

5-2009

A Charitable Modernity: Milton and the Democratic Aesthetic

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A CHARITABLE MODERNITY: MILTON AND THE DEMOCRATIC AESTHETIC

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2009

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces a narrative of John Milton's modernity. My formulation of a "charitable modernity" is a paradoxical one, and builds on Marshall Berman's theory of modern life. Modernity is characterized by both disintegration and possibilities for renewal. Charity, according to Milton, is the means by which different readers are allowed to read different meanings into different texts. For Milton, a charitable modernity is a promising thing, because it makes allowance for a democratic kind of government where people are allowed to govern themselves in part by the way they each read texts differently. Milton was not always a poet of modernity, though, and as such, this thesis presents a history of that modernity as developed primarily in Milton's poetry. In "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), Milton presents an ordinary reading of the world, one that is not complicated by modernity, and where the mode of speech represents an irrefutable kind of meaning. In *Lycidas* (1637), the death of a friend corresponds to the death of that oral absoluteness of meaning; images and metaphors complicate meaning, presenting a problem for interpretive objectivity and also a possibility for the capacities of individual readers. In *Paradise Lost* (1667), the Fall corresponds to the ambiguity in the act of interpreting meaning, an ambiguity by which Adam and Eve literally create a democratic state for themselves. This uncertainty is tied crucially to Milton's ideas of reason, which he defines as "choice." By reading Milton as a modern poet, we can see a model of democracy in which literacy becomes important, not because it presents an absoluteness of meaning, but because it accommodates a variety of interpretive positions.

DEDICATION

To my father Michael and my mother Robin

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I feel blessed to have had the privilege of working with Lee Morrissey in writing this thesis. Dr. Morrissey's breadth of understanding in the area of Milton and Restoration studies is vast, and I am grateful beyond words for his encouragement and guidance as both my thesis director and academic mentor. Thanks are also in order for Elizabeth Rivlin, whose graduate seminar in fall 2007 first brought me to love the study of Milton and Renaissance literature. Her guidance during my time at Clemson has been invaluable. I am also thankful to Brian McGrath, whose conversations on theories of reading and aesthetic ideology with me last summer and during the writing process helped to "breathe life" into this thesis.

In the process of composing a master's thesis, one begins to understand the paradox of simultaneous isolation and company. For helping me to survive in this state, I am indebted to the following people, all of whom have been not only wonderful intellectual peers and colleagues, but also close friends: Brent Robida, Charles Bax, Emily Scism, Russell Hehn, Jessica Martin, Leslie Haines, Stephen Leech, Neil Barrett, David Foltz, Tess Rooney, Melissa Davis, and a number of others whom I should name but for the interest of conserving space. Thank you all.

Finally, I must thank the following faculty members who have provided me with invaluable amounts of instruction, advice, and encouragement during my two years at Clemson: Alma Bennett, Susan Hilligoss, Michael LeMahieu, Arthur Young, Aga Skrodzka-Bates, Donna Winchell, Keith Lee Morris, and Jonathan Beecher Field.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING CHARITY

“The juggernaut of modernity is not all of one piece.”
—Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*

John Milton’s democratic conception of government is founded in his engagement with a nuanced kind of modernity. Whatever else he may have been, I claim that Milton was a poet of modernity, but to make the claim that Milton was a poet of modernity, one first needs to establish what *kind* of modernity he identifies with. I define modernity as the continual calling into question of those structures and value systems held dear by individuals or societies. This skepticism turns meaning into something that is not only fluid, but also in constant danger of decay, as its tenets are called into question, such that the foundations are also questionable. It is this intellectual kind of modernity that I address in this thesis, through a close examination both of Milton’s prose and poetry. Many scholars associate modernity with the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, but it is my position that by looking at the seventeenth century in England as a period of decay, uncertainty, *and* newness—using Milton as our touchstone—we can see modernity as an engagement with an intellectual history that is as much tied to the question of literacy and government in the late seventeenth century as it is to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Gordon Teskey’s book-study of Milton’s later poetry, titled *Delirious Milton*, might be the most compelling recent study of Milton’s modernity. Teskey aligns Milton’s modernity with the sense that “...the author begins to play a new and unfamiliar role, as one who mediates spiritual power, like a shaman” (2). One of the questions that this thesis addresses has to do with the stakes of this “spiritual

power,” and whether or not the power is not so much spiritual as it is *subjective* and *literal*; that is to say, whether or not Milton’s modernity is grounded in the subjectivity of individual readers—or individual citizens—to arrive at meaning in texts where the meaning seems unstable. I claim that Milton’s modernity is based in the reading of texts, as opposed to the literal following of God’s commands or the mediating of God’s voice through poetry. By this, we can see that democracies are formed by the abilities of the citizens to read in different ways, and as such, a fruitful conception of democracy is tied to a complex kind of literacy, as we will see in the following pages.

Thus, in order to approach Milton as one who worked within a “modern” discourse, one has to come to terms with his conception of how the subject is to function healthily in that discourse without losing his or her capacity for choice. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman situates the experience of modernity in terms of paradox:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. [...] it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (15)

The paradox, for Berman, lies within what he calls the receptacle of “disintegration and renewal.” This is a rather estranging situation for the subject: is that which is being disintegrated also that which is being renewed? Or, are some things disintegrating while

other things are being renewed? The hitch—and this is why modernity is modernity—is that it may not always be clear what is disintegrating and what is renewing. Berman reconciles this ambiguity by using the device of memory. He writes, “This act of remembering can help us bring modernism back to its roots, so that it can nourish and renew itself, to confront the adventures and dangers that lie ahead” (36). Berman is speaking specifically of how modernities of history past come to make the present seem new; what I am claiming is that we might see how modernity for Milton and his contemporaries became the lens by which a unique seventeenth-century conception of citizenship in a democracy is birthed. The person retains his or her subjectivity by the freedom to see that while some things are disintegrating, this disintegration opens up a way to critique through the act of reading. As such, I use Berman’s definition of modernity both to build an argument about Milton’s modernity and to respond to Teskey’s argument about Milton’s modernity. Milton’s modernity is not merely spiritual, as Teskey claims it is, but it is also grounded in the actions of communities, and in how communities of people interact with each other, instead of merely with God. In Milton, that which disintegrates is a belief in a perfect society that is devoid of disputes or arguments. It also looks at error as something that is fruitful, because it means that people are being given the ability to choose on their own how to live their individual lives, even if they are making decisions that may appear irrational. We make decisions by the way that we critique meaning, each in our own different ways. One way of critiquing meaning in a modern context, for Milton, is by reading, because different people might read the same thing in different ways. In addition, I approach Milton in terms of what I call a

“charitable modernity.” Modernity might be the decaying of meaning, but it also suggests a *renewal* of meaning. One thing may be destroyed, but in the destruction of one thing, something else is born. My claim is that, for Milton, a kind of charity is born out of the disintegration.

In order to arrive at a conception of Milton’s modernity in this Introduction, I claim that his modernity is fundamentally different from the modernity of Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, specifically because Hobbes leaves no room for charity in *Leviathan*. For Hobbes, meaning is always falling away when one tries to remember it because the only thing that exists is the present moment. This rejection of the memory of the past is something that Milton must come to terms with. Milton utilizes the vehicle of charity as a way of departing from Hobbes. For Milton, charity (as mentioned in works like *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and elsewhere in *Paradise Lost*) is that which makes the modern moment possible; it gives the subject liberty to interpret based upon the spirit of a word rather than in a strictly literal sense. Milton’s modernity, then, is a vehicle for allowing the subject to govern his or her own thought and memory, by choosing how he or she should engage it. I claim, using *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, specifically, that a literal reading of history which contains no flexibility of interpretation becomes obsolete in a modern setting. For Hobbes, on the other hand, individual capacities to read in different ways must be completely ignored, because they open up the possibility for wrong interpretations of how a subject should function within a society. I am particularly interested in the methods Milton utilizes to get around Hobbes’ fear of erroneous interpretations of meaning. Looking at Milton’s charity will

help us to see a guiding thread for the narrative of his modernity that will play out in the rest of this thesis.

Milton sees disintegration and renewal as fundamentally inseparable from one another. This is because of the continually prevalent effects of the Fall. He begins *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) by claiming, “If men within themselves would be governed by reason, and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny of custom from without and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favour and uphold the tyrant of a nation” (273). If the human subject is plagued by “blind affections,” then the implication is that he or she cannot perceive the source of these affections. Concomitant to this blindness is a sacrificing of reason. Reason is that which is threatened by decay. Milton’s implication, judging from the “if” which begins the political tract, is that men do *not* exercise reason, and that they *have* given up their understanding. This is his condition of modernity. The state of modernity may or may not have been created by the individual; however, the individual is still a modern individual insofar as its reason is questioned by a modern occurrence—the Fall. The question, for Milton, involves the ways in which one decides to operate within the discourse. The answer takes on a historical dimension: one must see that the discourse is one of necessity. The discourse cannot be escaped. One can only exercise one’s own liberty within the confines of this discourse of modernity. We might, then, say that modernity arrives for Milton after the Fall.

In a passage providing some of the most shocking images of the post-fall cosmos in *Paradise Lost*, Satan's legion of demons partake of the fruit of a tree of their imagining, a tree which replicates that Tree of Knowledge which was the vehicle by which Adam and Eve fell. The imagined fruit is actually "bitter ashes" (10.566). The demons are

[...] plagued

And worn with famine, long and ceaseless hiss,
Till their lost shape, permitted, they resumed,
Yearly enjoined, some say, to undergo
This annual humbling certain numbered days,
To dash their pride, and joy for man seduced (10.572-77).

This passage provides evidence to Milton's view that meaning, in a post-Fall state, is "plagued" by the curse of repetition and fading away. We might say that this is Milton's modernity arriving at the forefront of our approach to him. His framework is shaped by a recognition that the cosmos is a material thing, and even if this materialism is fused ultimately to a higher metaphysical order, it still retains some dimension of the physical. Modernity is physical more so than it is physical; it has implications for the way that we behave in the real, physical world.

This is how I approach Milton's theory of democracy. For Milton, the commonwealth is born because it is necessary after the Fall. The response that Milton gives to the modernity of his age is democratic; if everything is capable of being called into question, the only way that we can hope to civilize this instability is by providing an

outlet that allows people to exercise their differences via liberty. Others, such as Hobbes, approached modernity in a different way. For Hobbes, the uncertain nature of the human predicament necessitates the installation of a sovereign to govern what questions are asked, and how these questions are answered. If, in a post-Fall state, nothing can be concretely defined, then how are we to be certain of anything? Hobbes says in *Leviathan* (1651) that this question implies an impasse between the finite and the infinite, an impasse that the human cannot—and should not—attempt to breach: “Whatever we imagine is *finite*. Therefore there is no idea or conception of anything we call *infinite*. [...] No man therefore can conceive anything, but he must conceive it in some place, and endued with some determinate magnitude, and which may be divided into parts” (*Leviathan* 15). This is where the imagination becomes a dangerous thing, and why it must be civilized, distanced from the contaminating effects of memory. For Hobbes, the inevitability of the finite precludes anything from being infinite in the realm of human understanding. The human mind is already limited by its own temporal and spatial definition. For Hobbes, however, this limitation itself must be civilized. Memory is that which erodes into the fabric of understanding. It threatens the spatial nature of the mind by forcing the mind to leap outside of the present, the only thing immediately accessible to it. This reality has astounding implications for Hobbes’ model of reading. In order to read a contract that has been written out of a need for order, one must completely distance one’s self from any notion of infinity. While Hobbes does not deny that meaning might have an infinite dimension, he claims that infiniteness does not reside in the realms of “idea” or “conception.” As a result, any question of meaning with which the human

subject engages must be tied only to that which is immediately proximal to the understanding.

What, though, for Hobbes, *is* immediately proximal to the understanding? Hobbes indicates that this question is resolved in how one sets up the state. He writes:

But as men (for the attaining of peace and conservation of themselves thereby) have made an artificial man, which we call a commonwealth, so also they have made artificial chains, called *civil laws*, which they themselves by mutual covenants have fastened at one end to the lips of that man or assembly to whom they have given the sovereign power, and at the other end to their own ears. These bonds, in their own nature but weak, may nevertheless be made to hold by the danger (though not by the difficulty) of breaking them. (*Leviathan* 138)

In Hobbes' reading of the political contract, contracts are given power or meaning because if they are not given power, then the commonwealth might self-destruct. The signification of the contract's potency is almost irrelevant. In fact, the contract itself is marked by the instability of its own structure. The only binding weight of the political contract is in the signification of the necessity of civil order that arises out of the necessity of its making. This is where Hobbes finds common ground with Milton (in the necessity of the creation of order in the wake of human weakness), though this common ground is arrived at by different readings of the necessity of the contract.

If modernity is the constant threat of meaning "melting" away, to use Berman's and Marx's terminology, then Hobbes' philosophy is governed primarily by this threat.

For Hobbes, this threat takes the form of the subject's understanding being irreducibly distant from any sort of higher consciousness. In fact, human understanding is so distant from the form which actual meaning should take that we are constantly in danger of deceptions by words and texts. When addressing the things that lead subjects to “absurd conclusions” (*Leviathan* 24), Hobbes writes:

The sixth, to the use of metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper. For though it be lawful to say (for example) in common speech *the way goeth, or leadeth hither, or thither, the proverb says this or that* (whereas ways cannot go, nor proverbs speak), yet in reckoning and seeking of true such speeches are not to be admitted.

(*Leviathan* 25)

Hobbes here is speaking out against texts as vessels of representation. We are always to be seeking out “true such speeches.” Whatever Hobbes' truth may be, it is only to be found in “words proper,” that is to say, words that mean exactly what they say they mean. The implication is that metaphors and tropes do *not* mean exactly what they say they mean. Essentially, Hobbes is speaking out against representation in writing, claiming that it makes meaning potentially unknowable.

One way of casting modernity is in light of what it does with the question of literary representation. For Hobbes, literary representation—such as images and metaphors—can be a preface to evil and absurdity. For Milton, representation is a necessity. Thomas Docherty writes in *Aesthetic Democracy*:

The answer to this [question of whether democracy is possible] lies within one of the fundamental questions governing democracy: representation.

Representation is basically a trope that regulates the relations between the particular and the general, between the one and the many: one stands for many; or one is a ‘type’ whose characteristics are shared by many. (158)

For Docherty, the event that gives way to the emergence of governing structures is grounded in the fundamental principle of one thing representing another. For Hobbes, one thing representing another thing is a danger, a masking vehicle that needs to be civilized by the consolidations of the many (the subjects) into the one (the sovereign). For Docherty—and, I argue, for Milton—representation is that vehicle which opens up the possibility for liberty, via democracy. Milton’s principle of representation becomes wrapped up in the device that he claims readers should employ when they read: charity. If charity is tied to reading, then representation means the representation of ideas via the use of words. We can read the term “charity” in several ways. One reading would imply that the subject gives up a little bit of him or herself in the act of reading a text for the sake of freeing up the text. Another reading, the reading I pursue in this thesis, suggests that charity is the exercising of liberty itself in the act of reading. By exercising liberty when we read, we unveil the text so that it can be read in a number of charitable ways. The text gives itself to the reader, so to speak.

Once the text gives itself to its reader, however, the reader must know what he or she is supposed to do with it. For Milton, one must approach the text with a consciousness that he or she is governed by a freedom of choice when they read. One must choose how

to read the spirit behind the words, rather than merely the words themselves, as Hobbes would have one read. Milton believes that the discourse of metaphoricity gives the subject a way to maneuver within the post-Fall state of modernity. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), Milton claims that the language of the marriage covenant, and the prohibition that Christ places upon divorce in the New Testament, must be read in terms of charity. In that Milton defines charity as “the interpreter and guide of our faith” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 183), charity places an emphasis upon the fact that the reading of words presuppose the ideas that lie somewhere beyond those words. Words cannot be ends in themselves. In a sense, for Milton, words are alive; they contain a spark of meaning beyond the bare appearance of syllables and letters. The question, then, is whether Milton’s reading of Christ’s command regarding divorce turns bare language into a metaphor for meaning. Does language mean anything until one utilizes the device of charity to interpret it? If so, this *would* make language a metaphor for meaning, as Derrida implies in *Of Grammatology*. He posits that the “...‘literal’ meaning of writing [is] metaphoricity itself” (15). This “metaphoricity” of writing, for Milton, reveals itself in the human obligation to interpret the marriage covenant: words contain a spirit—made manifest by the device of charity—beyond their mere bare presence on a page or in the mouth of a speaker. Words contain the capacity for a multiplicity of meaning, allowing for the “society” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 186) of marriage to become a metaphor for the well-being of the individual as well as for the political “society.”

When one speaks of a metaphor, one is identifying the power of a word (or of a grouping of words) to mean something other than what it would appear to mean in a

strictly straightforward reading. As such, a metaphor is always referring *back* to another concept that exists prior to the present literalness of the word in the primary text.

Metaphors thus depend upon history—not only on the history of words themselves, but also on the history of the different things that words might *mean*. This inescapable influence of history belies the rhetorical base of the concept of metaphor. The metaphor is rhetorical because it forces one to interpret subjectively. In “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” Paul de Man identifies the metaphor as rhetorical as well, in that the meaning of a metaphor is never entirely straightforward. Metaphors are tropes, and are always subject to interpretation. De Man writes, “[Tropes] are always again totalizing systems that try to ignore the disfiguring power of figuration. It does not take a good semiotician long to discover that he is in fact a rhetorician in disguise” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 49). In this reading, questions of representation in writing must also be construed as questions of language, and questions of language must be construed as questions of representation.

Milton is referring to the necessity of an interpretation based in the dimension of the rhetorical when he claims that “Christ meant not to be taken word for word” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 202). Interpretation is rhetorical because, if Christ did not mean to be taken word for word, then we can argue over what it was that he did mean. For Milton, words mean things based upon the history out of which they are born. He claims that the marriage covenant is a remnant of the state of Eden, and that some people think of the perfection of marriage in the state of Eden as a command to the members of the present age. Milton writes, however, that “...it will best behoove our soberness to follow rather what moral Sinai prescribes equal to our strength, than fondly to think within our

strength all that lost Paradise relates” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 210). Milton admits here that history begets a shift in the way one is to apply a biblical command; whereas in the state of Paradise (or state of perfection), humankind possessed the capacity to follow the letter of a command, in the post-Edenic state (or state of the rule of the law), the command is accommodated to the capacity of the individual. A command is not given without consideration to the ability of the subject of this command to carry out its terms. Thus, for Milton, interpretation of commands must take into account the shifting nature of history.

