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English/Mathematics

Milton and the Disintegration of the Public Sphere

From Professor James Lee's ENG 314 Milton Seminar

After taking both Humanities 101 and Critical Theory, I've been preoccupied with the question first articulated by Plato: What is the role of the poet in civil society? Though I certainly don't agree with him, I've been trying to answer this for myself ever since. As a major in the Humanities, what is my role as I prepare to enter the post-collegiate world? In this paired down version of my final paper for the Milton Seminar, I examine the role of writing and the poet in creating knowledge through an analysis of Milton's history of the public sphere. In the spirit of *Areopagitica*, I hope that my participation in the Humanities symposium will allow me to be "open to refutation," so that my peers' criticism or approval can help us become "champions of truth" in coming up with an answer to Plato's question. Thank you for your consideration.

As a writer, John Milton was preoccupied with the regulation of literature. From the “troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing” he addresses in his preface to *Paradise Lost*, to his political pamphlet on the Licensing Order of 1643, *Areopagitica*, Milton advocates against the regulation of literature that comes from both literary customs and from the state. Of equal importance to his argument on censorship is the tension he identifies between public and private. Although the opposition is not couched in these terms—for the rhetoric of the public sphere, as identified by Jurgen Habermas, only emerges in the mid-eighteenth century—Milton offers a distinctly different relationship between the two terms. If we counterpose the Miltonic and Habermassian public spheres, we can see that Habermas’ spatial notion of a public is an insufficient model of a truly democratic social sphere. Instead, we must also incorporate Milton’s notion of a public formed by writing to closer approximate the unmediated knowledge acquisition present in pre-fallen Eden.

Jurgen Habermas’ 1962 work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, lays the foundation for public sphere theory. