[https://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/b/bruegel/pieter\\_e/11/01parabl.html](https://www.wga.hu/html_m/b/bruegel/pieter_e/11/01parabl.html)

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So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold:  
So since into his church lewd hirelings climb."  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.181-187, 192-193)

<sup>191</sup> There had always been mindfulness of Christ's parable of the blind leading the blind and both parties consequently landing in the ditch (Matthew 15:14). The horror at a blind guide comes through repeatedly in contemporary publications such as Francis Cupisse, *The Blind Guide Forsaken* (London, 1641); John Audland, *The Innocent Delivered out of the Snare: and the Blind Guide Fallen into the Pit* (London, 1655); and Howard Luke, *A Few Plain Words of Instruction [...] And a Testimony against All Blind Guides* (London, 1658).

But if people around him mistrusted the blind guide, Milton must even more forcefully have done so, having from youth carried the figure of the guide close to his heart. By the time of his Seventh Prolusion (a university exercise undertaken at Cambridge in 1632), Milton was already alive to the power and responsibility of the “single wise and prudent man [who] has often kept loyal to their duty a large number of men who lacked the advantages of Learning. [...] Even a single individual, endowed with the gifts of Art and Wisdom, may often prove to be a great gift of God, and sufficient to lead a whole state to righteousness.”<sup>192</sup> By 1652, if Milton had Learning, Art, and Wisdom, he indubitably also had blindness. He might not unnaturally have wondered where blindness fit into his accomplished and ambitious life.

The fervent scorn in Milton’s use of “blind” in “Lycidas” is symptomatic of most of his uses of the word both before and after the Psalms. *Of Reformation* (1641) had complained of a “succession of illiterate and blind guides.”<sup>193</sup> *Animadversions* (1641) scorned “departing this life in a blind and wretched condition.”<sup>194</sup> *Eikonoklastes* (1649) protested that “wee suffer one mans blind intentions to lead us all” and against the “blindness of hypocrisy”—and warned of the “*fatal blindness* [that] did both *attend and punish* wilfulness.”<sup>195</sup> In 1634, *Comus* had established that “unbelief is blind.”<sup>196</sup> This negatively biased use of “blind” persists into Milton’s later works: there is pain invoked or intended with each mention of the word in *Samson Agonistes* (1671), and we have the frightening assurance of

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<sup>192</sup> “Delivered in the College Chapel in Defence of Learning: An Oration” in “The Prolusions,” *Complete Prose Works*, vol. I (1953), 292.

<sup>193</sup> *Of Reformation: Touching Church-Discipline in England*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. I (1953), 603.

<sup>194</sup> *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence against Smectymnuus*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. I (1953), 702.

<sup>195</sup> *Eikonoklastes in Answer to a Book Intitul’d Eikon Basilike*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. III (1962), 416; 422; 567.

<sup>196</sup> *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, 519.

God in *Paradise Lost* (1667) that (as I shall discuss in the next chapter) should his “umpire conscience” not be heeded, the “hard [will] be hardened, blind be blinded more.”<sup>197</sup>

In 1648, with nothing so clearly visible to him as the gradual disappearance of light, Milton undertakes some exercises in poetic translation.

### Blind Devices: 1648

The 1648 Psalm translations give us glimpses into Milton’s darkening days. The desperation that is the subject of this set of psalms in the Bible sits well with Milton’s own circumstances of political and personal frailty at this time. To date, these translations have received little critical attention.<sup>198</sup> This could be because of the obvious embarrassment of riches available in the greater

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<sup>197</sup> And I will place within them as a guide  
My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear,  
Light after light well used they shall attain,  
And to the end persisting, safe arrive.  
This my long sufferance and my day of grace  
They who neglect and scorn, shall never taste;  
But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,  
That they may stumble on, and deeper fall;  
And none but such from mercy I exclude.  
(*Paradise Lost*, III.194-202)

<sup>198</sup> For those who have read and considered the Psalm translations, their significance for Milton’s creative body of work is evident. W. B. Hunter, Jr, points to Milton’s experiments with genre and metre. See “Milton Translates the Psalms,” *Philological Quarterly* 40:4 (1961), 485-494. Margaret Boddy investigates the 1648 translations for later political ramifications, underscoring their recurring motif of a populace learning to act in absolute accountability to God and none but God. See “Milton’s Translation of Psalms 80-88,” *Modern Philology* 64:1 (1966), 1-9. Carolyn Collette investigates the tradition, in Geneva Protestantism and elsewhere, of finding strength in the Psalms in times of personal trial. See “Milton’s Psalm Translations: Petition and Praise,” *English Literary Renaissance* 2:2 (1972), 243-259. John Hale valuably sees in the 1648 set Milton’s understanding of the parallels between Israel and England, but improbably sets aside the translations’ autobiographical charge. See “Why did Milton Translate Psalms 80-88 in April 1648?,” *Literature and History* 3:2 (1994), 55-62. Milton’s biographer W. R. Parker reads the psalm translations as argument for an early date of the composition of Milton’s last “dramatic poem,” and offers that “the spirit of *Samson Agonistes* is everywhere in these psalms.” See *Milton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; 2nd edn rev. Gordon Campbell), 322-325. Jason P. Rosenblatt, in his assessment of Milton’s

corpus of Milton's work. Or it could indicate our privileging of "original" works over the "derived." Or critics might have been turned away by the ostensible lack of sophistication in these poems' sing-song-y metrical regularity. Compared to the later thrilling verse of *Paradise Lost*, there seems to be little worth study here.

Nonetheless, these translations are located within a pivotal moment of Milton's life as a poet—and they become, for Milton, a poetic vehicle through which to write out his affliction, his sense of abandonment, and his hard-held hopes. As such, they enfold in them a complex emotional reconfiguration that effectively becomes a re-dedication to poetry. I have mentioned how these translations emphasise a certain linguistic expertise, a play with versions, and a scholarly fidelity—as though these things are all the more treasured for being threatened by the oncoming darkness of the eyes. The engaged reader is invited to pause where Milton has departed from the Hebrew; to note the alterations marked by italics; to "check" the poet's translation; to agree or differ. But precisely because of this general consistency of Milton's method, the irregularities are worthy of note.

The 1648 set is overwhelmingly constituted by prayers for God's attention: a blind poet's entreaties for the divine regard. Here, for example, is Milton's psalmist's refrain (directed to God) in

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acquaintance with and use of the King James Bible, stops at Milton's psalm translations to argue that these meditative poems are repositories of Milton's anxieties and hopes during the time of their composition. See "Milton, anxiety, and the King James Bible," in Hannibal Hamlin and Norman W. Jones, eds, *The King James Bible after 400 Years: Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181-201. Oddly, Rosenblatt argues that "[t]here will never be a definitive explanation [...] for the total absence of marginal notations in the 1653 translations of Psalms 1-8" (184). As I show, the business of the changing marginal notations relates directly to the business of the poet's changing visual abilities. Rosenblatt's general note on Milton's uses of various Bibles is helpful to keep in mind as we proceed in our engagement with Milton's translations of the Psalms. "He read the Old Testament in Hebrew (and the relevant parts of Ezra and Daniel in Aramaic, which he called Chaldee), the New Testament in Greek, as well as the Latin translations of both the Vulgate and the Protestant Junius-Tremellius Bible, the latter used with some frequency in his prose. Although Milton's third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, owned a Geneva Bible of 1588, there is no evidence that her husband used it. The only edition of the Bible that bears incontrovertible signs of Miltonic ownership is a 1612 printing by Robert Barker of the King James Bible, with seven entries and various marginal notations in Milton's own hand" (181).

Psalm LXXX: “Cause thou thy face on us to shine/ And then we shall be safe” (15-16, 31-32, 79-80). Safety is in the divine regard. For another instance, here is the continued supplication of the singer:

Return now, God of Hosts, look down  
From Heav’n, thy seat divine,  
Behold *us, but without a frown,*  
And visit this *thy* vine.  
(Psalm LXXX, 57-60)<sup>199</sup>

In Psalm LXXXI, which opens with an invocation to song—“To God our strength sing loud, *and clear/* Sing loud to God *our King*” (1-2)—and morphs into a soulful ventriloquisation of God by the psalmist, it sounds as though God has heard the psalmist’s entreaties for attention, and the divine regard appears to be benevolently turned towards the singer.

I am the Lord thy God which brought  
Thee out of Egypt land  
Ask large enough, and I, *besought,*  
Will grant thy full demand.  
(Psalm LXXXI, 41-44)

But this, we soon learn, is wishful. The psalmist continues in God’s voice:

And yet my people would not *hear,*  
*Nor* hearken to my voice;  
And Israel *whom I loved so dear*  
Misliked me for his choice.  
(Psalm LXXXI, 45-48)

At this point, sorrow turns into a blend of lamentation and anger—and in the psalmist’s voice of God, we now encounter the only use of “blind” in all of Milton’s psalm translations.

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<sup>199</sup> All italics in the psalm translations cited are Milton’s.

Then did I leave them to their will  
    And to their wand'ring mind;  
Their own conceits they followed still  
    Their own devices blind.  
(Psalm LXXXI, 49-52)

What happened here? Did Milton forget his convention of marking out his departures? Or did he mark his deviation out all right but his compositor omitted the italics for that particular word in the setting of type in 1673? Because in neither the Hebrew nor the King James Version of verse 12 is there an equivalent for the “blind” adjective so unequivocally attributed to the people who will deliberately not heed God. As it appears in Milton’s translation, “own” devices are by default “blind.” Milton’s use of the word “blind” is reminiscent of his many deployments of it in the past to signify wilful obstinacy or self-delusion. It is arguably only as loaded as it had always been in a culture where the primacy of the sense of vision stood unshakable, and we might further say that “blind” was simply a convenient metrical fix, to rhyme with “mind” above. But that leads to further questions. For it is, in fact, Milton’s decision to use “mind” in the first place. The Hebrew has “heart” (לֵב, לֵב). Simply an interchange of “mind” for “heart” too would have been minimally significant. But when the verse, as it stands, gives us a blindness to that mind—and a textual “blind”ness made invisible by *not* being marked in the separate type that readers have been promised—we may wonder about the translator’s nervousness about an errant and “wand’ring” lapse that he thinks might be seen and derided.

The psalms following this one swing mercurially from reassurance to pleading, back to comfort, and again to uncertainty. A few examples of the affective crests and troughs are worth noting, for the reader is never distant from the singer’s pleas for God’s attention, regard, and even responsiveness. Psalm LXXXII, for instance, calls for the defence of the weak, and specifically those who know to ask for God’s support.

Defend the poor and desolate,  
    And rescue from the hands  
Of wicked men the low estate  
    Of him *that help demands*.  
(Psalm LXXXII, 13-16)

Psalm LXXXIII is explicitly clamorous for divine intervention.

Be not thou silent *now at length*  
    O God hold not thy peace,  
Sit not thou still O God of *strength*  
    *We cry and do not cease*.  
(Psalm LXXXIII, 1-4)

Psalm LXXXIV powers through on a surge of confidence—with, tellingly, a slight addition of luminous vividness to the “sun and shield” of God.

For God the Lord both sun and shield  
    Gives grace and glory *bright*;  
No good from them shall be withheld  
    Whose ways are just and right.  
(Psalm LXXXIV, 41-44)

But Psalm LXXXV is again acutely alive to the possibility of God’s wrath and withdrawal of divine favour.

Wilt thou be angry without end,  
    For ever angry thus?  
Wilt thou thy frowning ire extend  
    From age to age on us?  
(Psalm LXXXV, 17-20)

In the course of these rises and falls in the psalmist’s mood and temper, there appears to be a moment of power midway through Psalm LXXXVI—psalm of confessedly “*incessant prayers*” (19):

For great thy mercy is toward me,

And thou hast freed my soul,  
Ev'n from the lowest Hell set free  
    *From deepest darkness foul.*  
(Psalm LXXXVI, 45-48)

A man going blind alleges that he has already been saved from darkness. We cannot know if this is hope, or a longing for it. Milton knows that despair is darkness—just as grief is darkness, to be without the company of friends is darkness, and to have to yearn without hope is darkness. In the King James Version, verse 13 of this Psalm reads “For great is thy mercy toward me:/ and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell,” translating from the Hebrew “שאל שאול” [sh<sup>o</sup>l sh<sup>o</sup>l; hell]. In Milton’s translation, the lowest Hell is also, unambiguously, the “deepest *darkness* foul” (my emphasis), and the psalmist is happy to be delivered from it. Sadly, this confidence does not last. In fact, the verses immediately following reveal the previous declaration of assurance to be prayer instead of an achieved state, as is made clear by the apostrophe:

O God the proud against me rise  
    And violent men are met  
To seek my life, and in their eyes  
    No fear of thee have set.  
(Psalm LXXXVI, 49-52)

Significantly, at this point, the psalmist again begs that God *look* in his direction. The poem ends:

O turn to me *thy face at length,*  
    And me have mercy on,  
Unto thy servant give thy strength,  
    And save thy handmaid’s son.  
Some sign of good to me afford,  
    And let my foes *then* see  
And be ashamed, because thou Lord  
    Dost help and comfort me.  
(Psalm LXXXVI, 57-64)



The many lines of vision and ocular energy evoked in this poem are worth our own glance. The singer fears for his life because the eyes of the “violent men” (50) betray their essential godlessness. This is a Miltonic moulding. Most translations keep the eyes of the violent men out of explicit mention.<sup>200</sup> It is also soon revealed why the men have their violent eyes fixed on the singer: because the singer does not have God’s regard. Thus, while God looks away, the malignant agents can look at the singer and mean and do harm. Thence the Miltonic singer’s plea to God: “O turn to me *thy face at length*” (57; in slight intensification of the biblical “O turn unto me”). The most immediate “sign of good” (61; “token for good” in the King James Version) that God can afford to the psalmist is, therefore, simply his regard. Once this regard is turned to the singer, the very tables will presumably be turned. The poet’s imploration for this turning of the divine visage now mingles with fierce but uncertain entitlement. He asserts that when God looks at the singer, his persecutors will no longer be able to raise violent eyes on him. Instead, they will see and be ashamed, for they will know that he, the singer, has help and comfort beyond all assail. To both biblical psalmist and his translator, there is no doubt about where this succour is to come from, or how it will be recognised by the singer’s adversaries. In both cases, the eye is crucial. But significantly, this ocular drama leaves unclear exactly where, if it is present at all, the Miltonic singer’s regard resides. Without doubt, the Miltonic psalmist’s regard stays emotionally fast on the object of desire: the divine visage. But neither biblical nor Miltonic psalmist offers clarity on just what the singer sees—if he sees at all.

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<sup>200</sup> The Geneva Bible offers: “O God, the proude have risen against me, and the assemblies of violent men haue soght my soule, and haue not set thee before them” (Psalm 86:14). And the King James Version has: “O God, the proud are risen against me,/ And the assemblies of violent men have sought after my soul:/ and have not set thee before them” (Psalm 86:14). The Bishops’ Bible does, however, make a mention of the malignant eyes, malignant *because* of their being turned away from the divine: “O God, the proude are rysen against me: a companie of naughtiepackes haue sought after my soule, and haue not set thee before their eyes” (Psalm 86:14). This mention of the eyes is not found in the Hebrew.



Hast set me *all forlorn*,  
 Where thickest darkness *hovers round*,  
 In horrid deeps *to mourn*.  
 Thy wrath *from which no shelter saves*  
 Full sore doth press on me; (30)  
 Thou break'st upon me all thy waves,  
 And all thy waves break me.  
 Thou dost my friends from me estrange,  
 And mak'st me odious,  
 Me to them odious, *for they change*, (35)  
 And I here pent up thus.  
 Through sorrow, and affliction great  
 Mine eye grows dim and dead;  
 Lord all the day I thee entreat,  
 My hands to thee I spread. (40)  
 Wilt thou do wonders on the dead,  
 Shall the deceased arise  
 And praise thee *from their loathsome bed*  
*With pale and hollow eyes?*  
 Shall they thy loving kindness tell (45)  
 On whom the grave *bath hold*,  
 Or they *who* in perdition *dwell*  
 Thy faithfulness *unfold?*  
 In darkness can thy mighty *hand*  
 Or wondrous acts be known, (50)  
 Thy justice in the *gloomy* land  
 Of *dark* oblivion?  
 But I to thee O Lord do cry  
*Ere yet my life be spent*,  
 And *up to thee* my prayer *doth hie* (55)  
 Each morn, and thee prevent.  
 Why wilt thou Lord my soul forsake,  
 And hide thy face from me,  
 That am already bruised, and shake  
 With terror sent from thee; (60)  
 Bruised, and afflicted and *so low*  
 As ready to expire,  
 While I thy terrors undergo  
 Astonished with thine ire.  
 Thy fierce wrath over me doth flow, (65)  
 Thy threat'nings cut me through.  
 All day they round about me go,  
 Like waves they me pursue.  
 Lover and friend thou hast removed  
 And severed from me far. (70)  
 They *fly me now* whom I have loved,  
 And as in darkness are.  
 (Psalm LXXXVIII)

The end is profoundly disconsolate; the poem reaches it through twists and turns of fear, almost-hope, pleading, (mis)fortune, and a final realisation of the absence of beloved company. The Davidic psalmist's apprehension is multiplied in Milton's version. Milton's psalmist opens with the sense of impending death. He cries to God because "My life *at death's uncheerful door*/ Unto the grave draws nigh" (11-12). Already he is "weak alas" (15) and "for that name [of man] unfit./ From life discharged and parted quite/ Among the dead *to sleep*" (16-18). He pleads a tenuous connection to the living world, indeed, a tenuous connection to humanity. It is as though he has somehow already been excluded from the concourse of life and belonging—"And like the slain *in bloody fight*/ That in the grave lie *deep*,/ Whom thou rememberest no more,/ Dost never more regard" (19-22), he now fears the ultimate oblivion. He fears he might be among God's unremembered. This sentiment turns on a word that Milton has been writing around all over the preceding translations, as his psalmist asked God to variously turn to him, listen to him, speak to him, and attend to him: "regard" (22). Using "regard," Milton's Psalm LXXXVIII swings the emphasis from God's hand to the divine eye. Where other translators record the psalmist's fear of being cut off from the care of God's hand, Milton's psalmist considers with deep sorrow the absence (or perhaps withdrawal) of a potentially fuller relationship.<sup>201</sup> For to be in God's regard, as Milton's use of the word signals, is both seeing and being seen, remembering and being remembered. There is a completeness to it: a taking in of

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<sup>201</sup> The Geneva Bible translates: "I am counted among them that go downe into the pit, *and* am as a man without strength: Fre amon[g] the dead, like the slaine lying in the graue, whome thou remembrest no more, and they are cut of from thine hand" (Psalm 88:4-5). The Bishops' Bible provides: "I am counted as one of them that go downe vnto the pit: and I am nowe become a man that hath no strength. I am free among the dead: like such as beyng kylled lie in a grave, whom thou remembrest no more, and are cut away from my hande" (Psalm 88:3-4). In the King James Version, "I am counted with them that go down into the pit:/ I am as a man that hath no strength:/ free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more:/ and they are cut off from thy hand" (Psalm 88:4-5).

the other, an acknowledgment, a reciprocity, perhaps even a belonging. The loss of this regard is therefore just as acute as to be physically separated from God. To be un-regarded of God will be as never to have been—and woe to anyone whom death claims before they can claim God’s (benevolent) attention.

This singer has good reason to believe that his time is running out. “Through sorrow, and affliction great/ Mine eye grows dim and dead” (37-38). This is an unacknowledged intensification. Where the biblical verse 9 only says that the singer’s eyes are “on-ee” [עני], afflicted, Milton’s singer can sense his eyes dying—through sorrow. The Psalm becomes a point within a long tradition of the extinguishing of the eyes being considered prevenient for the loss of life. For in his time, there was an established tradition of the extinguishing of the eyes being considered an omen for either a living death, or the end of life. Milton’s contemporary Samuel Pepys, when troubled by his eyes (19 February 1663, “my eyes begin to fail me”), and afraid he might be going blind (30 June 1668, “I very melancholy under the fear of my eyes being spoilt and not to be recovered”), considered it would be “almost as much as to see myself go into my grave” (31 May 1669). To him, blindness was a catastrophe as much for its living consequences as for the death that it forebode. He gave up writing his Diary for fear of losing sight altogether.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Richard Standfast, a Bristol Rector and a slightly later contemporary of Milton’s, remembered his fears from his early days of blindness in a broadside entitled *A Dialogue Between a Blind Man and Death*. In it, Blind Man does not know that Death is standing nearby until Death speaks to him. Death takes a sadistic pleasure in intimidating his blind interlocutor before demanding the latter’s final “Breath.” Blind Man tries to stall. “What need such Posting haste?” he asks, and pleads, “Pray Change your mind;/ ’Tis a poor conquest to surprise the Blind.” But Death is inexorable:

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<sup>202</sup> Samuel Pepys, *The Diary: A New and Complete Transcription*, 11 vols., eds Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: HarperCollins, 1995; rpt 2000), vol. IV, 50; vol. IX, 252; vol. IX, 565.

You may not call it Posting, nor Surprise;  
For you had warning when you lost your Eyes.  
Nor could you hope your House could long be free,  
After the Windows were possest by me.<sup>203</sup>

At this, Blind Man realises he must yield. The extinguishing of sight, he agrees and the reader of the broadside is expected to know, is natural presage for death.

In Milton's Psalm LXXXVIII, although "Thou break'st upon me all thy waves,/ And all thy waves break me" (31-32), there is every effort towards pushing death as far away as possible for as long as possible. It cannot stand to reason, Milton's psalmist argues, that God will work wonders for the dead. The dead will, by definition, not even know them. Prayers—and their answers—are only proper to the living. "In darkness can thy mighty *hand*/ Or wondrous acts be known,/ Thy justice in the *gloomy* land/ Of *dark* oblivion?" (49-52) Here, Milton emphatically attributes darkness and gloom to oblivion and the land of the dead. But this added ascription of darkness and despair now points to a disturbing fear, and a kind of courage, on Milton's part. The Old Testament psalmist might have sung as he did, for what did he know of the realised truth of Christ and everlasting life in him? But the poet of "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" belongs in the New Testament world, in which the Saviour has already lived and left a legacy of possible salvation. Should death be quite so dark to a New Testament singer? Does physical darkness of the eyes make it difficult to even imagine the possibility of future light? If so, how can this psalmist still pray? It is also striking that in Milton's interpretation, if the dead are characterised by anything, it is by their "pale and hollow eyes." They are blind indeed that have unseeing eyes even after they are free of their mortal selves. Did they ever see?

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<sup>203</sup> Richard Standfast, *A Dialogue Between a Blind Man and Death* (London, 1686).

The Psalm continues in the only manner it can: with prayer. “But I to thee O Lord do cry/  
*Ere yet my life be spent,/ And up to thee my prayer doth bie/ Each morn, and thee prevent*” (53-56). The singer undergoes God’s terrors, as he says, “[a]stonished with thine ire.” There is no other way open to him. “Lover and friend thou hast removed/ And severed from me far./ They *fly me now* whom I have loved,/ And as in darkness are.” There is heartbreak enough in verse 18 of the biblical psalm. As the King James Version has it: “Lover and friend hast thou put far from me,/ and my acquaintance into darkness.” But Milton intensifies the pain—and the deep emotional fear—with agency of departure shifted over to those who have been the object of the singer’s affections: it is “[t]hey” who “*fly me now*.”<sup>204</sup> The darkness that the “[l]over and friend” find themselves in in Milton is the more poignant because it is not darkness in an absolute sense. They are *as* in darkness. Paradoxically, the darkness in fact belongs to Milton’s consciousness, even as the flight belongs to lover and friend. Through this syntactical bifurcation of agency, a wide cosmic longing concentrates itself on the loss of human loved ones.<sup>205</sup>

A yearning for “lover and friend” is not new for Milton. Milton’s hankering after companionship and friendship is evident from his earliest correspondence, and this seems to have stayed with him and possibly intensified through later years of work and blindness. In 1625, Milton wrote to his erstwhile teacher Thomas Young: “You complain (as you justly can) that my letters to you are quite few and very short; but I [...] rejoice and almost exult at holding that position in your

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<sup>204</sup> The Geneva Bible translates with an emotional thrust similar to what Milton offers. In the Geneva Bible: “My louers and friends hast thou put away from me, and mine acquaintance hid themselues” (Psalm 88:18). The Bishops’ Bible agrees more with the King James Version: “Thou hast put a way farre from me my frende and neighbour: [thou hast hid] mine acquaintaunce out of sight” (Psalm 88:18).

<sup>205</sup> This is indicative too of the poet’s awareness of the unenviable social value of blindness. As we have seen, he will remain sensitive to the social cost of his condition even in 1654, while writing to his Athenian friend Leonard Philaras.

friendship which can require frequent letters.”<sup>206</sup> From Cambridge in 1628, he complained to Alexander Gill of “finding almost no intellectual companions here.”<sup>207</sup> In a letter to his friend Charles Diodati in 1637, there was the confession that “if I find anywhere one who, despising the warped judgment of the public, dares to feel and speak and be that which the greatest wisdom throughout all ages has taught to be best, I shall cling to him from a kind of necessity.”<sup>208</sup> A life of intellectual pursuit, as the maker of “Il Penseroso” knew, could be a lonely one. But Milton could work through it. As he told Diodati in an earlier letter, “my temperament allows no delay, no rest, no anxiety—or at least thought—about scarcely anything to distract me, until I attain my object and complete some great period, as it were, of my studies.”<sup>209</sup> But sometimes, this dedication to scholarship is not enough. By 1647, what he misses is referred to in terms of vision and loneliness: “[T]hose whom character, temperament, interests had so finely united are now nearly all grudged me by death or most hostile distance and are for the most part so quickly torn from my sight that I am forced to live in almost perpetual solitude.”<sup>210</sup> This image of his friends being “torn from my sight” by “death” or “hostile distance” is in apparent contradiction to the sentiment of Psalm LXXXVIII, where “[t]hey *fly me now*.” But these repeated references, in 1647 and 1648, to human and relational concourse bring into relief the complex mindscape of a man grasping for his position of human

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<sup>206</sup> “Letter 1, to Thomas Young, 1627 (?)” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 311.

<sup>207</sup> “Letter 2, to Alexander Gill, 1628” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 314.

<sup>208</sup> “Letter 8, to Charles Diodati, 1637” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 327.

<sup>209</sup> “Letter 7, to Charles Diodati, 1637” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 323.

<sup>210</sup> “Letter 11, to Carlo Dati, 1647” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. II (1959), 762-763.



regard in the world as his eyes give out on him. They also underscore that if essential authorial responsibility for Milton's blind verse rests with the poet, then another equally essential hands-on obligation and charge must also have been assumed and executed by those around him in his years of visual unmooring. If in sighted days Milton had sought intellectual company, in the sightless ones, sheer necessity made him draw around himself a support network of readers and amanuenses.<sup>211</sup> Thus, blind language is indebted to the collectivity of labour and perhaps affection around the man whose physical condition of restricted participation in the world inspired it. Much of this collective labour is, to current-day readers, invisible. But if we are willing to look and listen beyond a simple authorial virtuosity (Milton's own), we register the myriad sustained and sustaining hours of service and help that made the poet's continued intellectual and creative work possible. Of most of these hours of assistance and aid, we have no record. Yet some testimonies emerge and indicate palimpsestically the network of care that must have existed around Milton. Edward Phillips mentions Milton supplying himself with eyes through his daughters.<sup>212</sup> The anonymous biography earlier conjectured to be by John Phillips and now taken to be by Cyriack Skinner similarly records that "[t]he Youths that hee instructed from time to time servd him often as Amanuenses, and some

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<sup>211</sup> On 5 March 1652, Herman Mylius saw Milton for the last time, and wrote in his diary: "He gave me to understand his friendship in the most lavish terms, and gave me another two copies of the original *Salvanguardia* and of the Latin translation signed by his own hand, despite the fact that he is wholly deprived of his sight in his forty-second year, and so in the flower and prime of his age." Quoted in Leo Miller, *John Milton and the Oldenburg Safeguard: New Light on Milton and His Friends in the Commonwealth from the Diaries and Letters of Hermann Mylius* (New York: Lowenthal Press, 1985), 214-15. See also Milton's 1655 correspondence with Leo Van Aizema and Ezekiel Spanheim over his books. Spanheim was one of many who wrote to Milton without introduction from a third party, and in expectation of intellectual exchange. Milton's reply in 1655 was characteristically generous: "I am not surprised at being greeted by a foreigner; nor could you estimate me more accurately than to deem that I count no good man foreigner or stranger." See "Letter 26, Milton to Ezekiel Spanheim, March 24, 1655" in "Milton's Private Correspondence," *Complete Prose Works*, vol. IV pt 2 (1966), 873.

<sup>212</sup> Darbishire, 77.

elderly persons were glad for the benefit of his learned Conversation, to perform that Office.”<sup>213</sup> The Quaker Thomas Elwood provides a testimony of Milton’s ability and generosity as a listener-reader and teacher. “He, perceiving with what earnest Desire I pursued Learning, gave me not only all the Encouragement, but all the Help he could. For, having a curious Ear, he understood by my Tone when I understood what I read, and when I did not: and accordingly would stop me, Examine me, and open the most difficult Passages to me.”<sup>214</sup>

Milton never stopped reading—albeit increasingly through the eyes of others. The anonymous early biographer [Cyriack Skinner] documents that even through his fall in fortunes, Milton was “not sparing to buy good Books; of which he left a fair Collection.”<sup>215</sup> Milton’s letter to Emery Bigot in 1657 confesses, “I am not angry at written words nor do I entirely cease studying them, severely though they have punished me.”<sup>216</sup> Here, Milton may be retelling his version of the story that he lost his eyes “overplied” through study or he may be saying that the greatest hurts he has received have come to him through written words. Either way, he cannot give them up. What he has read, he will remember. What he has not, he will, if he can lay hands on it, “read.”