This state of interpretation of the law as contingent upon the constant shifting of history gets to the heart of Derrida’s commentary on the lineage of the *logos*. While writing on how meaning and truth are construed in the theology of the Middle Ages, Derrida asserts that an “...absolute logos was an infinite creative subjectivity in medieval theology: the intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God” (13). The *logos*, which is Greek for “word,” implies a continual reaching back toward the divine God, who in orthodox Christianity is the author of meaning. Words, then, are the means by which God communicates to humanity his truth. It is in this sense, for Milton and for Derrida, that words are metaphors in themselves, and it is here that Milton makes a crucial departure from thinkers like Hobbes. For Hobbes, thinking must be entirely literal, divorced from any depth of interpretation that might lead to absurdity in a modern setting. For Milton, words remind us that people must be given the freedom to interpret differently if any significant meaning is to be derived. As he suggests, however, these representations must be altered in the act of reading; the meaning of the

word must be given some room to shift and alter itself so as to accommodate the post-Fall human state.

The question remains, though: *how* is one to read the command concerning marriage and divorce in the post-Edenic state? Perhaps charity will provide a possibility at an answer. If charity is established as the “guide of our faith” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 183), then one must begin by thinking of charity as a vehicle by which one interprets the command. It is, for Milton, the lens through which we read the meaning in the language of the covenant. Charity is decidedly *not* “...resting in the mere element of the text” (183). On the other hand, the will of charity “...is that we should so be good to others, as that we be not cruel to ourselves” (215-16). The mandate that Milton claims Christ gives implies that the person should have their own best interests at heart when reading the marriage covenant. In other words, one must embrace one’s own subjectivity in reading the covenant. Living as a subject means that one possesses freedom to pursue his or her own well-being in matters related to marriage. If one’s mind is being contaminated, or is stagnating in the context of an unbearable marriage, then that subject has the freedom to pursue a healthy conversation with another partner. Being good to ourselves implies a sense of narcissism, but we should remember to think of Milton’s intent in terms of a conversation. If we are being good to ourselves, we are also being good to our partner, in that we are pursuing a discourse with that partner.

This freedom would seem completely at odds with Christ’s command that divorce is permissible only in the wake of marital infidelity. Reading with charity in mind, though, allows for one to read with an awareness of “...what moral Sinai prescribes equal

to our strength” (210). Thus, the language of Christ’s command does not mean exactly what it would appear to mean in a word-for-word reading. The command becomes a metaphor in that it represents something other than what it would appear to literally mean. The persistence of charity is what allows for one to read Christ’s command as meaning something else beyond its elemental appearance.

De Man recognizes that tropes such as metaphors are at heart rhetorical (what is less clear is his emphasis upon metaphors as historical). Thus, if metaphors are subject to interpretation, they must also be subject to *mis*-interpretation. One might misinterpret the mere language of the command, like Milton claims that his anti-divorce contemporaries do. What about the possibility that one might misinterpret the spirit of the idea behind the words as well, though? What if, in reading the spirit of the command, one somehow misreads that spirit? This is modernity sinking its teeth into the purity of the metaphor of language, and it is a dilemma we must address in Milton.

Milton ends his tract by claiming that the device of charity is something that stretched beyond mere principles of reading, but also into questions of human liberty to misinterpret the meaning of a command. He asserts that an overly rigorous adherence to “textual restrictions” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 226) puts one in danger of ignoring the most pervasive command recorded in the biblical text: “‘Let them go’, therefore, with whom I am loath to couple them, yet they will needs run into the same blindness with the Pharisees” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 226). Milton’s reference to the Jewish exodus from Egypt is not a mistake. The image of slavery in this passage holds connects to slavery of another kind against which Milton is speaking out in this tract: the slavery to the mere

words in a text or commandment. In order for one to be free, Milton argues, one must be “let go,” so to speak, in this instance, from the restrictive language of a commandment. This letting go may or may not lead one to misread the spirit of a command. Milton does not make this entirely clear. In any case, though, liberty becomes the device that must take prominence in a modern reading of the divorce prohibition. Liberty allows people to pursue marriages in which the bond of meaningful discussion becomes the main priority. Whether or not this liberty leads one to error, it is still a necessary track in order for a democratic society—whether that society be the society of marriage or the society of the free commonwealth—to present itself as a possibility.

Milton’s reliance upon liberty in reading puts him further at odds with Hobbes. As previously mentioned, Hobbes argues that any activity of the imagination that involves memory is a danger that must be minimized by the installation of a sovereign to govern the subject’s interpretive freedom so that error is avoided. For Milton, the sovereignty lies in the people who read. Things can only be read according to the spirit that lies beneath the literal words when people are let go from a purely literal reading of the text. In other words, the foundation seems to be removed. We are not channeling a purely God-centered “spiritual power,” to use Teskey’s term. The power we are channeling lies in the disagreements between different people’s readings of the same things. The power of different people to read differently might lead to unreasonable conclusions. In *Paradise Lost*, as I will explore later in this thesis, the differences between people might even lead to disobedience, and a destroying of the “perfect” state of Eden. Fredric Jameson situates this process of error along dialectical terms. In *A Singular Modernity*,

Jameson identifies the possibility of error as one of the central tenets of modernity. He critiques de Man's reading of metaphor by claiming that de Man ignores that narrativistic aspect of metaphor; in other words, de Man ignores the fact that metaphors are at root historical and reliant upon historical readings of them. Jameson writes, "...if one is willing to assert that all error contains its 'moment of truth', one must also admit that error, cancelled and subsumed (*aufgehoben*) into truth, remains, not only a necessary moment (aspect) of truth as well, but also a necessary moment or stage in the latter's emergence" (111-12). For Jameson, error must always be present in any revealing of truth, and this is why the nature of meaning is always dialectical in any condition of modernity. For thinkers like Hobbes, error is something to be entirely avoided, its potentiality squashed by the installation of the sovereign. Milton's own views on the necessity of error are famously clear in *Areopagitica* (1644), where he claims that, "...how much we thus expel of sin, so much we expel of virtue" (253). I claim that this unbreakable marriage between error and reason must be present in any approach to meaning within the context of modernity for Milton.

In *Wayward Contracts*, Victoria Kahn claims that Milton's discussion of the freeing aspect of language makes a shift to self-interest legitimate. She writes:

In contrast to contemporary manuals of domestical duties, which stressed that a husband 'should' love his wife, Milton made passion itself a source of obligation rather than having obligation dictate passion. In doing so, Milton sought to provide a rational account of the marriage contract, which 'passion not mistrusting may not seek to displace.' (199)

Here we see that the liberty to interpret the language of the divorce prohibition becomes a double-edged sword. While it might present the possibility for error, it also frees up the passions; in short, it gives the human subject the capacity to *be* human. For Milton, passions are an inescapable aspect of subjectivity. While Hobbes fears these passions, claiming that they threaten to lead one down the path toward wrong thinking, Milton sees human feeling as the crux of any approach to meaning. In short, for Milton, human feeling, as well as the human capacity to govern one's own engagement with the society of marriage, is that which makes it possible to live a fulfilling life in a state where meaning can only be construed according to the spirit of a language rather than its mere literalness.

At this point in the reading of the command, the correlation between the marriage covenant and the political contract begins to draw itself out more plainly. While Milton may not be proposing that the marriage covenant *is* the political contract, he certainly recognizes the parallels one can draw between both when charity becomes the method of interpreting meaning. Milton certainly recognizes the parallels between both when he claims at the beginning of the second printing of *Doctrine and Discipline* that, "...as a whole people is in proportion to an ill Government, so is one man to an ill marriage" (qtd. in Kahn 198). If one is to read commandments in terms of charity—or in terms of sustaining one's own well-being—then one can extend the method of interpretation practiced when examining the marriage covenant to other contracts as well. This is another implication of the metaphoricity of writing to which Derrida refers: when words stand in as representations of other ideas, then the possibilities for interpretation are vast.

Derrida writes that the meaning in writing manifests itself as "...a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos" (*Of Grammatology* 15). In acknowledging that reading implies a history upon which meaning is founded, one also acknowledges that the present moment is a part of this history. This is the implication of Milton's emphasis upon interpretation: that the history of meaning (in this instance, the history of interpretation of the command of the marriage covenant) must always be extended so that it includes the present moment. The manifestation of the political contract in seventeenth-century England draws a number of resemblances to the marriage covenant for Milton: the liberty and intellectual well-being of the individual is restricted when we are chained to a tyrannical government, and if we are to recover our well-being and our liberty of mind, we must break from that contract to form a new one. Our conception of history as containing the past as well as the present signifies a further implication of Milton's modernity: if meaning is always fluid and susceptible to reconstruction, then one must look at history in a fluid manner as well. This is because the present moment allows for one to re-conceive words written in the past in a manner that will make them applicable to any present situation.

There is still a fundamental issue at stake in Milton's reading of history as distinctly modern: how can one intend to exercise reason in a state where meaning is fluid and more reliant upon the spirit of words rather than on the entirely literal meaning of the words themselves? The answer lies in Milton's definition of reason. In *Areopagitica*, Milton claims that, "reason is but choosing" (252). Sharon Achinstein

claims, “Since choices are constitutive of free will [...], reason—and choice—are as necessary to humans as life itself. In states that suppress this fundamental liberty of choice, the humanity is stripped from the people” (62). Reason, then, is the choice itself. It is also, by extension, the capacity of one to exercise his or her own free will. It contains the will of the individual to break free from a society that is advocating “self-cruelty,” whether this cruelty is contained in the covenant of marriage or in the make-up of the commonwealth.

Milton claims that charity is the one facet of interpretation that persists throughout history: “...for the gospel enjoins no new morality, save only the infinite enlargement of charity, which in this respect is called the new commandment by St. John, as being the accomplishment of every command” (*Doctrine and Discipline* 216). Charity is that mechanism which binds all commands together and which has at its heart the liberty of the individual to read the words differently than someone else might read them. Since Christ has our own well-being in mind in his giving of commands, we can interpret one thing to mean something beyond its mere surface appearance; we can read his command in terms of its history. The commandment must be read in terms of the spirit of liberty that God would desire for his subjects. Thus, one cannot ignore—as Milton does not ignore—the correlation between the terms of the divorce command and the terms of the present political climate in England. Rather than restricting the free will of the reader to interpret, language frees the reader to identify patterns and similarities between the terms of two seemingly disconnected contracts.

Modernity makes a democratic model possible in Milton's view. If Christ's supposed prohibition against divorce becomes something else, then we can say that we are seeing meaning as fluid. When one uses charity to read the commandment, though, instead of seeing it decay, one sees the command in a new light. To use Berman's language, one is using charity to "remember." This remembrance, however, is not a passive remembrance. It implies an act of agency and an act of interpreting. One must remember what Christ said, and think of what Christ so that the individual's own well-being becomes the dominant priority. In a sense, one must govern one's self in a state where meaning must come from an act of deliberate remembrance. Milton writes, "Those commands, therefore, which compel us to self-cruelty above our strength, so hardly will help forward to perfection that they hinder and set backward in all the rudiments of Christianity" (*Doctrine and Discipline* 216). The command is something that should not advocate "self-cruelty." The term "self" in this phrase implies an individuality, an intense focus upon the needs of the one self and not necessarily upon the needs of an aggregate mass of people. One must be free to govern one's own ability to act, because different people might choose different courses of action. This implies a reliance upon one's own ability to govern one's self. The state of a modern reading of Christ's command as fluid is that which makes it possible to govern one's self. In other words, the state in which meaning is fluid makes democracy possible.

The model of freedom and liberty espoused here makes possible a return to the dilemma from Book 10 of *Paradise Lost* that I posed earlier. In a post-Fall state, images of knowledge (in this case, the fruit which turns to ashes upon the touch of Satan's

demons) become subject to their own forms of disintegration, to use Berman's language. I believe, however, that the threshold of disintegration upon which the possibility of meaning resides, makes possible the free model of democratic society for Milton. For Satan and the demons, the possibility of meaning—concentrated in a representation of the fruit—becomes dust. It is *not* what it seems. For Adam and Eve, however, in the face of the loss of Eden after the Fall—in which the perfect state is “melting” away, for them at least—the possibility for a dialectical model of history which leads to a charitable approach to meaning begins to unveil itself. Toward the end of Book 12, Michael tells Adam:

...only add

Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,

Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,

By name to come called Charity, the soul

Of all the rest: then wilt thou no be loath

To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess

A paradise within thee, happier far. (12.581-87)

Here, the device of charity makes another appearance, and it is no mistake that Milton elects to mention it toward the end of *Paradise Lost*. Adam and Eve have lost Eden, and have been supposedly “divorced” from that state of perfection. They will live lives of pain and hardship, but they will also be given the ability to govern themselves. Charity is coupled with other vehicles of right living, but these vehicles do not serve merely as ends in themselves. They are followed by the claim that paradise is more than merely a

physical, immoveable location. It is a concept, an idea which rests in the heart of the subject who practices deeds such as faith, virtue, and love. Paradise, then, becomes an abstraction rather than something entirely corporeal or material, even if it does play itself out in the vicinity of the material world. It lies “within” the individual, not in a place outside of the individual.

The onus in these lines lies, of course, in the subject. The subject is responsible for practicing charity. It is not a vehicle that God can force one to utilize, and in this respect, the Hobbesian notion of sovereignty resting only in an individual vested with supreme political power is toppled. Kahn suggests that perhaps “God is not a Hobbesian sovereign, and so he must, by the logic of the contract, divest himself of his absolute sovereignty” (219). The hitch, of course, is that despite the possibility of God giving up some of himself to the human subject, the paradise that exists within the person is still just that: *within* the person. It is not solely material, and thus, to use Hobbes’ rhetoric, it might *not* be “immediately proximal to the understanding.” The reading of history which I have laid out is certainly material in that it concerns how humans function in the material world when attempting to cultivate a lifestyle of liberty; however, this materialism which is a characteristic function of Milton’s modernity belies a spirit of interpretation that works dialectically with the material world. This is how Milton is a modern poet. For Milton, the well-being of the individual in the material universe serves as something that illuminates the elusive conception of meaning in a larger sense. However, one cannot ever expect to be able to approach the question of meaning until one is allowed to govern one’s self—democratically—in the society that he or she

already inhabits. This is where Teskey's "spiritual power" becomes something more in a modern reading of Milton. The foundation of that spiritual power is being questioned by the fact that Adam and Eve are given the freedom to govern themselves. Readers are given the freedom to read in a way that might *not* correlate to the word-for-word commands of Christ. The power is not merely in God anymore. It is also in how different readers approach texts in different ways.

In this Introduction, we have seen that Milton's modernity—as brought out by the mechanism of charity—is apparent in a close reading of his prose. In the following pages of this thesis, I claim that we can see the same kind of modern thinking at work in Milton's poetry. Moreover, by reading Milton's poetry through the lens of modernity, literacy, and democratic theory, the practice of charity is more explicitly put into play than it is by reading Milton's prose, because poetry's extended use of linguistic tropes like image and metaphor creates an added layer of interpretation that allows for many different readers to read in exponentially different ways. Of course, prose allows for this kind of flexible reading as well, as it employs the use of letters, but the complex tropological dimension of poetry displays for us more explicitly the ambiguity of reading, as it involves a more apparent layering of interpretation. Locating the meaning in poetry involves more apparently an act of looking at the verse as a text, such that the text, to use Teskey's language, "...places the interpreter in a position of authority" (47), since the author of the poetic text is clearly absent when we read the text. We become modern readers of poetry, I claim, when we recognize that the use of images and metaphors

presupposes an absence of the author. This absence is one that locates the meaning of the word not simply in how the words themselves appear on a page, but also in how we, as readers, process the words and the tropological aspects of those words.

Milton's modernity, though, is not a simple or static modernity. His sense of modernity evolves alongside his theories of the role of government. As such, the body of this thesis will trace a history of Milton's modern thought, beginning in 1629 with "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" and ending in 1674 with the publishing of the second edition of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's early poetry, I claim in Chapter Two, is decidedly *not* modern, as it presents a largely ordinary vision of government and of the universe, where Christ comes to redeem the oral senses by perfecting their use. Instead of advocating a new kind of world with a new kind of thought system, the *Nativity Ode* advances the idea of a return to the sacred perfection of an old age that has already lived and died. In my exploration of *Lycidas* in Chapter Three, Milton's modernity begins to take a very primitive form, as Milton uses poetic tropes to transform a pastoral elegy into a treatise on the communicability of meaning and then into a scathing critique of the clergy. Chapter Four, then, examines *Paradise Lost* and the complication of understanding of knowledge that accompanies the mandate to exercise reason by exercising choice. Our understanding of modernity in Milton can help us to see how literacy, in all its different forms, contributes to a healthy democracy. Democracy is founded upon debate and dispute, I claim, but in order to be able to intelligently debate, we need to possess that thing called charity. Charity is tied inextricably to the act of reading, because it requires one to analyze and interpret the text, utilizing both the text and their own capacities to

understand; each capacity for analysis will be different from another. Thus, by reading, we exercise our difference as well as our abilities to self-govern, and learning to read thoughtfully and critically will make for sophisticated and individual democratic subjects.

Jameson claims that, “Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category” (*Singular* 40). In turn, I demonstrate in this thesis that Milton’s modernity stands as a narrative in its own right, creating a track that becomes apparent in the progression of his political and ontological thought throughout his poetic career. In this sense, my own study of Milton’s modernity differs from Teskey’s. Teskey limits his study to Milton’s late poetry, and my analysis begins with his earlier poetry and ends with his later poetry for the purposes of charting that gradual narrative of modernity that Jameson writes about. Moreover, in using Berman’s sense of modernity as a state of “disintegration and renewal,” we can see how Milton is a poet of “disintegration and renewal” as well. Literal meaning might disintegrate, but out of that disintegration, a sense of reading as an interpretive act begins to emerge.

CHAPTER TWO

THE *NATIVITY ODE* AND THE CONDITION OF SENSE

“If the expression of modern tradition has a meaning—a paradoxical meaning—the history of this modern tradition will be contradictory and negative.”

—Antoine Compagnon (*The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*)

The claim that Milton is a poet of modernity is disrupted and contradicted when we look at his early poetry. His modernity did not fully express itself from the beginning of his career. In fact, in “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” (1629), the poem that many will claim to be his first great exercise in verse, Milton presents a rather ordinary, classical notion of Christian salvation and the coming of the Christ-child. The poem seems to serve as a hymn of praise and awe devoted to the infant Christ, leading to what we might refer to, embarrassingly, as a boring conception of the universe. Milton’s appeal to “ye crystal spheres” (l. 125) to offer him the assistance of a Muse as he works to honor the entrance of Christ into the world situates the poem inside of a context that is nearly medieval. There is the sphere of the divine, and there is the sphere of the human, which is wholly separate from and inferior to the divine sphere. The occasion for the writing of the poem is Christ’s infiltration of the human sphere to “...with his father work in us a perpetual peace” (7). Stephen M. Fallon claims that Milton’s earlier poetry is characterized by a “regular Heaven” (*Milton Among* 81). That is to say, the heaven that Milton depicts in his earlier poetry—including the *Nativity Ode*—is one characterized by a sense of order above all else. I agree with Fallon’s suggestion, but I would also say that the “regularity” of heaven and earth in the *Nativity Ode* makes for an interesting study of the vehicle of poetic representation. As I will claim in later chapters, the poetic mode of

representing things through image and metaphor is a byproduct of a modernity that is anything but simple, as it calls into question the very foundations upon which we base a unified notion of truth. The difference is that, while my definition of modernity is similar to Claude Lefort's definition of pluralistic democracy as "...the dissolution of the markers of certainty" (*Democracy and Political Theory* 19), Milton's "premodern" sense of meaning in the *Nativity Ode* is one that seeks to *resolve* those markers, rather than eradicate them. In the *Nativity Ode*, though, poetic representation is normal, regular, and ordinary, because it is a byproduct of the Christian tradition. That is to say, poetry is traditional and not modern. Particularly, I claim that the Milton of the *Nativity Ode* is a poet who places emphasis upon the spoken word rather than on the written word, which should seem odd considering the argument I presented in the Introduction, where Milton's model of interpretive charity is based on the reading of the word rather than on the literal *hearing* of it.

The *Nativity Ode* presents a model of what Milton calls "perpetual peace" (7). I claim, though, that the poem presents a political peace which is enacted by the preserving of God's heavenly monarchy. Milton's depiction of Christ renders him as an heir to the kingship of God, his father, and in fulfilling his role as heir, Christ redeems humanity as a benevolent monarch. He redeems humanity by enlightening humanity. Christ accomplishes this enlightenment by redeeming the senses, particularly through the spoken word. Milton's ultimate reliance upon the necessity of human sense works alongside a corresponding critique of "nature," which he both alludes to and indicts throughout the poem. Christ tunes our senses so that they work together with his

kingship, and once our senses are tuned or redeemed, we will be enlightened. Milton preserves the human capacity for sense—a capacity which upholds the oral tradition and which sets up a phonocentric model of the understanding of meaning—by setting up Christ as the sovereign arbiter and redeemer of speech. By redeeming speech and the senses, Christ serves as a sovereign whose sovereignty is not tyrannical, but rather, allows for people to become enlightened so that they are capable of using speech in a way that corresponds to their liberation from the destructive aspect of nature. Milton's dependence upon the senses, even in his earliest poetry, works as a signpost for a coming debate regarding the reliability of senses which develops during the second half of the seventeenth century. Other political thinkers like Thomas Hobbes would denounce the reliability of the senses 22 years later in *Leviathan*. Milton himself would later revise his ideas of government in his prose tracts and in *Paradise Lost*, and would do so by calling into question the integrity of the source of truth. For the later Milton, truth would not be so easily transmitted to us by a spiritual power, but it would involve the free thought of people as well, making for a world in which things could be questioned more easily than they could be made absolute. Here, though, Milton uses the mandate for political order to complement the ideal of peace, and correspondingly uses the hope for peace as a way of making sure that political discord would still result in “perpetual peace.” He recognizes that there will be political discord, but instead of condoning it, as he would later, he still believes that it is a problem that can be fixed by the blessed “crystal spheres.”

Milton begins the poem by revealing the source of salvation as coming from outside of the human, and as coming on a sanctified day. He writes, “This is the month, and this the happy morn/ Wherein the son of heaven’s eternal king,/ [...] Our great redemption from above did bring” (1-4). Redemption is brought to us from a place above us. It is not something that lies within us, waiting to germinate and spring out from a deep core in ourselves, but it is entirely separate from anything that we can create on our own. This mode of thinking which Milton is proposing is one that is born out of a medieval notion of the spheres, in that the divine sphere is one that infiltrates the non-divine sphere. In the process of infiltrating the human sphere, for Milton, Christ must sacrifice some of his heavenly glory: “That glorious form [...] He laid aside” (8, 12). This sacrifice is somewhat ironic. He has to withhold some of his glory in order for the glory to translate itself most effectively to the human sphere. Milton calls the “glorious form” a “far-beaming blaze of majesty” (9). Indeed, if redemption is being brought to us from above, then it is “far-beaming.” However, Christ has laid the glory of that light aside in order to become human, his intent being that, by becoming human, he will bring something to us from above that we can both understand and benefit from.

Without embracing modernity, Milton here is laying the groundwork for a conception of things in a modern context. David Harvey writes that, “Modernism from its very beginning, therefore, became preoccupied with language, with finding some special mode of representation of eternal truths. Individual achievement depended upon innovation in language and in modes of representation” (*Condition of Postmodernity* 20-21). A subscription to a modern notion of the world, for Harvey, begins with a belief that

the human sphere is separate from the eternal sphere. This built-in separation, however, provokes an attempt to break through to that eternal sphere, specifically by the employment of representational norms. Milton's own separation of the spheres, then, signals a step toward modernity, but in other, more predominant ways, as we shall see, it is still grounded in traditional and classical notions of an ordinary communicability of meaning.

The paradox here between the "glorious form" being laid aside by Christ and the glory of redemption being brought to humans opens up several possibilities. One possibility is that the glory Christ leaves behind in heaven is not the same glory that he delivers to us in redemption. This possibility would assume that Christ's original glory is irrelevant to humans, and therefore, we should speak about a different kind of glory, one that is directly applicable to us. Another possibility is that Christ is bringing us a form of the same glory he experiences in heaven, and that, by bringing it to us from above, he is translating that glory into something that we can properly apply to our human condition. I use the term "translate" intentionally when speaking of this glory of redemption, as it turns Christ's glory into something communicable to us. This possibility is the one that I pursue, particularly because the importance of communicability and translatability is one of the central tenets upon which the poem itself is grounded. Before establishing the communicability of Christ's redemptive work, one must look at what it is for the Milton of the *Nativity Ode* that Christ comes to redeem us *from*. Toward the end of the poem, Milton says:

The babe lies yet in smiling infancy,

That on the bitter cross

Must redeem our loss;

So both himself and us to glorify:

Yet first to those ychained in sleep,

The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep. (151-56)

Christ is coming in human form to redeem us from something that we have lost. This thing that we have lost must correspond in some way to that “wakeful trump of doom [that] thunder[s] through the deep,” and that thundering trump is something that calls out “to those ychained in sleep.” If something is thundering and trumpeting, then it makes itself known to us by the noise that it makes; it is something we *hear* in our lethargy. Moreover, that which we hear is something that calls out “first” (155) to prisoners. That is to say, its trumpeting is primarily intended for those people who are in chains. The loss that humans have experienced is a loss that chains them. We can say that what we have lost is our capacity for experiencing sense, and the most vital aspect of that capacity is our capacity to *listen*, because when one is asleep, one does not usually hear things unless the things that they hear are “wakeful trumps.” Those who sleep are in a state of hypnotized trance, and unless something loud and overtly disruptive intrudes into that sleep forcefully, they will probably not wake up, especially since they are “chained” in sleep. In other words, Christ comes to redeem us from our sleep. We cannot hear things unless those things are noisily and deliberately disruptive, and disruptiveness is what characterizes the *sound* of Christ’s arrival. So we might say that Christ comes to redeem us from our inactive state of lethargy, because what we have lost is our capacity to be

awake—and therefore, to be aware of what is going on in the world through the use of our senses.

This state of sleep may contribute to what Milton calls “nature” in the *Nativity Ode*. From the beginning of the poem, Milton classifies nature as something that defers itself to the glory of the Christ child. He writes:

Nature in awe to him

Had doffed her gaudy trim

With her great master so to sympathize:

It was no season then for her

To wanton with the sun her lusty paramour. (32-36)

Here, nature seems to function as something that, while perhaps not diametrically opposed to Christ himself, must at least surrender itself in part to the majesty of the child who has just been born. Nature performs a gesture of deference to Christ in the wonder of the moment, removing its trappings as a way of acknowledging its “great master.” This gesture is more than simply mere acknowledgment, however. It signifies the end of nature’s “season,” at least for a time. Milton is making it clear to the reader that Christ and nature cannot each have equal rule in the event of Christ’s birth, because nature has done something that Christ must come to remedy, or redeem. Milton says that nature has owned a “gaudy trim,” and in the following lines, he reveals that the front which nature puts up is a “guilty front [hidden] with innocent snow” (39). While the snow may hide nature’s guilt, it does not extinguish it. The guilt is still present; the snow simply covers it over because nature is deferring itself to Christ.

Nature, then, seems to be simply the bare state of things, or the “naked shame,/ Pollute[d] with sinful blame” (40-41). It is characterized by imperfection and infidelity. This nakedness exposes its “foul deformities” (44), blemishes that must be covered over with the coming of the Christ child into the human realm. Thus, nature is something that must be redeemed in itself, along with the human state of being asleep and fettered, so our state of sleep is brought about in part by our being consumed within the ugliness of nature. Milton cannot completely reject nature, though, even though it is foul and shameful. He needs nature, because for him it is an example of the way that things are represented to our senses. He has to do something redemptive with his state of nature. Barbara K. Lewalski says the *Nativity Ode* is an example of “an anticipated but deferred restoration of the Golden Age against that celebration of the annual springtime renewal of Nature” (*The Life* 46-47). The renewal is certainly a deferred one, as Lewalski suggests, but in creating a form of that renewal, Milton has to employ a way to communicate that renewal to his readers. That renewal—or restoration—is translated to the reading subject by means of nature, something that we all see and anticipate through our senses. Nature might be guilty, but Milton exposes it as guilty in order to give his readers an example of what it is we have to be redeemed from. Thus, nature becomes a form of representation for Milton that, while condemned as guilty, is capable of being communicated to us alongside a renewal of the senses. In deferring its own guilt by covering it up, nature also represents its guilt to us, so the danger of sensory or poetic representation through nature is a double-edged sword, in a way. Nature makes itself look better in order to hide its guilt, but it also represents the flaws that make Christ’s coming all the more poetically

powerful. Milton uses poetic images to reveal nature, but he uses the oral mode of communication to redeem our existence in nature, even if that redemption must be, to use Lewalski's language, "deferred."

Corresponding to the revealing of nature as foul and deformed is the revealing that, while nature defers itself to Christ, so do violent conflicts of war between human armies. Thus, one thing that characterizes the "foul" state of nature is the state of "hostile" war. Milton claims that "No war, or battle's sound/ Was heard the world around" (53-54). In awe of the Christ child, wars cease and the battlefields are reduced to a state of universal silence. The cause-and-effect relationship here is apparent: the fruition of one event (the birth of Christ) leads to the ceasing of other events (actions of war). The role that silence plays here is a crucial one. Milton writes, "The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng,/ And kings sat still with awful eye,/ As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by" (60). If the trumpets are overcome by quiet, then the implication is that the battlefield at large is also quiet. It is clear that this noise is a violent kind of noise. The noise of the battlefield, though, does not seem to be simply a raucous clamor with no articulacy or communicability. Rather than ceasing to simply make noise, the trumpet has ceased to speak. Whereas before the trumpet "spake," as if communicating to the armies in a form of language, it has now been deprived of its use of speech. Or, it has at least deferred its use of the oral aspect of language. It has given up its voice, and thus, like nature, has become naked and inarticulate, reduced to bareness and silence. The state of nature or naked ugliness, then, is characterized by war, but it is also dependent upon the function of voice, a voice that it gives up in deference to and awe of Christ. The

trumpet's voice is what *represents* war to the senses, and in this instance, the representation of violence has been deferred, but replaced by another kind of representation. That form of representation is a poetry that reinforces a sense of divine order.

With the entrance of the Christ child, then, the mechanism of sensory representation seems to rework itself. Nature's "season" (35) does not have a place during the event of the birth of Christ. Nature still engages in activity, however, and this activity is a function of speech. Milton writes, "Only with speeches fair/ She woos the gentle air/ To hide her guilty front with innocent snow" (37-38). There are several things at work here. First of all, nature is "wooing" the air, and "hiding" itself with snow. Milton does not say that the air and the snow *are* nature in themselves. Rather, they are the means that nature employs in order to cover itself, or in order to make itself appealing. While Milton may never explicitly state in the poem what nature is, he does make it plain to the reader that nature is bare without external markers like air and snow. These natural things are the representations of nature, and they are still at work in the event of Christ's coming, if only as a way of covering up the ugliness of nature. Secondly, Milton places the "speeches fair" in the same category as things like snow when describing nature, in that both speech and natural occurrences are vehicles that nature uses in order to make itself seemly or attractive. In short, again, speech is a way that nature represents itself to the poet, and by extension, to the reader. The activity of representation is not completely on hold; it is still alive and well. But whereas before, nature would "wanton with the sun her lusty paramour" (36), now nature works to hide its guilt from its "maker's eyes" (43).

Instead of participating in illicit and potentially devious carousing, nature has now moved to make penance for that sin by representing itself in another way that would appear more innocent and less violent.

The assumptions that one might make at this point from the reading I have proposed is that nature is deviant, and with the coming of Christ, some of the uglier things associated with nature (like war) have suspended themselves. As a result, nature has moved to represent itself in a different way that is more appropriate to fundamental Christian ideals. One of the modes of representation that seems to suspend itself is the mode of speech, but this leads to a question: does the ceasing of one kind of speech, at least in time of war, give way to silence? And, perhaps more importantly, is Milton claiming that speech is always deceptive? Or, if it is in fact deceptive, is it capable of being redeemed? The answers to these questions reveal that Milton is working to redeem the phonocentric tradition to his readers. Speech is in need of Christ's redemptive work, and once Christ reworks speech so that it always works to glorify *him*, then meaning is something that can be communicated to us absolutely via the vehicle of speech. While Milton seems to doubt the abilities of the senses to say things that are good and acceptable in the *Nativity Ode*, he does allow them a place, writing:

Ring out, ye crystal spheres,

Once bless our human ears

(If ye have the power to touch our senses so),

And let your silver chime

Move in melodious time;

And let the base of heaven's deep organ blow,
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to the angelic symphony. (125-32)

Milton implores the spheres to make a song that will not only be pleasing to the ears, but that will also “bless” the ears. Interestingly, this appeal to the spheres—which sounds eerily similar to an invocation to a muse—is qualified by an “if” (127). Milton is admitting that it may not be possible for the spheres to speak to our senses and bless them, but he is placing faith in them to do so anyway. Thus, while Milton may still doubt the capacity of the human sense to respond to divine song, he is having faith in the ability of the song to redeem the senses. It is worth noting that Milton utilizes the medium of music to redeem the human capacity for sense, because the song in itself is, again, a *spoken* representation of the harmony of heaven. The “ninefold harmony” of the music is a harmony that corresponds to the harmony of heaven, and by corresponding to heaven, it represents heaven to our senses. Thus, when Christ comes and indirectly puts a stop to both war and to nature’s lustful carousing with the sun, he does not replace that disorder with mere silence; he replaces it with a song, which is a more eloquent and refined form of speech. By being a form of speech, the song also functions as a form of language that is communicable to the human senses. This language makes time melodious.

In the preceding stanza, Milton claims that “Such music (as ‘tis said)/ Before was never made” (117-18). Indeed, the kind of music to which he is appealing is one that will return us to a time when “the creator great/ his constellations set” (120-21). Thus, the enacting of this music brings about a form of creation in itself, as if the act of creation is

almost repeating itself again, being represented to the senses by the melodies of song. Milton is calling out to the spheres to bring us back to a time when things seemed new by representing to us what things were like at the beginning. The question of what things were like at the beginning, however, might be a disturbing one to ask. Things might have been new when God set them in order, but they are not new anymore. Milton wants to return us to an age that has become old by the passing of time.

The world was “well-balanced” (122) in the beginning, and seemed to embody a sense of order. It has been built, however, on “dark foundations” (123). We can read the darkness of the world’s initial foundations in a couple of ways. One, it may simply be inaccessible to us. It might be dark in that we cannot *see* it. Another possibility is that the darkness implies that there is something disturbing and unstable about the nature of the foundations that the earth has been set upon. The first possibility I mention is more than likely a function of the second. Order itself is based on something that cannot be seen easily, perhaps making the foundations themselves precarious in nature, since we do not know for sure what the order is founded upon. Apparently, if Christ is coming to redeem our senses, then the foundation on which God initially founded the world must be by nature a precarious one already, since we have already violated the condition of the senses so that Christ needs to redeem them for us. The wonder of the initial foundation is communicated to us, of course, in the mode of song: “But when of old the sons of morning sung,/ While the creator great/ His constellations set” (119-21). That is to say, order is made real to us today by the singing of words, and moreover, the proximity of the words to the order itself seems to indicate to the reader that the words are a function

of that initial divine order. Words become sacred because one, they are put into the form of a song, and two, they operate in conjunction with God's divine act of creation. Despite their inherent sacredness, though, words and speech can be used to participate in acts of nature that are contrary to the "order" which God ordains. When the armies wage war on the battlefield, aided by the speech of the trumpets—as we have already seen—the scene is decidedly one of disorder and hostility, as opposed to the order of "perpetual peace" which Christ comes to enact. This is where the foundations of earth become potentially dark. The same kind of decorated speech that makes up the song of the morning's sons is also the decorated kind of speech which the trumpets on the battlefield perform. Thus, from the beginning, the scene of order is already a potentially dangerous one. We can use words to sing about a beautiful golden age, but we can also use words to sing about war and violence. God becomes for us the arbiter of these words. He indirectly puts an end to the bad use of speech by setting up Christ's birth, and he also inspires the good use of speech by creating something beautiful that is worth singing about.