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<sup>213</sup> Darbishire, 33.

<sup>214</sup> Darbishire, lv.

<sup>215</sup> Darbishire, 31. See also the letter from Milton to Peter Heimbach in 1656 calling one hundred and thirty florins—a very substantial sum of money at the time—something more than he felt inclined to spend on the “Mauritanian Mount Atlas”. This is astounding for what it tells us about Milton as a bibliophile. “Since to me, blind, pictured maps could hardly be useful, surveying as I do the actual globe with unseeing eyes, I fear that the more I paid for the book, the more I should mourn my loss.” Yet, Milton continues to consider the further “furnishing of [his] library.” See “Letter 30, to Peter Heimbach, November, 1656” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works*, vol. VII (1980), 494-95.

<sup>216</sup> “Letter 31, to Emery Bigot, March 24, 1657” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works*, vol. VII (1980), 497.

### Blind Song: 1653

With memoried reading, we return to 1653 when with the appointment of Philip Meadows to assist him, Milton was effectively relieved of many official duties. In August 1653, he went back to playing with the strange incantatory power of the remembered verses of the psalms to make new verses—in new meters. Contra what we might expect—that Milton’s growing dependence on mnemonic aides would eventuate in easily-followed meters and rhymes—the short and sharp biblical psalms I-VIII are recast in novel and irregular verse forms that follow a more complexly tuned ear. In the space of these eight poems, only once is a rhyme scheme repeated in Milton’s translations: Psalms V and VIII each have *abab*. All the rest carry out individual rhyme schemes: Psalm I is entirely in couplets; Psalm II does *terzetti* in *aba bcb cdc* and so on; Psalm III has four stanzas in the vein of *aabccb*; to mix it up, Psalm IV traces *abbacc* along seven stanzas; Psalm VI accomplishes two stanzas of a delicate *abbacd-dcebbe*; and Psalm VII achieves nearly eleven full stanzas of *ababba*. And even as themes from the prior set—sorrow, loss (of eyesight, of God’s regard, of friends), and the need for divine favour—return, now, with nothing marked in separate type, there is implicit admission of the subjective potential of the exercise. This potential is not left idle. For instance, in Psalm 1:2, the usual translation for “*hāgāh*” [הגה] is to “meditate,” but Milton’s psalm has the autobiographically more potent “studies” (Psalm I, 6). In place of the King James Version’s “Hear me when I call” at the opening of the biblical Psalm 4, Milton generates the emphasis he wants with “Answer me when I call” (Psalm IV, 1). Memoried reading makes for new strategies of composition that are a function of deep internalisation of the poetry of the psalms, and of the personal, increasingly blind, human history the psalms can stand for and articulate. This set of psalm translations allows us to see the various ways in which Milton continues to work through the terms of his newly complete blindness both when he thematises his disability *and* when he does not explicitly do so. Blindness becomes an evolving body of knowledge—to use Siebers’s assertion of

disability as a particular kind of embodied knowledge—and the visual loss is variously made mood for the compositions and means of memory; matter of the translations and method of probing the biblical psalms themselves; metaphor and present reality.

Most additions or expansions in Milton's translations draw out the terse imagery of the Hebrew Bible. Milton's Psalm III provides a good example, while also echoing the emotional unsettledness around affliction that we have seen in the 1648 psalm translations and shall again with greater intensity in his Psalm VI. Although drawing from the biblical 3:6, "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people,/ that have set themselves against me round about," Milton heightens the sense of being closed upon: "Of many millions/ The populous rout/ I fear not though encamping round about/ They pitch against me their pavilions" (Psalm III, 15-18). Milton's "I fear not"—an accurate translation—becomes appropriate acknowledgement of the possibility and validity of fear. As he renders in the psalm, "Many are they/ That of my life distrustfully thus say,/ 'No help for him in God there lies'" (Psalm III, 4-6). But, continues Milton's singer, "thou Lord art my shield my glory."

But thou Lord art my shield my glory,  
Thee through my story  
Th' exalter of my head I count  
Aloud I cried  
Unto Jehovah, he full soon replied  
And heard me from his holy mount.  
I lay and slept, I waked again,  
For my sustain  
Was the Lord.  
(Psalm III, 7-15)

Both the biblical psalmist and Milton attest that God is their support and shelter. But Milton's singer, independent of the Hebrew Bible, underscores his singing of his story: the story that is even now *being* sung ("Thee *through my story*/ Th' exalter of my head I count"; my emphasis). In this singer's enduring present tense, notwithstanding the Psalm's immediately subsequent account of gaining God's nurturing attention, there is something of a prayer for things not yet received but

desperately hoped for. In *his* story/*his* *story*, God is always the “exalter of my head.” It is a story that repeats—and is each time a genuine story, in that it is ever open-ended and ever fulfilled. Each time the singer is “with dangers compassed round” (*Paradise Lost*, VII.27), he thinks on his God, is sustained, and his song can thus each time vindicate his naming of God as the exalter of his head. This disabled poet’s blind body of knowledge aspires to be a body of faith. For in the right faith (or the right assertion of faith) is the right repose, the assurance of the divine regard.

Psalm IV is again concerned with reassurance of God’s regard: “On us lift up the light/ Lift up the favour of thy countenance bright” (29-30). The psalm ends with a recognition that in all likelihood, divine approval is selectively bestowed, and the selection itself might crucially rest on the individual’s apart-ness and difference from the usual and the typical. The biblical Psalm 4:2 asks: “O ye sons of men, how long will ye turn my glory into shame?” In his Psalm 4, Milton asks this question with equal emphasis, but directs it to the worldly powerful “Great ones.”

Great ones how long will ye  
My glory have in scorn  
How long be thus forborne  
Still to love vanity,  
To love, to seek, to prize  
Things false and vain and nothing else but lies?  
(Psalm IV, 7-12)

As an ardent believer in the “mighty weakness of the Gospel” to “throw down the weak mightiness of mans reasoning,” this psalmist has news for these individuals of worldly might.<sup>217</sup>

Yet know the Lord hath chose  
Chose to himself apart  
The good and meek of heart  
(For whom to choose he knows);  
Jehovah from on high  
Will hear my voice what time to him I cry.

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<sup>217</sup> *The Reason of Church Government*, in *Complete Prose Works*, vol. I (1953), 827.

(Psalm IV, 13-18)

Milton's psalmist insists on God's deliberate choice of the singer. Where the Hebrew Bible is content to call the singer a "godly" man, Milton adds that this is a man chosen "apart" by God for himself. The man so chosen must learn to expect derision and harassment in the world.

Paradoxically, worldly misfortune enables the hope that God takes an interest. In this construction, it is possible to talk about the misfortune in positive terms. To do that, of course, the singer must first accept his misfortune: register it, own it, even consent to be defined by it. The singer, if he is to be the "person separate to God" (*Samson Agonistes*, 31), must understand his essential alone-ness in the world, and make his peace with it. And this, of course, is exactly what Milton will do with his blindness, and what his blindness will do for him.

In Milton's Psalm VI, that understanding and ownership of darkness appears to be the fundamental objective. Translated three days after Psalm IV and a day after the sudden buoyancy of the conclusion of Psalm V ("they shall ever sing/ And shall triumph in thee, who love thy name" 35-36), Milton's Psalm VI opens with a recognisable appeal that God depart from just anger to grant undeserved mercy: "Lord in thine anger do not reprehend me,/ Nor in thy hot displeasure me correct" (1-2).<sup>218</sup> But probably the greatest recollection of the 1648 set is in a Miltonic interpolation to the Bible's "Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weak" (Psalm 6:2). Milton's psalmist sings: "Pity me Lord for I am much deject,/ Am very weak and faint" (3-4). Milton evokes the power of grief to convert itself into physical pain and loss: "For all my bones, that even with anguish ache,/ Are troubled, yea my soul is troubled sore" (5-6). All the while, the singer waits in nearly incapacitating distress. Glancing back at his Psalm LXXXVIII—or in a kind of aural echo to the

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<sup>218</sup> The insistence on song in Milton's Psalm V is again his own. The King James Version has: "But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice:/ let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them:/ let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee."

earlier “In darkness can thy mighty *hand*/ Or wondrous acts be known,/ Thy justice in the *gloomy* land/ Of *dark* oblivion?” (Psalm LXXXVIII, 49-52)—Milton’s psalmist now cries: “Turn Lord, restore/ My soul, O save me for thy goodness’ sake/ For in death no remembrance is of thee;/ Who in the grave can celebrate thy praise?” (Psalm VI, 7-10). A great exhaustion cum debilitation cum intimidation from quarters invisible threatens to overcome the singer, perhaps to the point of the extinction of song.

Wearied I am with sighing out my days,  
Nightly my couch I make a kind of sea;  
My bed I water with my tears; mine eye  
Through grief consumes, is waxen old and dark  
I’ th’ midst of all mine enemies that mark.  
(Psalm VI, 11-15)

The singer’s eyes, unfortunate organs of sorrow, are being consumed by grief. Their steadily-disappearing light—“Through grief consumes”—tries to unsuccessfully stay what follows in the achieved tense in the next few words, “is waxen old and dark.” With unseeing eyes, the singer is now among enemies that appear to be aiming at/for him. This sense of being “marked” registers Milton’s panic at being surrounded by malignant agents, and it does so via a term that is resolutely ocular.<sup>219</sup> Again, a metrical contingency might well have nudged Milton into this accentuation of the Bible’s suggestive but less explicit offering that “My eye is consumed because of grief;/ it waxeth old because of all my enemies” (Psalm 6:7). But we only find “dark” in the previous line to potentially

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<sup>219</sup> The etymology of the verb similarly indicates the overwhelmingly *visual* basis of a distinguishing mark: “Cognate with Old Frisian *merkia* to notice, Middle Dutch *marcken* to put a mark on, notice, Old Saxon *markon* to design, destine (also *gimarkon* to direct, command, discern), Old High German *markhōn* to limit, determine (German *marken* to put a mark on (now rare), German regional (Tyrol) *markhen* to set up a markstone), Old Icelandic *marka* to draw the outline of, put a mark on, observe, heed, Old Swedish *marka* (Swedish regional *marka* ) to put a mark on.” See [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

have warranted this “mark.” We note that this “dark” too is Milton’s elucidation of the Bible’s perfect-tense “consumed.” No other translator of the psalms uses this shadowy adjective.<sup>220</sup>

In this supreme adversity, God finds the singer. The psalmist sings:

[T]he voice of my weeping  
The Lord hath heard, the Lord hath heard my prayer  
My supplication with acceptance fair  
The Lord will own, and have me in his keeping.  
(Psalm VI, 17-20)

The overwhelming relief of these lines is dramatically offset by the absence of any talk anymore of reclamation of the eyes. Milton’s psalmist makes it clear that God found him in his moment of greatest darkness and will keep him “with acceptance fair.” Indeed, the ostensible darkness is the means and marker using which God located the singer and set him apart for himself. This makes the darkness, in Milton’s construction, something to be accepted, perhaps even celebrated. Later, in the *Second Defense*, he will go so far as to lay out what he understands to be the implications of his condition—even as he will impute a more consequential blindness to those who attack him.

Finally, as to my blindness, I would rather have mine [...]. Your blindness, deeply implanted in the inmost faculties, obscures the mind, so that you may see nothing whole or real. Mine, which you make a reproach, merely deprives things of color and superficial appearance. What is true and essential in them is not lost to my intellectual vision. [...] Nor do I feel pain at being classed with the blind, the afflicted, the suffering, and the weak (although you hold this to be wretched), since there is hope that in this way I may approach more closely the mercy and protection of the Father Almighty. There is a certain road which leads through weakness, as the apostle teaches, to the greatest strength. May I be entirely helpless, provided that in my weakness there may arise all the more powerfully this immortal and more perfect strength; provided that in my shadows the light of the divine countenance may shine

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<sup>220</sup> For instance, the Bishops’ Bible offered, “Mine eye is almost put out through grief: and worn out through all mine enemies” (6:7). The Douay-Rheims translated simply: “My eye is troubled through indignation: I have grown old amongst all my enemies” (6:8); and the King James Version rendered: “Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies” (6:7). The Geneva Bible contains what is closest to Milton’s offering, with “Mine eye is dimmed for despite, and sunk in because of all mine enemies” (6:7).



forth all the more clearly. For then I shall be at once the weakest and the strongest, at the same time blind and most keen in vision. By this infirmity may I be perfected, by this completed. So in this darkness, may I be clothed in light.<sup>221</sup>

Milton's political rhetoric here balances, indeed, celebrates physical debility against spiritual strength, in conspicuous reverberation of 2 Corinthians 12:9 (which would become for Milton a kind of personal motto): "And he said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." In the context of the final equanimity of Milton's Psalm VI, we note too the echoes of the biblical Psalms 18:28 ("For thou wilt light my candle:/ the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness") and 139:12 ("Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee, but the night shineth as the day:/ the darkness and the light are both alike to thee").

Despite the confidence expressed in Psalm VI, it is temporary, perhaps even a performative wish. In Psalm VII, Milton's psalmist falters again. "Upon the words of Chush the Benjamite against him," he sometimes stridently, sometimes plaintively, pleads righteousness while being less than absolutely sure of it: "if wickedness/ Be in my hands, if I have wrought/ Ill to him that meant me peace,/ [...] Let th' enemy pursue my soul/ And overtake it, let him tread/ My life down to the earth" (Psalm VII, 8-10, 13-15).

It is only in Psalm VIII—Milton's final translation in this set—that a quiet and surprised confidence becomes an exultation and then, simply, joy. A blind man feels a dark light he cannot see, and calls it vision in the assurance that he stands—and perhaps waits—under a regard he has long longed for.

When I behold thy heavens, thy fingers' art,  
The moon and stars which thou so bright hast set,

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<sup>221</sup> *A Second Defence of the English People*, trans. Helen North, *Complete Prose Works* vol. IV pt 1 (1966), 589-90.

In the pure firmament, then saith my heart,  
    O what is man that thou rememberest yet,  
  
And think'st upon him; or of man begot  
    That him thou visit'st and of him art found?  
Scarce to be less than gods, thou mad'st his lot,  
    With honour and with state thou hast him crowned.  
(Psalm VIII, 9-16)<sup>222</sup>

God's regard for the poet is couched within Milton's own beholding (or, more precisely, his memoried beholding) of the heavens, as though to establish that mutuality, belonging, and all-over reciprocal seeing that his psalmist has for so long been advocating for. Milton's translation exercises stop here, with his registering of himself—and indeed, all of humankind—as remembered, seen, visited, even exalted.

The interim exercises of Milton's psalm translations are, therefore, generative of a fractious and restless, yet deeply sustaining energy for the translator. The 1653 set, in particular, exists in that moment in Milton's life when he makes his blindness his own, after more than a year's being in it. Through these translations, Milton achieves a practice of what we may call composing himself blind: finding a composure in his blindness, while also finding it possible to compose in and through it. Henceforth, he will not only talk about his peculiar gift, but in a manner typical of him, talk about it on his terms, as his own, *even as his deliberate choice*, willing himself to derive from it a hard and tenacious assurance. Arguably, this is also Milton's moment of decisively reassigning himself to poetry. Epic poetry lies ahead—and blind language will there learn anew how to accomplish

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<sup>222</sup> Another poet had not long ago written in a similar abandonment of pleasure that was also surprise and acknowledgment of greater favour than had ever been anticipated. George Herbert documents the start of his day as an unsettling and at the same time deeply appropriate reminder of his place in the world and in the eyes of his creator: "I cannot ope mine eyes,/ But thou art ready there to catch/ My morning-soul and sacrifice:/ [...] My God, what is a heart?/That thou shouldst it so eye, and woo,/ Pouring upon it all thy art,/ As if that thou hadst nothing else to do? ("Matins," 1-4, 9-12). See Chapter II of this dissertation.

representation and meaning. But in this transitional moment, if perceptibly failing light was a fearful thing, in Milton's hands it was arguably also an acute and prospective creative tool. Writing himself into blindness ensured Milton's ability to write blind, for there was nothing for it anymore but to own his blindness and make it poetic language.

### **All in a Night's Work**

An arresting emotive power informs a short piece undertaken in Milton's conscious conjugation of blindness and language. It is the last poem in the Trinity Manuscript of Milton's poems. Sonnet XIX (in the manuscript, numbered "23") is a poem recording a memory of a dream: a dream that the poet is at best profoundly ambivalent about waking from, although he must wake to write. He thinks he saw something/someone the other night; he wishes he could have held his vision. Again, an amanuensis inscribes what is essentially intimate.

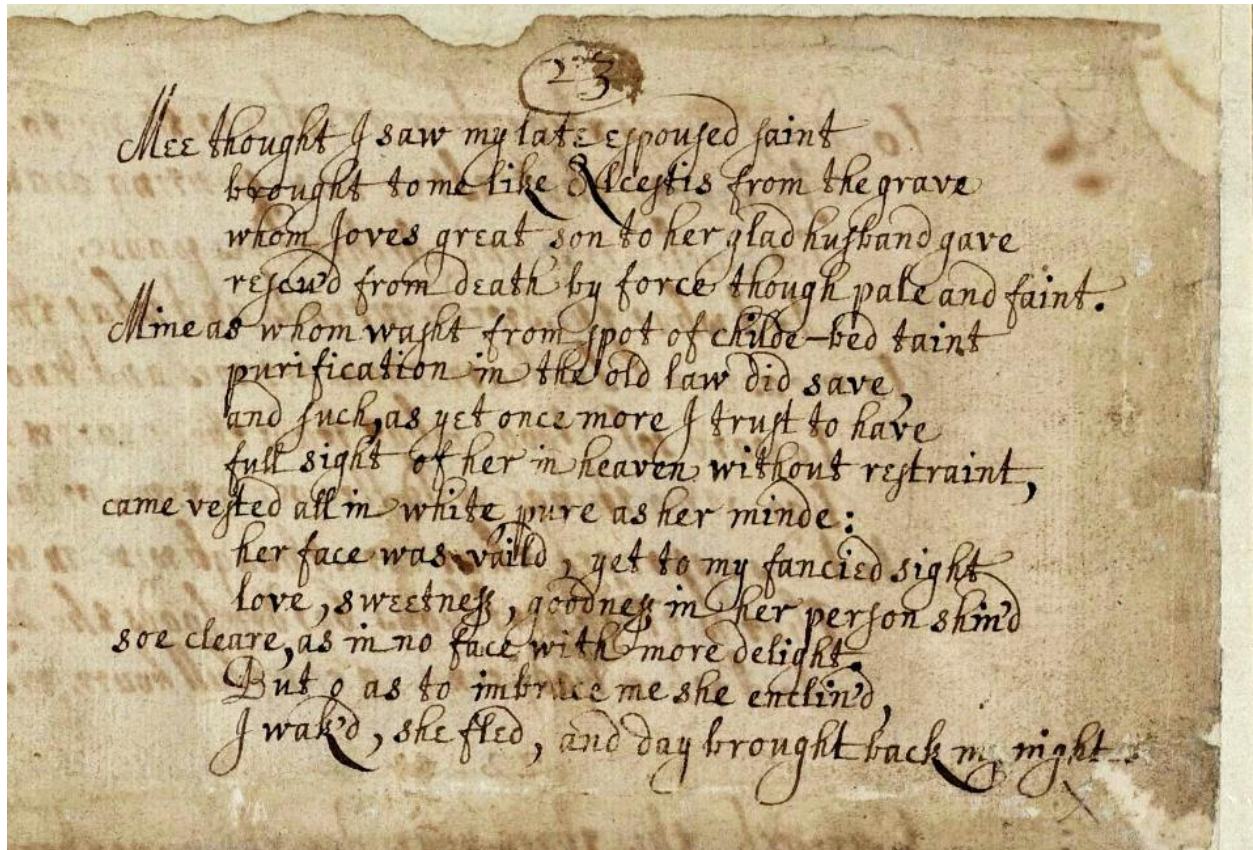


Figure 44. The Trinity College Manuscript of John Milton's Poems, R.3.4, p. 50

Reproduced from the Trinity College Library Virtual Manuscript, [http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r\\_3\\_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1](http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r_3_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1)

Methought I saw my late espoused saint  
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,  
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,  
Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.  
Mine as whom washed from spot of childbed taint,  
Purification in the old Law did save,  
And such, as yet once more I trust to have  
Full sight of her in heaven without restraint,  
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:  
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,  
Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined  
So clear, as in no face with more delight.  
But O as to embrace me she inclined  
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.  
(Sonnet XIX)

Something about the sonnet's emotional pitch and achievement seems to have resisted sustained critical engagement. Or perhaps the very dreamlike nature of its topic has proved hard for scholars to materially grapple with. Indeed, the most robust arguments surrounding it have been about the identity of the person who is the poem's subject. Some critics have proposed that the subject of the poem is Milton's second wife, Katherine Woodcock: his "late" or recently espoused wife, whose face had always been "veiled" to Milton, for they had married in 1656, after he went blind, and whose name, from the Greek *katharos*, "pure," may have inspired the phrase "pure as her mind." Others have proposed his first wife, Mary Powell, who actually died in "childbed," and whom Milton *had* seen in his sighted days, and may therefore "yet once more [...] trust to have/ Full sight of" in heaven.<sup>223</sup> There is perhaps no poetry in the Miltonic canon that can boast as much wide and admiring readership while also garnering so little critical attention—beyond, that is, the debate about "which wife."<sup>224</sup> I am not here concerned with the identity of the late espoused saint of Milton's who is the subject of the sonnet. What concerns me is the poet's representation of his unusual vision. The poem's deeply ambivalent narration of blindness, together with his dream/memory/memory-of-a-dream, demonstrate the disconsolate but unambiguous power of his visual affliction for Milton: they show Milton's comprehension and even assertion of sight as a sense that transcends the eyes, and show him using poetry to break and hold his dreams.

This sonnet begins and ends with the poet's blindness. There is such an ownership of the (non) visual condition at the heart of the poem that the poet repeatedly refers to it: "[m]ethought"

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<sup>223</sup> Thus, the date of the poem's composition, too, is mainly determined by the evidence of the hand of the scribe who copied the poem into the Trinity manuscript. Critics agree that the writing is by Jeremie Picard, who came to serve as Milton's amanuensis after 1655. The sonnet was first published in Milton's 1673 volume of *Poems*. Milton's biographer W. R. Parker first questioned Katherine Woodcock's being the subject of this poem, suggesting Mary Powell instead. See Parker's "Milton's Last Sonnet," *Review of English Studies* 21:83 (1945), 235-238.

<sup>224</sup> The poem is widely anthologised, but has received disproportionately few critical engagements.

he saw something, he says, deliberately skirting actual sight; what or whom he sees is somehow also “veiled” to him; “yet once more” at some point in some future he trusts to have “full sight” of what he sees; he has but a “fancied sight” even at his acutest perceptive moment in the poem; and finally, he wakes to have day bring back his night. None of these mentions of the absence of regular visual facility is either straightforward joy or simple grief. Instead, delight and sorrow are complexly intertwined, especially in the poet’s awareness that the intensity of the vision is enabled by the reality of blindness. The dream vision is particularly remarkable for the poet precisely because of vision’s unattainability outside dreams. What/whom the poet sees in the dream is celebrated because she is in the poet’s life doubly absent—the poet cannot see her because she is dead, and the poet cannot see her because he cannot see. (He may never have seen her. Or he may have seen her, but in his blindness felt the loss of her visual presence even when she was around.) An intricate wistfulness thus saturates several levels of consciousness—until the poet gives it expression, leaving accessible the multiple layers of uncertainty and desire. First, his late espoused saint is “[b]rought to me like Alcestis from the grave” (brought by whom?) and “rescued from death by force” (whose force?)—yet she alone and by her own agency “[c]ame vested all in white” and inclined to embrace her late husband. Second, she came “*as* [one] whom washed from spot of childbed taint,/ Purification in the old Law did save” (my emphasis)—her actual purification and post-mortal state of redemption by the “old Law” thus cast into question by the very mention of the once-husband’s dream of such salvation for his wife. Third, “[h]er face was veiled” yet apparent in it *and* in the rest of “her person” were “love, sweetness, goodness”—all these, “[s]o clear, as in no face with more delight.” Within the incoherent coherence of the dream, these are not contradictions, but certitudes and aspirations that the dreamer must nevertheless wake and depart from. Subsequently, in the post-dream wakefulness of the poet, these ostensible paradoxes are owned and inscribed to extend what is already memory.

These are deep longings. In the invocation of Book III of *Paradise Lost*, for example, Milton will write this out again and expressly.

Thus with the year  
Seasons return, but not to me returns  
Day, or the sweet approach of ev'n or morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,  
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine  
(*Paradise Lost*, III.40-44)

In Sonnet XIX, sight and the beloved exist together, appear and leave together—and what the dreamer awakes to becomes poetry. By the time Milton composes the sonnet, he is dreaming while awake, dreaming of night, and dreaming of both his last light, of the past, and his last and final light, of the future.

Looking to the future—the “yet once more” that the poet gestures towards—the sonnet records a trust and hope even while it announces that the vision at the heart of it is almost a premonition. *As he has had in his dream*, the poet asserts, there will come a time when he *will* have full sight in heaven without restraint—as though even the fullest of mortal sight was and remains somehow restrained. As in the dream, so in heaven ultimately, Milton trusts: love, sweetness, and goodness will be readily apparent (even) through the veiled face of a composite figure of affection, notwithstanding the subject's vision or lack thereof. And just as qualities of goodness will shine through “her person”—*all* her person, without restraint—so too will the apprehension of these qualities belong to a holistic regard and perceptive faculty that draws from, yet operates beyond, a simple visual register. The love, sweetness, and goodness are—and will be—*felt* as much as seen. The (post)human regard will be as close as possible to, perhaps, the timeless divine regard. Sight will operate in a register that transcends the mortal function of the eyes. In terms of literary reflexiveness, this is a presentiment of Samson's intense physical desire for sight to be available “as

feeling [and] through all parts diffused,” so that a person may “look at will through every pore.”<sup>225</sup> In terms of Milton’s acknowledgment of his present and wakeful absence of sight, this is an odd and audacious near-prophecy of attaining such vision in heaven as no one alive can muster, except in dreams (or, perhaps, prayer). In terms of poetic harvesting of powerful images, this is profoundly considered resonance with the creative potential that Milton will later afford Adam’s dream, where the first man in the world sees his companion in his own “fancy my internal sight” (*Paradise Lost* VIII.461)—and wakes to find her beside him.

I waked  
To find her, or for ever to deplore  
Her loss, and other pleasures all abjure:  
When out of hope, behold her, not far off,  
Such as I saw her in my dream, [...]  
Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye.  
(*Paradise Lost*, VIII.478-482; 488)

Adam explicitly receives from Milton what the poet records he does not have. In Sonnet XIX, “But O as to embrace me she inclined/ I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.” The final couplet completes the devastating affective turn with the same fierce power that marks the end of Sonnet XVIII (where the very *thought* of his contribution towards liberty might lead him through the world’s vain masque, content though blind, had he no better guide) and concludes Sonnet XVI (where they also serve who only stand and wait, as is discussed in the next section of

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<sup>225</sup> Since light so necessary is to life,  
And almost life itself, if it be true  
That light is in the soul,  
She all in every part; why was the sight  
To such a tender ball as the eye confined?  
So obvious and so easy to be quenched,  
And not as feeling through all parts diffused,  
That she might look at will through every pore?  
(*Samson Agonistes*, 90-97)



this chapter). But the final couplet of Sonnet XIX is also the dénouement of a movement throughout this poem from what can be seen to what cannot, a translation of what may be obtainable in vision to what may not. Liminal though she is, Alcestis, pale and faint and brought to Admetus by Hercules is intensely and eerily visually available.<sup>226</sup> The flushed and visceral sadness of a childbed death is chillingly associable with sight, and indeed, the image almost overpowers the spiritual idea of purification and salvation that is evoked immediately afterwards.<sup>227</sup> Even with the assertion of salvation, the persisting memory remains that of death, pain, and loss.<sup>228</sup> So too is a woman in white, even with her veiled face, entirely amenable to vision. But then we have love, sweetness, goodness, and delight. Here, the images end, allowing mnemonic connotations, through the associative power of poetry, to take over. Specialised or “fancied” sight, as we have seen, becomes explicitly a matter of amalgamated sense, emanating from and available to a composite sensibility. “Love, sweetness, and goodness in her person shined/ So clear, as in no face with more delight.” This is the climax of the dream, and here language too might have stopped, with the dreamer’s contentment, allowing the dreamer his embrace, the desired culmination of the dream, the togetherness where language is no longer necessary. But such a culmination is not to be, and this moment of greatest positive sensibility is also the moment directly preceding and therefore cueing the start of the dreamer’s awakening. Milton records the instant where, alongside the poet’s waking

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<sup>226</sup> In Euripides’s play *Alcestis*, Hercules rescues Admetus’s wife, who gives the play its name, from her grave. The death and resurrection of Alcestis form the subject of numerous ancient reliefs and vase paintings.

<sup>227</sup> See particularly Louis Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15-48.

<sup>228</sup> This is a matter of poetic expression precisely because it is a matter of the poet’s unresolved memory and hope. And this, in turn, is because this is about what is greater than a single man’s memory. At the end of the day, this is a world of widespread female death owing to reproductive complications, and simultaneously one of widespread infant mortality.

consciousness, language must similarly return to carry the weight of wakefulness and its attendant longing. It is almost all stress at the close of the sonnet, slowing the poem into awakening and anguish, a dreamer opening his eyes into blindness, which is also exquisite poetry: “**But O as to embrace me she inclined/ I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.**” Each syllable in the final line is a word and a unit of sense and loss. They fly him now, whom he has loved, and as in darkness are.