The scenes of creation, war, and redemption, then, are all scenes that are represented to our senses. Milton proposes that:

Yea Truth, and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Orbed in a rainbow; and like glories wearing
Mercy will sit between,
Throned in celestial sheen (141-45)

Justice is dressed in the garb of the natural world, rather than being naked. It is clothed in a rainbow. Milton is imploring Truth and Justice to represent themselves to us by clothing themselves in nature, but the clothing here is not a guilty clothing, as nature's representation of itself is earlier in the poem. It is a glorious garb. Milton wants to redeem the "disguise" of nature by having it represent those ideals of order that are first communicated to us in the creation of the world. We can infer that, in order for people to understand Truth and Justice, they have to be communicated to us via our senses. Their representation to our sight, however, is absolute. In later chapters, we will see that Milton's use of images allows for the reader to exercise their own individual judgment in discerning what the images mean. Here, there is no question as to what the images mean. The image of the rainbow signifies Truth and Justice, and nothing else, because God—not the reader, and not the poet—is the only arbiter of what the image means. He communicates this meaning to the poet.

Another complication emerges here as well. Milton has to defer his sensory representation of Truth and Justice by telling the reader that it cannot be represented to us in this way yet: "But wisest fate says no,/ This cannot yet be so" (149-50). This putting on hold of the method of sensory representation is a reminder that the event of Christ's coming is communicated to us by the terms of an already-ordained process which is still in the process of coming to fruition. Milton, then, restrains both his poetic voice and his desire to completely rely on the abilities of the senses to represent Truth and Justice to the reader. Until Christ's sacrificial act of reversing the initial loss of the order of justice, the tendency to want to represent things poetically to the senses must wait until their

prophecies can come to complete fruition. The rebirth of the senses, and thus by extension, the rebirth of poetic representation, has to be a gradual one. It is a rebirth subject to the condition of fate. Antoine Compagnon has said that “The modern tradition started with the birth of the new as a value” (xv), and Milton’s hope in this poem seems to be that the birth of Christ also signals the birth of something new in itself, that something being the act of redemption. This redemption, though, is not new. It is old; it has already been laid out by fate and order, and this order cannot be reversed. This is where Milton departs from Compagnon’s claim that modernity is marked by newness. Truth and Justice have to make a “return.” They have already been there before, and thus, they are old. The certainty is that the redemption *will* occur; it just has not occurred *yet*. Justice, then, and order are inevitable. Fate seems to leave open the possibility that one day, justice will be something transmitted to us through our sensory perception, and thus, the fidelity of the mode of representation is something through which we will one day be capable of understanding justice and order.

For the Milton of the *Nativity Ode*, the sense of order is not a simple one. Christ is supposed to bring redemption, the term “redemption” implying a sense of liberation and freedom. Once we are redeemed, our losses will not only be restored, but we will supposedly be free to experience God through our senses. Thus, in the ideal picture that Milton presents, Christ and the freedom he brings will be part of our senses—specifically, part of the *song* that we sing. We will be free to use spoken words eloquently, and the eloquence will not be an empty vessel. It will be an eloquence of true meaning, and pleasing to the ear and the senses in a divinely ordained way. How can one

be free to be eloquent through their senses if they are being subjected to order, though? If things are subject to order—specifically a kind of order instituted by God—then it would seem that humans would subsequently be subjected to the ethics of that order. To violate those ethics, even through eloquence, would be unreasonable for an ethical person who is concerned with adhering to that state of order. Milton suggests in the final lines of the *Nativity Ode* that that order has already been instituted, and thus, has become a tradition: “And all about that courtly stable,/ Bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable” (244-45). Order means service, and service means subjection to that order. Things have been put in their place. The “oracles are dumb” (173), even, in awe of that order. Their modes of representation have been put to a halt. It is apparent that the form of eloquence and speech that Christ is redeeming is one that is a direct response to his redemptive work. Christ seems to ordain, if only indirectly, the kinds of songs that are sung and the ones that are not sung—he has even ordained how and when they are sung. Representations and poetic responses are all set under his feet, and only the songs that serve to justify his own glory most fully are the ones that are allowed to be sung or even talked about. Christ has been set up, in the most all-encompassing manner possible, as the one sovereign arbiter of how people speak and how people represent him. They are all subject to the same rule, that rule being that only those who sing directly in serviceable response to him are the ones who have the ability to sing.

We have here, then, a poem where the redeeming of the senses and the redeeming of sensory representation are governed by an arbiter. The tendency is to want to sing *back* to Christ in response to his imminent work of redemption, but we will all be singing back

with the same end in mind, if we are even able to sing at all. The songs that we may or may not be able to sing are responses. We have already seen in Chapter 1 that the device of charity is a way of responding too, but the response that Milton lays out in the *Nativity Ode* is of a different kind. The term charity, which Milton would coin later, is an interpretive response, and an accommodation of the fact that different people will respond in different ways, because different people will read in different ways. The singing and the poetic representation in the *Nativity Ode* are responses of mere praise, all with the same end in mind. They echo back to the coming of Christ in a way that the divine order would want them to. In other words, the act of interpretation here is not up to us. Our only task is to submit to the divinely mandated sense of order that is already being established. It is already established because the authority of the monarchical sovereign is one that is clear and unquestioned. We are not the ones who redeem our own losses; Christ is. We merely respond to that redemption by echoing it back in a manner that has already been ordained. Milton's fundamental political ideology in this poem is one that is founded in the doctrine of traditional kingship and sovereignty. God is the arbiter of the perceptions, and he mandates that *our* perceptions be governed by the sense of tradition and order that he passes down to us. Once our perceptions are civilized—as they are done so by Milton's own poetic exercise here—then the order of Christ will be seen as a good kind of order.

Seeing Milton's early poetry as a poetry concerned with order is certainly troubling for a study devoted to Milton's modernity. Indeed, Milton's political philosophy in the *Nativity Ode* seems dangerously similar to what Chantal Mouffe

describes as “extreme pluralism that emphasizes heterogeneity” (*Democratic Paradox* 20). This model of democratic government, according to Mouffe, eradicates any notion of difference by placing certain people in subordination to other, more superior people while forgetting that these people are fundamentally different from one another. Consensus becomes the goal of this form of democracy, and political antagonism becomes merely a means toward an end in which agreement is tacitly expressed through policies that everyone accepts without much of a protest. This model of government with its hoped-for end of political consensus is one that the Milton of the *Nativity Ode* seems to be proposing. With the model of “perpetual peace” culminating in a vision of the angels surrounding the infant Christ in “order serviceable,” we get the implication that peace is based in order and service, not in ineradicable difference. Milton opens up the possibility for the liberation of the senses in the poem, even if that liberation is ultimately civilized by a call for submission to the divinely ordained way of representing things to the senses. In seeking to liberate the senses, the early Milton prefigures a debate concerning the role of sense and representation which would become increasingly more prevalent in the coming years, where some saw the senses as particularly dangerous and deceptive.

Going into the middle part of the seventeenth century, where the role of words come to take on heightened political relevance, it would be reasonable to take a look at how Milton’s own theories of sovereignty laid out in the *Nativity Ode* might differ from some of the other notions of absolute sovereignty that would follow it (and that he would later radically revise, both in his prose works and in *Paradise Lost*). While the Milton in this poem is one concerned with upholding the tradition of kingship and sovereignty, he

indicates that eloquent uses of language—including poetry—are viable ways of representing, even maintaining, that sovereignty. People like Hobbes would say later in the seventeenth century that any poetic use of language can be dangerous, and that any use of metaphors or images leads to deception and absurdity. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes says that “the general use of speech is to transfer our mental discourse into verbal, or the train of our thoughts into a train of words” (16). For Hobbes, words should be used to directly relate facts about the world. These words can be abused. One abuse that Hobbes mentions is, “when they use words metaphorically, that is in other sense than they are ordained for, and thereby deceive others” (17). Even in his ordinary description of the divinely ordered world in the Nativity, Milton uses explicit poetic language, including metaphor, and this use of metaphor, for Hobbes, is something to be avoided at all costs.

For Hobbes, words *cannot* be used metaphorically, or else they will lead to untruth and absurdity. Victoria Kahn claims that Hobbes’ critique of the language of metaphor “involves a chaste revision of the bad mimetic desire he associates with the reading of romance” (*Wayward* 150). For Hobbes, when we read things that invoke romantic notions of the world—this would include the use of images to appeal to a “golden age” which Milton talks about—we are approaching things incorrectly, because our perceptions are no longer grounded in things that are going on in the real, physical world around us. Contrast this notion with the *Nativity Ode*, where Milton himself uses words for the purposes of representing things and images abstractly. Some of the things Milton writes about are things that have not even happened yet; Truth and Justice have

not fully instituted their own senses of order yet, so Milton's description of them is entirely abstract and not founded upon things he can immediately see going on in the world around him. For Milton, words can be used to forecast things that might lie outside our immediate understanding, even though they must be ordained for the purposes of pleasing God, and even though they must be first ordained themselves by the act of redemption so that they *can* please God. For Hobbes, any attempt to please God through the vehicle of poetic representation can be compromised by its inherent indirectness. Before we please God, we will be pleasing ourselves through the poetic usages of words, and this will lead to deception, and even to absurdity.

Milton has been seen as a writer devoted, in his later works at least, to the value and the flexibility of the written word. In *Areopagitica*, he indicates that nationhood is best established when people are able to write freely, because writing is the most appropriate form for exploring the slippery conditions of meaning. In *The Ready and Easy Way*, he claims that the king is a "cipher" (337), or literally, a written code that the subjects are free to read and decipher on their own. *Paradise Lost* is a poem in which man of the words themselves contain numerous potential double meanings and can be read in many different ways, depending on the tendencies of individual readers. We might say that the Milton who wrote these works is one devoted to a view of the word in which the meaning lies in the way that individual readers choose to read. Furthermore, the meaning lies in the way that people read the *printed* word, and different people will read the same words differently—and will inevitably arrive at different conclusions as well. In the *Nativity Ode*, though, the predominant condition for the studying of meaning

lies in the way that we *hear* words when they are spoken. Moreover, this phonocentric reliance upon the mechanism of the spoken word represents order and monarchical sovereignty. It is not merely that we cannot question the monarchy of heaven; we have no need to, because the absolute presence of the spoken word gives it an authority that makes it unnecessary to try to interpret. The words that are spoken, or sung, correlate directly to the absolute order of heaven that has infiltrated the human sphere. Milton is upholding the value of the oral tradition here over the value of the written tradition.

David Loewenstein claims that, “for Milton monstrous rebellion could be equivocal and many-headed in the sense that it readily assumed many forms and operated through language and artifice, as well as in political action” (*Representing Revolution* 177). Loewenstein is discussing the later Milton, who is more invested in the radical and revolutionary aspect of the print culture in which he has become involved, but the Milton of the *Nativity Ode* is one invested in language and artifice as well. The difference, however, is the dichotomy between the print tradition and the oral tradition—or, between writing and speech. In the *Nativity Ode*, Milton clearly privileges the tradition of the spoken word as an outlet for the communication of meaning over the tradition of the word that is printed and read by the public as a text. We see here the reliance upon the perception of the absolute presence of the spoken word, which is more absolute by the fact that the people speaking the words (God, and those who sing about God) are speaking them in the present moment, rather than writing them down to be read later when they are physically absent. Speech implies presence in the *Nativity Ode*, because someone literally has to be present in order to speak, or sing. Writing would imply

absence. This of course is problematic, as Jacques Derrida claims that both logocentric and phonocentric notions of meaning present "...absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (*Of Grammatology* 12). The ideal, of course, is that however the words are presented, they will still be immediately proximal to meaning. The Milton of the *Nativity Ode* believes that the spoken word gives the closest proximity to meaning, but he will come to believe in his later writing, as we will see, that perhaps the written word gives meaning more immediate flexibility and is thus more conducive to democracy. The difference is that, while Milton may come to privilege the written word later in his career, his later writing will present the idea that perhaps meaning *should* be flexible, whereas in the *Nativity Ode* it is not supposed to be flexible. It is associated perpetually both with peace and with the absoluteness of the revealing of truth and justice. To return to Harvey's claim that a modern conception of things involves a "special mode of representation of eternal truths" (20), we might say that Milton's seeming orthodoxy in representing the birth of Christ lays the groundwork for a nuanced sense of modernity that he would develop later in his life and in his writings. Harvey's claim is that modernism begins with this notion. In keeping with Milton's poetic development—which we will continue to trace in the coming chapters—Milton's own sense of modernity is one that begins, at its most basic level, with an attempt to represent the eternal realm in more human terms.

In one way, Milton's society in the *Nativity Ode* is repressively organic and one-dimensional, in that it is preoccupied with a tradition founded by God. In another way, though, the promise of poetry as a product of Christ's redemption of the senses makes it

possible for society to move past this one-dimensional characterization at some point for Milton, if not yet in the *Nativity Ode*. It is true that “this must not yet be so” (150), according to Milton’s characterization of fate, but the possibility of a “yet” indicates a promise. Perhaps the senses and poetic representations to the senses will be civilized and subjected to order by Christ’s redemptive act, but as we continue to chart the progression of Milton’s modernity alongside the progression of his democracy, we will see that the senses may one day be allowed to experience things while still being irrational. As we will see in the coming chapters, his evolving conception of modernity is a conception that is going to be tied inextricably to his view of something that we might call a more radically autonomous form of democracy.

CHAPTER THREE

‘THOU ART GONE, AND MUST NEVER RETURN’: INSCRIBING *LYCIDAS*

“For surely to every good and peaceable man it must in nature needs be a hateful thing to be the displeaser and molester of thousands; much better would it like him doubtless to be the messenger of gladness and contentment, which is his chief intended business to all mankind, but that they resist and oppose their own true happiness.”

—John Milton (*The Reason of Church Government*)

This chapter examines the model of what Milton calls the “two-handed engine” (*Lycidas* 130) of politics. Whereas in the *Nativity Ode*, the political realm seems to be something that can be civilized by the imminent redemption of humanity by Christ, *Lycidas* (1637) brings to bear the direct relation between politics and religion by calling into question the irrefutability of spoken meaning that the *Nativity Ode* proposes. By utilizing the model of the elegy in *Lycidas*, Milton reveals relations between human subjects in both political and religious terms more complexly than he does in the *Nativity Ode*. Meaning takes on two dimensions and is no longer characterized merely by Derrida’s “face of pure intelligibility” (*Of Grammatology* 13)—or by “the determination of absolute presence [being] constituted as self-presence” (16). Meaning does not have one pure face, but multiple faces, and this is linked crucially to a definition of a modern democracy. In a modern democracy, meaning has to have more than one dimension, precisely because it is made up of more than one kind of citizen. Milton has not developed his modernity in 1637 in the same way that he will in *Paradise Lost*, but in a close reading of *Lycidas*, we can see the plurality of a modern democracy beginning to shape itself more coherently. For the Milton of *Lycidas*, writing takes on a more self-conscious flexibility by the recognition that modes of meaning must be classified by

absence—both of the poetic subject and of the meanings behind the words themselves. If politics is two-handed, I suggest, then the act of reading is two-handed in its own way as well, and this claim will have profound implications for Milton’s still-developing sense of modernity at the time of the publication of *Lycidas*.

David Loewenstein employs the model of the “two handed engine” in his critique of Milton’s later poetry, and while Loewenstein’s use of the term reveals the two-sided face of Milton’s poetry, it does not explore the way which the term affects *Lycidas* itself. Loewenstein claims that Milton’s later poetry (as exemplified by his simultaneous publication of *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained* in a single volume) is marked by a “calculated indeterminacy” (*Representing Revolution* 294). For Loewenstein, the two hands of the engine are characterized by “verbal dueling” and “holy violence” (294), and it is up to the individual reader to decide which route is the most appropriate. It may be that the “two-handed engine” manifests itself more coherently in Milton’s later poetry, but if we are to use the terms of the engine as a model, then it would behoove one to look first at the poem out of which the term itself emerges. In *Lycidas*, we see a place where the ambiguity, the indeterminacy, and even the plurality of meaning begins to take shape. Where the *Nativity Ode* establishes the redemption of the oral tradition of meaning’s communicability, *Lycidas* mourns the death of a speaking voice that no longer carries any semblance of the reliability of truth. After the death of the one who speaks truth, images and metaphors become occasions for heightening the effect that poetry has on different readers who will read the images and metaphors in a variety of ways. Moreover, as I demonstrate in the conceptual arc of this chapter, the presence of written images and

metaphors help us to see the role that poetry plays in developing a conscientious form of citizenship. Poetry, by the complexities and ambiguities that are explicitly written into it, displays a mandate for political protest and dissent. Political protest, as the latter half of this chapter shows, is informed by the possibility for more than one meaning in reading—as the “two-handed engine” shows us. Poetry also asks readers to interpret the poem in different ways, which in turn provides an occasion for political protest and dissent.

On one level, *Lycidas* is an elegy for one Edward King, a deceased friend of Milton's who drowned in the Irish Sea in 1637. In the poem, King takes on the moniker of Lycidas, a mythic king who also died at a presumably premature time. The association of King with Lycidas allows for Milton to utilize the pastoral genre of poetry in mourning the loss of life. Barbara Lewalski claims that “...pastoral traditionally portrays the rhythms of human life and death in harmony with the rhythms of the seasons. In classical tradition the shepherd is poet, and pastoral is a way of exploring the relation of art and nature. In biblical tradition the shepherd is pastor of his flock, like Christ the Good Shepherd” (*The Life* 82). It is apparent, then, that Milton's use of the pastoral in *Lycidas* allows for multiple applications of its uses. It can conjure up relations between nature, human life, and religion, for instance. The poem is not a traditional pastoral verse, though. In a sense, it seems to signify the inadequacy of the pastoral genre. The retreat of the figures associated with the pastoral corresponds to the death of Lycidas himself: “Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless deep/ Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?” (50-51). Milton appears not only to be mourning the death of Lycidas, but also

grieving over the fact that the traditional figures associated with pastoral poetry possess no inherent power to keep Lycidas from dying. This doubt of the abilities of the pastoral genre to have any real effect on the world is one aspect, among others, that leads one to believe that *Lycidas* is no traditional pastoral poem. Milton's self-conscious doubt of his own force as a pastoral poet reveals *Lycidas* as a poem full of interpretive ambiguities. Milton is utilizing the pastoral genre while simultaneously calling the genre's legitimacy into question.

The moniker "Lycidas" may be one that Milton borrowed from Theocritus' *Idylls*. Theocritus' Lycidas was a shepherd who was stoned to death presumably for suggesting that the king's policies be voted upon by a popular assembly of the people. Milton's Lycidas, like Theocritus' Lycidas, is one who appeals to the rural population as a shepherd and not as a king. Moreover, his appeal to the rural subjects inspires a vibrancy of community. In her biography of Milton's life, titled *Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer, and Patriot*, Anna Beer says that Milton's choice of the moniker "Lycidas" "...clearly suggests that Milton was placing his work within the Latin pastoral tradition so familiar to his fellow Cambridge scholars" (84). Lycidas' act of speaking and singing is a popular act and is grounded in the capacity of the people to hear the same things and to join in equally, each in a way that corresponds to their own sense of happiness; but it also appeals to Milton's generally well-educated readership, many of whom, as Beer suggests, were already familiar with Theocritus' *Idylls*.

A number of scholars have presented potential double meanings that might come out of serious readings of the poem. Lauren Shoet, for instance, has claimed that the

poem presents a tension between human autonomy and the power of material “objects” typically associated with the pastoral genre: “One model does indeed advance the kind of emergent, autonomously human voice taken up in previous critical discussions. The other model, however, is entangled with objects—with inanimate, nonhuman ‘things’—to such an extent that objects actually seem to cosponsor the poetic utterance” (“Subjects and Objects” 101). Shohet may be right—perhaps the poem facilitates numerous, and sometimes contradictory, critical readings simultaneously. The question for this chapter, though, is how it is—and why it is—that the poem *does* accommodate itself to double readings so easily. My contention is that it has something to do with Milton’s evolution as a poet committed to the power of the flexibility of words as he begins to recognize the death of the absoluteness of the spoken word and sees that even nature itself is bound to the politics of a civilization. It is also bound to the politics of the differences in how people derive meaning. Milton writes, “So may some gentle muse/
With lucky words favor my destined urn” (19-20). The terms “luck” and “destiny” seems at odds in this passage. We saw in the previous chapter that the *Nativity Ode* establishes the early Milton as a poet who saw God as the supreme and sovereign arbiter of meaning, and that the absoluteness of meaning is communicated to humans via speech. Since God is the supreme arbiter, no one can make the mistake of seeing words as “lucky.” They are divinely ordained and they have a divine singularity of meaning. For the Milton who wrote *Lycidas*, however, things become more complicated, as both luck and destiny hold equal sway in communicating meaning. Meaning seems to depend upon the whims of a muse, who may speak words without any foreordained meaning in mind. Milton simply

hopes that these words might come out in a way that corresponds with destiny of the structure with which he has crafted his “urn, ” or poem. Milton’s doubt in the power of words to do anything meaningful represents the beginning of a break for him—from a place where words carried absolute truth to a place where the words are lucky and may very well *not* mean anything absolute. This might be our first hint that Milton is developing a sense of his modernity.

Michael McKeon sees the pastoral genre as focused on the mechanism of nature, but claims that the political tensions of the seventeenth century force one to look at nature in a more complex way than as a mere expression of the inherent beauty of a landscape, for instance. He writes, “...pastoral inevitably presupposes people: voices speaking singly and in dialogue, figures populating the countryside in labor and in leisure. What we take to be ‘natural’ about these people is not an essential attribute but the way they live in relation to nature and one another” (“Pastoral Revolution” 275). Indeed, *Lycidas* is about the relationship between people: most obviously the relationship between the “uncouth swain” (l. 186) who is the speaker and Lycidas the king himself. What is interesting, though, as we shall see, is that the poem comes to encompass more than a relationship between the speaker and the deceased. The relation between these two figures occasions a scathing discussion of the relationship between other groups of people, most notably between the clergy and the congregation of the church. Initially in *Lycidas*, the beauty of the relationship between the speaker and Lycidas is one of similarity and proximity: “For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,/ Fed the same flock” (23-24). Milton is not saying that the speaker and the poet are literally the same as

one another, but that they did the same things in the same places. This sameness of circumstance, however, is one that facilitates a bond, and seems to signify a sense of stasis of peace and duty, at least while Lycidas is alive.

The force of the speaker's act of mourning is increased by Milton's constant use of past tense in describing the way things were, and how they way they were differs radically from the way things are not. Milton claims that Lycidas "knew/ Himself to sing" (10-11). Lycidas used to know himself by the way that he sang—or by the way that he used the mode of speaking—but he apparently does not know himself anymore, because he is dead. This seems a significant shift in Milton's poetic ideology, especially when we consider the fact that the early Milton—characterized by the *Nativity Ode*—is one who upholds the still-forceful power of the mode of speech. In *Lycidas*, though, it seems that the oral tradition is dead along with the deceased himself. We used to be able to sing ourselves and signify ourselves by the power of our actual voices, but not anymore. Moreover, the medium of song used to be a way by which we would both know ourselves and by which others would know *us*:

Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,
Tempered to the oaten flute,
Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel,
From the glad sound would not be absent long,
And old Damaetas loved to hear our song. (32-36)

The prior age in which song precipitated something celebratory and joyous among other people suggests that the pastoral tradition, for Milton, was one founded upon camaraderie

and community. Fruitful interactions between individuals were not limited to the relationship between Lycidas and the speaker, but were also inclusive of all those who would hear the song. The fact that the song was rural instead of elite is significant as well. No one is being forcibly coerced or subjected in the “golden age” preceding Lycidas’ death; the satyrs and fauns participate willingly in the song. The act of participation in song and speech is also one characterized by presence and not absence. The fauns “would not be absent long” (35). The fact that they will be present sooner or later does not mean that they are being coerced into being present. Everyone’s presence seems to be a product of their love for the song.

The most apparent reason that Lycidas would not know himself anymore is that he is dead, but this possibility seems odd on the surface, in that many scholars have speculated that *Lycidas* is a piece that holds up the possibility of immortality, as evidenced by the hope of the poem’s end: “Lycidas your sorrow is not dead” (166). He “Flames in the forehead of the morning sky” (171). Perhaps the real reason, then, that the speaker doubts Lycidas’ continuing self-knowledge is not simply because he is dead, but because his death signifies a correlating death of the oral tradition. Milton suggests that part of the tragedy of Lycidas’ death is “...thy loss to shepherd’s ear” (49). While Lycidas’ song may have inspired communal participation in the past, his was still a presence of absolute meaning. The satyrs and fauns participated in the song not only because of the song’s beauty, but also because of who was singing it. If the song itself had been perfect in its own right, then Lycidas’ passing would not have made any difference. Everyone still would have been singing with the same vibrant energy, because

the meaning would have been concentrated in the song itself, and not in the one singing the song. We might say, then, that the eloquence of the song was made eloquent because the shepherd singing the song endowed the words with power by his mere presence as a carrier of truth.

The necessary shift in the shape of meaning, then, in the wake of Lycidas' passing, becomes a shift from an emphasis on speaker—albeit a very complicated emphasis on speaker—to an emphasis on words. This is why the words now are “lucky,” or subjected to the whims of chance. If Lycidas had been speaking the words, the meaning of the words would not have been so random; they would have been built carefully, like an architectural structure: Lycidas “...buil[t] the lofty rhyme” (11). The act of building suggests care and thought, not luck and randomness. The structure of the song also presupposes an act of planning. So perhaps Lycidas was a more powerful speaker—or singer—because he was a figure who planned and crafted his song carefully. Lycidas, then, might have been powerful in that he was a symbol for structure and care, both in the way that he used his words and in the way that he cared for his pastoral “flock.” Thus, in the age which preceded the event of Lycidas' passing, words carried meaning both by the persona of the speaker and by the way that the speaker chose to build his words. Words did not carry meaning on their own; they carried meaning because of how they were built and because of who it was that built them. They had a definitive foundation.

The harsh reality for Milton, though, is that this age is gone. The simple conclusion to draw might be that the death of Lycidas corresponds to a death of poetry and a death of meaning, since the figure who signified both is now gone. This conclusion

is complicated, though, by Milton's opening, where he pleads to the natural world to "...disturb [its] season due" (7). He still wants to build a poem by "disturbing" nature, or by intruding upon it. Poetry is not dead because Lycidas is dead. It is still alive, but the writing of it presupposes that the poet has to disrupt the natural flow of things. The opening line of the poem, "Yet once more" (1), suggest that the poet is coming to make a poem again in the same way that he did before with Lycidas. Poetry and eloquence have not died; their focuses have changed. Here, we see the shift that Shoet has suggested from an emphasis on subject to an emphasis on things. My formulation of this shift is slightly different, however: whereas before, the communicability of meaning was centered in the "absolute presence" of a gifted person, it is now centered in the way that the poet looks at other objects for meaning. These objects function in much the same way as the written word does. Objects become figures and texts, made significant by the way that people look at them and read them. When cataloging the grief of various mythic figures, Milton comes upon Camus, who is most likely a classical river god:

Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow,
Hid mantle hairy, and his bonnet sedge,
Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge
Like to that sanguine flower inscribed with woe. (103-6)

Different figures have been "inwrought" into Camus' bonnet, imbedded into the fabric of the material, in much the same way that we might see words inwrought in the pages of a printed text. The "sanguine flower," in addition to the mantle, has been "inscribed." In short, it has been written upon, as if like a script. Here, we see a dichotomy between

outside and inside. Meaning is not an external feature of a figure; it is something that has been written inside of the figure. Objects have been transformed into things that can be read, and thus, meaning has taken on a more complicated dimension. Prior to Lycidas' death, meaning was communicated via song and speech. Spoken words are immaterial things in that they are things that people hear; they cannot see or touch them. The "inwrought" and "inscribed" figures are things that people might decode by looking at them and by looking at what is inside of them.

The move toward the poetic inscription of material objects suggests the coming-to-fruit of a form of communication that would necessarily bring with it a thrust of political dissent and upheaval. The emphasis would no longer be on simply remembering what someone said, but on reviewing it scrupulously, because it would always, as a material *thing*, be present for people to observe, study, and speculate over. Kevin Sharpe suggests that:

...the control of reading was (and remains) impossible. In an oral culture, with devices for and traditions of memory, 'texts' could be spread far beyond the reader of the material page, and long after a book had been called in.[...] The sometimes ambiguous texts of authority, law, custom, and memory, we begin to see, opened spaces for 'a broad spectrum of interpretive positions.' (*Reading Revolutions* 327-28)

Sharpe's claim seems somewhat problematic for *Lycidas*, because how can the grieving of a man's death, and the subsequent grieving for the loss of the impact of a song, "open spaces"? It seems that the loss of song closes these spaces instead of opening them up.

The singer's voice has been closed by his death, and the communication of meaning seems to have come to an end. We might say, in response, that the death of song that Milton mourns opens up the possibility to look at a poem as a text, as a vessel that takes individual effort to read in the same way that it takes individual effort to write. While the death of a gifted friend might initially be cause for grief, it can also be the vehicle for the opening up of communities that are made up of people who individually read these texts instead of simply hearing songs that they are only able to remember, instead of critique.

Here, then, we can also say that when Milton speaks of his poem as a "destined urn" (20), he is speaking of poetry that should not simply be sung and understood by the way that it presses upon the auditory senses, but by the way that it is crafted and built as a material object to be looked at and read. Perhaps Lycidas built his "lofty rhyme" prior to his death in the same way that the speaker of the poem builds his urn by "lucky words" with the help of a muse. Lycidas' emphasis upon poetry as a work of craftsmanship still upholds his poem as a song where meaning is communicated via the spoken word, and not via a written text intended to be read by many other people. Urns, figures, and flowers, however, are things that a reader looks at, and they imply a more apparent disjunction between the author of a message and the one who receives the message. In speaking, the message is supposedly transmitted directly from one person to another, from mouth to ear. In writing, however, the text serves as a mediator between the author and the audience. The author does not speak directly to his or her audience. The author uses an object (such as an urn) to fill in the gap between themselves and the people receiving the message. The gap that exists presupposes an inevitable absence that

accompanies writing, since the writer is not literally present when their text is being read. By extension, the act of reading will become more blatantly speculative. In his essay titled “Signature Event Context,” Derrida claims that:

All writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, ‘death,’ or the possibility of the ‘death’ of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark. (*Margins* 315-16)

When a reader is invited to speculate, the act of reading might become more democratic in nature, because different people can read—and speculate—in correspondingly different ways. For the Milton of *Lycidas*, this absence (both the literal absence of Lycidas himself as well as the absence presupposed in the inscribing of objects) might be an occasion for grieving, but it also opens up the possibility for a community that is made up of more autonomous individuals, as we will see in Milton’s scathing critique of the clergy.

To this point, we have established that Lycidas’ death opens up a space for readers to read written texts. The opening up of this space throws the objectivity of truth into a mode of uncertainty, seemingly without a foundation. The question remains what kind of meaning it is whose communicability is threatened by the death of Lycidas. I claim that it is related to the change that accompanies Lycidas’ death. The occasion for the poem is the shock of an irreversible change: “But O the heavy change, now thou art

gone” (37). If the way that the two figures operated prior to Lycidas’ death was an occasion for tranquility, then the death of Lycidas becomes the occasion for doubt. Change signals a disruption in the order of things: Lycidas might be gone, but the speaker is not gone. The similarity of circumstance prior to tragedy indicates that the true tragedy of Lycidas’ death is that things are not the same anymore—that things have changed permanently, and that the poet does not know how to carry out the duty of keeping up order in Lycidas’ absence. In one sense, then, we can say that the absence of Lycidas means a *permanent* disruption of the order of things. He “...must never return” (38). That is to say, things can never be the same again. Whereas before, relations between subjects were characterized by a continuity of duty and pleasure, they are now characterized by uncertainty and doubt, which in turn leads to a doubt that poetry can effect that sense of stability and order in the world. To borrow Marshall Berman’s (and Karl Marx’s) terms for the state of modernity, “...all that is solid [has] melt[ed] into air” (*Communist Manifesto* 223). But if all that is solid is now gone, then why write poetry anymore? What is poetry accomplishing for Milton if everything is dissolving? This is the crisis of modernity that is beginning to emerge for the poet. Poetry might be a problem for modernity, in that it continues to complicate things; but does poetry also provide a case for citizenship in an ever-dissolving world?

I claim that we might still be able to communicate meaning in the wake of Lycidas’ death, but in order to communicate or understand meaning, we have to take an approach in which everyone is allowed to read, as opposed to simply the culturally elite. This is where the engine becomes “two-handed.” Different people have to be able to

discern the two hands of the engine for themselves. The turn that Milton makes in the latter half of the poem indicates that the anxiety that has come to the forefront in the wake of Lycidas' departure from the world is primarily a religious kind of anxiety. After the cataloged grievings of Mincius, Hippotades, and Camus, one identified as "the pilot of the Galilean lake" (109) enters the scene, bearing "...two massy keys [...] of metals twain" (110). This "pilot," according to scholars, is most likely St. Peter, the "rock" on whom Christ had said in the New Testament that he would build his church. Christ's proclamation of Peter as a rock established him in Catholic tradition as the father—and the first pope—of the Catholic Church. Why, in a pastoral elegy for a dead friend, would Milton choose to make Peter the most prominent member of his parade of mourners? We have already established Milton's pastoral as a primarily rural genre of poetry, one that allows for a healthy and uncoerced interaction between shepherd and flock. Milton's pastoral is also one that places as much emphasis upon the rural population as it does on the objects associated with the rural tradition, in that the population can "read" and interpret the meanings inscribed into the objects associated with the genre.

Peter's presence in the poem invites a scathing criticism of the clergy, which has *not* fed its flock and, moreover, has deprived its flock by means of deception and dishonesty. If Lycidas' death has signaled a change in the way that one communicates and understands meaning, then this shift has to encompass more than simply the pastoral genre of poetry. It has to take on a more public dimension for Milton. Utilizing the death of an honest and decent man as an occasion for an investigation into the way that the public understands the way things mean, Milton turns his conceptual shift toward the

most public domain available to him: the church. One of Berman's subjects in *All That Is Solid* is Charles Baudelaire, whose late prose poems, Berman says, is marked by a tension between the urban and the spiritual. The modern city, for Baudelaire, makes for a modern conception of people's souls, and for Berman this "...expresses a radical break in [...] tradition" (147). Berman says that, for Baudelaire, "...the modernization of the city at once inspires and enforces the modernization of its citizens' souls" (147). I claim that Milton expresses a break too, apparent in *Lycidas*, which signals his modern thought. In *Lycidas*, the significance of words begins to change, and this break in their significance necessitates a change in citizens' conceptions of things. Most obviously, this change for Milton expresses itself in the form of protest against the clergy.