### Blind Language

When he considers how his light is spent, a man who has all his life felt tardy and old, suddenly feels young: “When I consider how my life is spent,/ *Ere half my days*, in this dark world and wide” (Sonnet XVI, 1-2; emphasis mine). Long before this spending, Milton had imaginatively contemplated the experience of departing light. The identity of the intended recipient of a letter by Milton to an “unknown friend” of his youth remains a subject of conjecture, but evidence of Milton’s handwriting and the accompanying poem’s place in the Trinity Manuscript—a draft of the letter contains the poem we now call Sonnet VII—allow confidence in dating it to 1633 or thereabouts, when Milton would have been transitioning from university life in Cambridge into wider social and political community.<sup>229</sup> Caught between his inclination to be serviceable to the

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<sup>229</sup> In the Trinity Manuscript, after “Solemn Music” and before “Time,” there are two drafts in Milton’s handwriting of a letter to an unnamed friend. A possible interlocuter is Milton’s erstwhile tutor, Thomas Young. The letter is undated, but the first draft of it contains Sonnet VII (“How soon hath time the subtle thief of youth,/ Stol’n on his wing my three and twentieth year”) as example of the poet’s “nightward thoughts some while since.” Besides the identity of the unnamed friend, critics also debate the date of the poem. To many, the completion of Milton’s three-and-twentieth-year, 9 December 1631, counts as the date of composition. Milton’s biographer William Riley Parker, however, instances Milton’s method of dating some of his Latin poems to advance that this poem would have been written by Milton *in* his three-and-twentieth-year, in 1632. Whatever the exact date of poem and letter, the documents mark a young man’s concern with consequential work in the face of the onrush of time. See “[To a Friend]” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 319-20.

world with his scholarly endeavours and his singular “desire of honour & repute, & immortall fame,” all that the conscience—“which I firmly trust is not w<sup>th</sup>out God”—of this young scholar with almost “too much love of Learning” had been assured of was “this my tardie moving.”<sup>230</sup> Rooted in his awareness that “the day with me is at hand wherein Christ com[m]ands all to Labour while there is light,” was his mounting sense of the fast transience of that light.<sup>231</sup> Milton knew that Christ himself had exhorted, “Walk while ye have the light” (John 12:35), and that, while healing the man blind from birth, Christ had explained: “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). In his turn, Milton registered the urgency of timely action. The sonnet proclaiming and lamenting his “late spring” (Sonnet VII, 4) in the letter to his unnamed friend indicated how his own “belatednesse” grated on him.<sup>232</sup> But he had soon written himself into a consolation that argued for an imminent coincidence of divine will and personal ripeness. Sheltered both by circumstance and metaphor, he had known his ability to look his great task-master in the eye and present his finest effort at the right time. Long before his blindness, and in the anxious precocity of his mid-twenties, he had written this out in his precise and practised hand.

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<sup>230</sup> “[To a Friend],” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 319-20.

<sup>231</sup> “[To a Friend],” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 319-20.

<sup>232</sup> “[To a Friend]” in “Milton’s Private Correspondence,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 319-20. In the context of Milton’s intense awareness of time, see also Blair Hoxby, “Milton’s Steps in Time,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38, no. 1 (1998): 149-172.

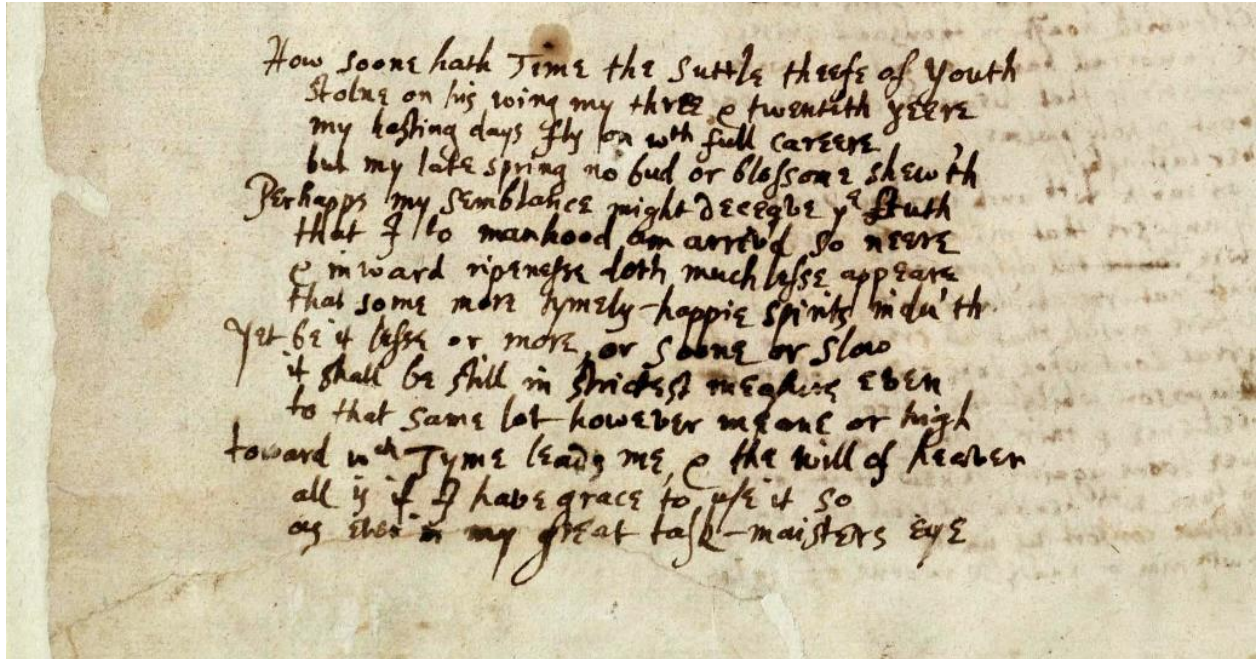


Figure 45. The Trinity College Manuscript of John Milton's Poems, R.3.4, p. 6

Reproduced from the Trinity College Library Virtual Manuscript, [http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r\\_3\\_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1](http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r_3_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1)

Here is the sestet of his final assurance:

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,  
 It shall be still in strictest measure even,  
 To that same lot, however mean or high,  
 Toward which time leads me, and the will of heaven;  
 All is, if I have grace to use it so,  
 As ever in my great task-master's eye.  
 (Sonnet VII, 9-14)

But a couple of decades on, things are different. The metaphor is now close to the bone—too close, almost, to remain metaphor. There is no manuscript copy of Sonnet XVI (Milton's sonnet "On His Blindness") extant from Milton's time, in Milton's hand or anyone else's. To us, its first appearance is in the 1673 *Poems*.

When I consider how my light is spent,  
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
 And that one talent which is death to hide,  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my maker, and present  
 My true account, lest he returning chide,  
 Doth God exact day-labour, light denied  
 I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need  
 Either man's work, or his own gifts, who best  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his state  
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
 They also serve who only stand and wait.  
 (Sonnet XVI)

This poem still divides critics on its time of composition. Some date it to 1652, shortly after Milton became completely blind, and others, who take the ordering of the 1673 *Poems* as indication of chronology, time it to 1655.<sup>233</sup> Whatever the date of composition may be, Milton writes out his yearning soul bent to present before his maker his true account, perhaps his true poem. The sonnet builds breathlessly, aware of its precarious position in a dark world that is the darker for being wider than perhaps its poet had ever taken heed. The near-surprise and apprehension are registered with a hard brevity that repays repeated metrical stress: **“this dark world and wide.”** In his forties and intellectual prime, a scholar and polemicist takes stock of his achievements, and records his sense of being prepared to give back to discourse and deliberation in a manner befitting his long and painstaking learning. But now blind, he fears that his one talent, this well-honed intellectual capital, is in peril of unemployment precisely at the point at which it should be most used.<sup>234</sup> The “one talent

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<sup>233</sup> See Jonathan Goldberg's excellent “Dating Milton,” in Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus, eds, *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 199-220.

<sup>234</sup> “[To a Friend]” in “Letters by Milton,” *Complete Prose Works* vol. I (1953), 319-320.

which is death to hide” activates a resonance with the financial capital mentioned in Matthew 25:14-30. The parable of the talents concludes with a frightening judgment: “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness.” In Milton’s long-ago letter to his unnamed friend (in which he had bemoaned his own “belatenesse”), he had argued that “the terrible seasing of him that hid the talent” was educational but did not speak to his own situation directly; Milton had counted himself as someone “not taking thought of beeing late so it give advantage to be more fit, for those that were latest lost nothing when the maister of the vinyard came to give each one his hire.”<sup>235</sup> But this assurance of productivity and consequence may seem facetious when the very means of using his literate and sighted training, his eyes, are no longer his to command. What answer might he now present to his maker “lest he returning chide”? Summoning the critical force of two verbs deployed and temperamentally withheld by the proclaimed “fondness” of the “ask,” the poem at this point moves from acknowledgment of the poet’s limitation towards claiming a potentially unreasonable generosity on the part of his creator: surely God will not *exact* day-labour from one light-*denied*. But a personified Patience, quite unable to pre-vent—in the full etymological sense of coming before, and therefore *staying*—such a murmur of weighty discontent, soon replies that the poet must reason not the need with the maker. God, Patience appears to say to the anxious poet, does not need from man. An intense quiet and reassurance now attempts the place of the agitation that had opened the poem. But repose, if such it is, must not be confused with rest. At the close of the sonnet, the talent so far claimed to have been lodged useless within the poet is used with stunning power. The end of the sonnet confronts readers with surprise and inevitability in equal measure: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Just when it had appeared that Milton’s

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<sup>235</sup> Milton’s reference here is to Matthew 20:1-16.

maker did not need him Milton to do anything other than believe in the divine presence, it becomes clear that in Milton's version of this story, God always did have needs and expectations of his creatures. Who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. Milton inserts himself into the equation in a manner as immeasurable as inexorable. He inscribes his inhabitation of human service at its most passionate: the ability to remain passive to an incomprehensible divine yoke. In a prefiguration of Jesus at the climax of *Paradise Regained*, Milton asserts the reciprocal gift and grace of those who blindly stand and wait in the eye of a taskmaster they cannot see. It is here, in this unreserved lack of mutuality and ability—which Milton nevertheless offers in this poem as a position of response, grace, and poise—that we must now consider the characteristics, affordances, and powers of blind language.

### **The Metaphorical, the Structural, the Cognitive, the Rhetorical, and the Affective**

There are two caveats and three propositions to keep in mind before we can understand the properties of blind language. Even as I delineate what it means for sighted-trained language to go blind, the blind language that we are reading and reading for here and in the next chapter is *Milton's* blind language. It is Milton's poetic language as it emerges in the physical and physiological contingencies of approaching and final blindness. Yet, there are resonances beyond this apparent singularity. My reading of Milton's last long verse will show how his blind language helps us understand poetry as a generative link between disability and creativity, and how it allows us to conceptualise language as a means for creatively responding to and functioning in a variously-abled consciousness. But in this dissertation, and towards forming a framework whose most serious claim to wider contribution must remain its rigorous particularity, I shall read blind language as Milton's specific response to and creation out of visual affliction. Thus, we shall see Milton's blindness as a condition for the great poems that have placed him so firmly within the canon of English (and

Anglophone) literature for several centuries, and we shall be positioned to contemplate our own inhabitations within a language deeply influenced by and inherited from Milton and consequently, perhaps, also vestigially blind.

The next—and related—point about blind language is that its consideration is not an exercise in reification of an abstracted visually-disabled person or populace; it is, instead, a commitment to understanding the lived and the particular conditions of such creative/writing lives, goals, events, and perhaps habits in a world where the prompts for literary composition are as numerous as the circumstances of the individuals who find themselves embedded in them. In this dissertation, the study of blind language is about understanding Milton’s blind and manifestly literary writing.

As for my propositions: first, blind language is, fundamentally, language. That is, it is a means of verbal communication embedded both within wider conventions of meaning-making and within the particular contingencies of its context.<sup>236</sup> Thence, it is also a tool shaped out of a specific personal and political situation of intellectual power held within a real disenfranchisement in society and ability. It is a means of talking, and talking back. It is a tool wielded for political purposes—although, as we know, this is politics of a *longue durée* and therefore inextricably intertwined with the ethical, the aesthetic, and the organic development of meaning across cultures and periods. It is here that blind language owes to and extends disability studies, in whose framework the aesthetic is always-already associated with and valued for a drive towards inclusion, justice, and equity.

Second, blind language is poetic language. It is not the language uttered when the poet sits down and asks for dinner. Milton’s blind language occurs when the poet composes. It is language

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<sup>236</sup> The first definition of the word, as recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is instructive in its obviousness and simplicity. Language is “[t]he system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure.” See [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).



that bears the weight of poetic intentionality even as it carries the weight of visual difference and its attendant physical realities, accommodations, and exclusions.

Third, in being language, and in being poetic language, blind language acts out and writes out the unfolding of time. Poetry is a phenomenon that happens, for both writer and reader, across time, and in which the experience of pleasure—or discovery and meaning—is similarly spread across time.<sup>237</sup> Blind language uses this property of poetry to self-generate from its own past, hold itself together, and to engender and hold together its reader's/hearer's comprehension and attention. The fulfilment of blind language belongs within the temporal dimension which gives all poetry meaning. Obviously, this is not to mark a distinction for blind language from other poetic language. It is, instead, to mark continuity and underscore that Milton's past sighted training in poetry constitutes as much of the foundation of his blind language as his blindness does.

In our understanding of blind language as language, poetic language, and poetic language aware of its realisation in time, we can now identify the properties of blind language. These properties may, almost more for reasons of convenience than because they allow us purchase on the poetry itself (for the greatest purchase still remains in the themes, images, and constructions of the poetry), be classed into the following five categories: the metaphorical, the structural, the cognitive, the rhetorical, and the affective. These categories are not exclusive. They meld and divide organically even as we speak about the verse that exemplifies them. But they offer an orientation as we look at poetic language that readers of Milton know, and even love, but to which we perhaps necessarily, and in our inhabitation of the infrastructures and realities of a normatively organised world, bring a majority-sighted lexicon, eye, ear, and appreciation. If the categories defamiliarise Milton's verse to

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<sup>237</sup> For different but related treatments of the unfolding of language through time to make meaning, see, for example, Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), and Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

his readers long enough for us to see the work it does as poetry generated by a blind poet, they will have done their job.

The metaphorical valence of blind language is an obvious place to start. That blind language uses metaphor is not to say much. All language uses metaphor, and certainly poetic language does. Even in the insistent convergences and divergences of Milton's poetic language with some of the most powerful metaphors of his time and ours, such as relate light with life, the visual with the intellectual, and darkness with blindness and death, Milton's blind language is not more than remarkable than, say, Shakespeare's or Herbert's. It is another kind of metaphorical valence to Milton's blind language that concerns me here. Blind language's use of metaphor is synaesthetic, and therefore enables associations that are lateral (with the radial carrying across that is the work of *metaphorein*) and unpredictable (where the stimulation of one cognitive pathway can produce an experience in quite another). That is, blind language engages many senses at the same time, with sometimes one unusual sense doing the work of another. There is also a messy depth to this synaesthesia—for while blind language is synaesthetic in the sense that one type of stimulus evokes sensation of another kind, it is also synesthetic in a subtler manner, in that it asks a different register of engagement to hear, process, and understand the work accomplished by rhymes and rhythms that operate *beneath* normal perceptive range. As such, blind language involves a multiple-senses' engagement for a reader/listener. If Milton, as Gordon Teskey asserts, was always microtonal, that capacity now helps him, in and after blindness, towards an aural integrity that can hold together 10,565 lines of poetry *without* rhyme.<sup>238</sup> This is associative power and music of a different order.

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<sup>238</sup> “By *microtonal* (a term borrowed from music) I mean subtleties of assonance that affect us unconsciously as we read because they fall beneath the level of attention at which we perceive rhyme.” See Gordon Teskey, *The Poetry of John Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 15. *Paradise Lost* has 10,569 lines in its ten-book version (1667) and 10,565 lines in its revised twelve-book version (1674).

The structural follows. Blind language is bent language—language bent syntactically, operationally, and rhythmically to the limits of its uses, and sometimes beyond, thereby creating new possible pacings, ambiguities, suggestions, and meanings. This too may appear to be quotidian for all poetic language, especially utilised in, for instance, the verse of John Donne, Emily Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. But as we proceed, we shall see in Milton’s verse certain orders of verbal disturbance and rearrangement of syntax, peculiar inversions and delays, hidden rhymes and resonances, and a tensile strength that is more than elasticity—features through which the previously impossible later become inevitable. This bending of language is at once the most pervasive and the scruffiest aspect of blind language, but valuable because it allows our most considered look at Milton’s verse “after blindness.”

By and because of this bending, blind language carries a great mnemonic potency and even adhesiveness. That is, it is language that sticks in our memories, and language that facilitates associations across cognitive registers. This is the cognitive aspect of blind language. For all the characteristics of blind language, but maybe especially here, it is important to resist ascribing its development to a compensatory greater-flourishing of his other senses—a sort of super-ability to Milton’s poetic aptitudes. Although blind language is assuredly founded in loss, memory, and desire, to read blind language as compensatory tacitly posits a model of disability as the path towards reparative super-ability in other ways, and similarly to posit that the sighted Milton is the lesser poet for having his vision.<sup>239</sup> There is a kind of allure—an allure Milton knew—to thinking about the lone blind poet who beats the odds of circumstance to compose heavenly verse. But to submit to that

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<sup>239</sup> The inaccuracies, pitfalls, even violences of such a line of thinking have been laid out at length in disability scholarship. Even a deeply considered and pragmatically-focused/activist-oriented notion such as “disability gain”—whereby disability is reframed as a source of gain—is critiqued when the critical power of loss is elided in the eagerness to claim profit or benefit from disability. See, for instance, Michael Davidson, “Cleavings: Critical Losses in the Politics of Gain,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 36:2 (2016), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v36i2>.

allure is also to write off the substantive continuities between Milton's poetic composition before and into blindness: the intractable years of study and training and conscious application; the hard and pragmatic drive towards composition in a man despite his knowledge of the precariousness of his social and political condition; and a continued cultivation of scholarly and poetic skills. My argument is therefore for something both simpler and less divine than a lone blind poet celestially or at least supernaturally assisted into magnificent poetry. I argue for an evolution in poetic habits of thought, formation, and expression. Today, neurologists have a language for this re-wiring of the brain to accommodate sensory loss.<sup>240</sup> But in this dissertation, which does not seek explanations in the medical sciences of cognitive circumnavigations of lost senses, I shall show how Milton's blind language re-members itself, and similarly makes us participate in an exercise of recollection and renewal of language.

We next come to the rhetorical. Blind language is explicit about its need for its readers' help towards its completion and fulfilment. All language can be said to be about communication, and to therefore ask and reward exchange. But blind language, which is literally a function of community and participatory physicality, insists on a continued reciprocity. Over the years, Milton's verse learns to both give and ask more. This is not the same as saying that he gets better as a poet—although that may well be an assertion we wish to make—but that there is an open ask for the participation of the reader. Insights from disability studies, particularly the notion of “collective access” (whereby various abilities work *together* towards a particular task), again help as we watch for the moments in Milton's later verse in which the reader's engagement and participation are directly solicited. Meaning is a function of that collective access. As twenty-first century readers/listeners, we similarly also watch/listen for the moments where compositionally or editorially, the labours of the first

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<sup>240</sup> See, for instance, Oliver Sacks's *The Island of the Colorblind* (New York: Vintage, 1997), *The Mind's Eye* (New York: Vintage, 2010), and *Hallucinations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).]

writers or recorders of Milton's blind verse might become perceptible. Interdependence is a fact of life; it should not take us a crisis of physicality or connection to alert us to this. But sometimes, it does. Blind language, which comes out of a crisis, does not have the dubious luxury of ignorance about fundamental human interdependence; it makes explicit its command of help in either direction, its avowal of the importance of mutual regards.

Finally, blind language is a function and expression of a peculiar joy; this is the affective dimension of blind language. Almost counter-intuitively, I assert the affective dimension of blind language not so much as something that operates at the level of affect itself, but at the level of craft. If memory is about both mind and muscle, if joy is a delight in repetition of what works, then blind language is an enactment of a special kind of poetic confidence and drive, an extraordinary Erasmian *copia*.<sup>241</sup> It is abundant in the sense both of lavishness and sufficiency. This is what allows it to be extravagant and minimalist at the same time. In existing Milton scholarship, we call extravagance and minimalism the relative styles of Milton's two epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Analysis of blind language invites us to think about them also as rage at and peace with the dying of the light. This is not to suggest a sequential progression, as though through quasi-medical stages of affliction. It is, however, to propose a human journey of continued experimentation, a persistent capacity for surprise and humour, and an unrelenting investment in and application of poetic dexterity.

Obviously, blind language is not all these things—metaphorically suggestive, structurally innovative, cognitively distinctive, rhetorically insistent, and affectively buoyant—at once. But it is often more than one of these at the same time. Also obviously, blind language has serious thematic stakes: it takes up blindness as matter of theme, composition, even inspiration, just as it works with blindness as practical circumstance. In so doing, this language wrestles with loss, pain, and sustained

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<sup>241</sup> See Erasmus's *De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia* (Paris, 1512).

desire. For as we have seen in this chapter and shall again in the next one, at the heart of Milton's blind compositions there is continued regret, loneliness, and anger—just as there is a recursive movement towards sensing and asserting the profound proficiencies of incorporeal insight. If Milton ever fully exchanged the delights of his sighted days and pursuits for the severer pleasures, as he claimed, of indrawn/withdrawn/inner vision, reflection, and composition, his poetry does not stand unambiguous witness to that transfer. But it is that lack of resolution, that tussle, that ever-in-process coming-to-terms-with that affords Milton's final verse its structural elasticity, its stern confidence, and its last and lasting generative pleasure.

## CHAPTER IV

### Writing Blind: John Milton 2

In this chapter, I demonstrate the fulfilment of the metaphorical, structural, cognitive, rhetorical, and affective valences of Milton's blind language in *Paradise Lost*. Through my reading *for* and *of* blind language in this epic, I argue that *Paradise Lost* evidences the mechanics (in terms of both matter and metaphor) of the poet's extended compositions in his blind days; permits insights into his continued meditations on visual debility even as he claims his position in the world as maker and author; presents Milton's audacious and successful patterning of metrical language outside the conventions of rhyme (the better to set off deeper reverberations throughout this massive verse undertaking); and finally, offers a sense of Milton's fraught yet essential accommodation and ownership of visual disability through his poetic language.

Scholars of Milton have always known of the poet's biographical circumstance of blindness, but we have not thus far adequately considered the fact that the poetic labour responsible for the creation of the greatest epic composition in the English language is a blind labour, or labour undertaken in a condition of blindness. My work emphatically acknowledges the blind condition of this colossal poetic effort. Indeed, I place Milton's blindness centrally within the aesthetic aspiration and achievement of *Paradise Lost*. Apart from opening up the poem for ever deeper pleasure and reward for a twenty-first-century audience, this marking of the blind tectonics of *Paradise Lost* reminds us that although critics have with good reason attributed Milton's grand syntax to the poet's cosmological vision and his skill as a Latinist, we need to also remember a more grounded reason for

it, namely, the poet's writing of himself into modes of practical memory and creation as his world proceeded further beyond visual mnemonics and orientation. Through the consideration of blindness as fundamental to the poetic accomplishment of *Paradise Lost*—and a commitment to reading the poem with a consistent mindfulness of its blind generation—my work urges twenty-first-century critical conceptions of poetry to take consequential measure of the affirmative capacities of blind writing.

As I mark the five (and often interconnected) properties—the metaphorical, structural, cognitive, rhetorical, and affective—I identify in Milton's blind language, I also indicate how blindness inheres in Milton's verse as both matter of composition (theme) and method of composition (compositional strategy). I argue that it is the fundamental emotional and intellectual *working through* his blindness, and exploring, with infinite care and a kind of taut devotion, the lived and figurative associations of blindness (from human disgrace to spiritual privilege to vast ethical questions of mortal choice) that animates Milton's major epic. Blindness, as readers of *Paradise Lost* know, is sometimes overtly the theme of composition (for instance, in the invocations). I offer that blindness is also often subliminally the theme of composition, for the epic recursively returns to the very questions of reason and choice and insight and heedlessness that, as we have seen, are so entrenched within discourses of sight and its lack in early modern England. I similarly contend that his blindness becomes, for Milton, the very thing that gets him composing. I don't entirely mean this in a quotidian sense (for example, along the lines of "what can a very learned blind person of Milton's time and station in life do *but* compose?" although we might well want to consider such a question). In saying that blindness is part of compositional strategy for Milton, I mean instead that his visual condition becomes, for Milton, part of the essential intellectual and emotional apparatus that allows him to take up the enormous questions of reason, choice, accommodation, ability, grace, dishonour, and desire that move the epic and those who engage with it.



Milton's back-and-forth organisation of the "action" of *Paradise Lost* to a large extent influences the organisation of this chapter—as I show, the sequence of the poem is of consequence for readers'/listeners' experience of it. Following the structure of the epic thus allows us to follow the lines of mnemonic and associative, culminative and propulsive, momentum and energy that I see as key properties of blind language. But ultimately, this chapter is concerned not so much with a comprehensive reading of *Paradise Lost* as it is with marking those moments of the poem that most powerfully indicate their blind vitality and drive, and thence opening up the poem to more generous, generative, and expansive readings than a normative—or genius-ridden—conception of it has thus far allowed.

### **Darkness Visible**

In this section, I spend some time in detailed readings of passages that generate and reward anticipation across stretches of the poetry at hand. This is to indicate the mechanics of blind language, something that speaks directly to the structural, but also to the cognitive, metaphorical, and affective qualities of this poetic language that I want to highlight. Structural deferral and delay, as I show, breeds cognitive and affective anticipation in readers'/listeners; the resultant composite engagement is the very basis of what makes Milton's blind verse work. I shall continue to engage with these qualities as I proceed in the epic, but it is especially important to foreground them now, at the start of the poem, where the poet sets up so much of what will engross his readers'/ listeners' minds and ears and keep them attuned. I shall not attempt, in so many words, the rebuttal of myriad veins of criticism—for praise *or* for censure—that connect Milton's visual loss to the purported

absence of adequate visual detail in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>242</sup> Instead, my readings will indicate not only the abundance but also the power of Milton's blind visuality. They will also lay out just how the

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<sup>242</sup> To recapitulate parts of this longstanding discussion: critics from Samuel Johnson to T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, Theodore Banks, Stephen Dobranski, and Jane Partner have tried to trace what Milton's blindness meant for his poetry, or what the visual—or inadequately visual—properties of his poetry have meant for the aesthetic achievement of the verse Milton is best known for. Johnson asserted that Milton's "images and descriptions of the scenes or operations of Nature do not seem to be always copied from original form, nor to have the freshness, raciness, and energy of immediate observation." See *The Lives of the Poets: A Selection*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105. T. S. Eliot claimed that "Milton's weakness of visual observation [...] was always present—the effect of his blindness may have been rather to strengthen the compensatory qualities than to increase a fault which was always present." See *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1943), 177. F. R. Leavis noted that Milton focused "rather upon words than upon perceptions, sensations, or things." See "Milton's Verse," *Reevaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), 49. Theodore Howard Banks, in a similar vein as Eliot did, proposed a kind of compensatory development of Milton's other senses: Milton's "visual sense [...] weakened, but his other senses—smell, hearing, and touch—became more quick and sharp." See *Milton's Imagery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 137. Troubling all of these opinions of Milton's visual paucity of imagery in his epic(s), of course, is the fact that *Paradise Lost* has inspired visual artists for centuries. See, for instance, the works of William Blake and Gustave Doré, to name only two of the most famous of those who have sketched, drawn, and painted from Milton's works. For accounts of other artists and their engagements with Milton's verse, see also Robert Woold, Howard J. M. Hanley, and Stephen Hebron, *Paradise Lost: The Poem and its Illustrators* (Grasmere: the Wordsworth Trust, 2004) and Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton and English Art: A Study in the Pictorial Artist's Use of a Literary Source* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970). Stephen Dobranski rightly takes issue with the idea that "a reliance on memory dulls a writer's visual acuity." Dobranski oddly references decades-old works of scholarship to declare that "psychologists have concluded that a person who goes blind after the age of seven does not experience a decline in mental imagery or visual memory." Accounts by blind persons might have served Dobranski better than accounts by psychologists, and alerted him to the fact that there are more kinds of visual carry-overs or non-carry-overs in blind individuals than psychology studies might well encapsulate. He is correct, however, to claim that Milton "would not have been hampered in envisioning the world of his epic simply because he could no longer see his own." His exploration of how "Milton combine[s] poetic tradition and seventeenth-century culture to render the invisible visible" is thus fruitful in its own right—despite the limitation he places on himself to look predominantly for the *visual* in the imagery of *Paradise Lost*. See *Milton's Visual Imagination: Imagery in Paradise Lost* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3-5. Jane Partner's work, the most recent in this thread, reads the "symbolic and structural pre-eminence of sight" in *Paradise Lost* to uncover what she calls Milton's purpose in the poem: "to educate the eyes of his readers." Partner's valuable argument of "[t]he shift from physical to spiritual vision that occurs during *Paradise Lost*" nevertheless does not seek to engage with the full weight of lived blindness for the poet's rhetoric of inner and inward sight. See *Poetry and Vision in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 213-258.

language of the poem achieves the composite sensuality and the intellectual and emotional reach it does.

*Paradise Lost* begins in “a place of utter darkness, fittest called chaos” (“The Argument” to *Paradise Lost*, Book I). But before even beginnings, there are other beginnings. Before the start of the story, there is the teller of it. Milton folds these beginnings one into another in an opening that is both command and entreaty, an acknowledgment of human inadequacy and an assertion of perfect poetic ability. A de-pendent pre-position—“Of” (I.1)—leads into cause and matter and scope of the poem: “man’s first disobedience, and the fruit/ Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste/ Brought death into the world, and all our woe,/ With loss of Eden, till one greater man/ Restore us” (I.1-5). This in turn leads into a statement of form; the heavenly Muse and the poet will “Sing” of all this (I.6). This leads into unambiguous personal claim that in its very contention betrays the poet’s longing to touch and move his reader or listener—“I thence invoke thy aid to my advent’rous song,/ That with no middle flight intends to soar/ Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues/ Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (I.12-16).