Peter's first criticism of the church establishes the clergy as gluttons, so concerned with consuming things themselves that they see religious exclusiveness of the general population as a worthy means toward establishing themselves as absolutely sovereign. Milton writes, "Of other care they little reckoning make,/ Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast,/ And shove away the worthy bidden guests" (116-18). The guests here are clearly synonymous with the flock that both *Lycidas* and the speaker have worked with inclusively in song and exuberance. It is a flock that needs to be fed in much the same way that *Lycidas*' flock needed to be fed. To feed themselves, the clergy do not hesitate to exclude the rest of the flock, violently "shoving" them away if they find it necessary. The "scrambling" at the table works in opposition to the careful craftsmanship exhibited by the deceased *Lycidas* and establishes the order of the church as random and disorganized. Milton goes on to declare the clergy as possessing of "Blind

mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold/ A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least/ That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!" (119-21). Here the use of the mouth comes into play again, but whereas before, the mouth was celebrated for speaking meaningful words, the mouth now takes on a doubly derogatory significance: it is both a tool for ravenous consumption and it is also an object which cannot see anything because it is blind. In the oral tradition of communicating a message, the mouth spoke words; things proceeded from it in an orderly and worthy fashion. Here, the mouths of the corrupt do not speak; they take things in and devour the feast in a way that signifies that their capacity for "learning" has been fatefully compromised. They are so gluttonous that they "have learned aught else the least." Thus, while the mouth is still a crucial object in the interactions between people, it is not devoted to the communicability of a universal message. It is there to feed itself in a way that compromises people's abilities to learn.

Milton's use of the term "blind mouths" signals a crucial turn, something that seems like a self-contradiction. How can mouths be blind? Mouths are not meant as mechanisms by which one can literally see things, and thus, they cannot be blind, because they have no literal capacity for sight in the first place. Moreover, in the establishing of the prominence of the oral tradition that Milton has been working toward, sight should not be as important in the comprehension of meaning as hearing should be. It would seem, in a poem that is so concerned with the translation of meaning, Milton has reached a point where his own thoughts have been lost in translation. Perhaps, though, the shift to the loss of sight indicates a turn in Milton's own theory of how things mean. Maybe meaning should not be heard anymore so much as it should be seen, and maybe the

corruption of the church has provided the occasion for his own transition from meaning as something that should be communicated in a verbal manner to something that should be communicated in a written manner as well. If mouths can be blind, then the logical inference one might make is that a healthy mouth should *not* be blind. It should be able to see *and* speak, and it should not be a vehicle by which one merely consumes things without transmitting something as well.

When a mouth is used merely as a medium for consumption, Milton suggests, then its capacity to communicate eloquently and meaningfully is irreversibly compromised:

What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,
The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread... (122-27)

In this model, the mode of song has died, presumably because the ones singing the song do not think that they “need” anything. Ironically, once one loses their need for nourishment, they are not nourished; they are “sped,” or spent. Their capacities as vessels for communicability have been drained, such that when they try to communicate audibly, all they do is contaminate the ones whom they are supposed to be feeding. Thus, in a healthy relationship between speaker and flock, the ones doing the speaking will always need something themselves, and might nourish themselves by engaging in a conversation

of sorts with the ones they are supposed to be feeding. The unhealthy model manifests itself when the dominant party sees itself as needing nothing, so it would seem that the healthy model in turn is represented when the dominant party realizes that it *does* need spiritual nourishment, and feeds itself in a healthy manner by singing *with* the flock, as Lycidas—the embodiment of a good shepherd—does. In addition, inward rottenness begets a spreading of sickness. Like a healthy model of reading and conversing, the way that one takes something in themselves will have a profound effect on the way that he or she influences those in their community. We have seen that Milton’s dependence upon objects as vessels for communicating something that has been “inscribed” in them begets a response from others who interpret and analyze those things that have been inscribed and “inwrought.” In this instance of bad song and bad consumption—embodied by a corrupt clergy—the rotting that is “inwrought” inside of a subject does not stay inside. It spreads, like a disease.

Because of this corruption that feeds off of consumption instead of conversation, Milton ends his address to the clergy with the threat of “...that two-handed engine at the door,/ [which] Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more” (130-31). As I mentioned earlier, Loewenstein claims, in his discussion of Milton’s publication of the 1671 volume of poetry, that the two hands of the engine might be the double options of religious pacifism and religious violence. Milton never identifies what the two hands are, however. The engine is certainly a dual mechanism of some sort, and this duality may very well stand in for a plurality of meaning. This question must remain entirely speculative, though, and perhaps that is Milton’s point. If the singular engine is to be most effective,

for Peter and for Milton, it has to maintain some semblance of duality within. The poem as an object in itself is “inscribed” and “inwrought” with figures like the two-handed engine, and it is inevitable that different readers will read different things into the identities of the two hands. Whatever means these two hands may or may not signify, the end remains absolute: it is a singular strike that will “smite once,” a strike that will end all strikes, and regardless of the means the subject might employ on the way there, the strike that threatens the clergy is going to be one and only one. No additional strikes will be necessary. Thus, despite the death of the “absolute presence” of voice which has accompanied Lycidas’ passing, Milton holds in the balance the possibility of an “absolute presence” which may be radical and violent. We can say, then, that a viable response to a clergy who consume and do not feed is to strike violently and radically in some form or another, however ambiguous the shape of that strike might be. This is where Milton forecasts his later thoughts on the role of the citizens in a tyrannical state. In this instance, the abuses of words, as well as the corresponding abuses of the mechanisms for producing words, might be forerunners for a kind of radical strike that topples the absolute sovereignty of a corrupt establishment. It is only when Milton realizes that speakers of words and writers of words function in conversation with one another that he proposes that the neglect of the ways these words are produced can—and perhaps *should*—be occasions for violent smiting.

This too, may provide an answer to the question of the identity of the engine’s two hands. The clergy are approaching matters with only *their* interests in mind, looking to consume in such a way that they will be fed sufficiently, even at the expense of the

congregations of people whom they are ostensibly supposed to serve. For them, the engine of church politics is one-handed and one-sided. One side is feeding another side, but Milton is claiming that the act of feeding, in addition to the act of communicating truth, must be two-sided in a couple of ways. One, the people must be fed along with the clergy. Two, the act of communicating truth might carry a dimension of the verbal (as it did during Lycidas' life), but it also must carry a dimension of the written (as evidenced by the inwrought and inscribed objects).

We might say, then, that when St. Peter calls out the clergy in *Lycidas*—who would seem to possess some sort of divine right themselves, in that they are governing the institution which advocates supposedly divine actions—he is acting as a dissenter in his own right. He claims that the absolute presence of voice is not absolutely present because the mouths that serve as the exercisers of that voice are blind. By questioning the absolutism of one form of government, St. Peter serves as a voice of dissent, exercising a form of voice that is *not* absolutely present in that it is decidedly different from the other, more tyrannical voices that have the most authority in the society at the time. The irony here is that if Peter is, in the Catholic tradition, the “rock” on which Christ builds his church, then he would appear to serve as a stabilizing presence or order in the church, even in his literal bodily absence from the church after his death. Peter stands at the head of a long line of Catholic popes who have presumably represented order and continuity throughout church history. In Milton's formulation, however, Peter becomes one who disturbs the predominant order by engaging in and calling for active disruption of that

order. Richard Hooker, in an attempt to quell the tide of potential political disruption, will say in 1648—eleven years after the publication of *Lycidas*—that, “Without order there is no living in public society, because the want thereof is the mother of confusion, whereupon division of necessity follows, and out of division inevitable destruction” (Rpt. in Wootton 221). For Hooker, to be divided is to invite a chaos that cannot be stopped and which subsequently cannot be fixed once it has taken hold. For the Milton of *Lycidas*, things have already been divided by the death of Lycidas, his death providing the occasion for Milton to call into question the foundations of order in the church. If the foundations are made up of self-involved, gluttonous tyrants, then the order that arises from these foundations is something that should be—and eventually will be—overthrown.

Milton, then, has thrown himself into the debate over the role of government in perhaps the most subversive way possible—by veiling it in the form of a pastoral elegy. In a way, he is displaying and carrying out the flexibility of the written word that will become more central to his beliefs during the English civil war and the English Restoration. An elegy for a friend becomes a political call for an overhaul of the beliefs and practices of the clergy, and the corresponding death of the absolute authority of the spoken word reveals the abuses associated with the “blind mouths” of the corrupt, self-obsessed leadership of the church. The end of the infallible authority of the spoken word signals a coming age in which material reading of written texts will become more central to Milton’s politics and theology. At the end of the poem, Milton the poet takes a step back from the speaker of the poem, distinguishing himself from the narrator: “Thus sang

the uncouth swain to th' oaks and rills,/ While the still morn went out with sandals grey,/ he touched the tender stops of various quills,/ with eager thought warbling his Doric lay” (186-89). The most apparent way to read the “quills” in this line is to look at them as reeds that are used for the playing of music for a pipe. This would further establish the poem as a pastoral elegy, in that it would end with a song after Milton has claimed that song has died. Another way to read the passage, though, would see the quills as writing utensils as well as tools for the making of a musical instrument. Judging from Milton’s “inscribing” of objects with grief earlier in the poem and from the way that he has subverted the elegiac form to discuss the corruption of church politics, it may not be unreasonable to question whether he is endowing the conclusion of his elegy with a sense of undecidability that upholds, simultaneously, both the force of writing as well as the force of hearing. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton will utilize both logocentric and phonocentric methods of communicating meaning more apparently than he does in *Lycidas*, but here, he is communicating a loss of the auditory mode of meaning through the pastoral genre. It is reasonable, then, to consider that with the death of an exclusively phonocentric model, some other kind of model may soon come to take its place, one that will look more willingly upon ambiguity, undecidability, and perhaps even disorder as necessary modes of discourse during an equally ambiguous political age of upheaval and dissent.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLAIMING REASON: *PARADISE LOST* AND THE CRISIS OF AUTONOMY

“Every Subject passes in force, at a point where language fails, and where the Idea is interrupted.”

—Alain Badiou (*Being and Event*)

Milton’s God says in *Paradise Lost* (1667) that “...reason also is choice” (3.108)—a line taken from *Areopagitica*—and suggests that his pleasure comes not from the mere obedience of humans, but from the use of will and reason. One of the implications that arises from this claim is that reason—or choice—differentiates human subjects from one another, because different people may make different choices. As such, we can say that one of the central tensions in *Paradise Lost* is the tension between the imperative of choice and the obligation to obedience. It is this capacity for choice, I claim, that helps to establish the late Milton as a poet whose democratic conception of government is tied to an evolving modernity. We see the world here as one that blossoms with newness and birth, but which also carries with it a necessary uncertainty and ambiguity of meaning. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s poetry is no longer simply a conduit for the infallibility of the audible “voice.” It establishes Milton as a poet of images and metaphors, and these images and metaphors make it necessary for different people to choose how to read them. Via the vehicle of poetry, the spoken word and the writing of images work in conversation—and sometimes in contradiction—with one another to establish a political sphere grounded in the concept of debate rather than indisputable absoluteness. By way of the reading of images and poetic tropes, Milton suggests, we

learn to choose. Images and tropes will provoke many different readings from many different people.

In *Delirious Milton*, Gordon Teskey claims that the modernity of *Paradise Lost* rests heavily in the reader. Modernity comes largely from the way that we read and interpret the poem:

For the ancient interpreters the work is open to endless reinterpretation only because it was made to be infinitely meaningful by a poet who was infinitely wise. The modernist interpreter, however, recognizes the distinction between the *poem* as a thing made and the *text* as an empty structure open to any meaning that may be worked into its lattice—or pressed through its lattice, as in a silkscreen. (57)

I agree with this claim, but I would qualify it by saying that the reason we are able to reinterpret the poem infinitely is because of the mandate to choice in the text itself, which reveals itself gradually through the course of Adam and Eve's domestic relationship. Thus, our freedom to read the poem and interpret the poem comes not only from our own modern tendencies as readers, but also from the fact that Milton's modernity, as revealed in *Paradise Lost*, is more similar to contemporary notions of modernity than we might initially think. Because of the implications that reason and choice have for the fluidity or absoluteness of words in the text of the poem, we can say that *Paradise Lost* is open to numerous meanings. As we will see, the meaning is something that lies ultimately in the way that we receive and interpret the words more so than in the definitiveness of the meaning of the words themselves.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Teskey believes that Milton is a poet of modernity largely because he is a poetic “shaman.” He channels a higher spiritual power while still being devoted to human forms of creativity. He balances Christian thought with complicated humanist ideals of the poet as a self-ordained sort of “prophet”:

“Milton’s creativity, which would be the ground of the shamanistic authority of the poet in the modern world, depends on the hallucinatory creativity of God” (*Delirious* 18-19).

For Teskey, this hallucinatory experience balancing God and the world is what calls everything into question. I would claim, as a revision of Teskey’s claim, that the cause for the doubt of absolute meaning comes from the potential disaster of choices that might be disobedient. When we choose, we can create new circumstances, but we can also destroy things. Adam and Eve destroy the “perfection” of Eden by eating of the Tree, but they also activate that thing called charity, which is why I claim that Milton’s modernity is a charitable one. We lose the absoluteness of meaning in a modern world, but we are also able to exercise charity; we are able to understand things each in our own individual ways. Berman says that modernity is marked by paradox: “Catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities for redevelopment and renewal; disintegration works as a mobilizing and hence an integrating force” (*All That Is Solid* 95). Berman’s claim opens up my approach to the modernity of *Paradise Lost*: we can say that the catastrophe is the Fall from Eden, and thus disintegrates Adam and Eve’s supposedly perfect state. As a result, however, disintegration opens up the possibility of charity and also the possibility of choice as a form of law. The catastrophe of Milton’s modernity might not simply come from him straddling a place between God and his own creativity; it might also come from

the dangers of choosing, a danger which also opens up a place for personal renewal, via the vehicle of choice.

Despite Milton's claim that his aim is to "...justify the ways of God to men" (1.26), his justification is one that is classified by argument, dissent, and debate as functions of the mandate to human autonomy. The reason that we are allowed to make different choices and to engage in acts of political dissent is because the structure of the universe must be uncertain and many-sided. Part of this many-sided structure involves the vehicle by which we receive and understand language, whether it be written or spoken. In demonstrating the interweaving of autonomy with the flexibility of both the written and spoken word, I intend to look primarily at the domestic relations between Adam and Eve, as their relationship to one another—and to their maker—reveals Milton's move toward a modern democratic thought. Their marriage evolves, I claim, from a monarchical society classified by subjection and subordination, to the embodiment of a commonwealth that finds its function in the mandate to conversation and dissent. In other words, by way of being a struggle to find a "meet and happy conversation" (*Doctrine and Discipline* 186), Adam and Eve's relation to each other in turn becomes a narrative about the founding of a democratic society. Regardless of how the words are communicated, Adam and Eve's mandate to choice is justified by the different ways that they are allowed to understand words. This mandate establishes the autonomy of Adam and Eve by the way that they strive to find a way to converse, even if—or perhaps *because*—that conversation does not play itself out toward a definitive, quantitative conclusion.

Eve's recollection of her coming-to-consciousness in Book 4 establishes one of the primary tensions of *Paradise Lost*: the tension between the right to make individual decisions and the absoluteness of the monarchy, which is made absolute by the spoken word. Eve sees her own reflection in a pond after waking up for the first time. Not realizing that she is in fact looking at a reflection of herself, Eve is astonished by the beauty of the person she perceives to be looking back at her against the backdrop of what "...seemed another sky" (4.459). Her initial awareness of the beauty of the natural world is one that she processes by way of seeing it. She first sees a "...shape within the watery gleam" (4.461) before being taken by a sense of pleasure at what she sees. Thus, before being pleased by this strange creature in the water, she has to identify the form of what she sees. In short, recognition precedes a reaction of delight. Though the process is simple, Eve must employ a subjective reaction to the thing she sees in the pond, recognizing the form of the thing before understanding that the thing is beautiful and that it can thus be a source of pleasure. Her seeing of the reflection of herself is the cause that serves as the precondition for her analysis of the image that so perfectly resembles her.

There are a couple ways of reading this passage in the poem. One reading displays the irony in that Eve does not recognize that she is looking at an exact physical representation of herself. Despite the image's function as a direct representation of Eve, Eve is still responding to the image, not knowing that the image she is looking at is actually an image of herself. Eve says that, "As I bent down to look, just opposite,/ A shape within the watery gleam appeared/ Bending to look on me" (4.460-62). It seems

that the image provides the first move itself and Eve is made to be the one that reacts. The shape appears, “bending to look on” Eve, instead of Eve bending to look on the shape. In this reading, it seems that the image “speaks” first, even though the image is a replica of Eve’s physical appearance and thus would not even exist were it not for Eve to be there to produce the image by her own presence. Being naturally provoked by Eve’s presence, a “text” appears for Eve to react to. It does not seem, in these lines, that the image appears as a reaction to Eve’s appearance. Rather, the image appears first to take a look at Eve. In short, the image seems to make the first move by its initial glance at Eve, and Eve’s corresponding glance at the image is necessarily a glance *back*, a response to the first glance that has already been enacted by the image.

Another reading of this passage, though, severely complicates the first reading and provides an indication that the image actually *is* responding to Eve, while making Eve think that she is the one responding to it. Eve says:

[...] I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire... (4.463-67)

It is possible say that the poetic “image” is one that responds immediately to the subject, rather than the subject responding immediately to the image, a claim that would appear to stand in contradiction to the last point about Eve responding to the image. Eve “starts back,” and the effect of her start is that the image starts back as well. When we think

traditionally about the interaction between the poetic image and the one who “reads,” or looks at, the poetic image, we think of the image as speaking first and the person seeing the image reacting to it. Here, though, the image responds to the person. Eve’s “start” happens *before* the reflection’s “start,” and Eve’s sense of pleasure precedes the image’s sense of pleasure. One conclusion to draw from this instance is that the initial meaning lies in the person who sees the image. The meaning lies not solely in the image, but in the way that the person can get the image to respond to it. This would seem to serve as a refuting of both logocentric and phonocentric readings of meaning, where the “first” meaning lies in the words, or in the thing to which the subject responds. The first meaning in this case lies in the subject, because the subject can literally manipulate the image by the things that she does and by the physical movements that she makes, even if she does not realize that she is manipulating the image.

The indication from these two simultaneous readings of the passage is that the image and the subject are engaging in a conversation of paradox. Eve reacts first to the image of herself, prompting a subsequent reaction from the image itself. Both are reacting to one another. The irony is that both Eve and the image are making the first move, but both of their first moves are reactions to what is perceived to be a move that has already been made. The meaning lies in Eve’s internal, subjective response to the image, yes, but the procedure of analyzing the meaning has to be prompted by the belief that Eve is looking at something that she perceives to be someone else. She might be reacting literally to herself, but she does not know this. This is where the model of speech

establishes itself as the vehicle that clears up Eve's confusion about what she sees. Eve recounts that

[...] a voice thus warned me, What thou seest,
What there thou seest fair creature is thyself,
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
Thy coming... (4.467-71)

The voice that speaks to Eve is unidentified; it may be Adam, it may be God, or it may very well be Satan, but we are never told the identity of the voice. It is a voice without a speaker. In its most organic sense, the voice is the embodiment of "absolute presence," because it is not tied to a person who would have any motivation to inform Eve what or who the image is. The voice itself is all that matters, and it is presumably a voice that speaks the absolute truth. It is interesting, though, that the voice is not being truthful in the most *literal* sense. Eve does *not* actually see herself in the pond. She sees an image of herself. What she *literally* sees is the water in the pond, not her actual, physical self. Furthermore, the voice promises to take Eve to a place "where no shadow stays," or to a place where everything she sees will be completely real and tangible. A shadow, we can say, is a representation of the thing of which it provides an after-image. It is the leftover residue of the thing itself, while presumably *not* being the thing itself. To use the language of the voice in this passage, it is apparent that the image of herself that Eve sees in the pond is a shadow of herself; it is something left over from herself that provides a picture—however distorted that picture may be—of herself.

The voice, thus, is promising to take Eve away from a world of images and into a world of real things. Crucially, then, it takes a voice that is “absolutely present” to convince Eve that what she sees is literally herself and not a representation of herself. It also convinces Eve that there is a world immediately accessible to her where shadows and images will not threaten the integrity of the actual things in the real world. In order to inhabit this world free of shadows that might hinder her self-perception, though, Eve has to function as the image of Adam. Milton writes that “. . . he/ Whose image thou art, him thou shall enjoy/ Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear/ Multitudes like thyself” (4.471-74). In other words, to be free of the deception of shadows and distorted images, Eve has to become an image of what Adam is. The image has to be joined “inseparably” to the thing that it reflects, and the presumable effect will be that the holy linking of the original thing with the image will produce offspring. And, not only will they produce offspring, but they will produce “multitudes” of offspring that will all be like their original parents, one of those parents being a reflection of the other one. Essentially, the unidentified voice is reducing Eve herself to the image in the pool. By promising to take her away from a world of images (shadows are images in themselves), the voice is turning Eve into an image of someone else. The spoken word is the vehicle by which the confusion, misidentification, and estrangement of images are all ordered and “set right,” so to speak. It leaves no room for debate, because the mystery about what images *mean* has been taken away and wrapped up into a neatly ordered and arranged hierarchy. The meaning of the images does not lie in Eve anymore. It lies in the way that the voice explains everything to her, such that Eve does not need to interpret the meaning anymore. It is

already interpreted for her in such a manner that Eve actually becomes the object by which *Adam* is made whole, and is no longer the subject that performs the interpreting of images.

After hearing the voice, Eve recognizes Adam and, seeing that he is not nearly as beautiful as she is, flees in fear from him. Adam seizes her hand and explains to her that in fact she *is* a part of him in that she was formed from his rib. After hearing this, Eve recounts that, “I yielded, and from that time see/ How beauty is excelled by manly grace/ And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (4.489-91). The fact that Adam is supposedly both graceful and wise makes things clear to Eve. The one who is more wise excels the one who is physically beautiful, and thus has the God-given authority to take charge in matters of choice, since superior wisdom presumably leads to a superior ability to make decisions. If one is wise, then, it would make sense that that person would possess the capacity to reason, as an exercising of reason would prefigure the ability to make wise decisions. As a result, we can say that wisdom manifests itself in the decisions or choices that one makes. When Milton makes the claim in *Areopagitica*, however, that “...reason is but choosing” (252), he is speaking of reason as corresponding to the freedom to make bad choices. Thus, reason is the allowance for people to make choices that might not seem reasonable. People might also make decisions of disobedience against God, if reason is choosing. It allows people the freedom of self-government, with the very real possibility that different people might choose different things, and that some people might therefore make decisions of disobedience.

The setup in Eden at this point, then, that rids the scene of confusion and disorder is a monarchical setup. The hierarchy established by the unnamed voice seeks to civilize the confusion that might come about when people are allowed to interpret the meaning of images on their own. Adam is the monarch and Eve is his follower. Eve yields to Adam because he is inherently wiser than she is. Armand Himy observes that, "...the etymological root of hierarchy is *hieros*, 'sacred.' Obedience to hierarchy is a religious service." ("*Paradise Lost* as a 'Tractatus Theologico-Politicus'" 121). Certainly, the hierarchy has been made a sacred structure that cannot be broken because of the language associated with that hierarchy, but I should reinforce that this hierarchy has been made sacred at this point by the words that are spoken. Wisdom is said to be better than beauty. Himy goes on to say that "The commonwealth cannot lapse into tyranny if it is a Christian commonwealth; the virtue of the subjects remains the fundamental issue" (121). In the model being privileged in Eden at this point, however, the supposed virtue of the subjects (i.e., wisdom), has become the mandate to a hierarchical setup that prevents people from enacting their own free will. It may be a bit strong to call the monarchical model here a tyrannical one. It is certainly not a model, though, that lends itself to any form of self-government that would lead to one making a decision that could upset the hierarchy of Eden. The hierarchy, then, is sacred, but it is excluding the virtue of one of its subjects—Eve. Eve is not allowed to carry out her own capacity for free will simply because Adam is assumed to be more wise than she is.

In Eden's hierarchical model presented here, however, *wisdom* does not allow for self-government and for different people's freedom to allow them to make different

choices. Wisdom is the means by which one person “excels” another person and is therefore allowed to speak for that person. When Adam makes a decision, Eve has to follow and make the same decision, since Adam is supposedly more wise than she is, and since Eve might very well make a poor decision. Milton writes of Adam in relation to Eve, “His fair large front and eye sublime declared/ Absolute rule” (4.300-1). A few lines later, Milton writes that Eve’s graceful beauty “...implied/ Subjection” (4.307-8). It would seem, from reading these lines describing Adam and Eve’s initial relation to one another in Eden, that their bond is one clearly delineated by an objective order; Adam is the sovereign and Eve is his subject. In this case, the words have become a mechanism by which the order becomes objective. The word “rule” is assigned to Adam, and the word “subjection” is assigned to Eve, and it seems like these terms cannot be reversed. The terms give a name to the kind of government that Milton has set up in pre-Fall Eden. As such, words and terminologies make the structure familiar to us and serve as a means of identification. It would appear then, that the structure is already there, and the monarchical and hierarchical language is simply a way of reminding us what kind of government we are observing in Eden. More so than simply making it familiar and recognizable, though, the words stand as markers of absoluteness, or, to return to Lefort’s language, “markers of certainty” (*Democracy and Political Theory* 19). If Adam signifies “absolute rule” and Eve signifies “subjection,” then the absoluteness of language suggests to the reader that the language establishes the entire order objectively, beyond the shadow of any doubt. The meaning lies in the words, then, and by definition the meaning is a logocentric kind of meaning. The words give an indisputable name to the relation

between Adam and Eve. This logocentric model establishes the word as absolute and not open to dispute. If Adam's rule is absolute, then there is no room for debate. This absolute logocentrism will be severely complicated later on, however.

By this token, then, Adam and Eve are different from one another, but they are also made to be the same as each other, and this reveals the contradiction of the monarchical state they have agreed to set up for themselves. Adam even cites this purported sameness when justifying his absoluteness to Eve:

Whom thou fly'st, of him thou art,
His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent
Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart
Substantial life, to have thee by my side
Henceforth an individual solace dear;
Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half... (4.482-88)

Eve is *of* Adam, by virtue of the fact that Adam claims to have given Eve her "being." In addition, not only is Eve *of* Adam, but she is also a part of him; she is his "other half." In essence, Adam is claiming that he and Eve are actually two parts of the same person. In the past, before God took Adam's rib to make Eve, they *were* the same person, in that Eve was literally a part of Adam's physical body. Now, though, contrary to Adam's claim, they are both different individuals, as evidenced by the fact that when Eve looks into the pool, she sees herself. She sees an individual, distinct person; she does not see Adam. Adam, then, is using the past to justify he and Eve being two parts of the same

whole in the present. His conclusion from this deduction is that now they will find an “individual solace,” or peaceful happiness. There will be no debate or dissent in this Eden, since Adam and Eve are actually the same person. In *Fables of Responsibility*, Thomas Keenan claims that, “When society cannot be totalized, when it has no foundation and no given order or principle capable of comprehending or organizing it as a totality, then there is politics” (174). In Eden’s hierarchy, there is an alleged foundation, even though that foundation will soon be violated by sin. Eve’s “foundation” as a self-aware human subject, capable of recognizing an image of herself and identifying it as an image of herself has been violated by Adam’s insistence that she only find herself in him. The possibility of a governing principle operating behind the actualization of human existence has been denied, refused. Eve is now perceived as merely a function of Adam, and thus she has been thrust into the maelstrom of politics even while living under the guise of isolated bliss and pleasure.

This model is decidedly *not* what Milton had in mind when he said in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* that marriage is a “meet and happy conversation.” Certainly, marriage should provide solace and intimacy, according to Milton, but in the model he proposes in *Doctrine and Discipline*, the spouse is intended to be “...an intimate and speaking help, a ready and reviving associate” (189). In other words, both parties in the marriage are intended to have each their own voice; they are both intended to be *speaking* parties. In the monarchical presentation of Eden, though, the ones doing the meaningful speaking are Adam and the unnamed “voice.” The voice is key because, in part, it promises to free Eve from the danger of images. Adam is key because he has been

assigned the trait of wisdom. Since Eve cannot be subjected to images or shadows anymore and already has someone wiser than her to make up for the fact that she is supposedly *not* wise, there is no room for her to govern herself. Self-government could lead to unwise decisions, as well as to the influential deception of images and shadows.

In Book 9, the turn to tragedy that Milton notes in the beginning of the book becomes coupled with an anxiety of the retaining of the “state” (9.958) of marriage, as Adam designates it. The state, as we have seen up to this point, has been set up as a monarchical and hierarchical state. In the conversation leading up to Adam’s decision to follow Eve in eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the language again reminds a close reader of the language of government. However, this language comparing the marriage society to the society of a monarchical government is also bound by a fear of losing one’s essence in the potential rupturing of the state. It is in this fear, I claim, that the state makes a shift from a monarchical structure to the society of a commonwealth. It also signals, crucially, a shift in the locus of meaning. Before, the words were indisputable and objectively ordered. There was no room for the subject to read the words differently than they might be intended to be read, because the language of Eden’s monarchy was absolute and beyond the possibility of questioning. The presence of sin against God, though, also signals a break in the meaning of words. Their entire foundation is being thrown in doubt. When Eve makes the choice to eat and Adam follows her, he uses the same language that he used before, telling her that she is literally a part of him. The difference here is that Adam is reading the words differently, in part

because he has to retain himself, and in part because Eve has already exercised her own reason by *choosing* to eat of the tree. Adam tells Eve: "...for what thou art is mine;/ Our state cannot be severed, we are one,/ One flesh; to lose thee were to lose my self" (*PL* 9.957-59). This passage serves to illuminate the tension of retaining a semblance of order in the face of a looming catastrophe: Adam must make a choice between the fear of being lost by God and his devotion to Eve which has come to define his very essence. As a result, in this struggle that Adam voices, one can see his autonomy as a person at stake. He does not identify himself as merely his own self, isolated from Eve, but he is bound to her, even in the event of death. This moment, for Milton, figures itself as a place in which one body is subsumed as a part of another body and the choices that one individual makes has ramifications for the rest of the subjects who inhabit this state. This case was true before, because Adam and Eve's monarchical government operated on the principle that they were two parts of the same whole. In this case, however, Adam and Eve's unity comes about because Eve has made an anti-monarchical decision, and Adam feels the need to follow her down this anti-monarchical path so that he can retain himself.

Prior to this point, the fact that Adam and Eve are seen to be one has meant that they are both bound to make the same decisions, and the wisdom of those decisions has been grounded in Adam and not Eve. Adam is wise and exceeds Eve because she is beautiful, and not necessarily wise. Milton, however, needs the threat of annihilation in order for this unity to take on a different configuration. In this sense, Milton's notion of a state of togetherness is paradoxical; things can only be one when the possibility of a breaking up of this one presents itself by way of one of the subjects making a decision

that goes against the rules of the monarchy. In the monarchy, Eve cannot choose because she is Adam's subject. Now, Eve is making a choice, and Adam's position as her sovereign is threatened. Thus, the true decision that Adam makes when he chooses to eat is not simply to eat, but rather, it is the decision to retain his "self" despite the prospect of death that overshadows it. In choosing to retain himself as a body, Adam has to recognize that Eve can be as rational as he can be. That is to say, Eve can exercise her reason by her freedom to choose. By choosing—that is, by reasoning—Eve has reconfigured not only the nature of the state, but she has done so by re-reading the language of the monarchical state and casting aside the absoluteness of the words "subjection" and "absolute rule." She has the capacity to make her own choices, regardless of what the language of the monarchy might command her to do.

When Eve first encounters the serpent in Book 9, we see a crucial dynamic that plays out between eloquence and autonomy. Eve's first words to the serpent are written in the form of a perfect fourteen-line sonnet. Moreover, Milton tells us that, "Into the heart of Eve [the serpent's] words made way" (9.550). In essence, Satan's words are persuasive to Eve because they appeal to her heart; they appeal to something inside of her, not to her position in Eden's hierarchical state. The meaning of the words, then, we can say, does not lie solely in the words themselves, but in the way that Eve receives the words. In addition, Eve's reception of the words in her heart allows her to speak meaningful words of her own, first in the form of a sonnet. Because the serpent appeals to her heart, Eve *chooses* to hear him: "Say, for such wonder claims attention due" (9.566).

After Eve enacts her own form of eloquence and autonomy in choosing to hold a rhetorical conversation with the serpent, she tells him:

But of this tree we may not taste nor touch;
God so commanded, and left that command
Sole daughter of his voice; the rest, we live
Law to our selves, our reason is our law. (9.651-54)

Eve is allowed to tell the serpent that she can live the law to herself because “reason” is her law. “Reason,” of course, to Milton, is choice, and might also be a way of living the law to one’s self. Different people are going to have different selves—even if their selves are bound up in other people’s selves—and thus, different people will have to reason the law out differently. In the model that Eve proposes here, the command of God is not absolute. It is the “daughter” of God’s voice, and so it has to be separate from God’s voice. Since it is literally separate from God, Eve has to choose on her own. Thus, the true meaning of the command is not in the words themselves. It is in the way that Eve interprets the words, and thus, the meaning lies inside of Eve. Joan S. Bennett says that, “...the law allows God, regardless of angelic or human sin, to retain his divine freedom ultimately to do good. Sinful creatures, however, suffer under the law” (*Reviving Liberty* 73). In reading this exchange between Eve and the serpent, though, sinful creatures do not “suffer” under the law so much as they *make* the law. If reason is law, then the law allows people to think things out on their own. The law is that condition that allows people to decide for themselves what God’s command actually means and entails, regardless of whatever suffering the law might bring about.

I have noted in the Introduction to this thesis that in Book 12, when Michael is speaking to Adam while Eve is presumably sleeping, he says to:

[...] only add

Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,

Add virtue, patience, temperance, add love,

By name to come called Charity, the soul

Of all the rest... (12.581-85)

Charity, in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, is the means by which different people are allowed to interpret Christ's words in different ways. Here, charity is the vehicle by which Adam and Eve will "...possess/ A paradise within thee, happier far" (12.586-87). Michael's mandate to charity sounds strangely similar to Eve's own declaration prior to her taking of the fruit that "our reason is our law." Eve's reason is something that exists within her, in that it allows her to interpret the law for herself, in much the same way that charity is something that exists within Adam and Eve and allows them to possess that inner paradise. The tricky thing with charity—and with reason—is that, if it allows for a difference of choice for different people, then it eradicates any notion of certainty as to which choices are the right ones and which choices are the wrong ones. Liberty, then, includes—and might be defined by—the capacity to make an autonomous decision that could lead to chaos and exile. There can be no way to civilize the freedom to choose, because different people will always make different choices. Thus, we can always make new choices, or choices that will cast the world in a new light. We cannot, however, always make choices that will maintain or create a utopia, because the freedom to choose

eradicates the certainty that we will inevitably make the right choice, or the wrong choice. In addition, we cannot even say for certain which choices are the right ones and which choices are the wrong ones. Despite the fact that Adam and Eve's choice to eat of the Tree of Knowledge is an act of "disobedience," it results in Adam and Eve being promised a "...paradise within [them], happier far." There is no way, then, to say that Adam and Eve made the *wrong* decision by eating of the Tree, since it carried for them both positive *and* negative consequences. Teskey claims that, "...what God wills, fatally, is the restoration of human freedom. [...] History may be fate for him. For us, it is necessity and chance and, just possibly, freedom" (*Delirious* 106). Adam and Eve's act of divine disobedience is certainly fatal, but its byproduct of freedom comes about by the practice of charity, which allows both Adam and Eve to re-read the language of their state together. The meaning, like charity, lies within them, rather than in the absoluteness of the language of the law.

When one speaks of the order of a state being marked by its status as one and unified, the temptation is to conceive of this oneness as objective. If everything is brought into the same space and made one, it would seem logical to think that this "unity" brings about a state without difference, because things that are different are consumed in the greater body and subject themselves to a universal law that makes everything work in unison, without any disruption. For Adam, though, in the face of the impending Fall, the objective order of things suddenly is called into question. Prior to Book 9, as we have seen, the reader has been led to believe that the marriage state is characterized by power and submission. This kind of relationship leaves little room for subjective action within

the society. Both Adam and Eve are present to perform their respective roles, and their difference from one another teases itself out in the form of a hierarchy. In the moments following Eve's tasting of the fruit and preceding Adam's eating of it, however, we see another dynamic at work, one which causes the members of this state to question what it is that makes the state function. The state is still marked by difference in togetherness, as it was prior to Eve's temptation by the serpent. Now, though, the difference lies in the way that different people are allowed to choose, precisely because the reason of the law dictates to Eve that people have to decide for themselves what it is that the law commands.