A single sentence achieves all this, over sixteen lines of blank verse that at once pulls our expectations of sentence-length to what is certainly longer than what twenty-first-century English allows, and longer too than the average sentence of Milton’s time, *and* urges us to listen for the delayed verb, the imminence that only when we encounter it, we shall recognise with a shock of pleasure as memory. “Of” all these many things, “Sing heavenly Muse.” (If we go one level deeper within the nested sentence, we similarly listen for the deferral and fulfilment of “till one greater man/ Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.”) Milton is certainly helped by the content of the story he wishes to tell. The story of events that will populate this song is well known. But as ever with Milton, events by themselves mean little. He is about to make this story of events a story of causes. In fact, it will be his task and prerogative to gently unsettle cause and consequence, to make

apparent causality suspect to the point where the only consequential matters are reason and reason-abled-choice. We shall begin to hear and anticipate differently as we proceed or re-read. Adjectives both build up and give things away; only, we don't realise the giving away until afterwards. For instance, it was a "mortal" taste, that of the fruit of the forbidden tree—no wonder, then, that it brought death into the world. Eden was a "blissful" seat to have lost and to naturally therefore want to regain. And it is the "chosen" seed, long ago taught by the heavenly Muse, in whose emulation this poet now wants to sing; what surprise then that there is such ambition and assurance to his utterance. Unattempted all this may or may not be in prose or rhyme thus far.<sup>243</sup> It does not matter; this song too is neither prose nor rhyme. It will define its own form as it builds, certain only of aiming for "the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another."<sup>244</sup> Adventure is not just adjective to this poet's song, it is intrinsic to it—and we are made, from the very outset, complicit in its onward movement.

After a long breath at the end of that opening sentence, the next section is striking for its extravagant desire.

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,

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<sup>243</sup> Scholars of Renaissance epic know that such a claim to novelty was a common opening convention. See, for instance, Ludovico Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso* (1516): "Cosa non detta in prosa mai, né in rima,"—"things never told in prose, nor in rhyme" (Canto I, verse 2; translation mine).

<sup>244</sup> Note on the verse of *Paradise Lost* (added in 1668, in the fourth issue of the first edition). Milton makes an explicit case of his departure from conventional metric patterning. In his note on the verse to *Paradise Lost* (added in 1668, the fourth issue of the first edition), rhyme is "the invention of a barbarous age," serving contemporary poets mainly for "vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise." In his own rejection of rhyme is Milton's implicit assertion that *he* aims for "true musical delight; which consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoided by the learned ancients both in poetry and all good oratory." If Milton is clear about what he wants to avoid, namely rhyme and all its "troublesome and modern bondage," he is also clear about what he wants to achieve: "an example set, *the first in English*, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem" (emphasis mine).

Instruct me, for thou knowst; thou from the first  
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss  
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert the eternal providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.18-26)

All bets are on. This will have to be a true poem, for the Spirit that must instruct the poet knows to choose the upright heart and pure above all temples.<sup>245</sup> The instruction is crucial help for the poet, since the Spirit knows the story both by insight and priority—“thou from the first/ Wast present.” But this poet needs yet another kind of assistance: “what in me is dark/ Illumine, what is low raise and support.” This is not all metaphor, although the poet uses the metaphor for its power even as he gently signals the literal help he stands to gain. For he does ask actual visual help: “Say first, for heaven *hides nothing from thy view*/ Nor the deep tract of hell” (27-28; emphasis mine) It is because the Spirit has *seen* things that this poet asks this help. In this respect, of course, the poet’s blindness is no different from general human blindness—for no creature from the first was present or has seen what the Spirit has. But this blind poet writes the visual interest explicitly in; his visual lack is something that, in material terms and metaphorical ones, he will keep returning to.

The poem ultimately takes up the highest of stakes. Providence has willed and enabled things a certain way: a blind poet, a fallen humankind, a history of loss, and a frightening and mortal capacity of a people to return to past mistakes and commit them again.<sup>246</sup> The stakes matter at the

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<sup>245</sup> On Milton’s idea of the “true poem,” and the requisites of the poet capable of creating one, see Chapter III.

<sup>246</sup> It is worth remembering that *Paradise Lost* is ultimately a product of the post-Restoration years. Milton’s disillusionment with the Protectorate fiasco nevertheless failed to make him think favourably of the return of monarchy and Charles II. Even with the Restoration of 1660 imminent, Milton wrote and published *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (February 1660), which earned him the serious wrath of the powers coming into office. (It is likely that Milton would

level of the individual and of the world. Both ways, God needs justification, perhaps even accommodation in human terms.<sup>247</sup> That is the task Milton now sets himself, blindly asserting together the need for such justification on his maker's behalf, and his own capacity to deliver it. Blind language will make this possible: through its metaphorical qualities (its self-reflexive use of the figuratives around light and dark as also around vision and its lack, and its considered harnessing of myriad senses to satisfy anticipations along unexpected sensory or conceptual lines); its structural qualities (its amenability to being stretched to the limits of normal and normative use, and its ability to expand those limits), its cognitive qualities (its capacity for re-collecting, and its corresponding mnemonic "stickiness" for its reader or listener), its rhetorical qualities (its explicit asks for apprehension and even help from readers/listeners), and its affective qualities (its sheer persistence and perhaps also exuberance, even in the face of the author's occasional self-pity and anger at his fate).

Something of the beginnings of blind language in the translated psalms of 1648 and 1653 is recalled in *Paradise Lost* in the eerie waste of hell. Hell is defined by nothing so much as a multivalent darkness.

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
No light, but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes

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not have survived to write his final long poems but for the intervention of powerful friends, such as Andrew Marvell.) *The Readie and Easie Way* is a frantic effort on Milton's part to turn his people and country away from what he sees as a retrograde step leading back to intellectual and social bondage. The disappointment that gave birth to *The Readie and Easie Way* was keen, and must only have been matched by Milton's disappointment that even this explicit document failed to influence history in the desired direction.

<sup>247</sup> As in the sonnet to Cyriack Skinner (Sonnet XVIII) considered in Chapter III, we may ask who requests this justification. Perhaps Milton above all.

That comes to all; but torture without end  
 [...]
 Such place eternal justice had prepared  
 For those rebellious, here their prison ordained  
 In utter darkness, and their portion set  
 As far removed from God and light of heaven  
 As from the centre thrice to the utmost pole.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, I.61-74)

In temper, this darkness of hell, which is marked by an active absence of divine light, yet is not for that reason devoid of its own vitality, is not distant from the energetic gloom of Milton's Psalm LXXXVIII ("Thou in the lowest pit *profound*/ Hast set me *all forlorn*,/ Where thickest darkness *hovers round*,/ In horrid deeps *to mourn*." 25-29; italics Milton's), or from the burning apprehension of the protagonist of *Samson Agonistes* ("O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,/ Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse/ Without all hope of day!" *Samson Agonistes*, 80-82).<sup>248</sup> But the "Prince" of darkness in *Paradise Lost* (I.128), Satan, almost like his author Milton, seeks to organise the obscurity away from chaos, and inhabit it elementally and productively.<sup>249</sup> The difference is that while the Miltonic singer had come to own the darkness in his Psalm VI, the rebel angels seek but to mimic light after their fall from it. Milton places craving and cravenness close to one another, in the process underscoring the willed intervention, the essential choice, that separates them. Satan speaks:

This deep world  
 Of darkness do we dread? How oft amidst  
 Thick clouds and dark doth heaven's all-ruling sire  
 Choose to reside, his glory unobscured,

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<sup>248</sup> A similar continuity marks the image of oblivion in *Paradise Lost* Book I's account of the fallen angels with Psalm LXXXVIII's terror about those who are forgotten by God: "of their names in heavenly records now/ Be no memorial, blotted out and razed/ By their rebellion, from the books of life" (*Paradise Lost*, I.361-363) is a kind of echo of: "And like the slain *in bloody fight*/ That in the grave lie *deep*,/ Whom thou rememberest no more,/ Dost never more regard" (Psalm LXXXVIII, 19-22).

<sup>249</sup> To present-day readers, such moments recall the idea of Milton being of the devil's party without knowing it, as William Blake famously opined.

And with the majesty of darkness round  
Covers his throne; from whence deep thunders roar  
Mustering their rage, and heaven resembles hell?  
As he our darkness, cannot we his light  
Imitate when we please?  
(*Paradise Lost*, II.262-270)

Being rebel angels, they lack the understanding that what appears to be “thick clouds and dark” surrounding “heaven’s all-ruling sire” is a matter of creaturely regard of inestimable brightness. This image of blinding (in the sense that it is *not* sensible to vision) brightness will recur in this poem, always in reference to the divine, which remains in this epic all-seeing yet consistently unseeable. Each mention of this paradoxical yet heavenly too-much-light-for-actual-sight at once speaks to and complicates the equation between sight and intellection that holds in early modern England. For as Milton repeatedly shows us in this epic, there is something to be said for the essential and even desirable condition of human blindness in the face of the divine. A nervous yet sustained energy of blind language resides precisely in this repeated revisiting of what allows metaphoric or material light or darkness to function as such, and in its negotiation of these through desire and even exposition of how fine a line separates the light from the dark.<sup>250</sup> “The mind is its own place” (I.254), Milton’s Satan knows, as Satan’s author Milton knows, as they too must know who enter this poem as readers and makers-up-of-their-own-minds.

Repeatedly, thus, the language of the poem is conceived of and deployed as a painter of pictures, a delayer of sense, a provoker of decisions, and a holder of memory—all charged with momentum towards fulfilment, and that in turn capable of setting off other actions, other expectations. The structural lusciousness of the increasingly-tensed yet expansively-leisured epic

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<sup>250</sup> A similar move had been made some lines ago, when Satan, “[v]aunting aloud but [in fact] racked with deep despair” (I.1126) had made the claim that the rebel angels’ side was “[i]n arms not worse, in foresight much advanced” (I.119).



simile around Satan at the burning lake is a case in point. Students of Milton note this virtuoso epic simile for Milton's wide-ranging allusiveness, but we have not fully considered its simple yet far-reaching enactment of dispersal and reassembly of mnemonic and emotional energy.<sup>251</sup>

Thus Satan talking to his nearest mate  
With head uplift above the wave, and eyes  
That sparkling blazed, his other parts besides  
Prone on the flood, extended long and large  
Lay floating many a rood, in bulk as huge  
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,  
Titanian, or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,  
Briarios or Typhon, whom the den  
By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast  
Leviathan, which God of all his works  
Created hugest that swim the ocean stream:  
Him haply slumbering on the Norway foam  
The pilot of some small night-foundered skiff,  
Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,  
With fixèd anchor in his scaly rind  
Moors by his side under the lee, while night  
Invests the sea, and wishèd morn delays:  
So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay  
Chained on the burning lake, nor ever thence  
Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will  
And high permission of all-ruling heaven  
Left him at large to his own dark designs,  
That with reiterated crimes he might  
Heap on himself damnation, while he sought  
Evil to others, and enraged might see  
How all his malice served but to bring forth  
Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn  
On man by him seduced, but on himself  
Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance poured.  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.192-220)

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<sup>251</sup> Scholars have pointed out, for instance, that there are echoes here of the sea-serpents swimming towards Laocoon in Virgil's *Aeneid* (II. 206-210), of the "old Dragon" in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (I.xi.8), Typhoeus in Homer's *Odyssey* (XI.305-320), and Typhon in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (V.325-358). For further possible associations, see Alastair Fowler's extensive note to this passage in his edition of *Paradise Lost*.

Milton's epic narrator interrupts the conversation Satan is having with Beelzebub to provide a visual image that itself contains another visual image, both working to set up sense, expectation, and eventual satisfaction. A single mazy unit, whose succession of images is nevertheless entirely clear, moves our mind and our mind's eye so finely over trepidation, hope, and anticipation of justice, that we hardly notice the ground and the worlds we cover. We are, as we begin it, at the lake of fire—whose flames' sloped and "pointing spires" and "rolled [...] billows" (I.222-224) we have not yet read, therefore not seen. To properly see them, we need scale. Thus it is that we begin with Satan's "head uplift above the wave, and eyes/ That sparkling blazed." But we must look away from this head before we can see it well. It is Satan's prone "other parts besides," which lie "extended long and large," to which we must turn. Covering many roods (a rood being a quarter of an acre), these other parts spread each as massive as the hugest of God's creatures, the one called leviathan.<sup>252</sup> Here, the second image inserts itself, and this image-within-image carries a vague menace that by outward mirroring catches the smouldering and sinister power of what it is ultimately synecdoche for. Leviathan lies like an island off Norway's coast, and a small boat attempts to use it to cast anchor. The vulnerability of the skiff (a function of both its size and its unawareness of what it is close to) is signalled by the adjective "night-foundered." Its mooring (which we now know is anything but) therefore becomes fearful anticipation, "while night/ Invests the sea, and wishèd morn delays." The nautical traveller's anchor is suspended in what is in equal measure hope and mischance (depending on whose point of view we take up—if we can by now separate the seaman's point of view from that of us readers), and like the wishèd morn, the culmination of this action is both metrically and sensibly delayed. Blind language wanders and re-members itself: structurally, it capitalises on deferrals and adjournments that activate memory and anticipation; cognitively, this training of its

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<sup>252</sup> On the ambiguity attached to this name, see Fowler's edition of *Paradise Lost*, Book I, n. 201.

reader in extension of near and far recall contributes to its mnemonic power and momentum. As the delay is acknowledged, it entails a fulfilment that itself doubles as a bigger deferral. When, in the verse, “**wishèd morn delays**” with a final stress to the line, it owns its position at the close but not yet full termination of the affair we have been considering. The sense returns to what it had swerved but not departed from, and proceeds to build again: “*So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay/ [...] nor ever thence/ Had risen or heaved his head, but that [...]*” (emphases mine) another action, which we now realise has been all this time outside all the actions we have been reading about, is brought to the fore. This bigger action, we now see, is both the consummation we have been primed to want, and an opening out into the poem in its entirety. That the “high permission of all-ruling heaven/ Left him [whose limbs, we now know, are as leviathans] at large to his own dark designs,/ That with reiterated crimes he might/ Heap on himself damnation, while he sought/ Evil to others,” is as reassuring as it is, at this point in the poem, actually unfulfilled. Satan is left at *large* to his *dark* designs—no surprises there, except to reinforce our sense of vindication that this must be so—but almost more comforting, in the aquatic wake of that unfortunate anchor we so recently saw, is the statement that “his [Satan’s] malice served but to bring forth/ Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shewn/ On man by him seduced.” The afterimage of land-that-is-not-land persists, even as it gives way, finally, to a sense of real mooring—which we nonetheless have yet to watch and wait for.

Such structural suspensions and anticipations will only intensify in *Paradise Lost*. For centuries now, critics have sightedly, normatively, and therefore, we might in unhappy metaphor say, blindly, analysed such remarkable instances of Milton’s “sense variously drawn out” in his grand epic. But there is an irony to thus reading this blind verse for what by common consent is its excellence, and thence inserting it into a normative model for the apex of epic narration. I offer, instead, that such passages become the richer for our being able to imagine them as a blind poet’s

composition of a morning or two (if we go by Jonathan Richardson's report that Milton in his blind days and particularly while composing *Paradise Lost* dictated "perhaps 40 Lines as it were in a Breath"); I argue that these structural, mnemonic, and affective build-ups are about a holding together that is also a casting forth.<sup>253</sup>

The slow but graphic action within which the simile we were looking at is set—that Satan wishes to rise from the lake and gather his counsel elsewhere—is indicative of Milton's intricate orchestration of his reader's/listener's attention. When Satan directs the eyes of those around him, he underscores anew the various and unreal hues of darkness visible to him, thus also making them appreciable, even if not actually imaginable, to us.

Seest thou yon dreary plain, forlorn and wild,  
The seat of desolation, void of light,  
Save what the glimmering of these livid flames  
Casts pale and dreadful? Thither let us tend  
From off the tossing of these fiery waves,  
There rest, if any rest can harbour there [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.180-185)

When Milton ends his epic simile comparing Satan to leviathan and has him rise, it is to launch immediately into another image, this time to compare the fiery flight of the huge rebel angel with the terrible momentum of a volcano. The grand visuality and surprising tactility of this action merit examination.

Forthwith upright he rears from off the pool  
His mighty stature; on each hand the flames  
Driv'n backward slope their pointing spires, and, rolled  
In billows, leave i' th' midst a horrid vale.  
Then with expanded wings he steers his flight  
Aloft, incumbent on the dusky air  
That felt unusual weight, till on dry land  
He lights, if it were land that ever burned

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<sup>253</sup> For Jonathan Richardson's account, see Darbishire, 291.

With solid, as the lake with liquid fire;  
 And such appeared in hue, as when the force  
 Of subterranean wind transports a hill  
 Torn from Pelorus, or the shattered side  
 Of thundering Aetna, whose combustible  
 And fuelled entrails thence conceiving fire,  
 Sublimed with mineral fury, aid the winds,  
 And leave a singèd bottom all involved  
 With stench and smoke: such resting found the sole  
 Of unblest feet.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, I.221-238)

The massive upward lunge—“Forthwith upright he rears [...] / His mighty stature”—of a figure whose limbs are as large as leviathan cognitively anticipates the tremor of the earth that will catch up with us a few lines later: “as when the force / Of subterranean wind transports a hill.” We might be tempted into successive spondees to begin this colossal action: “**Forthwith upright he rears.**” The thumping slowness then explodes into movement, with spires of flame dripping from the leviathan-like arms, alongside the billowing and furious heat of the space that has just been vacated. What could have been majesty in the flight of this awesome creature is obscured by our knowledge of his sinister motives, and more physically, by the dusky air which itself, which, the narrator mentions, appears to protest the “unusual” weight it bears. “[T]ill on dry land / He lights,” we are told. But this alighting / rest / escape from the burning lake is immediately questioned: “*if* it were land that ever burned / With solid, as the lake with liquid fire” (emphasis mine). As the “solid” fire is now described, with “combustible / And fuelled entrails” as of Aetna, we might again be looking at the dire limbs that were so recently soaked in flames. The final condemnation of Satan’s condition is sealed with a stunning threefold pun that detonates into pain: “such resting found the sole / Of unblest feet.” In trying to escape the lake of fire, the soles of Satan’s feet must land, “rest,” on singèd, burning, ground. Such, too, is the burning “rest” of the soul of the fallen angel. And behind “sole” and “rest” remain, in both actualisation and anticipation, Satan’s essential solitude and

isolation, his journey deeper into his setting himself sole apart from the divine and all the rest of faithful creation.

Again and again actions thus lunge forth, to pull back, to then plunge ahead one more time, like widening ripples in a lake. In their expansion, these ripples continually refer back to the centre, the small(er) action that produced an effect which, in its reference back, we now see, was in fact a larger action than the first effect would have had us catch. These repetitions and spreading circles generate a mnemonic pattern through which we process what we are see, hear, and register in the course of the poem. We learn to pay attention, to hear for fast or slow words, and to watch for recurring images and their evolving associations. Always, the sum is greater than the parts. A cumulative momentum is thus gained. As in the mind of its blind author, the epic builds on what we knew, what it has itself taught us, and what it continues to prime us to anticipate.

But such structural and cognitive affordances of blind language also perform another function for the epic. When something is *like* something else in certain respects—that is, when it can serve a metaphorical function—it can stand in *for* that something else in certain situations. Milton’s similes—always sensual, often visual, and frequently indebted to shared literary or contemporary memory—allow him to talk about things that no one has ever seen or can ever see or know. In its carrying-sense-across registers of imagination or knowledge, Milton’s blind verse undertakes to describe what is fundamentally unimaginable.<sup>254</sup> The structural and cognitive thus meld into and are

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<sup>254</sup> This is not the same as saying, as Samuel Johnson did as he pointed this out as an “inconvenience of Milton’s design,” that *Paradise Lost* “requires the description of what cannot be described.” Johnson conflates the unseeable/unimaginable/un-image-able with indescribable. As I show, the very human unseeable-ness of what Milton sets out to work with is a significant factor in what powers his descriptions. The worlds Milton creates are eminently describable in the register of blind language. See *Lives of the Poets*, 108. In this context, see also Andrew Mattison, *The Unimagined in the English Renaissance: Poetry and the Limits of Mimesis* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013).

in turn animated, even given purchase to, by the metaphorical. Here, for instance, is the famous description of Satan's shield, massive as the moon.

[T]he superior fiend  
Was moving toward the shore; his ponderous shield  
Ethereal temper, massy, large and round,  
Behind him cast; the broad circumference  
Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb  
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views  
At evening from the top of Fesole,  
Or in Valderno, to descry new lands,  
Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe.  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.283-291)

For all those who have never seen Satan's shield, Milton gives us the image of the moon as his world has begun to know it, thanks to the recent observations by Galileo: a mind-bendingly large heavenly body suddenly visible in its wondrous details of rivers and mountains at a distance scarcely conceivable on the human scale.<sup>255</sup> Not that scale is itself important beyond its suggestive potential. This is not about exactitude, or even merely about how sight can ostensibly be enhanced through prosthetic technologies. It is, rather, about the blowing open of proportion itself, as we register the cosmic measure of the world we shall spend the next several thousand lines of poetry in.

His spear, to equal which the tallest pine  
Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast  
Of some great admiral, were but a wand,  
He walked with to support uneasy steps  
Over the burning marl [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.292-296)

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<sup>255</sup> The wonder of the image is that even now, when we know what a light-year is, and when human beings have travelled to the moon, we can still barely grapple with the size of a figure whose shield is of lunar proportions.

The next section of the epic takes us deeper into this world of in-human dimensions. Having thrown syntax, proportion, and expectations into methodical disarray, this blind verse now prepares to tell with ever-expansive and consequential metaphors—comparisons that tease with unreal familiarity and thence hooks readers’ cognitive and affective buy-in—of things entirely unavailable to mortal sight.

### Night

This chapter will later discuss the affective dimension—the peculiar joy—of Milton’s blind language, which I see most pronounced in Books VII and VIII of *Paradise Lost*, when creation is in every sense the goal of the verse. But a word about the sustained pleasure of composition that animates the epic is in order here, even as we are considering Book I. This section is concerned, then, with two things. To begin with, I unpack here something of the affective dimension of blind language as we begin to see it early in the epic—for elements of the peculiar joy, the unabated confidence, of Milton’s composition will keep surfacing to claim our attention as we proceed in the epic. Next, I assert here the conceptual cognitive work of essential disorientation and even trepidation that Book II of *Paradise Lost*, with Satan’s fateful journey from hell to earth, achieves for the epic. First, the joy.

Two similes illustrate what I sense as a joy both of the composition itself and a granular engagement with it. I use these to showcase, in relative miniature, and long before the exuberance of creation in the middle of *Paradise Lost*, the poised plenitude of blind language. The first simile describes another fall of another of the rebel angels and concludes where the narrator steps in to take ownership of and offer correction for the errant tale. I want to mark the sensuous pleasure of the verse and note how a conventionally metaphorical structure of storytelling—through



comparison and association—pulls in readers’/listeners’ cognitive and affective immersion. Thus the narrator of *Paradise Lost*:

Men called him Mulciber; and how he fell  
From heaven, they fabled, thrown by angry Jove  
Sheer o’er the crystal battlements: from morn  
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,  
A summer’s day; and with the setting sun  
Dropped from the zenith like a falling star,  
On Lemnos the Aegean isle: thus they relate,  
Erring: for he with his rebellious rout  
Fell long before [...]   
(*Paradise Lost*, I.740-748)

Mulciber’s fall enacts time as intertwined with sensual, strangely visual, desire and memory: “from morn/ To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,/ A summer’s day.” This is time remembered and evoked as pleasure—the meter of the poetry playing out the leisured draw of the long syllables—with something strangely innocent about it, the kind of memory we might have of a long day of summer and its passage of light, its every second savoured. The slight, almost imperceptible escalation of rhythm “from noon to dewy eve” wraps up, with utter contentment, “A summer’s day.” The playfulness of the next few words is not without its own flash of visual brilliance: “and with the setting sun/ Dropped from the zenith like a falling star.” In an instant, the sun drops below the horizon, and a trail of light moves across the evening sky. The revocation of a part of the pleasure of this image is immediate, and total: “thus they relate,/ Erring.” For Mulciber fell, as we must now know from our time among the fallen of heaven, long before this incident with Jove. But even as we read through a withdrawal of ethical energy from the metrically beautiful fall—because the error of Mulciber and the error of those who relate this story are offered loud and clear—an afterimage of the falling star persists, and with it, something like delicious regret. The final aesthetic remuneration of the image (not unconnected with the sonic pleasure available to a blind poet) is in

this pleasure of the syllabic composition and utterance, together with the maturity of knowing something for its flaw yet understanding its loveliness.

The second simile is a writing of tele- and macro-level vision. It is the image of the springtime bees that prepares us for the movement, the industry, and perhaps the scale of what is to come in the great consult of the fallen angels.

As bees  
In spring time, when the sun with Taurus rides,  
Pour forth their populous youth about the hive  
In clusters; they among fresh dews and flowers  
Fly to and fro, or on the smoothèd plank,  
The suburb of their straw-built citadel,  
New rubbed with balm, expatiate and confer  
Their state affairs.  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.768-775)

There is method, we sense, in the madness of Pandaemonium. But we are not yet prepared for the zooming-in that is to come. The narrator verbalises the astonishment of it.

Behold a wonder! they but now who seemed  
In bigness to surpass earth's giant sons  
Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room  
Throng numberless, like the pygmaean race  
Beyond the Indian mount, or feerie elves,  
Whose midnight revels, by a forest side  
Or fountain some belated peasant sees,  
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon  
Sits arbitress [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, I.777-785)

In the light of the dreamy moon, the visual athletics of the exponential shrinking of those whose limbs had compared with leviathan even make sense. It is no matter what the “belated peasant sees,/

Or dreams he sees.” Sometimes dreams constitute vision, and this author knows it.<sup>256</sup> As *Paradise Lost* builds, readers/listeners will repeatedly be called upon to see the “action” of the epic in unreal detail (the war in heaven is a particular case in point); we might even say that in these instances is an invitation, from a blind poet, for his sighted and unsighted and partially-sighted audience into a register of imagination otherwise unavailable to them.

A quite different landscape, if it can be called that, awaits us as we undertake the odyssey, with Satan, to earth. Milton harnesses his verse to express what can only exist in blind invention, for the matter of composition is such as has no possible human history or sensory register. In itself, this is not saying much; it is the business of poetry, after all, to invent, conjure, and bring worlds alive to readers/listeners. What makes Satan’s journey in Book II worth our notice as blind composition is the verse’s studied gathering together and mapping out of a vertiginous disorientation, at the climax of which is Satan’s own physical blindness at the moment in which he engenders his unholy insurgence, his departure from the divine. In Milton’s version of the story, Satan’s actual inability to see is co-constitutive of his inability to stay righteous. This incident of blindness—in the very pattern of re-collection and pro-jection of ideas and associations that we now know to watch for—then sets the stage for the tortured prevarication, the deep figurative blindness-while-in-light that we shall witness in Satan at the opening of Book IV.

As Satan knows, “long is the way/ And hard, that out of hell leads up to light” (II.432-433). The danger of the passage through Chaos and Night is in that once anyone goes beyond hell gates, “the void profound/ Of unessential night receives him next/ Wide gaping, and with utter loss of being/ Threatens him” (II.438-441). While some of his unnamed compeers go exploring the bounds

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<sup>256</sup> In this context, see also Stuart Clark’s chapters on “Fantasies” and “Dreams” in *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39-77, 300-328. This particular passage is also precursor to the visual gymnastics that Milton will later write in *Paradise Regained*, Books III and IV.

of hell with “eyes aghast” (II.616)—their obstacle-ridden journey caught in the unrelenting stresses of “**Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death**” (II.621)—Satan, on the sails of an awe-inspiring orientalist image, reaches the ninefold gates of hell.<sup>257</sup> What Milton writes and has Satan reckon with at these gates speaks to the loss of memory, history, and self that Satan had mentioned earlier while contemplating the risks of the passage, an “utter loss of being” (and which we shall encounter again at the end of Satan’s journey to earth). It turns out, when Satan speaks to the horrid shapes that guard the gates of hell, that he is creator of both of them, and lover to one. The fantastic awfulness of the appearance, desire, and behaviour of Sin and Death, and Satan’s exchange with them, set up thematic reverberations for the later birth of Eve and her relationship with Adam. The epic operates in such widening referential echoes: even the utter delight of that later birth and love will remember the terrors of these ones. Thus the “snaky sorceress” (II.724) who now confronts Satan:

Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem  
 Now in thine eye so foul, once deemed so fair  
 In heaven, when at the assembly, and in sight  
 Of all the seraphim with thee combined  
 In bold conspiracy against heaven’s king,  
 All on a sudden miserable pain  
 Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum  
 In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast  
 Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,  
 Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,  
 Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed

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<sup>257</sup> As when far off at sea a fleet descried  
 Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds  
 Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles  
 Of Ternate and Tidore, whence merchants bring  
 Their spicy drugs: they on the trading flood  
 Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape  
 Ply stemming nightly toward the pole. So seemed  
 Far off the flying fiend.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, II.636-643)

Out of thy head I sprung; amazement seized  
 All the host of heaven; back they recoiled afraid  
 At first, and called me Sin, and for a sign  
 Portentous held me; but familiar grown,  
 I pleased, and with attractive graces won  
 The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft  
 Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing  
 Becam'st enamoured, and such joy thou tookst  
 With me in secret, that my womb conceived  
 A growing burden.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, II.747-767)

From the absence of recollection to visual bafflement to collective disgust to unholy desire, the verse that narrates the frightening exchange at the gates of hell takes up everything it must write itself out of.<sup>258</sup> The incident of Satan's own blindness, that physically overtakes him at the time of his rebellion—"All on a sudden miserable pain/ Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum/ In darkness"—and engenders Sin is telling for its reliance on the negative connotations of visual depravity. So too is the image of the erstwhile Satan *almost* placed before us. Sin discloses to an oddly memory-less Satan that the latter "in me [Sin] thy perfect image viewing/ Becam'st enamoured." As readers/listeners, we *almost* get to see Satan and Sin in dreadful and intimate mutual reflection at the precise point at which the angelic Lucifer ("the carrier of light") of heaven begins his decisive transformation into Sin-ful, Death-engendering, hellish Satan. But that "perfect image" that Satan saw of himself in one that he had in pain and darkness brought forth is not described to us. Thus, in an extension of what we have already learnt in Book I—to exercise our skills of athletic vision, multi-sensual perception, scale, and imagination—we now take away what we actually need to take away about Sin and Death: not a sight, but dread, and a kind of pity.

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<sup>258</sup> Milton will indicate this in the invocation in Book III: that he has "[e]scaped the Stygian pool, though long detained/ In that obscure sojourn" (14-15).

When the gates of hell are drawn open, we may, along with Satan, pause to fear even for the fiend's intellectual being. "Before their eyes in sudden view appear/ [...] a dark/ Illimitable ocean without bound,/ Without dimension, where length, breadth, and height,/ And time and place are lost" (II.890-894). When he at last takes off, Satan plunges into blindness itself, for all he can see is no end in sight. Milton writes this out for us. Blind language can be mimetic of and enact blindness, and for all our withholding—by our author's permission—of ethical accompaniment of Satan, we notice the struggle faced by the traveller of this "vast vacuity" (II.932). A reader/reader-aloud/listener must halt, lunge, gather momentum and flounder for it: "**nigh foundered on he fares/ Treading the crude consistence, half on foot,/ Half flying** [...] O'er **bog or steep, through straight, rough, dense, or rare,** With **head, hands, wings, or feet** pursues his way,/ And **swims or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies**" (II.940-942, 948-950). The accomplishment of the craft of these lines is matched only by our disorientation mirroring Satan's. We cannot image what Satan travels through, and the point of the description is to alert us to precisely such a register of the unimaginable. A loss of perspective *is* loss of self, and later, in Book IV, in what is perhaps the most poignant moment given to Satan in the epic, he will act out what it is to be without coherent memory, and therefore without a consistent sense of his own past. We shall watch him damn himself as he looks with longing at the new created world, which he will insist must have no place for him. The scene for that is earth; the next book of the epic takes us that way.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> I say "act" and "scene" here with tribute to the theatrical energies carried over from the manuscript "Adam Unparadiz'd," which, in the Trinity Manuscript of Milton's poems, indicates the poet's initial planning of this epic story as drama. This first planning for what would become *Paradise Lost* was carried out in Milton's sighted days, and we find the notes in his own hand. Milton even writes proto-stage-directions as he plans the action. This work, first and tentatively named "Adam's Banishment," and then renamed "Adam Unparadiz'd," would begin with "The angel Gabriel, either descending or entering, shewing since this globe was created, his frequency as much[.] [N]ext the Chorus shewing the reason of his coming to keep his watch in Paradise after Lucifers rebellion by command from god, & withall expressing his desire to see, & know more concerning this excellent

## A Universal Blank

If on one hand Satan is born—at the moment when the heavenly Lucifer ceases to be—of blindness, God, on the other hand, is sight. This section follows on the conceptual and cognitive thematics of dark, disorientation, fickleness, and errancy set up in Book II to the kinds of light, orientation, constancy, and even love, mortal and immortal, that occupy Book III of *Paradise Lost*. Milton positions his readers/listeners well; we, like the poet, feel the air grow lighter as the narrator tells of his escape from the oppressive “void and formless infinite” (III.12). In Book II, blind language, as we saw, practised a careful roiling of all senses. In Book III, it begins to put the world sensibly back together, the better to prepare readers/listeners for the creation of the world that is to come. The metaphorical dimension of blind language is on display in terms not only of sensory carrying across (as in the invocation, which I discuss in the next paragraphs), but also, along with the cognitive and affective qualities of the verse: in terms of the putting-back, re-orienting, setting-right and setting-forth of the energies that will have to anchor readers/listeners as the epic proceeds.

The opening of Book III merits reading out loud, and listening to with eyes closed while another reads it. That we may want to do both, if possible, *at once*, speaks to the peculiar generosity of the verse in its invitation of the sighted and reader-ly together with the oral and aural. Milton’s complex synaesthesia is possibly never better on view than in these lines that literally attempt to blend the energies of light and sound—or even, impossibly, render them interchangeable.

Hail[,] holy light, offspring of heaven first-born,  
Or of the eternal co-eternal beam  
May I express thee unblamed? since God is light,  
And never but in unapproachèd light  
Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.  
Or hearst thou rather pure ethereal stream,

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new creature man.” See p. 38, Manuscript R.3.4, Trinity College Library, [http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r\\_3\\_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1](http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/manuscripts/r_3_4/manuscript.php?fullpage=1&startingpage=1).

Whose fountain who shall tell? Before the sun,  
Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice  
Of God, as with a mantle didst invest  
The rising world of waters dark and deep,  
Won from the void and formless infinite.  
Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,  
Escaped the Stygian pool, though long detained  
In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight  
Through utter and through middle darkness borne  
With other notes than to the Orphéan lyre  
I sung of Chaos and eternal Night,  
Taught by the heavenly Muse to venture down  
The dark descent, and up to reascend,  
Though hard and rare: thee I revisit safe,  
And feel thy sovereign vital lamp; but thou  
Revisitst not these eyes, that roll in vain  
To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;  
So thick a drop serene hath quenched their orbs,  
Or dim suffusion veiled. Yet not the more  
Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt  
Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,  
Smit with the love of sacred song; but chief  
Thee Sion and the flowery brooks beneath  
That wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling flow,  
Nightly I visit: nor sometimes forget  
Those other two equalled with me in fate,  
So were I equalled with them in renown,  
Blind Thamyras, and blind Maeonides,  
And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old.  
Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move  
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird  
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid  
Tunes her nocturnal note. Thus with the year  
Seasons return, but not to me returns  
Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,  
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,  
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;  
But cloud instead, and ever-during dark  
Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men  
Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair  
Presented with a universal blank  
Of nature's works to me expunged and razed,  
And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.  
So much the rather thou celestial light  
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers  
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence  
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell  
Of things invisible to mortal sight.



(*Paradise Lost*, III.1-55)<sup>260</sup>

The invocation at the start of Book III of *Paradise Lost* is to the “holy light, the offspring of heaven first-born.” As bright effluence (emitted brightness) of bright essence (the essence of brightness) increate (that is, it never had form or function outside this brightness), it would initially seem as though there could never be anything as luminous as this light, or any means of apprehending it *except* as light, or any means of *its* interacting with anything save as light. But the poet soon appears to be in two minds about this light’s expression and transmission. By way of a fertile faltering about his ability to poetically compose—or compose about—this light without fault and with adequacy (“May I express thee unblamed?”), a layered verb of a different kind of perception finds its way into the equation: “Or *hearst* thou rather pure ethereal stream,/ Whose fountain who shall tell?” (my emphasis). From blinding light, we are suddenly at the mouth of a stream, whose fountain must be told if it is to be registered. And “*hearst* thou,” asks Milton of this light (emphasis again mine), combining in that single word the awaited reciprocity of an ask and its answer. (*Would you rather be called pure ethereal stream?/ Would you rather answer to the name of pure ethereal stream?*) With the sound of water, we are made aware that even a few lines ago, in the presence of the “eternal co-eternal beam,” we had heard the light come into being as much as we had imaged/seen/imagined it. The following lines record this sensory amalgamation. “Before the sun,/ Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice/ Of God, as with a mantle didst invest/ The rising world of waters dark and deep.” If this light pre-vented—that is, came before—the sun and the heavens, this is because it was co-eternal with the voice of God, a sound and energy held and echoed

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<sup>260</sup> Is the verse composed by a poet “[p]resented with a universal blank” blank verse? The words “blank” and “verse,” despite coming from their apparently separate contexts of blind poetry and poetic form, stick to one another, and to me, and I take seriously the unity of verse that is not rhymed but nevertheless integrally connected through subtler aural and associational echoes.

by the rising world of waters dark and deep. On all of this, the poet tells us, lay the clothing, hearing, sounding, endowing, in-vest-ing light like a mantle, itself reminiscent of a much younger poet's twitching and restless blue garment stretched out like morning hills or a deep bay.<sup>261</sup>

The poet visits this light now, he says, with “bolder wing,” having “[e]scaped the Stygian pool.” But what follows is a peculiar avowal of inner darkness, culminating in an almost disconsolate grief before it erupts into prayer. He has flown through “utter [in both the senses of complete, and outer] and through middle darkness,” he declares, “up to reascend,/ Though hard and rare.” All would appear to be well: “Thee I revisit safe,/ And feel thy sovereign vital lamp.” But, he writes, his visual circumstances crashing into his poem, “thou/ Revisitst not these eyes.” The outer and the middle darkness have been overcome, but the same cannot be said of an inner darkness. In the rustle of the language of the poem—the rustle through which we see the poem *as* poem, and see it coming into being as poem—there is no one around but the poet's amanuensis and us, his readers, to hear this sudden grief. For all the poet's address to the holy light, the only certain auditors here are those who help bring these lines into being as poetry, and those who read/listen to them that way. If, as readers/listeners, we hear now a questioning of divine justice laid out by the poet for his visual status, we hear too the silent work of those around him, the emotional and actual labour of those who had to watch a blind poet compose, watch him compose his want, and record it as poetic language. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, blind language is participatory in this profound sense of interdependence and belonging. In its ownership of the circumstances of its engendering—“thou/ Revisitst not these eyes, that roll in vain/ To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn/”—blind language allows us to apprehend what is both within and surrounding the poet. If there is a poignancy to Milton's writing from within his blindness, this is because the language

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<sup>261</sup> See “Lycidas” 192-193.

carries the weight also of the fraught sympathy, the significant difficulty, and the real collective energy that went into its making. We might even say that blind language is heavy with love: love for poetry, love for what the poetry needs to say, and another kind of love, that of another's or some others' for a blind poet.<sup>262</sup>

The poet owns his persistence in poetry. His blind language is affectively sufficient to his topic, and extravagant with desire: "Yet not the more/ Cease I to wander where the Muses haunt,/ Clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,/ Smit with the love of sacred song." All these places of inspiration, "[n]ightly I visit," to follow with poetic composition in the morning.<sup>263</sup> In Miltonic use, the closest that the word "blind" comes to peace, and possibly power, is now, in the reverent naming of "[t]hose other two equalled with me in fate, Blind Thamyris, and blind Maeonides." But in that naming is immersed the knowledge and longing that only the likes of Thamyris and Maeonides can show the world that they are blind and expect to be loved for it. The admission is immediate and unequivocal: "So were I equalled with them in renown."

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<sup>262</sup> In asserting this, I don't credit Milton with acknowledgment of the labour of those he is surrounded by. In his epic—and even in his other writings from this time—Milton remains silent about the substantive work he is himself encompassed by. But as ever with my readings, I want us, Milton's current and future readership, to see/hear beyond Milton's singular genius to the geniality of exchange and participatory care and composition that is in a very real way what we owe the existence of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* to.

<sup>263</sup> As one of his amanuenses, the anonymous biographer scholars now take to be Cyriack Skinner, records: "He rendred his Studies and various Works more easy & pleasant by allotting them thir several portions of the day. Of these the time friendly to the muses fell to his Poetry; And hee waking early (as is the use of temperate men) had commonly a good Stock of Verses ready against his Amanuensis came; which if it happend to bee later than ordinary, hee would complain, saying *hee wanted to bee milked*. The Evenings hee likewise spent in reading some choice Poets, by way of refreshment after the days toyl, and to store his Fancy against Morning." Darbishire, 33. In a largely but not entirely similar vein, thus John Aubrey: "He was an early riser. Sc: at 4 a clock manè [sic] yea, after he lost his sight. He had a man read to him: the first thing he read was the Hebrew bible, & yt was at 4h manè – 4/2 h+. then he ~~thought~~ contemplated. At 7 his man came to him again & then read to him and wrote till dinner: the writing was as much as the reading." Darbishire, 6.

The “wakeful bird” of “darkling” song, who stands in for the poetic genius of the great blind ancients begins the final movement of this invocation: “Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move/ Harmonious numbers [...]” But this cannot write away another voicing of loss. The verse becomes almost a dirge: consolidated in pain because what is lost is so mundane. The diurnal and annual ebb and flow of life is written into the verse—“**Thus** with the **year/ Seasons return.**” But the elements composing this rhythm of life become increasingly ungraspable, each dearly remembered, stressed, and beyond reach—“**but not to me returns/ Day, or the sweet approach of ev’n or morn,/ Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer’s rose,/ Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine.**” The poet partakes, instead, of “ever-during dark,” and is “from the cheerful ways of men/ Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair/ Presented with a universal blank/ Of nature’s works [...] expunged and razed,/ And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.” Again, the very commonplaces of the book of nature and the ways of humankind accentuate the author’s deprivation. Milton’s contemporary Comenius clarified in his *Via Lucis* how all human knowledge was inscribed in three books: of nature, human reason, and divinely inspired scriptural wisdom.<sup>264</sup> Not to be able to access “the book of knowledge fair” was to be confronted with a “universal blank.” Sight proffered—or withdrew—vital participation.<sup>265</sup> When it was denied, it “expunged” and “razed” the very works of nature. Wisdom was at one entrance “**quite shut out,**” with a ringing

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<sup>264</sup> *Via Lucis*, Chapter XVI, paragraphs 1, 4, 9, as cited in *Comenius*, ed. John Sadler (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), 26-27.

<sup>265</sup> An older Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci, with trade and pleasures intimately reliant on the eye, had treasured sight enough to wonder what it would be like without. “Certainly, there is no one who would not choose to lose hearing and smell rather than sight. [...] He who loses sight loses the spectacle and beauty of the universe, and comes to resemble someone who has been buried alive in a tomb in which he can move and survive.” *Codex Urbinas* (sigs 13r, 15r-v), cited in Jodi Cranston, “The Touch of the Blind Man: The Phenomenology of Vividness in Italian Renaissance Art,” in Elizabeth Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 226.

finality. It is only one entrance, however, that thus eliminates wisdom, and anyway, there is nothing beyond the power of the divine. In fact, here is opportunity for the divine to do what only the divine can. The verse slows down as it enacts the beginning of the accomplishment of what it pleads. “**So much the rather thou celestial light/ Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers/ Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence/ Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell [or see and tell]/ Of things invisible to mortal sight.**”

The first of things invisible to mortal sight is the “almighty Father” (III.56)—whose first action in this epic, told us by a poet with eyes planted in his mind, is his observation of the world he has created. The almighty Father “bent down his eye,/ His own works and their works at once to view” (III.58-59). In the now familiar imagination of this blind poet—for we have seen his insistence, in his Psalm translations, of the importance of the divine regard—there is a benediction in God’s eye: “About him all the sanctities of heaven/ Stood thick as stars, and from his sight received/ Beatitude past utterance” (III.60-62). But there is more than primacy and beatitude to divine vision. At this moment, at the brink of much of the deciding action of the epic, Milton projects divine action itself, and the triggers for divine action, fundamentally as forms of sight. As Satan flies to earth and God watches, the epic poet narrates: “Him God *beholding*, from his *prospect* high,/ Wherein past, present, future he *beholds*,/ Thus to his only Son *foreseeing* spake” (III.77-79; emphases mine). God is sight. The fourfold insistence on the visual scope of the divine—whose very seat is a pro-spect, a place to view from—is resonant in the light of this God’s assertion of the grace he intends for his select: “I will clear their senses dark” (III.188).

Yet what follows signals a much more complex conceptualisation of what vision is, does, interacts with, and is completed by.

To prayer, repentance, and obedience due,  
 Though but endeavoured with sincere intent,  
 Mine ear shall not be slow, mine eye not shut.

And I will place within them as a guide  
 My umpire conscience, whom if they will hear,  
 Light after light well used they shall attain,  
 And to the end persisting, safe arrive.  
 This my long sufferance and my day of grace  
 They who neglect and scorn, shall never taste;  
 But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,  
 That they may stumble on, and deeper fall;  
 And none but such from mercy I exclude.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, III.191-202)

God's auditory attention to true contriteness will co-exist, he tells us, with his visual inspection of it. Where and when he finds out sincere prayers and obedience (we might say, the true poems) among his created beings, he will place within them their own inner guide "my umpire conscience" that will similarly both show and speak truth and direction. The select will be in a position to *know with* (con-scire) the divine, thus eliminating any chance of going astray. All they must do is "hear" this conscience, to simultaneously see "[l]ight after light" and finally "safe arrive" in their last and final home with their creator. But another sense yet is implicated within that desired arrival: that of taste, and by connection with the immediacy required of taste, touch. Those who fail to hear or watch for the directions provided by God's umpire conscience will fail to "taste" of grace, but—and this is where the association with the tactile intensifies—their very hardness will be hardened further. Damningly, now, this lack of insight is pictured as the lack of sight.<sup>266</sup> Those who are hard are also blind. Just as the hard will be hardened further, so will the blind be blinded more. These hard and blind will stumble and fall and it will go hard with them. In the world that this poet imagines his God for, it would appear, there is no respite for the blind but by means of inner light. Even as we hear in the verse Milton's projection of his own worst circumstance, his blindness, as fit punishment

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<sup>266</sup> A comparably negative use of "blind" returns in a few lines, when Satan alights on that lifeless corner of the created globe which recalls limbo: "All who have their reward on earth, the fruits/ Of painful superstition and blind zeal,/ Nought seeking but the praise of men, here find/ Fit retribution, empty as their deeds" (III.451-454).

for others, we register too a blind poet's sensual imagination of grace, which carries a fraught visual dependence that is crucial, yet also crucially incomplete without the involvement of the other senses. Such is the involved synaesthesia of blind language.

Having thus implicated the other senses, Milton returns to such a picturing of the events of human salvation—the Son's offering of himself as mortal, to redeem humankind—that leaves no doubt about the importance of the looks, glances, views, and visual comprehensions at play in heaven. We attend a divine theatre that is as insistently aware of its subject (things invisible to mortal sight) as it is graphic about the cross-views and lines of variously motivated vision animating the action (things somehow accommodated to mortal sight in the telling by this poet). The Son's offering of himself hinges on a verb whose real surprise to us is that it does not, in its context, surprise at all: "Behold me then, me for him, life for life/ I offer, on me let thine anger fall;/ Account me man" (III.236-238). In the Son's invitation of the collective heavenly regard—"Behold me then"—is everything of the poet's understanding of what it is to hold in one's sight, to know, to understand, and to realise. "Behold me then, [...] account me man." By the action of presenting himself visibly—and audibly, for he explicitly tells us *what* the sight of him in heaven at this moment is supposed to mean—the Son becomes both promise and evidence of "life for life," thus making possible the fulfilment of the divine condition by which humankind is to be saved. The Son continues, in almost cinematic fashion, to lay out what his being man will mean: the spending of Death, and his subsequent rising victorious to subdue his vanquisher (III.250-251). He will then "show/ The powers of darkness bound. Thou [particularly God, but really all the heavenly company] at the sight/ Pleased, out of heaven shalt look down and smile" (III.255-257). The culminating victory will be a spectacle of right, well-pleasing to God. That spectacle, in turn, will be in the service of another desired sight. "Then with the multitude of my redeemed/ Shall enter

heaven long absent, and return,/ Father, to see thy face, wherein no cloud/ Of anger shall remain” (III.260-263). There is no end but sight, and a very special one, at that.

When the epic narrator resumes, it is to underline the weight of what has just passed, and what is about to happen. The pregnancy and possibility of the moment are presented at the interstices of what can be seen or spoken. “His [the Son’s] words here ended, but his meet aspect/ Silent yet spake, and breathed immortal love/ To mortal men [...] Admiration seized/ All heaven” (III.266-268, 271-272). Where the Son’s words end, his aspect continues to “speak.” There is reciprocity, expectation, and communion set up by the very properties attributed to the Son and the collective gathering in heaven. What the Son looks out at, and his very direction of looking (his aspect, *ad specere*)—draw looks of astonishment and veneration (basically, admiration, from *ad mirare*) from the present company. In our turn, we get to see these things—right down to the details of visual suspense and anticipation—in our mind’s eye, Milton’s blind language performing for us something of what the holy light, he says, has done for him: irradiate a visual faculty independent of actual sight.

This becomes particularly useful for readers/listeners as the epic narrator directly addresses the most important divine characters that populate his poem, and pictures them for us in what is at once visual expression and the stated impossibility of such expression. What transpires is a narrative of accommodation, in both theological and textual senses.

Thee Father first they sung omnipotent,  
Immutable, immortal, infinite,  
Eternal king; thee author of all being,  
Fountain of light, thyself invisible  
Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sitst  
Throned inaccessible, but when thou shad’st  
The full blaze of thy beams, and through a cloud  
Drawn round about thee like a radiant shrine,  
Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear,  
Yet dazzle heaven, that brightest seraphim  
Approach not, but with both wings veil their eyes.



Thee next they sang of all creation first,  
Begotten Son, divine similitude,  
In whose conspicuous countenance, without cloud  
Made visible, the almighty Father shines,  
Whom else no creature can behold; on thee  
Impressed the effulgence of his glory abides,  
Transfused on thee his ample Spirit rests.  
(*Paradise Lost*, III.372-389)

God, the source of all light and the author of all being, is visually inaccessible to his creatures—so much so that even the brightest angels must approach him with wings veiling their eyes, even when God shades the full blaze of his beams. A blind poet—whose own investment remains in a powerful inner light that appears as obscurity in the mortal register—writes that this “shaded” God’s skirts appear “[d]ark with excessive bright.” God is such light as cannot be perceived within the creaturely condition. Everyone, without exception, is fundamentally disabled before it. But, Milton’s verse tells us, there is means yet to “see” God. His “divine similitude”—the Son, whose “conspicuous” (that which bears looking at attentively, from *con spicere*) visage can reflect that light “without cloud”—expresses divine glory adequately and yet accessibly. Just as the Son accommodates the divine brightness so that the brightness can at last be looked upon, so too does this blind verse accommodate such inexpressible and invisible things to our mind’s eye. Blind language is a device for expressing what no one in the human condition *can* see.

But what evocative poetic language, we might ask, does not do just this? What successful poetry is not full of its poet’s imagination and its readers/listeners’ own filling in of vital images to complete the receptive experience of it? Yet, to ask thus is to overlook the eerie viscosity of a blind poet’s imagined heaven. And it is to ignore the extraordinary insistence, in a very Latinate poet’s diction, on words that borrow from and enlarge the scope of what counts as vision and how vision works. That Milton’s heaven is active with prospects, aspects, beholdings, and admirations speaks to a reaching out within the language that gives it form. Blind language, in owning while also mourning

its blindness, displays its reliance on and enrichment from an inner perceptive faculty. In acknowledging that inner perceptive faculty's indebtedness to a composite sensual and associational richness, it achieves a generous leading of its readers through all their sensory and intuitive potentials.

But if blind language used to depict heaven is a device of accommodation and inclusion, it is also a device of expressing longing in depiction of the other-than-divine. It is a means of gesturing towards what is in a physical, immediate, and irreducible manner, inaccessible, and an expedient for recording exclusion. I refer, of course, to Satan and his and our encounter of beautiful earth and Paradise.<sup>267</sup> The invitations afforded by Milton's blind verse to the sensory and intuitive potentials of its readers/listeners remain as the epic's action turns away from heaven. In fact, they intensify. The poetic commitment to bringing us what is invisible to mortal sight remains. Indeed, the visual theatre in our mind's eye becomes ever more splendid. But the inaccessibility that we witness outside heaven is the more piercing for our knowledge of the longing—for it is a longing for a creaturely, instead of heavenly, world, a longing for what we call home—that underwrites it.

What we see of earth—its loveliness, its bounty, even the sense of joy and belonging of its two inhabitants—is, I offer, the more affectively penetrating for coming to us through Satan's eyes. Because we see them through Satan, we see them with (his) desire. Because the epic narrator gives us Satan's point of view as we approach the earth, we carry with us everything of the fallen angel's admiration, surprise, and yearning. His point of view becomes our point of view—to then adjust as we see fit.<sup>268</sup> Indeed, Satan expresses his mission to the watch-angel Uriel in terms of sight and

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<sup>267</sup> As we have also seen, the use of this verse for recording exclusion pertains similarly to Milton himself; it is present in the poet's autobiographical self-narration in Book III.

<sup>268</sup> In future work discussing *Paradise Regained*, I shall return to this, paying particular attention to Milton's creation of the worlds before us readers/listeners as sights of longing and belonging. I shall

intellection: “Unspeakable desire to see, and know/ All these his wondrous works, but chiefly man [...] Hath brought me from the choirs of cherubim/ Alone thus wandering” (III.662-663, 666-667). As a well-meaning angel, Uriel approves of this visual and experiential desire: it “merits praise [...] To witness with thine eyes what some perhaps/ Contented with report hear only in heaven” (III.696, 700-701). Satan travels on, following Uriel’s direction—“That spot to which I point is Paradise” (III.733)—and lands where sight will be grief to him, and as much a trigger for memory as a betrayer of it.

### Flying Hell

In this section, I pay particular attention to the structural versatility—a tensile syntactic expansion and bending, a capacity to contain duality and suggestivity in multiple directions—that I mark as a feature of the blind verse of *Paradise Lost*. The metaphorical, cognitive, and affective valences of the language remain in play. But it is the structural dimension of this I blindly-orally-aurally bent language, most evident in Satan’s tortured ruminations and desires as he first comes to earth, to which I now turn.

A sentence of some length brings Satan to earth, its structural elaborateness only setting off the unambiguous clarity of its greatest emphases. Language cannot but bend if it has to accommodate the onward and backward, destructive and considered, aspirational and hopeless movements of the Satanic mind. That this mind gives form to the divine prophecy we have so lately heard—that those who will not heed God’s “umpire conscience” will in their blindness be blinded more, in their hardness be hardened more—underlines how the language that must speak of this blind mind must itself contort to enact the evocation *and* failure of insight. It is one thing to note

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discuss how the temptations in that second epic work to set off their great allure and final repudiation precisely through unusual and powerful visualities.

that blind language is structurally remarkable because of the author's blindness and resulting compositional tactics, such as a lengthened (that is, not-visually-normative) span of thought and attention; strategically delayed verbs or adjectives or even nouns; and exercises of association across long stretches of poetry. It is a slightly different thing to note all this, and to add that there is also a conscious signalling of the manipulation and (dis)orientation that this language can be used for. I see such a poetic deliberateness here, as Milton divides the churning ruminations of Satan between the epic narrator and Satan himself. Thus the epic narrator: creating, watching, introducing Satan's own watching of Eden.

[...] for now,  
Satan, now first inflamed with rage, came down,  
The tempter ere the accuser of mankind,  
To wreak on innocent frail man his loss  
Of that first battle, and his flight to hell:  
Yet not rejoicing in his speed, though bold  
Far off and fearless, nor with cause to boast,  
Begins his dire attempt, which nigh the birth  
Now rolling, boils in his tumultuous breast,  
And like a devilish engine back recoils  
Upon himself; horror and doubt distract  
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir  
The hell within him, for within him hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from hell  
One step no more than from himself can fly  
By change of place: now conscience wakes despair  
That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory  
Of what he was, what is, and what must be  
Worse; of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue.  
Sometimes towards Eden which now in his view  
Lay pleasant, his grieved look he fixes sad,  
Sometimes towards heaven and the full-blazing sun,  
Which now sat high in his meridian tower:  
Then much revolving, thus in sighs began.  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.8-31)

For all his speed, rage, and apparent fearlessness, there is no rejoicing in Satan, no positive anticipation, as he arrives on earth. His devilish plan—proleptically, we might say—recoils on his

own “tumultuous breast,” stirring relentlessly “[t]he hell within him, for within him hell/ He brings, and round about him, nor from hell/ One step no more than from himself can fly.” Repeated, the articulation of “hell” emphasises its presence all around Satan, the assonance in “round about” enacting the sense of what surrounds him. Indeed, “hell” precedes and pursues “him” through the lines, so that he is never but a single poetic foot distant. The stresses are potentially abundant, the irregularities within the general iambic working to slow the verse and draw attention before and after. As in several instances of such conscious melding of matter and metre in blind language, the verse multiplies the claustrophobia of Satan’s hellish identity.

The **hell** | within | **him, for** | within | **him hell**  
 He **brings,** | and **round** | about | **him, nor** | **from hell**  
**One step** | no **more** | than **from** | **himself** | can **fly**

A threefold chiasmic repetition—more a complex and deliberate rhetorical schema than merely rhyme—is internal to one line: “The **hell within him,** for **within him hell.**” Another internal rhyme spans two lines from middle to middle—“for [...] nor”—driving the reader’s/listener’s ear from cause to more intense cause of why this sentence must thus be folded in on itself, repeating, reiterating, driving home the point before the verse can move on. When it does move on, it returns to the present, the present that was a few lines ago, and still is: “for *now*,/ Satan, *now* first inflamed with rage [...] *Now* conscience wakes despair [...]” (emphases mine). God’s “umpire conscience” exists also for the fallen angel. The fallen angel also knows with, and therefore potentially sees with, the divine. But what he knows and sees is somehow already despair. Satan’s conscience “wakes the bitter memory/ Of what he was, what is, and what must be”—and the sense ever so briefly stops here at the end of the line, to then resume and devastatingly announce the outcome: “worse.” Satan now begins to speak as he divides his looks between the pleasantness of Eden and the brightness of the sun. If the narrator’s part so far in this Book had been to produce language reflecting the theme

of Satan's moral blindness with consummate craft, Satan's part, now *enacting* that moral bewilderment, is language of exquisite control, with an even greater meta-poetic signalling of its awareness of itself. For Milton has Satan see, think, *almost* get it, and ultimately fail to—all the while working towards something like wistfulness and sympathy in us, his readers/listeners. We know how this story will end, but we too have a moment of wishing that Satan might take the loveliness of the world he sees for the better, and that everyone might live happily ever after. But the light of the sun and the prospect of Eden recall Satan to the pain of knowing what he does not have. In the wake of the invocation in Book III, we might also hear, in Satan's frustration, something of a once-sighted man's liminal registering of the warmth of the sun on his skin, and waking up to a recollection of what no longer accompanies it.<sup>269</sup> Here, of course, it is Satan's sight of what is around him that triggers his outpouring. A blind poet imagines a morally flawed—because devoid of inner light—intellectual being, and what this flawed intellectual being sees.