Adam tells Eve, "For what thou art is mine" (9.957). It would seem initially that he is still asserting some kind of direct sovereignty over her. However, the passage does not say that Eve is directly his. He does not say, "*Thou* art mine," but rather, that what she *is* is his. He is speaking here to Eve's essence, or that which makes Eve a human being. If he is saying that Eve's essence is his, he is saying that the essence that makes Eve is the same essence that makes him. Adam is admitting that they share something similar. He claims prior to this statement that he senses "The bond of nature draw me to my own" (9.956). Adam is claiming that, in this moment of crisis, he is beginning to understand the components that let him be a human being. It speaks volumes that Adam admits that the prospect of annihilation is the event that begins to summon him to himself. If he is only now being "drawn" to his own nature, then one would think that prior to this moment he has been separate from his own nature; that is to say, he has been separate from himself.

The logical question one would think to ask in this instance is what it is that gives Adam a “self.” It seems absurd to think that Adam would need to have his self given to him by something or someone else. Adam formulates the answer to this question in terms of loss: “to lose thee were to lose my self” (9.959). Adam is essentially claiming that Eve is his “self.” This, of course, is not the first place that Milton has presented Adam in such a light. In Book 8, Adam claims, “I now see/ Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, myself/ Before me: woman is her name, of man/ Extracted” (8.494-97). Here, immediately following Eve’s creation, Adam recognizes that he is looking at a remnant of himself. Again, though, this other self that he is looking at is a self that is not entirely one with him. It is a waste, something which has been extracted from his body. It is ironic, then, that Adam would express fear in Book 9 of losing himself if he lost Eve because, in a way, he has already lost her, as he has admitted before. After God “extracts” Eve from his own body, Eve is literally not a part of Adam anymore, even though she is admittedly his own standing in front of him. The difference between Adam’s amazement at this rupture in Book 8 and his recognition of a possible rupture in Book 9 is that in Book 9, the potential of a break forces Adam into making a decision. The circumstance he is presented with forces him to reconfigure the language of the bond. He is made to reinterpret what it means to say that Eve might be extracted from him. Instead of reading the language of the rupture literally, Adam begins to read it metaphorically of his own accord. The crisis of a potential break from Eve allows him to reinterpret what it means to be bound to Eve. In a sense, the meaning of the word “extraction” has changed for him

from the literal to the metaphorical. The meaning of “extraction” lies in the way that he reads it, not in the literal definition of the word anymore.

When Adam finally claims, after much agonizing over the threat of annihilation should he choose to follow Eve, that “I with thee have fixed my lot” (9.952), he does so by prefacing this remark with the word “however.” He has, after deliberation with himself, made the decision that he cannot be separated from Eve and still expect to retain the nature which he is now beginning to feel within him. Thus, what Adam chooses is not simply to eat of the tree, but to remain linked with Eve. It is crucial that the reason he makes this decision to retain the state is because it “cannot be severed” (9.958). Eve has already been literally “severed” from him when her body was created out of his own. Here, however, Adam sees that out of this initial severing a “state” has come to take its place, one that Adam feels he must not lose. His decision to retain this state can only occur when the possibility exists that it might tear itself apart at the seams if he does not make an effort to maintain the unity that has been formed out of the original, literal tearing apart of his own body. The intangible state, then, which comes to stand in for the uniformity of Adam’s one body prior to Eve’s creation, serves as proof that Adam has come to reinterpret the words so as to make an image out of them, an image that both sets up the state as a body and which requires a *choice* on his part in order to preserve. In this way, Adam’s making of an image out of the crisis forces him to exercise his own reason—or choice—in order to preserve that image of the body. Whereas before, images and “shadows” were extinguished by the promise of “solace” and peace, they now

become crucial players in Adam's attempt to preserve both himself and the state which he inhabits with Eve.

Of course, the state that existed in Eden prior to this moment of crisis was one that no one really wanted to sever either. In that state, though, the bond could *not* be severed at all, because the language of necessity and hierarchy made that apparently impossible. In Book 9, the words being used to describe the social state Adam and Eve inhabit are still fairly similar to the ones used in Book 4—aside from the fact that neither Adam nor Eve is using the language of monarchy to justify their state together now. It is important to emphasize, however, that Adam's placing his subjectivity in a place literally outside of his own body and in the hands of his other self—Eve—does not signify a stasis in the functions of this state. His recognition of the fact that he must be bound within his freedom of choice to that person who possesses the same essence as he possesses is only the beginning of the trials that accompany a linking of one's fate to another in an interaction of wills. Book 9 ends with Adam and Eve arguing over responsibility for the action of taking the fruit: "Thus they in mutual accusation spent/ The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,/ And of their vain contest appeared no end" (9.1187-89).

Whatever this match represents for Milton, it is decidedly *not* the sort of fruitful conversation that Milton endorses in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. This passage gives evidence to the fact that the resolve to bind one's self to another does not necessarily result in a state devoid of strife. Rather, this condition of seemingly endless quarreling serves as an indication of the grave reality that a society—whether it be the marriage society or the democratic society which the state of marriage represents—must

always function on the possibility that it will provoke a clash between subjects. This is where Milton begins to prefigure thinkers like Chantal Mouffe: “In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism” (*Democratic Paradox* 34). If subjects within a state never conflict with one another, then it must be questioned whether they are really subjects, or whether they are merely machines programmed to respond to each other in ways that are always agreeable.

Thus, the decision that Adam makes to let Eve decide *for* him to eat the fruit (as he does not want to lose her *or* her essence which gives him life as well) is one that gains its significance by the circumstance of the threat of annihilation that it embodies. It also opens up the possibility for more struggle. The state that Milton, through Adam, describes, then, is one that depends upon constant friction and quarrel. This tension—in which the stakes of the retaining of Eden must be played out heavily—is one that makes the democratic state democratic. It involves an interaction that is so intense that it binds them inextricably, and it also illuminates their own decisions as true decisions, in that they play themselves out with the fate of Eden hanging in the balance.

We have seen in this chapter an apparent link play itself out between the ideas Milton espouses in his poetry and the ideas he espouses in his prose. In the model I have put forward in this chapter, the theories of liberty and dissent that have characterized Milton’s prose become more eloquently revealed by way of poetry—or rather, by way of his employing the use of tropes and images, which the unidentified voice tells Eve that it

comes to rescue her from. I close this chapter by choosing to look at the poem's initial invocation, as it reveals the revolutionary aspect of dissent and choice that poetry comes to play for the late Milton. Milton's address to the muse to "sing" (1.6) is one that is familiar to us. In the *Nativity Ode*, the divine order is characterized by singing, and in *Lycidas*, the deceased was celebrated during his life by the songs of other people. Milton's epic song here, however, is one that is both written *and* spoken. His song "...intends to soar/ Above the Aonian mount, while its pursues/ Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.14-16). Milton's poem is not only going to surpass all other poems; it is also going to surpass all other written prose. Milton's appeal to prose writing is key, especially when we consider that Milton has spent the past thirty years of his life writing prose himself—prose that has been characterized by its appeal to "reviving liberty" and to the flexibility of a print culture. In short, Milton is going to take what he sees as the most effective aspects of prose writing and fuse them to the most effective aspects of poetry. The result of this fusion will be a "great argument" (1.24) that "...assert[s] eternal providence" (1.25). To run the risk of being reductive, we can say that prose writing—as facilitated by the growing public sphere of the late seventeenth century—is marked by argument and dissent, and poetry is marked by tropes and images. For Milton to marry the two is to seek those "things unattempted" and to produce an epic that finds its effectiveness by articulating terms of dissent and political choice through the extended use of poetic devices. Thus, the mandate to autonomy is revealed by the flexibility of poetic language, which both reveals choice and demands choice from the reader.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: THE COST OF READING LIBERALLY

“‘To the pure all things are pure’; not only meats and drinks, but all kind of knowledge, whether of good or evil: the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequently the books, if the will and conscience be not defiled.”

—John Milton (*Areopagitica*)

In 1667, Thomas Sprat published his *History of the Royal Society*, a discourse on the methods of practicing good science in the wake of a scientific revolution of sorts in Restoration-era England. While it may be mere coincidence that Sprat publishes his treatise during the same year as the publication of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*, his theories concerning the scientific method provide a useful lens through which we might see the tensions between Milton’s charitable modernity—which is based on the way that we read words and images—and a scientific modernity which would be more fully developed in the eighteenth century. Milton’s modernity is one that is based on the cultivating of the intellect as the certainty of meaning is thrown into doubt. Reinhart Koselleck, on the other hand, proposes a kind of modernity that did not become clear until *after* Milton: “The beginning of modernity (*Neuzeit*), with all the difficulties that arise out of this concept, was manifested for the first time in the Enlightenment, which had identified itself as the standard bearer of a new time (*neue Zeit*)” (160). Koselleck also describes modernity in terms of a “future in which new things would continue to come about” (165). For thinkers like Sprat, these “new things” took the form of scientific discovery, but for Milton, as we have seen in *Paradise Lost*, nothing new can come about unless the stability both of meaning and of the structure of government is disintegrating by the necessity of debate and dissent. As I conclude this thesis, I intend to show how

Milton's conception of meaning, rather than being merely scientific and based upon hard facts (as thinkers like Sprat and Hobbes would claim), is founded upon the recognition that there are no such things as hard, indisputable facts, because people are different from one another. This difference, for Milton, is legitimized in the freedom of interpreting words, be they written or spoken, as opposed to Sprat, who claims that words are a hindrance to enlightenment.

Sprat claims that the Royal Society's aim is "...to put a mark on the Errors, which have been strengthened by long prescription" (177). In quantifying human knowledge, errors should be eliminated, and the way that we eliminate errors is by practicing good science, which is formulaic and rule-based. For Sprat, nothing new can be seen or understood until things like words—which can be deceptive—are pruned from our understanding so that we think perfectly in a way that transcends the use of words. Essentially, what Sprat is claiming is that good knowledge operates on an upward scale of progression. By understanding new concepts, we can create a new and better world by our scientific discoveries, ever increasing toward that higher goal which is being constantly anticipated. That higher goal is within grasp as long as we follow the rules and put to rest the errors of tradition or "prescription," which have been accepted for too long. Sprat's method of achieving a new kind of scientific enlightenment, comes at a cost, though. He writes that those in the Royal Society "...have attempted, to free it from the Artifice, and Humors, and Passions of Sects; to render it an Instrument, whereby Mankind may obtain a dominion over *Things*, and not onely over one anothers *Judgements*" (178). If we are to be enlightened, according to Sprat, we have to be rid of

“artifice,” and by being rid of artifice, our attention will be drawn to material objects rather than on abstract theories that have no grounding in the real world. Sprat needs physical tools, then, which enhance the scientific project and which can contribute to our attempt to perfect a newly discovered world of reason and formulas.

If artifice is a danger and a hindrance, though, there is little room for the late Milton’s mode of thought in Sprat’s discourse of a modern and perfectible science. It is certainly true that artifice is not direct in its communication of meaning. Artifice adds another layer to comprehension of meaning, because rather than directly accessing the message that one might be trying to communicate to us, we are forced to interpret the metaphors and the images which artifice uses. The added layer of interpretation that comes with artifice would lead to deception and absurdity for Sprat—as well as for Hobbes, as we have seen earlier. For the Milton of *Paradise Lost*, images and artifice might lead to deception as well, but I claim that it also leads to the possibility of liberty, and even hope. This is where Milton’s modernity differs from the modernity of people like Sprat. Sprat’s “new world” is reasonable and objective. Milton’s “new world” is one that requires the possibility of sin, and therefore the possibility of error too. Milton also subscribes to reason, but as we have seen, his reason is founded in the capacity to make choices. If we are allowed to make choices by our capacity to be reasonable, then we are also allowed to make choices that might be *unreasonable*, in that they can lead us to commit sins. Milton’s idea of reason, then, has the inescapability of error literally written into its definition. In Book 11 of *Paradise Lost*, Michael tells Adam that the inevitability of images lead to vice:

Their maker's image, answered Michael, then
Forsook them, when themselves they vilified
To serve ungoverned appetite, and took
His image whom they served, a brutish vice,
Inductive mainly to the sin of Eve. (11.515-19)

If we are not taking God's image, according to Michael, we will be taking the image of another, and this is the condition of vice. Admittedly, we lose our state of perfection in this condition of adhering to images. This is the cost of choosing, though, and while it might be vice, it is also the enacting of Miltonic reason. Thus, we can *choose* to allow our perfection to disintegrate. For Sprat, this is not a good thing. For Milton, it is the condition for effective citizenship in a free state.

Moreover, according to Michael, "...true liberty/ Is lost" (12.83-84). Reading the Fall as a loss of liberty by the succumbing to the temptation of images and "shadows" (to use the language of the voice that speaks to Eve in her coming to consciousness in Book 4) would be to read Milton as an orthodox Christian, as readers of Milton like C.S. Lewis and Stanley Fish have done persuasively. We can read Michael's statement in another way, though, by looking at one line alone: "Since thy original lapse, true liberty" (12.83). If we read the one line alone, the "original lapse" *is* "true liberty." Milton allows for us to read Michael's claim in this way by wording the clause so ambiguously. Michael's line becomes an example of artifice and Miltonic reason in its own right. Like artifice, it requires an act of interpretation on the part of the reader; like reason, it allows the reader to intelligently *choose* how to read the statement. Likewise, the ambiguity of the wording

allows different readers to argue and debate over the meaning of the line, because it is decidedly *not* absolute. Sprat and Hobbes would argue that the ambiguity of a passage like this lies outside the realm of reason, because it can cause us to read erroneously and therefore deceive ourselves. Certainly, if taken far enough, reading liberally like this can lead one to arrive at a conclusion that might be incongruent with the overall message of a text, and it might lead one to deceive one's self. This possibility of incongruence in reading, however, is the precondition for being a citizen in Milton's model of reason. In order for a commonwealth to function, different people need to be allowed to think and act differently, even if some people might succumb to vice instead of obedience. Perhaps this is the cost of reading liberally. People might choose to read unreasonably, but in order for the cultivating of a literate citizenship, the option of irrationality and error should not be crushed, because the possibility of error is the very precondition for a modern democracy.

One might question what it is that we gain by looking at Milton as a modern poet. I claim that we might not literally *gain* anything, but we will understand better what it means to be a conscientious member of a modern democracy. As I have mentioned elsewhere, Milton claims in *Areopagitica* that, "...how much we thus expel of sin, so much we expel of virtue" (253). Liberal democracy has its grounding in the inextinguishable nature of the human capacity to interpret, and sometimes this mandate to interpret can lead to disorder and chaos. A common conception is that the primary advantage of liberal democracy is that it is a cure for disorder, because it gives the state a structure. Debate is the precursor to consensus and agreement, and if people are still

divided after a consensus has been reached, then the health of that democracy is in jeopardy. By reading the late Milton as an adherent to a democratic and charitable modernity, however, we see that perpetual debate is a necessity. If Milton thinks that our reason lies in our capacity to choose, then different people will always be making different choices that act in contradiction to one another. Our perfection has already disintegrated in the wake of the Fall, but what we have left after the Fall is charity, a device that exists within the individual and not in the structure of the state. Charity becomes the antidote to consensus, because it relies upon people's fundamental, inner difference from one another, and if charity is the ideal toward which we should strive—as Michael seems to indicate at the end of Book 12—then there is no gradual progression upward to objective perfection, as thinkers like Sprat would have us believe. If we are all perfect, then we are all perfect according to a scientific, error-free formula. We are, in other words, all the same. In a literate democracy, the only foundation is the foundation of debate and choice.

Moreover, Milton's democratic model, which is born out of a modern conception of the disintegration of human perfection, becomes grounded in the notion of artifice—that is to say, it becomes grounded in the aesthetic. Milton's brand of aesthetic representation is founded in the writing of literature and, as I have discussed in this thesis, in the literary tropes of poetry. Poetry becomes a means by which the foundational objectivity of meaning is called into question and is always open to debate. Thomas Keenan says that, "The experience of literature, ethics, and politics, such as it is [...] emerges only in the withdrawal of these foundations" (*Fables* 3). For Milton, the writing

of poetry becomes an occasion to look at reading in such a way that the foundations are questioned by our very right to read and interpret poetic images in different ways. Reading is where the stakes of modernity are played out. Since things are uncertain and open to questioning, we can exercise our own subjectivity in how we choose to look at poetic tropes and images. Often this reading (whether it be the reading of Christ's prohibition against divorce, Eve's reading of her reflection in the pond, or Milton's reading of "woe" as he sees it inscribed on Camus' mantle in *Lycidas*) will lead different people to see things differently, but for Milton, this is not a problem to be remedied. It is the very condition of reading, and it is likewise the condition of democracy. In this way, seeing Milton's modernity as a charitable modernity can help us also to see that literacy and reading contribute to life in a functional democracy. We can all read in different ways, and we can all think in different ways. This difference is not something that should be eradicated in a democracy, because the main concern, in addition to the protecting of people's physical well-being, should be the cultivating of people's minds. In a literate democracy, people are not coerced into receiving a message and agreeing with it. Rather, they are allowed to receive messages and critique them, such that the critique itself becomes its own end. Literacy is not only the receiving of a message by way of a text; it is also the critiquing of it. Once democracy has created a society in which everyone agrees, it can no longer be called a democracy because there is no longer any such thing as difference. Difference, as Keenan suggests, should be the only foundation of democracy

Perhaps we need to think of democracy not in terms of how successfully it eradicates problems, but in terms of how open it is to differences between subjects. Milton's charitable modernity becomes a model by which the commonwealth is not an unshakable structure, but rather, is a body made up of many bodies, all of whom think differently and all of whom perform different actions. When we think of democracy in these terms, then people are allowed to become subjects and citizens by their right to question. The ideal is no longer mere objective unity, which would require that people give up their right to constantly question and arrive at different conclusions. The only requirement for a modern democracy is that people be allowed to exercise charity, which "...enjoins no new morality" (*Doctrine and Discipline* 216) except that people be acknowledged the right to critique on their own, cultivating their own capacities to reason and interpret fruitfully and with thoughtful dissent.

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