O thou that with surpassing glory crowned,  
Lookst from thy sole dominion like the God  
Of this new world; at whose sight all the stars  
Hide their diminished heads; to thee I call,  
But with no friendly voice, and add thy name  
O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams  
That bring to my remembrance from what state  
I fell [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.32-39)

It is Satan's intermittent clarity about his position that makes his suffering so hard to watch. Here he is at a moment when we might find ourselves quite in agreement with his moral inclinations.

What could be less than to afford him praise,  
The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,

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<sup>269</sup> This motif of *feeling* the light and warmth of the sun will return in *Samson Agonistes*.

How due! Yet all his good proved ill in me,  
 And wrought but malice; lifted up so high  
 I sdeigned subjection, and thought one step higher  
 Would set me highest, and in a moment quit  
 The debt immense of endless gratitude,  
 So burdensome, still paying, still to owe;  
 Forgetful what from him I still received,  
 And understood not that a grateful mind  
 By owing owes not, but still pays, at once  
 Indebted and discharged; what burden then?  
 (*Paradise Lost*, IV.46-57)

There is no accounting for the poetic control of this tormented back and forth save by acknowledging the subtle rhymes and rhythms, upheavals of emotion, and grammatical and syntactical flexibility that make this sound like real-time cogitation. Apparently small things build into consequence for the mood of charged recollection and onward (in)decision. The verse expresses what is unreasonableness itself, but must for that very reason be most reasonably recorded and processed. For an example, let us consider a not-entirely-conventional syntax, rich with recurring consonantal sounds and near-assonance between key words, that establishes the restless lethargy and idle industry of Satan who cannot bear to look at *and* cannot bear to look away from what he is in front of. In his words, “What could be **less** than to afford him **praise**,/ The **easiest** recomp**ense**, and pay him **thanks**,/ How due!” The repetition of the sibilants draws a subterranean association between “less,” “praise,” and “easiest,”—with each of those words opening the sound of the respective syllables out further or longer. “Less” takes the least enunciative energy, mirrored later in the minimalist efficiency of “thanks.” (What could be less than simple thanks?) Meanwhile, “praise” falls easily from the tongue, the open-mouthed drawing out of the cousin vowel sound more satisfying than the earlier and quicker “less.” That in turn falls into the comfort of “**easiest**,” its first syllable stressed in the metrical build-up to “**recompense**.” Then, we have a single move of both redundancy and unforeseen efficiency: “How due!” Until these two words, we might have stopped with a relatively simple question: “What could be less than to afford him praise,/ The

easiest recompense, and pay him thanks?” But now, we register also Satan’s own registering of the simplicity of what he owed, so that it comes as an exclamation tripping out of what was going to be a rhetorical question. (Thanks *were* due.) But: “lifted up so high/ I sdeigned subjection, and thought one step higher/ Would set me highest, and in a moment quit/ The debt immense of endless gratitude [...]” By now, we recognise the strategy of repeating entire words or families of words that Milton likes to deploy: “so high [...] one step higher [...] highest.” If this repetition of “high,” contained in both “higher” and “highest,” sets up a visual echo on the page, the aural echo of the word across the lines is more unmistakable still. The many “highs” lead to a pivotal verb, “quit,” which in a word and at even that small pause at the end of the line threatens to topple what has in that “high” repetition risen without restraint. But in a moment, we carry over from “quit” to the next line’s “debt immense of endless gratitude,” realising the brief verb’s anticipatory power of transfer and release. But as Satan understands it, there is no relief—and we hear in his words the increasing drag of the “**debt of endless gratitude,**” and its heavy continuation in what is “**burdensome, still paying, still to owe.**”

What Satan remembers to talk about, he now immediately proceeds to forget, recalling to us the “unessential night” that he has travelled to get to earth. Perhaps there is no outcome but “utter loss of being” for those who undertake a journey through that “vast vacuity.” But this is another exposition of the various pulls of desire that blind language can accommodate and give arduous form to. For when Satan continues, he expresses no memory of what he has so eloquently just asserted—that there is *no* burden associated with the divine gifts he is capable of receiving. Instead, Satan decides that the gifts are all as one to him, for he will break whatever he touches, because he is himself both broken and brokenness. “Be then his [God’s] love accursed, since love or hate,/ To me alike, it deals eternal woe” (IV.69-70). Milton’s Satan speaks out loud his divided self—strangely,



momentarily, referring to himself in the second person, before returning to his first and interminably trapped self.

Nay cursed be thou; since against his thy will  
Chose freely what it now so justly rues.  
Me miserable! Which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;  
And in the lowest deep a lower deep  
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,  
To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.71-78)

The verse gives form to Satan's fleeting effort to step away from himself, cursing that other him who freely chose a great wrong. The return to himself is immediate: "Me miserable!" In between the run-on of the lines, the first almost-question ("Which way shall I fly?"), turns into a bigger question ("Which way shall I fly infinite wrath and infinite despair?"), which in turn becomes rhetorical by its sheer magnitude. What follows in the guise of an answer is despair: "Which way I fly is hell, myself am hell." As earlier in the narrator's telling, Satan's "conscience wakes despair/ That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory/ Of what he was, what is, and what must be," and confirms in the following line: "Worse."

As though to assure readers/listeners of the infinite equivocation of the Night-travelled mind, yet another pleading now commences in Satan's mouth: "Oh then at last relent: is there no place/ Left for repentance, none for pardon left?" (IV.79-80). Satan answers himself, exhausted, sober, pragmatic, and utterly in contradiction with the intelligence we might expect from someone who has thought himself to the brink of repentance: "None left but by submission; and that word/ Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame" (IV.81-82).<sup>270</sup> As reason for this vacillation between

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<sup>270</sup> A later instance of comparable equivocation is found in the exchange between Satan and Gabriel in IV.885-956. Satan is aptly found out by Gabriel in IV.947-961.

attention and arrogance, we might now point to Satanic pride, the ambition that Satan so often owns for himself, and which many of Milton's readers pick up on as the prime cause of Satan's rebellion. But in looking only towards Satanic pride we miss the subtler, yet profounder connections set up by Milton, across sections of his epic, for the metaphorical darkness that he affords as a constant travel-companion for Satan. For it is not simply a matter of pride (which, after all, springs from a logic of its own) through which Satan becomes unable to repent at this pivotal moment of the epic. It is something messier and less amenable to logic, this vacillation of Satan's, this utterly un-reason-able and un-light-able metaphorical darkness that he both inhabits and is. Thus, in looking towards Satanic pride we miss the wider sense of an extended Miltonic meditation on what makes moral obliviousness possible in the human world: how *can* an intelligent consciousness contradict itself from one logical moment to another, how *can* it allow memory to betray it, how *can* it push itself into positions where it believes it has no choice but to do what compromises it. We also miss Milton's underscoring of the possible continuations between sensory deprivation (as in the "vast vacuity" we have seen Satan go through in Book II) and intellectual disorientation (as in the "troubled thoughts" we witness in Book IV). Satan's confirmation of himself in evil echoes words and concepts we have heard and grappled with. "But say I could repent and could obtain/ By act of grace my former state; how soon would **height** recall **high** thoughts" (IV.93-94). We know the danger to these "highs," just as we know Satan's fondness for them and what they stand for. "This knows my punisher; therefore as far/ From granting he, as I from begging peace" (IV.103-104). Again, we could point towards Milton's contemporary beliefs in Arminian predestination to explain this presumed knowledge of his "punisher's" decided fate for him, but to do so is to overlook the analytical disconnect of what Satan utters, and the clarity with which the verse reveals both the logical suggestions and lapses before us. For the only reasoning Satan can claim is in this: that what he has not asked, he cannot be denied in. This is true. But this is no position from which to aver that *if* he

asked, he *would* be denied. What Milton's in-volved (rolled upon itself) blind verse has Satan display is the fallen angel's own logical betrayal, but one arising from a position of tantalising logical soundness.

Satan continues:

All hope excluded thus, behold instead  
Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight  
Mankind created, and for him this world.  
So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,  
Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;  
Evil be thou my good [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.105-110)

The Son's earlier "Behold me then [...] account me man" haunts this present urging to "behold." But the object of the verb here perplexes clear attachment. (Who is it that Satan even addresses, with his "behold" in the imperative?) As Satan commands "behold instead/ Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight/ Mankind created," we are left with an eccentricity of grammar, syntax, and reference. For exactly who is "us," whose is "his," and how do they connect to one another? But precisely because this is language both bent and insistent, and dancing around a moral blindness/heedlessness that Milton spends considerable time on in the epic, it merits a close look. Is Satan urging us to "behold instead" those who are "*of us*" (emphasis mine)—meaning himself—"outcast" and "exiled"? That is, are we to behold those who are cast out and exiled *by* Satan? But who is he to cast out? Isn't *he* the one cast out and exiled, as he has spent the last several lines reminding us? Or is it in fact a simpler construction: "All hope excluded thus, behold instead [...] Mankind created, and for him this world." Despite being grammatically and syntactically more amenable, this makes a compromised transitional sense. (Mankind and the world created for mankind can be excellent referents for "behold," but it does not figure why excluded hope should point that way. Unless this is followed by an explanation of *why* mankind and the world created for mankind should give form to excluded

hope.) Or is it to the effect of: “All hope excluded thus, behold instead [some sort of farewell to hope, in much the same way that Satan articulates a couple of lines later]”? But that does not stand well with the “instead” that follows “behold.”

Of course, what we in fact have is: “behold instead/ Of us outcast, exiled, his new delight/ Mankind created, and for him this world.” That is: *behold, instead of me, the outcast and the exiled, this new delight, his (God’s) new delight, mankind, and the world created for mankind. Behold, instead of me, mankind. Behold them and theirs instead of me and mine.* Yet at the same time as we grasp this, we also question, rub shoulders with, and half consider the other permutations and combinations of meaning that we have just glanced at. Those alternative almost-meanings are queerly contained within the sense that the verse would have its readers/listeners ultimately posit. For we know that mankind will ultimately mirror Satan in their being cast out and exiled. And we know that Satan will in fact play a role in the exile and casting out. We note too that these lines wish to explicitly turn our regard from Satan to what he sees. We are to behold, *instead* of Satan, what Satan wishes to see, God’s new delight. But these lines are also effectively a refusal to turn the regard. They are instead a way of drawing attention to how the regard will not and cannot be turned, because whatever we see now, until otherwise mentioned and perhaps even then, we shall see *through* Satan. In the “behold instead” is every positing of substitution, and in that, an awareness of that which is being substituted. Further: why should all this follow “all hope excluded thus”? Because with his own imperfectly excluded hope and similarly excluded fear and remorse and good, Satan paves the way for the exile and casting out of mankind. Here, the associational and mnemonic energies of blind language merge with and complement its structural suppleness. As though to emphasise this, we read on to find that Satan’s debate with himself is no pretty picture. “Thus while he spoke, each passion dimmed his face/ Thrice changed with pale, ire, envy and despair,/ Which marred his borrowed visage, and betrayed/ Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld” (IV.115-117). Uriel, watching, “saw him [Satan]

disfigured” (IV.127) by his violent passions. Satan’s passion during the moments when he thinks he is not being watched betrays an interiority that he has earlier concealed successfully, and offsets the contrast of this picture with the collective admiration that had greeted the Son’s “behold” earlier. Equally striking is the dissimilarity of Satan’s “marred” and “borrowed visage” to the Son’s beatific “conspicuous countenance.”

Everything we have seen or heard come into being in the epic so far thus becomes greater reason to listen for language unconventionally folded, language talking to what came before and will again after, language that re-collects to pro-ject, language that operates with widening ripples of association and poetic memory. That our view of Paradise will be informed by and intertwined with the grief, confusion, and desolation of Satan’s point of view is acknowledged by the epic narrator even as Satan and we approach this landscape of loveliness. “[O]f pure now purer air/ Meets his approach, and to the heart inspires/ vernal delight and joy, able to drive/ All sadness but despair” (IV.153-156). Along with the olfactory refreshment of a world opening clean and new to sight and sense is subtle reminder that the present traveller actually does bring despair into a landscape that is equipped to drive all sadness *but* that one.

### **Paradise**

The landscape of Paradise brings us to the finest expositions of the multiple sensualities that the language of *Paradise Lost* invites and accommodates. This pertains above all to the metaphorical qualities, the studied senses-carrying-meaning-across, the complex synaesthesia, of blind language, but so too is the “action” of our introduction to Paradise about desire, and thence pertinent to the cognitive and affective qualities of the verse. Satan is key to it all.

The first action reported in Paradise is Satan’s “prospect” from atop the tree of life.

Thence up he flew, and on the tree of life,

The middle tree and highest there that grew,  
Sat like a cormorant; yet not true life  
Thereby regained, but sat devising death  
To them who lived; nor on the virtue thought  
Of that life-giving plant, but only used  
For prospect, what well used had been the pledge  
Of immortality.  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.194-201)

The disdain of the epic narrator is sharp: Satan *only* used the tree of life for prospect/ he only used it for *prospect*. There is marked juxtaposition with the first action we had seen in heaven—God’s prospect of his creation. If reminder were needed to bring into relief the difference between a divine prospect and a Satanic one, it follows immediately after: “So little knows/ Any, but God alone, to value right/ The good before him, but perverts best things/ To worst abuse” (IV.201-204). We enter the feast of the senses that is Eden through Satan’s being in it, and with an awareness of what the company and vision of such a fellow-traveller can do to what we perceive.<sup>271</sup>

The language describing Paradise attempts to feature in terms of vision—we are shown what “now he [Satan] *views*” (emphasis mine; IV.205)—what cannot in fact be featured in terms of vision as we know it. This is true of several landscapes depicted in this epic: heaven, or Night, or the world created out of chaos. But Paradise teases with a strange familiarity, as though we could have seen and experienced this, if only things had turned out otherwise. Unlike with the burning lake or the void of Night, blind language now creates a place full of familiar shapes and structures, and redolent

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<sup>271</sup> There is a line of critical thinking which receives descriptions of Eden in the prelapsarian state as themselves prelapsarian, and deliberately indicative of the unsoiled and pure. I assert, of course, that in this beginning of our acquaintance with Eden, there is no such moment of the utterly unsoiled, unfallen, or pure—because the regard of Satan, through which we are obliged to see Eden, always-already acts upon the landscape itself and how we receive it. But that is not to declare express disagreement with the critical line of thinking I just mentioned. In fact, I contribute to it: what we see now is prelapsarian in the radical manner in that we see through eyes that are fallen, and yet see beauty. In different ways, this is both Satan’s condition and ours. The prelapsarian sense is the stronger for registering the desperate desires that form Satan’s regard, yet understanding the landscape as one of hope.

with things that gratify many senses, and are therefore amenable to a multi-sensual imagination. In fact, Paradise is necessarily a function of the imagination, in being the site of fantastic composite fulfilment.

Beneath him with new wonder now he views  
To all delight of human sense exposed  
In narrow room nature's whole wealth, yea more,  
A Heaven on Earth: for blissful Paradise  
Of God the garden was  
[...]  
Out of the fertile ground he caused to grow  
All trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste;  
[...]  
Southward through Eden went a river large,  
Nor changed his course, but through the shaggy hill  
Passed underneath engulfed, for God had thrown  
That mountain as his garden mould high raised  
Upon the rapid current, which through veins  
Of porous earth with kindly thirst up drawn,  
Rose a fresh fountain, and with many a rill  
Watered the garden; thence united fell  
Down the steep glade, and met the nether flood,  
Which from his darksome passage now appears,  
And now divided into four main streams,  
Runs diverse, wandering many a famous realm  
And country whereof here needs no account,  
But rather to tell how, if art could tell,  
How from that sapphire fount the crispèd brooks,  
Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,  
With mazy error under pendant shades  
Ran nectar, visiting each plant, and fed  
Flowers worthy of Paradise which not nice art  
In beds and curious knots, but nature boon  
Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain,  
Both where the morning sun first warmly smote  
The open field, and where the unpierced shade  
Embrowned the noontide bowers: thus was this place,  
A happy rural seat of various view;  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.205-209, 216-217, 223-247)

The verse narrates all that Satan views, but this is clearly not all about what he views. The point of the description is in the explicit welcome of many more senses than sight alone. To Satan's eyes, and

our imagination, this world lies exposed to “all delight of human sense,” the emphatic “all” performing a chiasmic function in its suggestion towards “delight of all human sense.”<sup>272</sup> The fertility of the ground and the nobility of the arboreal landscape are signalled through the trees’ stimulation of various senses: “sight, smell, taste.”<sup>273</sup> As the undulations of the land come into verse and view, an earthy tactility also begins to invoke the aural senses. Where “the rapid current [...] through veins/ Of porous earth with kindly thirst up drawn” rises as “a fresh fountain,” the gathering and irresistible upsurge intimates the transformation of a subterranean murmur of water into a mighty outpouring. The physicality of Paradise is overwhelming. The epic narrator acknowledges this. He concedes of things this account will not deal with, and even articulates the

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<sup>272</sup> Thematically, this composite delight of all human sense will return when the verse describes the world that Raphael flies in to in Book V. The angel:

[N]ow is come  
 Into the blissful field, through groves of myrhh,  
 And flowering odours, cassia, nard, and balm;  
 A wilderness of sweets; for nature here  
 Wantoned as in her prime, and played at will  
 Her virgin fancies, pouring forth more sweet,  
 Wild above rule or art; enormous bliss.  
 Him through the spicy forest onward come  
 Adam discerned [...]  
 (*Paradise Lost*, V.291-299)

The angel will divulge to Eve and Adam how even heavenly and “intelligential” (*Paradise Lost*, V.408) substances or spirits, such as himself, are nevertheless endowed with all the physical senses: “whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste” (*Paradise Lost*, V.411).

<sup>273</sup> The sense of taste is later—again, during Raphael’s flying visit in Book V—given particular place in Eve’s assembly of the meal she will serve for herself, Adam, and their heavenly visitor.

[W]ith dispatchful looks in haste  
 She turns, on hospitable thoughts intent  
 What choice to choose for delicacy best,  
 What order, so contrived as not to mix  
 Tastes, not well joined, inelegant, but bring  
 Taste after taste upheld with kindest change [...]  
 (*Paradise Lost*, V.331-336)



possible limits of his art. He will “rather [...] tell how, if art could tell,/ How from that sapphire fount the crispèd brooks,/ Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,/ With mazy error under pendant shades/ Ran nectar, visiting each plant.” “Mazy error” is, in Eden at its most Edenic, not yet erroneous, and there is a satisfying method inherent within the abundant profusion on “hill and dale and plain.” Yet, the gathering back into vision—of a landscape whose description had started with sight—is as gentle as it is consummate. The profusion of loveliness extends “[b]oth where the morning sun first warmly smote/ The open field, and where the unpierced shade/ Embrowned the noontide bowers.” Even here, where it is fundamentally light that we are meant to register, we thrill to the tactile joy of the sun’s first warmth at break of day and the cool of midday shade.<sup>274</sup>

The withdrawal of this multi-faceted pleasure and a recall to Satan’s state of haunted desire is sharp and unequivocal: “the fiend/ Saw undelighted all delight” (IV.285-286). Yet, the Satanic regard created by a blind poet is responsible for some of the most romantic lines in this poem, and potentially in the English language. Despite the seventeenth-century epic narrator’s tedious establishment of hierarchy between the two human beings in Eden (IV.295-299, 449-491, 497-499), Satan’s view of Adam and Eve betrays a fierce longing that is as human as it is joyful for what it

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<sup>274</sup> There is a return to this composite fulfilment as night gathers, and sights change or diminish:

Now came still evening on, and twilight grey  
 Had in her sober livery all things clad;  
 Silence accompanied, for beast and bird,  
 They to their grassy couch, these to their nests  
 Were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale;  
 She all night long her amorous descant sung;  
 Silence was pleased: now glowed the firmament  
 With living sapphires: Hesperus that led  
 The starry host, rode brightest, till the moon  
 Rising in clouded majesty, at length  
 Apparent queen unveiled her peerless light,  
 And o’er the dark her silver mantle threw.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, IV.598-609)

indicates as possible. At the same time, it partakes in a vast sadness. “Sight hateful, sight tormenting!” (IV.505) Satan begins. But what he describes is an image of power, contentment, and some of the greatest fulfilment possible within the human condition: “Thus these two,/ Imparadised in one another’s arms/ The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill/ Of bliss on bliss” (IV.505-508). Satan’s acute understanding of the pleasures of Eden informs the creation of his singularly apt verb, “imparadise,” just as the verb itself brings into purview something that might not until this utterance have been considered possible, but after this articulation, becomes not only conceivable but desirable. Paradise is rendered as the function of an embrace, an intimacy, a mutuality, and a belonging. Following immediately after, “[t]he happier Eden” becomes both a description and the created consequence of imparadising. “[O]ne another’s arms” *is* the happier Eden for those offering and gathered within the embrace. In the same breath, the very action of these two human beings’ imparadising one another makes for a greater happiness to the Eden they inhabit.<sup>275</sup>

In being a creative act and a structurally creative device, blind language is no different from other poetic language that pushes the boundaries of what counts as language. But I mark it here and I mark this moment—with its offering of imparadisement through the reciprocal enfolding within two pairs of arms—for the desire that is part of its very architecture. For this language is, I offer, remarkable for its capacity to accommodate longing, desire, and yearning at multiple levels. The joy of the first humans is made available to us by our perceiving them through Satan’s eyes, which themselves literally function as lenses of [Satan’s own] desire, and thence ask of us, as we have seen, a peculiar if reserved affiliation. But there is something within the image that also gestures outwards from the image, towards Satan’s creator, the blind Milton, whose perceptible world now belongs

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<sup>275</sup> A similar poetic move sums up the narrator’s description of the repast shared by Adam, Eve, and Raphael in Book V. “Oh innocence/ Deserving Paradise!” (*Paradise Lost*, V.445-446) the narrator exclaims, using the enjambment to set off bidirectional suggestions of both Paradise deserving of blissful innocence, and innocence itself deserving of the bliss of Paradise.

within the tactile reach of his immediate body, and who writes about imparadisement as achieved through touch, the indrawn sense of necessary mutuality.

At the same time, there is something about this vision that is both lonely and aggressive. There is some intimation and cognitive recall of this in Satan's introduction to what he sees: "Sight hateful, sight tormenting!" As Satan describes his vision, we realise the necessary outsider status of anyone who might be watching Eve and Adam's imparadising of one another. That which is serene and glad about what we see through Satan's eyes is also that which is unavoidably intruded upon by our very ability to look in on it. We are aware that we are seeing this through the eyes of another viewer, and that this viewer watches with something other than benediction, contentment, or the ability to live and let live in joy.<sup>276</sup> Thus, we note the layered interplay of desire and near-violence opened up by blind language. By the time we are done with Satan's description of what he sees, we hear the other possible compactations of syntax in the two phrases with which Satan had begun: what he sees is a sight hateful and sight tormenting, because it is sight *itself* that is hateful and tormenting by its capacity for looking in on what should by right be private, quiet, and intimate. Sight, by its property of not *requiring* reciprocity, can be invasive, harming both viewer and viewed. Blind language allows us to see this.

In a related vein, we register as well (almost but not quite subliminally) the author's own fraught transfer of allegiance of intellectual and emotional energies from his sighted days and pursuits to those of his blindness and recurrently avowed inner vision. For before our eyes and upon our ears and jogging again our minds in memory of loss, the verse writes itself into a position where the poet's greatest regret and loss is verbalised into apparent logic in a vehement denouncement of what is lost. If, that is, on the one hand Samson will later lament that "but chief of all,/ O loss of

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<sup>276</sup> In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton will return to the piercing and disturbing nature of invasive sight.

sight, of thee I most complain!” (*Samson Agonistes*, 66-67), here, Satan’s hateful rhetoric brings a fervent vilification of the very same visual facility. It is about the eye of the beholder, but also about the eye itself. Again, in its capaciousness for affective opposites, blind language lets us see this.

This is also language, and Paradise also the stage, for two interconnected discussions on the purpose of the visible universe, and even vision itself. Again, the human regard and the Satanic one come close to one another—and negotiate between desire for access to things of mystery and desire for independence from such desire. Satan watches, and presumably listens in, as Eve asks of Adam as the stars come out: “But wherefore all night long shine these, for whom/ This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?” (IV.657-658). In response, Adam speaks of things invisible to mortal sight, stressing the rightness of that invisibility. But his words make clear too how what is visible accommodates human yearning, thus allowing human awareness of, if not access to, what is beyond human vision. Adam tells of the stars:

Those have their course to finish, round the earth,  
[...]  
Ministering light prepared, they set and rise;  
Lest total darkness should by night regain  
Her old possession, and extinguish life  
In nature and all things  
[...]  
These then, though unbeheld in deep of night,  
Shine not in vain, nor think, though men were none,  
That heaven would want spectators, God want praise;  
Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth  
Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep:  
All these with ceaseless praise his works behold  
Both day and night [...]  
(*Paradise Lost*, IV.661, 664-667, 674-680)

Beholding, then, is an action that spans all orders of being. What is “unbeheld” by human sight is perfectly beheld by “[m]illions of spiritual creatures [who] walk the earth,” themselves “[u]nseen” of human beings. The want of human spectators does not mean an actual want of spectators for the

wonders of the universe. To both the human viewers and the multitude of spiritual creatures, “beholding” can be trigger for and manner of praise, and the action itself can be synaesthetic in nature and suggestion. As Adam recalls to Eve immediately following his statement of the “ceaseless praise” offered by those unseen by them but presumably not unheard: “how often from the steep/  
Of echoing hill or thicket have we heard/  
Celestial voices to the midnight air,/ Sole, or responsive  
each to other’s note/  
Singing their great creator: [...] their songs/  
Divide the night, and lift our thoughts to heaven” (IV.680-684, 687-688). Adam and Eve’s beholding of the evening stars leads into their being enveloped in cosmic music, the delight of which appears to be precisely in its closeness also to the homeliest sounds of the earth, those emanating from “echoing hill or thicket.” Thus, the spiritual creatures’ beholding *is* music, is praise, is the very medium through which human beings can then “lift our thoughts to heaven.”

The serenity of this is shattered when Eve reports her dream from the previous night. The voice in her sleep argued that loveliness was in fact “in vain” if unbeheld. “Why sleepest thou Eve?” it asked.

now reigns  
Full orb'd the moon, and with more pleasing light  
Shadowy sets off the face of things; in vain,  
If none regard; heaven wakes with all his eyes,  
Whom to behold but thee, nature’s desire,  
In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment  
Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze.  
(*Paradise Lost*, V.43-47)

In this rendition, there is no point to loveliness without a spectatorship or “regard,” and perhaps even a “gaze.” The stars, or “eyes” of heaven are conceived of as wakeful for the express purpose of beholding beauty, in this case Eve. But it is also clear that there is something oppressive about such looking. The promise of such “sight [in which] all things joy” is immediately compromised by the

violence implicit in the etymologies of “ravishment” and “[a]ttracted.”<sup>277</sup> The verse enacts the imminent violence of this unequal vision. “[A]ll things joy” in the sight of Eve, and are “with ravishment/ Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze,” but the stillness now works to qualify both the “things” in nature that “gaze” at Eve, and Eve herself, penetrated, pinned down, ultimately stilled by the eyes everywhere whose regards she can never adequately return.

The voice leads Eve on until she comes, in her dream, to “the tree/ Of interdicted knowledge” (V.51-52) which seems “[m]uch fairer to my fancy than by day” (V.53). There, she encounters a winged being who “gazed” at the tree (V.57), this action apparently exciting within him a desire to taste of its fruit. Eve watches in “damp horror” (V.65) as “[h]e plucked, he tasted” (V.65). But the eater appears to be overjoyed. Indeed, after praising the fruit he has just tasted, he offers it to Eve, who finds herself overwhelmed by its “pleasant savoury smell” (V.84) to the point of tasting the fruit herself. But remarkably, the first fruits of this tasting are manifested to her not in terms of gustatory delight or olfactory satisfaction, but a strange visual super-ability.

Forthwith up to the clouds  
 With him I flew, and underneath beheld  
 The earth outstretched immense, a prospect wide  
 And various: wondering at my flight and change  
 At this high exaltation; suddenly  
 My guide was gone, and I, methought, sunk down,  
 And fell asleep; but oh how glad I waked  
 To find this but a dream!

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<sup>277</sup> Etymology of “ravish” as verb: Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French *raviss-*, extended stem of Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French *ravir* (French *ravir*) to seize, snatch, carry away (someone or something), especially by force (beginning of the 12th cent. in Anglo-Norman), to plunder, rob, steal (something), to seize (something) as plunder (both second half of the 12th cent.), to abduct (a woman) by force or violence (late 12th cent.), to drag (someone) to a place (late 12th cent. or earlier in Anglo-Norman), to rape, violate (a woman) (late 13th cent.), to draw (someone) forcibly into some condition or action (late 14th cent.), to capture (a city) (end of the 14th cent. or earlier in Anglo-Norman) an unattested post-classical Latin form *\*rapire*, alteration (with change of conjugation) of classical Latin *rapere* to seize; etymology of “attract” as verb: classical Latin *attract-*, past participial stem of *atrabere* to draw with force, to drag towards, to cause to happen, to draw by invisible influence, *at-*, *ad-* *trahere* to drag, draw. See [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

(*Paradise Lost*, V.86-93)

We don't learn what, if anything, Eve views from her "prospect wide/ And various," but she speaks her loneliness and vertiginous disorientation unambiguously. The "high exaltation" comes across as both empty and unsettling—not unlike what Jesus in *Paradise Regained* will find as he undergoes the Satanic temptations in the later epic.<sup>278</sup> Eve can but sink to sleep from her unreal vision, and wake relieved to find herself outside her dream.

The possible alienation conferred and enabled by sight—to which both looker and looked-at are subject—becomes a recurring theme for Milton, to be taken up variously in both his later epic and *Samson Agonistes*. Arguably, any poet, regardless of sightedness or lack thereof, could meditate on this topic. Arguably too, any sighted reader of Milton's words can with sympathy or imagination understand the complexities of the power or powerlessness of the visual regard and its absence. But such argument omits an understanding of the creative and intellectual work done by a non-normative visual imagination to thus pick up sight and blindness, and almost like Keats with his Grecian urn, turn the phenomena round and round in hands and mind, and contribute to our collective imagination what those states of being or the states in between them might mean. Thus, we confront something of the full weight of visibility and invisibility for a blind poet, which, in turn, enlarges our own understanding of the sensible world.

As the metaphysical debates between Adam and Eve (and later, between Adam and Raphael) in *Paradise* make clear, some of that enlarged understanding owes precisely to its tolerance and even welcome of what would rather remain invisible to mortal sight. A simple definition of this tolerance

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<sup>278</sup> To readers of Milton, Eve's sudden high prospect here recalls the most famous of Satanic visions—in *Paradise Regained*, where visual manipulation will be part of how desire is attempted and ultimately overcome. See particularly Books III and IV.

of invisibility would be: an absence of coercion. Eve and Adam's morning prayer corroborates this: their joy in the invisible is a function of their acceptance of the visible as both end in itself, and vehicle for what it can call to mind and then re-mind of. As though insistent about its meta-poetic quality to refer beyond itself, the blind verse images and speaks what it cannot contain, the very diction drawing attention to the consummation of what is declared impossible. Thus Eve and Adam, about their creator:

Unspeakable, who sitst above these heavens  
To us invisible or dimly seen  
In these thy lowest works, yet these declare  
Thy goodness beyond thought, and power divine:  
(*Paradise Lost*, V.156-159)

Milton's blind language accommodates things invisible to mortal sight and things "[u]nspeakable" in normal/normative conditions of human expressivity. Indeed, it does so exuberantly as the epic proceeds towards creation.

### Witnessing Song

An astonishing act of poetic creation precedes the story of creation in *Paradise Lost*. Together with its structural elasticity, the affective dimension of blind language, in its exuberance and joy, is in specific evidence as Adam and Eve pray in conscious response to their beholding of the dawn, and readers/listeners see the world around the first humans spring into relief. The world sung into being by Eve and Adam appears to us in intimacy and reach, instead of at a remove and distance. The ostensible subject here is praise, and the epic narrator is aware that he places within the mouths of his human creations an unusual articulateness and music. We in turn register that the poet also sings his *own* praise—for a remarkable and “prompt eloquence/ Flowed from their [Eve and Adam's] lips,



in prose or numerous verse,/ More tunable than needed lute or harp/ To add more sweetness”  
(V.149-152).

As readers/listeners, we agree about the accomplished sweetness of the lines that follow, and the deftness of their vision-by-vision uncovering of the created landscape the two humans inhabit. We get to see, as the lines talk about time and unfold in it, the “[f]airest of stars, last in the train of night” (V.166), then the “sun, of this great world both eye and soul” (V.171), and finally the “[m]oon, that now meetst the orient sun” (V.175). But it is when the poetic perspective turns from the heavens to the earth itself that the now familiar explosion of sensual pleasures takes place. A situated, animate, expectant stillness hovers over the scene as the human beings still behold and still praise.

Air, and ye elements the eldest birth  
Of nature’s womb, that in quaternion run  
Perpetual circle, multiform; and mix  
And nourish all things, let your ceaseless change  
Vary to our great maker still new praise.  
Ye mists and exhalations that now rise  
From hill or steaming lake, dusky or grey,  
Till the sun paint your fleecy skirts with gold,  
In honour to the world’s great author rise,  
Whether to deck with clouds the uncoloured sky,  
Or wet the thirsty earth with falling showers,  
Rising or falling still advance his praise.  
His praise ye winds, that from four quarters blow,  
Breathe soft or loud; and wave your tops, ye pines,  
With every plant, in sign of worship wave.  
Fountains and ye, that warble, as ye flow,  
Melodious murmurs, warbling tune his praise.  
Join voices all ye living souls; ye birds,  
That singing up to heaven gate ascend,  
Bear on your wings and in your notes his praise;  
Ye that in waters glide, and ye that walk  
The earth, and stately tread, or lowly creep;  
Witness if I be silent, morn or even,  
To hill, or valley, fountain, or fresh shade  
Made vocal by my song, and taught his praise.  
(*Paradise Lost*, V.180-204)

It has been pointed out how these lines remember and echo the biblical Psalms 148 and 104.<sup>279</sup> They similarly echo the “Benedicite omnia opera Domini domino” from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1559). And thus these lines might have remained—as variations on the biblical psalms and on the melodic catalogue in a well-known prayer—if they were not also evocative of a blind poet’s reminiscence of the splendour and taste of dawn, and his composition of both textual and physical memory into poetry. For Milton departs from the literary inheritance that he is working with to claim a peculiar visual-cum-aural reciprocity between the singers and the world that surrounds them: the world that is asked to praise the creator is the same world that is beheld by the singers and asked to “[w]itness” their singing, and the same world that is “made vocal” by the *singers’* singing. Also, each singer sung into being by the poet individually asserts “my song” as they call attention to the act of composition through which the song is uttered. (For a reader/listener, in turn, the song therefore potentially becomes her song as well.) All of this is wrapped within the epic narrator’s ownership of his subjects’ extraordinary “prompt eloquence,” in meta-poetic and meta-historical anticipation of the hymns that will permeate the poet’s own soundscape.

Running through it all, the structural adaptabilities of blind language enact the discoveries of the landscape and the reverberation of praise. The delayed appearance of the verbs ensures that features of the landscape that are versed into being rest expectantly still until the following verb activates them and sets them into work and praise. For instance, “Air, and ye elements” must “let your ceaseless change/ Vary to our great maker still new praise,” or “Ye mists and exhalations [...] Rising or falling still advance his praise.” But even this does not fully account for the extraordinary sense of becoming with which the lines are infused. For the features of the landscape are themselves in movement. The air and elements run “perpetual circle” and “mix” in “ceaseless change.” The

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<sup>279</sup> Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Milton’s Epics and the Book of Psalms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 154.

mists and exhalations either rise from hill or lake in various moods, colours, and times of day, or descend as showers upon the “thirsty earth,” thus already painting time and passage into the landscape. The crowns of the pines, the birds, and the fountains are similarly all in flow or movement. The achievement of blind language is in the gathering up of these images of movement, stilling them with energy, and setting them forth with renewed force. As we know from earlier instances, the adjectives build and reward attention. Here the verbs, delayed in their positions to a point of aching satisfaction, similarly release what is built up back into the verse, thus propelling the verse irresistibly forward. Indeed, this is verse at its most etymologically resonant: earthy with turns of the plough as it is with turns of the writing that inscribes the lines on the page.<sup>280</sup>

But perhaps the most powerful and radially active energies of blind language here reside in the lines of the final action, that of *composing* the prayer, and the world’s simultaneous *witnessing* of that composition: “Witness if I be silent, morn or even,/ To hill, or valley, fountain, or fresh shade/  
Made vocal by my song, and taught his praise.” If we pause to examine the layers that constitute the meaning, we find that the apparent and reciprocal simplicity of the action is offset by the intricacy of the language used to portray it. Here are four distinct directions of meaning to note, as we gather together how these lines’ structural suppleness achieve their gestures of multivalent agency and song that animate the landscape. First: at the end of a series of addresses, the request articulated presumably to the air, elements, mists, exhalations, plants, fountains, and birds, is that they all stand testament to and furnish evidence of the prayer that they have both inspired *and* been taught. The

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<sup>280</sup> “Verse,” from the Old English *fers*, corresponding to Old Frisian *fers* (West Frisian *fêrs*, North Frisian *fêrs*, etc.), Middle Dutch (Dutch) and Middle Low German *vers*, Old High German, Middle High German *vers*, *fers* (German *vers*), Old Norse (Danish, Swedish) *vers*; Latin *versus* a line or row, specially a line of writing (so named from turning to begin another line), from *vertĕre* to turn. See <http://www.oed.com/>.

praise is thus both quiet and constant: still new praise. Second: if the subject of this unit of the sentence is at least grammatically clear (“all ye living souls”), the object is not entirely defined. This activates various possibilities of agency and reception. Third: “morn or even” are potentially both temporal markers for the praise the singers perform, *and* addressees of the humans’ song in their own right. Even and morn are thus partakers of the action and reason of praise. Last: the silence of the landscape is at once a complete reality, given the hushed stillness of the landscape we have just seen come into being, and a complete impossibility, because the land is after all “made vocal” by the singers and their conspicuous teaching of their song to the world they are in. The language of the epic, blindly flexed and extended into a sum greater than all these parts, makes room for all these meanings. This is also the poet’s preparing his readers/listeners for the extravagant élan of creation itself, whose story is approaching.

### **Likening Spiritual to Corporeal Forms: Measuring Things in Heaven by Things on Earth**

Milton’s raconteur for the story of creation is Raphael, who visits Eve and Adam by divine direction. Before entering the affective flamboyance of blind language in the story of creation, I want to pause, as Milton does with the incidents of Satan’s nascent rebellion and Abdiel’s lone heroism, to note the multivalent, troubled, and ultimately consequential thematizations of sight and blindness in Raphael’s narration of the story of the first fall and the creation of the world. For in almost meta-poetic Miltonic mode, Raphael preambles his narrative undertaking with the acknowledgment that as he tells of things invisible to mortal—and sometimes even immortal—sight, he will work through a kind of narrative accommodation: “what surmounts the reach/ Of human sense, I shall delineate so,/ By likening spiritual to corporal forms,/ As may express them best” (V.571-574).

As Raphael begins, the language of the poem draws attention to its own blind and precise clarity even as it stretches the reader's/listener's attention and their mind's eye. The effect is both vertiginous and accessible. "As yet this world was not," (V. 577) opens Raphael,

and Chaos wild  
Reigned where these heavens now roll, where earth now rests  
Upon her centre poised, when on a day  
(For time, though in eternity, applied  
To motion, measures all things durable  
By present, past, and future) on such day  
As heaven's great year brings forth, the empyreal host  
Of angels by imperial summons called,  
Innumerable before the almighty's throne  
Forthwith from all the ends of heaven appeared  
Under their hierarchs in orders bright  
Ten thousand thousand ensigns high advanced,  
Standards and gonfalons twixt van and rear  
Stream in the air, and for distinction serve  
Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees;  
Or in their glittering tissues bear emblazed  
Holy memorials, acts of zeal and love  
Recorded eminent. Thus when in orbs  
Of circuit inexpressible they stood,  
Orb within orb, the Father infinite,  
By whom in bliss embosomed sat the Son,  
Amidst as from a flaming mount, whose top  
Brightness had made invisible, thus spake.  
(*Paradise Lost*, V.577-599)

As yet this world where Adam and Eve and Raphael sit talking was not, where Raphael began. Then, in front of our eyes and training our ears—for as readers/listeners, we register nuances such as of the *imperial* summons of the *empyreal* host, as Milton must himself register, both while composing and editing—the first of Raphael's sentences carries us from Chaos through the conjuration of time itself to ten thousand thousand ensigns standing in well-defined orbs before (or is it around?) the

divine throne.<sup>281</sup> The transition from what cannot be precisely pictured (time and its motion, although we are told that both exist), to what can be pictured (heaven's great host, arrayed in magnificent order), is as striking as the swiftness with which the vision is subsequently withdrawn. No sooner is the concentric spectacle established than the heart of it is placed where vision cannot aspire. Concentred and embosomed within the "Father infinite" is the reason for this imperial summons of the empyreal host, the reason for this spectacle: the Son, in bliss, but potentially invisible even to immortal sight. For when Raphael describes "the Son, / Amidst *as* from a flaming mount, whose top/ Brightness had made invisible" (emphasis mine), we watch and listen at more removes than we can process, yet with the full weight of our own inheritance of signs and symbols of postlapsarian accommodation. The Son appears *as* from a flaming mount—such a mount as we might know of from the fabled encounter of Moses. Even if there were an actual flaming mount, we should never know what transpires atop it, for its apex is blindingly luminous, invisible with brightness, inaccessible with light. In a perfect Miltonic paradox, light itself is blinding. We cannot know if this visual withdrawal of the Son is God's accommodation for the angels, or the angel's accommodation, in telling the tale, for the humans he now sits with and narrates to. But the action moves on, and God proceeds to address the gathered host of heaven, the "progeny of light" (V.600), to announce his only begotten Son, disobedience to whom, he assures the present company, means the disobeyer's being "cast out from God and blessed vision" (V.613) and their "fall/ Into utter darkness" (V.613-614). The greatest crime merits the greatest punishment, and that punishment consists of the withdrawal of divine vision and light.

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<sup>281</sup> A few lines later, similarly sharp editing is called for to achieve the studied defiance in Satan's words to Abdiel: "then thou shalt behold/ Whether by supplication we intend/ Address, and to begirt the almighty throne/ *Beseeking* or *besieging*" (emphases mine; V.866-869).

But if the greatest retribution of heaven is presented in visual terms, thus speaking to a sustained primacy of sight as advanced by Milton, so too is the greatest crime, in Milton's account, similarly a visual one, thus speaking to every bit of the fraught relationship between sight and knowledge and intellection and desire that marks the early modern moment. In the definitive moment of Satan's undoing, his pride and his sight are inextricably linked to initiate his fall. Milton tells of Satan, who "fraught/ With envy against the Son of God, [...] could not bear/ Through pride that sight [of the Son's anointment as Messiah], and thought himself impaired" (*Paradise Lost*, V.661-662, 664-665). Satan essentially constructs his own relative inferiority, his impairment (from the Latin *impēiorāre*, to make worse) through what he sees. As Satan then proceeds to infuse "[b]ad influence into the unwary breast/ Of his associate" (V.695-696), thus beginning the insurgence in heaven, God watches, darkly vigilant, his own divine sight narrated again in humanly un-sight-ly terms. God watches (for) thought, and regardless of the light cast by the golden lamps that burn by heavenly night. God is and is surrounded by light, but does not need it to see.

Meanwhile the eternal eye, whose sight discerns  
Abstrusest thoughts, from forth his holy mount  
And from within the golden lamps that burn  
Nightly before him, saw without their light  
Rebellion rising, saw in whom, how spread  
Among the sons of morn [...].  
(*Paradise Lost*, V.711-712)

Presumably, God watches still as Satan frets himself into further visual contortions as the rebellion starts building in earnest. Satan imagines the new regime of heaven "coming to receive from us/ Knee-tribute yet unpaid, prostration vile,/ Too much to one, but double how endured/ To one and to his image now proclaimed" (V.783-784). Satan's heaven is full of sight hateful, sight tormenting to him. What he sees is hell, where he looks is hell. And repeatedly, his lapses are presented in visual terms.

In sharp distinction, Abdiel's is a non-visual and non-visually-represented strength, yet rightly "in sight of God" (VI.36). When "encompassed round with foes" (V.876)—as Milton's psalmist professed himself while "I th' midst of all mine enemies that mark" (Psalm VI, 15) and as Samson tells of being when "disarmed among my enemies" (*Samson Agonistes*, 540)—Abdiel "amidst them [the rebel host] he passed,/ Long way through hostile scorn" (V.903-904). As though to prove the strength of those who stand and wait, Abdiel holds his ground "unmoved,/ Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified" (V.898-899). When he finally leaves the rebel host, his is a gesture of looking noticeably away, of being able to absorb but *not* return the "innumerable" (V.898) hostile eyes directed at him. "[W]ith retorted scorn his back he turned" (V.906) to the angels whose fall is imminent. As readers/listeners, we learn that ultimately, the hostile eyes of those intellectually and by reason compromised are but glancing blows. Not so powerless, of course, the enraged divine regard. As we shall see towards the end of Book VI, those eyes, those glances, those looks, however imperceptible in human terms, wield irresistible power.

A few lines after his departure from the rebel host, we find Abdiel in front of a divinity invisible to angelic sight save as a "golden cloud" (VI.28). A "mild" (VI.28) voice calls Abdiel the "Servant of God" (VI.29), and praises him for one who

for the testimony of truth hast borne  
 Universal reproach, far worse to bear  
 Than violence: for this was all thy care  
 To stand approved in sight of God, though worlds  
 Judged thee perverse:  
 (*Paradise Lost*, VI.33-37)

Abdiel's actions are shown as being motivated by the desire for the divine regard, but again, in that regard's own ambiguous visibility. The work of the righteous is to submit to that regard, without the need to return it except in a singularly active passivity, a peculiarly quiet service, the likes of which Milton's readers know of from the poet's sonnet on his blindness. As the battle in heaven begins,



Abdiel drives further home the distinction between visible yet deceptive glory and invisible faith, between apparent splendour and true integrity. As “Satan with vast and haughty strides advanced,/ [...] armed in adamant and gold;/ Abdiel that sight endured not” (VI.109-111).

O heaven! that such resemblance of the highest  
Should yet remain, where faith and realty  
Remain not; wherefore should not strength and might  
There fail where virtue fails, or weakest prove  
Where boldest; though to sight unconquerable?  
(*Paradise Lost*, VI.114-118)

In this meditation on what is and is not available to vision, Milton might himself as well be asking again how his own eyes appear to see yet do not (as we have noted in our discussion of Sonnet XVIII and the *Second Defense*). Milton’s narrator Raphael similarly drives home, again, the unavailability-to-sight of the righteous force of Abdiel. For as Abdiel concludes his verbal battle with Satan, “a noble stroke he lifted high,/ Which hung not, but so swift with tempest fell/ On the proud crest of Satan, that no sight/ Nor motion of swift thought, less could his shield/ Such ruin intercept: ten paces huge/ He [Satan] back recoiled” (VI.189-194).

As Raphael warms to the story of the conflict in heaven, he explicitly returns to devices of narrative accommodation. Milton signals, through Raphael’s owning of the narration of “unspeakable” (VI.297) events, the precise potential of this verse to “lift/ Human imagination to such height/ of godlike power” as may allow a kind of comprehension of indescribable matters to his human audience. Similes return, as epic as ever. Structural athletics of blind language return, as evocative as ever, for there is no way to tell of a heavenly battle except through associations and with vivid blind vision, since what is described is such as no one in the human condition has ever seen or known. But this is not just about the structural aspect of this language; there is also the cognitive facet, with its mnemonic power and syntactical anticipations and satisfactions. Thus the

clash between Satan and Michael, at a decisive moment in heaven's great encounter, in two eventful sentences.

Now waved their fiery Swords, and in the air  
Made horrid circles; two broad suns their shields  
Blazed opposite, while expectation stood  
In horror; from each hand with speed retired  
Where erst was thickest fight, the angelic throng,  
And left large field, unsafe within the wind  
Of such commotion, such as to set forth  
Great things by small, if nature's concord broke,  
Among the constellations war were sprung,  
Two planets rushing from aspect malign  
Of fiercest opposition in mid-sky,  
Should combat, and their jarring spheres confound.  
Together both with next to almighty arm,  
Uplifted imminent one stroke they aimed  
That might determine, and not need repeat,  
As not of power, at once; nor odds appeared  
In might or swift prevention; but the sword  
Of Michael from the armoury of God  
Was given him tempered so, that neither keen  
Nor solid might resist that edge: it met  
The sword of Satan with steep force to smite  
Descending, and in half cut sheer, nor stayed,  
But with swift wheel reverse, deep entering shared  
All his right side; then Satan first knew pain,  
And writhed him to and fro convolved; so sore  
The griding sword with discontinuous wound  
Passed through him, but the ethereal substance closed  
Not long divisible, and from the gash  
A stream of nectarous humour issuing flowed  
Sanguine, such as celestial spirits may bleed,  
And all his armour stained erewhile so bright.  
(*Paradise Lost*, VI.304-334)

The poet must set forth great things by small, if he is to describe the battle in heaven—although it is only equivocally clear, here, which is the greater thing and which the smaller. An interstellar imagination is summoned as the first sentence builds, with expectation itself standing by in horror. The verse enacts this build-up of and opening out into suspense, an eerie stop-motion visuality and sonar quiet descending on the action as Milton completes the first sentence. The verse rewards the

lengthened span of aural accumulation, the final verb again serving to detonate the action: “their jarring spheres confound.” But from this moment of *suggested* encounter of the heavenly spheres, the action now falls back on to the divine figures whose actual encounter the warring planets have given us scale for. “Together both with next to almighty arm/ Uplifted imminent,” the fierce combatants meet. The next sentence is punctuated into sections of significant action but gathers pace as it moves to its climax in Satan’s pain—and breaks speed only at the strangely muted follow-through of that climax, Satan’s celestial sanguinity, seeping from his injured side, staining his moon-bright armour. We know by now how adjectives and verbs mediate the weight of strategically suspended action. For this passage, they merit mention for their gathering of a blow by blow visual energy that is nevertheless about more than vision, and rather about a visceral and full-body apprehension of motion and momentum: the sword of Michael meets the sword of Satan with “steep” force to “smite/ Descending,” the adjectives catching the sharp rise and fall of the blade; after cutting Satan’s sword in half, Michael’s sword stays not but with “swift wheel reverse” returns to sever Satan’s right side—the potentially double verb and potentially double adjective gathering the backward and forward energy of the sword drawn back to strike again; Satan writhes in “convolved” serpentine pain as the inflicted and arguably continuous wound actually threatens to discontinue *him*; “nectarous humour” issues from the cut, dissolving the thrusting action into injury. It is not, perhaps, until the sentence is done, that we notice the virtuoso use of the sibilants gliding through this extended sentence, setting up echoes and expectations of sound and sense.

The following day, Raphael continues, is the battle of the mountains. Seeing all heaven about to break loose, God appoints the Son to end this war. Raphael narrates the complex oversight/super-vision/omni-oculence of Father and Son—both as the divine pair discusses the Son’s setting forth, and the Son’s accoutrements as he starts out. To God, the Son is the “[e]ffulgence of my glory, [...] / Son in whose face invisible is beheld/ Visibly, what by deity I am” (VI.680-682).

Milton engages successive paradoxes to tell of things dark and wide of mortal or immortal sight. The Son is the effulgence, or shining forth, of the Father's glory. In the next line, "invisible" is a hinge. If it is an adjective, it is the Son's face that is invisible; if it is an adverb, it is a qualification, however impossibly, of the visibility of God's deity. As we noted with the hymn in Book V, here again is periphrasis of sense to a point of irreducible simplicity. Regular grammar and syntax almost fail. But only almost—because the language is carried forth with characteristically epic momentum well before a reader/listener might stop to puzzle syntax out. Also, after all we now know of the rightness of things invisible to mortal sight, there is a kind of sense to light and darkness, visibility and invisibility, themselves becoming interchangeable in God's speech. In what follows, God "on his Son with rays direct/ Shone full, he all his Father full expressed/ Ineffably into his face received" (VI.719-721). This action pivots on "expressed," which works with both "full" before (that is, the Son fully expresses the Father) and carries on into "ineffably" after (that is, the Son receives ineffably on to his face the full expression of his father; the Son's face fully expresses his father's).

Then, there is the eyeful "chariot of paternal deity" (VI.750) which the Son mounts as he undertakes the mission to rid heaven of the rebel rout. Here is the remarkable description of this vehicle:

Flashing thick flames, wheel within wheel undrawn,  
 Itself instinct with spirit, but convoyed  
 By four cherubic shapes, four faces each  
 Had wondrous, as with stars their bodies all  
 And wings were set with eyes, with eyes the wheels  
 Of beryl, and careering fires between  
 (*Paradise Lost*, VI.751-756)

The divine chariot speaks to a recurring Miltonic fantasy. It is a fantasy of full-body radiance *and* sight, such as we have seen in the previous chapter, where the poet's late espoused saint emitted love, goodness, sweetness, and delight for an ambiguously sighted poet to see right through a veiled

face; and such as comes up later in Samson's demand to see at will through every pore (*Samson Agonistes*, 97), notwithstanding loss of eyes. The chariot is a spectacular weapon of spectacular use. The drivers of the chariot, the cherubs, have four faces each, the better to watch in four cardinal directions. Eyes stud the very wings of the cherubs, just as eyes also festoon the wheels of the chariot. This vehicle knows where it is going. But the spectacular mobile serves only to underscore further visual lapses on the part of the fallen: "They hardened more by what might most reclaim,/ Grieving to see his glory, at the sight/ Took envy" (VI.791-793), thus giving the truth to a blind poet's God's early pronouncement that those of intellectual and consequential harness would be hardened more, those of inner blindness would be blinded more. Answering this double darkness of the fallen with his own luminous obscurity, the Son charges. He is effectively armed with a multitude of eyes, which shoot forth irresistible ruin.

At once the four spread out their starry wings  
 With dreadful shade contiguous, and the orbs  
 Of his fierce chariot rolled, as with the sound  
 Of torrent floods, or of a numerous host.  
 He on his impious foes right onward drove,  
 Gloomy as night;  
 [...]  
 Nor less on either side tempestuous fell  
 His arrows, from the fourfold-visaged four,  
 Distinct with eyes, and from the living wheels,  
 Distinct alike with multitude of eyes,  
 One spirit in them ruled, and every eye  
 Glared lightning, and shot forth pernicious fire  
 Among the accursed, that withered all their strength,  
 And of their wonted vigour left them drained,  
 Exhausted, spiritless, afflicted, fall'n.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, VI.827-832, 844-852)

As the cherubs spread their starry and many-eyed wings and the multitudinally-eyed wheels of the chariot turn, gathering speed and menace for the rebel army, innumerable lines of sight enabled by innumerable eyes become a moving force. A subterranean synaesthesia begins to surface: we hear

the thunder of the “fierce chariot rolled, as with the sound/ Of torrent floods,” but it is the scorching and “glared lightning” of “every eye” that “shot forth pernicious fire” that drains and desiccates the rebels. We sense the fire of the lines of divine displeasure shot as divine sight. The rebels are forced out of heaven by simply being *looked* out of countenance. If Abdiel’s trial by hostile eyes was such that he needed to turn away and look in the direction of God, the rebels’ trial is by their sheer inability to confront the divine look. They fail; they fall; “hell at last/Yawning received them whole, and on them closed” (VI.874-875). In the heaven where prospects, aspects, and admirations hold power and sway, the “Messiah his triumphal [and many-eyed] chariot turned:/ To meet him all his saints, who silent stood/ Eyewitnesses of his almighty acts,/ With jubilee advanced” (VI.881-883). They saw, he came, he conquered.

Here ends Raphael’s tale of the war in heaven, and Milton has the angel own again his accommodation of great things in small. “Thus measuring things in heav’n by things on earth/ At thy [Adam’s] request” (VI.893-894), Raphael says, he has narrated what could not otherwise have been narrated. Yet, further challenges remain for the epic poet, for the sound and fury of the tale told by the angel must now wind into the harmony of creation. In this next section, I read particularly for the affective dimension of blind language: its plenty, its joy, its exuberance as it assumes the task of picturing the nothing-to-everything and chaos-to-form that is the story of creation, and, we might remind ourselves, the function of poetry. But before creation, again, the verse makes room for its creator. The poet expressly discusses again the solitude, fear, loneliness, and strange claimed company that continue to in-form his poetic effort. Milton uses his blindness to think various aspects of creation through and to write it multivalently into sensible verse. Blind language is the very means for this poetic exercise, for the matter under consideration is unseeable except in the mind’s eye. The first order of business for Milton at this juncture is the arranging anew of his dark materials, his summoning afresh of his blind poetic energies.

## Creation

Descend from heav'n Urania, by that name  
If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine  
Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,  
Above the flight of Pegasean wing.  
The meaning, not the name I call: for thou  
Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top  
Of old Olympus dwelst, but heav'nly born,  
Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed,  
Thou with eternal wisdom didst converse,  
Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play  
In presence of the almighty Father, pleased  
With thy celestial song. Up led by thee  
Into the heav'n of heav'ns I have presumed,  
An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal air,  
Thy tempering; with like safety guided down  
Return me to my native element:  
Lest from this flying steed unreined, (as once  
Bellerophon, though from a lower clime),  
Dismounted, on the Aleian field I fall  
Erroneous, there to wander and forlorn.  
Half yet remains unsung, but narrower bound  
Within the visible diurnal sphere;  
Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,  
More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged  
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,  
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;  
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,  
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou  
Visitst my slumbers nightly, or when morn  
Purples the east: still govern thou my song,  
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.  
(*Paradise Lost*, VII.1-31)

Blind language spanning 10,565 lines (the total length of *Paradise Lost*, in its twelve-book version) is a daring, even risky, undertaking. Milton's invocation in Book VII examines that risk from several angles. This is a repeated matter of Milton's pondering; in Book III, Milton had wondered about his ability to compose (about) the "holy light, offspring of heaven first-born," (III.1) adequately and without blame. ("May I express thee unblamed?" III.3). Here, Urania is summoned by meaning (from Greek: Οὐρανία, "heavenly," or "of heaven"), and not simply by

name (“Urania,” which in itself is much too mired in the classical inheritance for this Christian poet) to make sure that the composer arrives safely back on earth, after his high sojourn relating the deeds of heaven. Her pre-eminence is asserted, and Milton uses the structural pliability of his blind verse to indicate her participatory creativity: “Thou with eternal wisdom didst converse,/ Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play/ In presence of the almighty Father, pleased/ With thy celestial song.” The fulcrum in “eternal wisdom” (and in “pleased,” for that matter, for the pleasure belongs to both Urania and the Father) now looks familiar to us. Until the enjambment, Urania conversed (or conversed, made poetry?) with eternal wisdom, this eternal wisdom being proper to her. After the run-on, we realise the personification at play: it is in fact “wisdom [,] thy [Urania’s] sister,” the same embodied wisdom who haunts the biblical Proverbs with great poetry: “When there were no depths, I was brought forth: when there were no fountains abounding with water./ Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: while as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields [...] when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: when he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep [...] when he appointed the foundations of the earth” (Proverbs 8:24-30). In Milton’s account, Urania is co-creative with this agential wisdom—and by meaning, if not by name, she is an equivalent of the “holy light” (III.1). Now, the poet asks her guiding back to earth to sing his mortal song, sung with “mortal voice,” which aspires to immortality precisely through its being “narrower bound/ Within the visible diurnal sphere.” The poet is clear, though, that he needs the guidance, because as ever, he knows of unwise risk: such wandering as once resulted in blindness, which in turn resulted in further forlorn wandering. Milton does not wish to emulate Bellerophon—who actually had *less* of a fall than this poet might have, for after all Bellerophon fell but “from a lower clime”—in the latter’s erroneous and forsaken roaming. He wants to be guided by Urania back to his “native element,” no matter the heady intoxication of the high and heavenly air (helpfully *tempered* by Urania) that he has breathed until now.



The return to earth brings risks of its own in a mortal poet's blind life. With the change of air and altitude, the sights and smells of earth rise—both for the poet and for readers/listeners who have recently seen the conjuration of dawn in Book V. Through this locational transformation, the poet asserts his voice unchanged: not hoarse, not mute. Yet, he is fallen on evil days, and evil tongues, and lives “[i]n darkness, and with dangers compassed round.” The mnemonic and cognitive dimension of blind language—most evident in the casting forth and pulling back and ranging out that we now know to watch and listen for—is activated both in the compasses borrowed and renewed from Proverbs, and in Urania's “still” governance of the poet's song through the night and the silent, resonant, purple morning. It is here, in the nightly visitations of Urania that the daily solitude of the poet is temporarily dispelled. In fact, this is what prompts his aspiration to move further away from a loneliness that threatens to overcome his days: for he wants to work towards a bigger community, that of readers/listeners fit for his song, though they be few in number. Despite the fact that—and perhaps because—the song cannot fully overcome or transcend evil/danger/solitude/blindness, it is a means of reaching out.

Writing several years after Milton's death, but drawing on accounts of those who knew the poet in his lifetime, biographer Jonathan Richardson gives us a curiously compelling account of Milton's methods of composition.<sup>282</sup> Thus Richardson, of Milton:

[H]e frequently Compos'd lying in Bed in a Morning [...] I have been Well inform'd, that when he could not Sleep, but lay Awake whole Nights, he Try'd; not One Verse could he make; at Other times flow'd *Easy his Unpremeditated Verse*, with a certain

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<sup>282</sup> Elsewhere in his biography of Milton, Richardson also draws on Milton's published writings about himself. Richardson is not sympathetic towards Milton's daughters, and it is in part to him that we owe the myth of Milton's daughters' incomprehension of and impatience with what they read to/for their father. Going by what we know of Milton as a teacher, however, Richardson's account of an essentially miserable pedagogical relationship between the scholarly parent and his less-than-scholarly children seems, at best, shaky. Such a narrative projects Richardson's own ideas of limited female literacy and intellectual prowess more than it indicates the intellectual capacities of Anne, Mary, or Deborah Milton.

*Impetus* and *Aestro*, as Himself seem'd to Believe. Then, at what Hour soever, he rung, for his Daughter to Secure what Came. I have been also told he would Dictate many, perhaps 40 Lines as it were in a Breath, and then reduce them to half the Number.<sup>283</sup>

He speaks, she hears, she secures what comes. Perhaps she asks him to repeat as he composes in a single breath; perhaps he asks her to read back to him what she has written; certainly, he hears the poetry in her voice. As Urania and a personified wisdom do, so too father and daughter: they converse. Song is materially a means for a blind poet to reach out. As readers today, we should remember that it is also, crucially, about finding the first, indubitably few yet very fit audience. Milton's final poetry would not exist but for this primary and necessarily participatory audience, this involved and what-soever-hourly network of care.

Back in Paradise, Adam and Raphael continue to converse. Adam asks to know—the senses intermingling again in the verse—“[h]ow first began this heaven which we behold/ [...] All space, the ambient air wide interfused/ Embracing round this florid earth” (VII.86, 89-90). The markers of time itself, Adam contends, will either stop or watch as Raphael narrates, for they wish, as Adam does, to hear of genesis.

And the great light of day yet wants to run  
Much of his race though steep, suspense in heaven  
Held by thy voice, thy potent voice he hears,  
And longer will delay to hear thee tell  
His generation, and the rising birth  
Of nature from the unapparent deep:  
Or if the star of evening and the moon  
Haste to thy audience, night with her will bring  
Silence, and sleep listening to thee will watch,  
Or we can bid his absence, till thy song  
End, and dismiss thee ere the morning shine.  
(*Paradise Lost*, VII.98-108)

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<sup>283</sup> Darbishire, 291.

The metaphorical (synaesthetic), structural, and affective qualities of the verse are called into play to enact the slope of day into night and night's release into day in the space of a few lines. A sunny languor informs the stillness of the "great light of day" who "will delay to hear thee tell/his generation." The agent of light and time is subject to the storytelling voice of the angel. Nature itself, by association, holds its breath, waiting to learn of its generation from "the unapparent," unseeable, "deep." But if—although there is no mention of the sun's having left the scene yet—the evening star and the moon rise apparently early, again as eager "audience," night itself will bring "silence" to presumably everything *other* than the voice telling of creation. Sleep itself will listen—until morning unlocks the spell, relieves the storyteller, and restarts the diurnal rhythm. The senses combine in the very words used to evoke them, and the Miltonic device of the syntactic hinge around verbs and adjectives pivots meaning back and forth. A stunning enjambment, for instance, enacts the quiet/non-quiet of the suspended sleep that Adam proposes. "[N]ight with her will bring/ Silence, and sleep listening to thee will watch." The verse pauses to indicate the instance when night will bring silence, but lunges forth into the verb of ambivalent use, "sleep," which here can answer both "night" and its own personified self. Sleep will also both listen *and* watch, as though to help the reader/listener anticipate the near-dreamlike story Adam expects to hear. Or, mentions Adam, this story-telling/story-listening collective can keep sleep waiting, watching, "till thy [Raphael's] song/ End."

Adam's request sets the tone for the story of creation. God's address to his Son marks an assertion of the Son as verbal poetry, and that verbal poetry as a creator of worlds: "And thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee/ This I perform, speak thou, and be it done" (VII.163-164). And it *was* done, we are told, *as God spoke*. It all happened terribly swiftly, indeed, instantaneously. Yet, Milton's Raphael's narration must remain language, poetic language, and poetic language that unfolds in time. "Immediate are the acts of God, more swift/ Than time or motion, but to human ears/ Cannot

without process of speech be told,/ So told as earthly notion can receive” (VII.176-179). It is within this explicit accommodation within speech and human time that blind language now enters its exercise in abundance, joy, and multi-sensual and layered iteration as it tells of creation.

In the beginning was the Word reaching out to chaos. As we read for the affective in this first remarkable passage of creation, I want to also listen for the balance between verbal sufficiency and excess, between solemnity and a kind of humour, between creative license and precision.

[H]eaven opened wide  
Her ever-during gates, harmonious sound  
On golden hinges moving, to let forth  
The king of glory in his powerful Word  
And Spirit coming to create new worlds.  
On heavenly ground they stood, and from the shore  
They viewed the vast immeasurable abyss  
Outrageous as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild,  
Up from the bottom turned by furious winds  
And surging waves, as mountains to assault  
Heaven’s height, and with the centre mix the pole.  
Silence, ye troubled waves, and thou deep, peace,  
Said then the omnific Word, your discord end:  
Nor stayed, but on the wings of cherubim  
Uplifted, in paternal glory rode  
Far into chaos, and the world unborn;  
For chaos heard his voice: him all his train  
Followed in bright procession to behold  
Creation, and the wonders of his might.  
Then stayed the fervid wheels, and in his hand  
He took the golden compasses, prepared  
In Gods eternal store, to circumscribe  
This universe, and all created things:  
One foot he centred, and the other turned  
Round through the vast profundity obscure,  
And said, thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,  
This be thy just circumference, O world.  
Thus God the heaven created, thus the earth  
(*Paradise Lost*, VII.205-232)

The story again begins in a place of utter darkness, fittest called chaos. But now, the language has richer form and power precisely because of what has come before this point, and potentially will

after. For we have already seen the unessential night (during Satan's voyage) and the compasses of creative circumscription (in the invocation to Book VII, itself echoing Proverbs); we already know the heavenly cherubim and the flaming wheels of the Son's chariot (from his recent purging of hell); we are aware of how words make worlds (as Eve and Adam's prayer did, in Book V). Now, all of that forms background music for massive actions that answer an unimaginable vision surging with waves high as mountains, from what is "as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild." What the Word, the Son, accomplishes in this dark wasteful wild is rustled into the language of the poem through Milton's use, now, of a word of his own creation: "omnific," all-doing, all-creating. Language and agency are made nearly interoperable. The omnific Word is all-creating to the extent of creating its own qualifying word, its adjective, "omnific." And once the Son's divine dance is completed, with his one foot creating the centre and another circumscribing the limits of the great globe itself, the perfect circle described by his movement is written acoustically and visually into the verse by Milton's own address: "O world." For "O" is both address and adjective. It operates visually (in its roundness on the page) and orally (in the shape of a mouth framing the word), to describe in miniature the form of the great world that we have just registered come into being. We get to hold it in our eyes and in our mouths. There is a sombreness and gravity here that comes from the matter under discussion. But I offer that as poet and maker of worlds, this author is also enjoying himself.

Soon, this world has a separation of oceans and land, and acquires the overlooking lights of sun and moon and stars. (What remains to be created is human face divine.) As in our approach to Paradise, so here, in the creation of the world: it is a multi-sensual feast. But this time, with creation being the ostensible subject of the verse, the feast unfolds luxuriously over time, the better to allow readers/listeners to participate in the coming-into-being of the world. Here, for instance, is the greening of the earth.

[T]he bare earth, till then  
 Desert and bare, unsightly, unadorned,  
 Brought forth the tender grass, whose verdure clad  
 Her universal face with pleasant green,  
 Then herbs of every leaf, that sudden flowered  
 Opening their various colours, and made gay  
 Her bosom smelling sweet: and these scarce blown,  
 Forth flourished thick the clustering vine, forth crept  
 The swelling gourd, up stood the corny reed  
 Embattled in her field: and the humble shrub,  
 And bush with frizzled hair implicit: last  
 Rose as in dance the stately trees, and spread  
 Their branches hung with copious fruit; or gemmed  
 Their blossoms: with high woods the hills were crowned,  
 With tufts the valleys and each fountain side,  
 With borders long the rivers.  
 (*Paradise Lost*, VII.313-328)

The visual plenitude of this nearly cinematic scene is clear. But even images that might have been predominantly visual operate with extra-visual appeal, in the sensual inclusivity of the poetry. The verdure covers earth's universal face with *pleasant* green, such that the senses already reach further than the eyes (while "green" might be primarily visually accessible, "pleasant" comes through many senses). If the flowering of the herbs with "various colours" looks to the eye for appreciation, similarly, what we immediately afterwards register is earth's gay bosom *smelling sweet*, at once enfolding the olfactory and the gustatory into this experience of creative delight. A tactile gratification is gestured towards through the "thick" and "clustering" vine, the "swelling" gourd on its tenacious creeper, and the bush with "frizzled hair." But last, as though to satisfy the growing throb of full-on motion throughout, "[r]ose as in dance the stately trees." Milton wraps up this movement with an enjambment that continues to gently turn and turn again and surprise: "Rose as in dance the stately trees, and spread/ Their branches hung with copious fruit." The upward movement, the rising, the dance, of the stately trees is continued in the next section of the sentence, for the trees spread their branches in their growth. Thus far, as we read, the branches look to the sky, airy with movement and light with youth. Then, without missing a beat but with a superb

suggestion of months if not years in time, the verse brings fullness and gravity to bear on them at once, until they, the branches, hang heavy and plentiful with fruit.

Similarly, imagery that is now part of the mindscape of readers/listeners is gathered back in and let out anew. For instance, where, in the newly created waters, fish “sporting with quick glance/  
Show to the sun their waved coats dropped with gold” (VII.405-406), we again meet “leviathan,/ Hugest of living creatures, on the deep/  
Stretched like a promontory” (VII.412-414). We recall when last we saw leviathan, and a night-foundered skiff tried to anchor on this promontory. But matters are peaceful now, and leviathan “sleeps or swims,/ And seems a moving land, and at his gills/  
Draws in, and at his trunk spouts out a sea” (VII.414-416), as leviathan is wont to do. Thus, the poem seems to say, it might always have been, but for Satanic machinations and desires. We also hear again the wakeful bird sing darkling. After the creation of the fowls of the air, and their great flights “intelligent of seasons” (VII.427)—again, the passage of time is written into the very moment of creation—we see the “smaller birds” (VII.433) singing with “painted wings/  
Till even” (VII.434-435), and with evening, we see “the solemn nightingale” (VII.435) who never yet “[c]eased warbling, but all night tuned her soft lays” (VII.436), rather like its current author, Milton. Next, we again see Eve in her still being looked at, her still and always unable to adequately return the visual attention she receives. Of everyone we meet in *Paradise Lost*, no one resembles Milton’s own condition of a human inability to return the visual regard the way Eve does, and the repeated mentions of her being held in others’ eyes are eloquent of her author Milton’s understanding of the complex give and take of sight. When Eve leaves the happy table she and Adam share with Raphael, she goes “[n]ot unattended, for on her as queen/  
A pomp of winning graces waited still,/ And from about her shot darts of desire/  
Into all eyes to wish her still in sight” (VIII.60-63). All is wonderful in Eden, yet Eve cannot look back. There is nothing for her to do but still bear up and steer right onward.

And finally, we see the power again of dreams and prayers: where Adam wakes into life, and soon, longing.<sup>284</sup> For it is an accommodated sight within which he converses with one “of shape divine” (VIII.295).<sup>285</sup> When they first meet, “by the hand he [the shape divine] took me [Adam] raised” (VIII.300). The gentleness and essential human blindness of this moment is magnified by the next level of the dream that Adam narrates, for this “presence divine” (VIII.324) brings Adam to Eden, and discloses: “Whom thou soughtst I am,/ [...] author of all this thou seest” (VIII.316-317). The creatures of the earth come by to creator and created man and are named. Yet Adam “found not what methought I wanted still” (VIII.355). To the “heavenly vision” (VIII.356) Adam makes his prayer for an equal companion: one “of fellowship” (VIII.389). When “the gracious voice divine” (VIII.436) finally approves and promises to this first man “[t]hy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self,/ Thy wish” (VIII.450-451), Adam enters a third level of dreaming: “Mine eyes he closed” (VIII.460). But “fancy my internal sight” (VIII.461) remains accessible, and Adam sees in his layered dream the fashioning of the woman who will be his wife. Adam ultimately wakes—in a manner that his author Milton cannot, no matter that he once thought he saw his late espoused saint—to find Eve beside him.

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<sup>284</sup> In Adam’s relation of the story of his waking into life, his first ever action is expansive sight, even as he undergoes a multi-sensual awakening. “As new waked from soundest sleep/ Soft on the flowery herb I found me laid/ In balmy sweat [...] / Straight toward heaven my wondering eyes I turned,/ And gazed a while the ample sky” (VIII.253-255, 257-258). Similarly, Adam’s first words are to the greatest light he sees: “Thou sun, said I, fair light” (VIII.273). He cannot look at God, but perhaps prelapsarian Adam can look directly at the sun.

<sup>285</sup> Adam never attempts a description of this divine shape—although he uses various epithets for the apparition.



## Higher Argument

I close with a consideration of the quietest invocation in *Paradise Lost*. My final section of this chapter briefly marks the rhetorical aspect of blind language: its explicit desire for others' engagement, its human reaching out.<sup>286</sup> But, as I show, this invocation is also thematically important to this study because of its strangely tangential connection with its author's blindness.

As the "notes" of *Paradise Lost* change "to tragic" (IX.6), and begin to tell of "distance and distaste,/ Anger and just rebuke" (IX.9-10) and such other grave matters, the poet who would write *Paradise Regained* affirms that this necessary solemnity nevertheless constitutes "argument/ Not less but more heroic" (IX.14) than what any of the classics could muster (IX.14-19).

If answerable style I can obtain  
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns  
Her nightly visitation unimplored,  
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
Easy my unpremeditated verse:  
Since first this subject for heroic song  
Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late;  
Not sedulous by nature to indite  
Wars, hitherto the only argument  
Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect  
With long and tedious havoc fabled knights  
In battels feign'd; the better fortitude  
Of patience and heroic martyrdom  
Unsung; or to describe races and games,  
[...]  
Not that which justly gives heroic name  
To person or to poem.  
(*Paradise Lost*, IX.20-33, 40-41)

Gently returning to the apparent belatedness that he has been long wont to protest (in Sonnet VII, for instance), the poet owns that he has been slow to decide on and begin his great poetic effort:

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<sup>286</sup> The future version of this work will consider how this human reaching is also made part of the theme and subject of the culminating actions of the epic: the fall and recovery of humankind.

“Since first this subject for heroic song/ Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late.”<sup>287</sup> When he did undertake his own heroic poem, it ended up being quite unlike the conventional ones, which tend to feature “tilting furniture, emblazoned shields” and suchlike.<sup>288</sup> But those heroic races and games and fantastic events—and the poetic elucidation of such things—do not justly give heroic name to person or poem, claims this poet, recalling to us Milton’s youthful aspiration towards his own “true poem” long ago. What he has set out to compose, he asserts, is towards a more lasting heroism. “Me,” this poet tells of himself, “of these [predictably epic matters, such as races and games]/ Nor skilled nor studious” (IX.41-42),

higher argument  
Remains, sufficient of itself to raise  
That name, unless an age too late, or cold  
Climate, or years damp my intended wing  
Depressed, and much they may, if all be mine,  
Not hers who brings it nightly to my ear.  
(*Paradise Lost*, IX.42-47)

It is this twofold and onward surprise and promise that I want to end with. First, that a blind poet claims a higher argument than any that his literary past has afforded him—yet, after repeatedly invoking his visual condition in his addresses thus far, he does not anymore explicitly mention his blindness.<sup>289</sup> He indicates factors that could contribute to the possible insufficiency of his unconventional undertaking: eventual cultural indifference, the northern clime, and his advanced

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<sup>287</sup> Indeed, Milton’s “Elegia Sexta” (composed in 1629), his “Epitaphium Damonis” (written in 1639), and Book 2 of *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) had variously carried mentions of his epic ambitions.

<sup>288</sup> In this, Milton recalls George Herbert of “The Forerunners.”

<sup>289</sup> For this insight, I am indebted to Angelica Duran’s presented response to my paper at the Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting in March 2018.

age. But his blindness is only tangentially referred to—in the mention that Urania still visits by night and opens worlds to his inner sight. We are almost recalled to Milton's translated Psalm VI, where a blind poet stops discussing his blindness, and mentions only his assurance of the best help, support, and company in his consequential endeavours. Second, that the poet unambiguously owns the say that even "an age too late" might have about his poetry. Ultimately, then, this blind and heroic composition is about participation and engagement in both directions: for the poet to reach out with, but also for the poet's age—and ages afterwards—to register and honour.

## Conclusion

Using the case of visual non-normativities, this dissertation has argued that the physical experiences of the body inscribe and imprint language, particularly poetic language. I began with the ocularcentrism of the early modern moment—its prioritisation of sight over other senses—to proceed into readings of the poetic works, across genres, of three canonical authors of this time and demonstrate how these poets variously unsettle the equation between sight and intellection dominant around them.

With Shakespeare, in Chapter I, I argued that blindness on this playwright's stage functions as means to radically rethink the equation between sight and intellection prevalent in early modern England. In writing from Simpcox in *2 Henry VI* to Gloucester in *King Lear*—that is, in writing from the discovery of a “blind” deception close to St Albans shrine to the famous blind/“blind” disorientation at the cliffs of Dover—I offered, Shakespeare writes the limits of the sighted imagination to fully take measure of human need, moral justice, and ethical knowledge. Indeed, I claimed, it is in this writing of the limits of theatre and vision and spectacle—both for those in the world of *Lear*, and our own world, in which Shakespeare's plays continue to be read, performed, and discussed—that *King Lear* succeeds in *not* being yet another sighted author's projection of visual disability.<sup>290</sup> Instead, it confronts audiences and spectators with the constructed nature of sight, and

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<sup>290</sup> We have plenty of those. Indeed, mainstream readership seems not to tire of able-bodied authorship of disabled characters. See, for instance, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (New York: Scribner, 2014), which won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 2015. One of the protagonists of this beautifully crafted story is a blind woman distinguished as much by her

ability more generally; it invites readers/viewers into the underlying architecture of theatrical convention, even at its limits, and thus energises the work that spectators'/audiences' imaginative projection can do in front of the dramatic medium; and it compels readers/viewers to grasp not only what is, but more consequentially, imagine what could be.

In Chapter II, I showed a devotional and lyric poet's exquisite disposition of text on the page, but also, in a complication of George Herbert's celebration of sight through his organisation of his readers' eyes, I analysed this author's multivalent references to vision as at once a conduit to the divine and an obstruction to it. I demonstrated how Herbert insists on his readers' visual engagement with his poetry, and also showed how, in his poetic constructions of sight, he sometimes desires what we might call physical blindness, the better to own an incorporeal and spiritual insight and privilege. In his way, Herbert makes it possible for his readers to enter into the very architecture of his poetry. In his picture poems, this poet assembles meaning in front of readers' eyes, literally block by block; this poetic meaning is then affirmed and gathered by readers' willingness to enter into active comprehension and engagement with the verse.

Chapters III and IV focused on Milton and his blind writing. In Chapter III, I followed Milton in part through his younger and aspirational years; the purpose of this was to help read Milton's poetry from his later years of failed and failing sight. In my study of Milton's poetic translations of the Psalms and some of his best-known sonnets, I considered Milton's blindness as a lived reality that is nevertheless heavy with metaphorical baggage, both for Milton and his readers. I showed how Milton's poetic exercises during his years of failing sight became, for him, lyrical

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extraordinary courage and compassion as by her frequent practical and day-to-day helplessness that helps drive the plot of the novel.

devices to work through his visual loss and assign himself to ever more ambitious poetic undertakings.

In Chapter IV, I considered Milton's greatest poetic enterprise of all, and one of the defining pieces of literature in the English language, *Paradise Lost*. I asserted the centrality of Milton's blindness to the aesthetic aspiration and achievement of this epic. I read variously but interconnectedly for syntax, structure, tropes, poetic autobiography, affect (positive and negative), and the kind of consummate poetic confidence that moves from composition of *Paradise Lost* to *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. In future work, I intend to carry my insights from my reading of *Paradise Lost* into my readings of Milton's two other final long poems. Milton's last and defining poetic compositions have had admiring readers for several centuries. However, most readers either heroicise Milton's blindness, or forget about it amidst the grandeur of the poetry. Through my scholarship, I assert my wish that we might never again read these poems without fully reckoning with the lived (non) visual conditions of their making; without understanding the necessary and even intimate collaborative nature of their creation; without confronting the depth and desire and complex affects and affections that underlie them. In affirming Milton's blind language, I am not making an argument for Milton's "disability gain." I am making an argument for, indeed urging, our own capacious and inclusive collective understanding of poetic drive and ability.

Milton's works also demonstrate the poetic unsettlement of the equation between sight and intellection. This brings me to a thread that has emerged in the course of my work towards this dissertation, and which will continue to inform my project's future development. In *Paradise Lost* (and, also, I offer prospectively, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*), a blind man takes up his blindness as method of thought and poetry, and uses poetic language to accommodate it, complete with the many-angled irresolutions, discontents, and powers of this visual loss. In future work, I hope to show how the very concept of accommodation—with the word's remarkable resonance

across disability cultures, theology, and the business of poetic creation—can work to de-essentialise disability *and* itself accommodate metatheatricity/poetic self-referentiality.

Another—and related—thread that has remained comparatively latent throughout this work, but which has informed many of my readings (and which I intend to develop in future work) has to do with the ethics of reading/viewing/listening and the networks of care implicated within non-normative visualities. I have indicated at various points the active engagement that is required of us as readers/viewers: when Gloucester falls at the cliffs of Dover, for instance, or when we see Herbert’s “Altar” build in sense and sight, syllable by syllable and line by line, or when Milton commands our associative attention across hundreds of lines of poetry. I offer that all of these receptive/creative/meaning-making energies that we afford to the poetic works under our consideration are actively involved in a receptive regard that can never stay still, because it is constantly engaged in a process of aesthetic and ethical perception and generation. We see/hear/understand/perceive what we do because we care to engage, and because we care to rethink our own selves with hard memory and harder hope. In turn, the networks of care come into relief and sight and sound when we learn to read/view/listen with an awareness of the ethical and emotional claims that a work of literature makes on us. We begin to see the collaborative and complex loves written about or written within: such as Edgar and/for his father; Herbert and/for his readers, copyists, and printers; Milton and the many unnamed individuals who provide a whatsoever-hourly network of support and company around him, which makes his composition possible in the first place. We thus begin to understand, even as we consider three of the most canonical poetic voices of the early modern period, the essentially collaborative process through which their works are created and through which they continue to find meaning in the world we inhabit.

I shall end with an example from our present day, even as I submit a few notes about the literary-theoretical concept I have advanced, that of blind language. Although I have used it in my

reading of Milton, I want the concept of blind language to be useful in other contexts of people, periods, and cultures. But of course, any such undertaking must remain uncompromisingly awake to the exigencies and precisions of those various settings, and more importantly, individuals. Milton's blind language can and should give us the mindscape and the vocabulary to discuss the blind languages of, for instance, Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, Taha Hussein, Belo Cipriani, Oliver Sacks, Georgina Kleege, John Hull, Stephen Kuusisto, or many others who have composed in partial or total blindness.<sup>291</sup> But despite what Milton's blind language may share with any others', they are not one and the same thing. To one author, blindness may serve as a trigger for writing; to another, it may be an event in their longer and already established writing life. To one, advanced technologies of reading, writing, and editing may afford a radically new configuration for shaping language; to another, it may be a matter of painstaking re-moulding of existing cognitive frameworks. To one, blindness may accentuate participation in a strong cultural oral tradition; to another, it may mean an overpowering alienation from a predominantly visual ecosphere. To one, it may seem an affliction among several other medically comprehensible (even if not treatable) disorders; from another, it may take a disproportionate emotional toll. Any essentialising about blind language—and indeed about blindness and disability—is to be avoided.

Nonetheless, I do make two comprehensive claims for blind language. First: that it allows—and possibly compels—us to see difference as a creative resource. Second, and linked, I contend that it enlarges our perceptive registers, potentially viscerally, and alerts us to what we might else have

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<sup>291</sup> See, for instance, Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –;" Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking and B. W. Huebsch, 1916) and *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1939); Borges's "Poema de los dones" [or "Poem of the Gifts"]; Hussein's *An Egyptian Childhood*, trans. E. H. Paxton (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1990); Cipriani's *Blind: A Memoir* (Tucson: Wheatmark, 2011); and Kuusisto's *Planet of the Blind* (New York: Dial Press, 1988) and *Letters to Borges* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2013) in addition to the works already mentioned by Sacks, Kleege, and Hull.



never regarded, or even turned away from. Here, then, is a sonnet from our own time, Tyehimba Jess's "When I consider how my light is spent."<sup>292</sup>

I squint through the glaucoma of my right eye  
to watch the YouTube video of Frankie Taylor,  
arrested on a DUI, strapped down in a restraining chair,  
beaten unconscious and half blind by the police  
of Eastpointe, Michigan. The officer put on his light  
blue rubber glove, and in a shout that slowly shrugged  
into bureaucratic chant, told Taylor to "stop resisting"  
13 times - once for each blow to Frankie's left eye  
until it was pummeled into bloody darkness.  
We share a darkness, Frankie and I. Turns out his  
blinded eye also had glaucoma, an affliction  
more common for those of dark American hue -  
this is my true account. But my question chides:  
Who labors day and night to deny my darkness light?

The doubleness of the metaphor of light (as life and the resources that make it worth living, such as sight) in Milton's sonnet of the same beginning is mirrored in the doubleness of the metaphor of darkness (as race and violently-induced blindness) in Jess's poem. They are true accounts, both, but must nevertheless each be "presented," in the combined senses of being brought into the present and being brought to notice. In Milton's case, if responsibility for affliction may conceivably be imagined to rest in the divine, in Jess's account, it must be humanly grasped, accounted for, and reckoned with. Both poems unfold through lyrical delays of parts of speech or action. Above all, in both, there is no escaping the blindness that is both cause and matter for the poetry. We should not turn away.

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<sup>292</sup> This was the Annual Poem of the Milton Society of America in 2017, and the poem is reproduced from the proceedings of the Annual Dinner of the Society in 2017. Jess has other work that explores the intersection of music, orality/aurality, race, and blindness. See, for instance, his series "Roots of Boone," "Blind Boone's Blessings," "Blind Boone's Vision," "Blind Boone's Escape," "Blind Boone's Rage," and "Blind Boone's Pianola Blues," *Olio* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2016), 102-120.

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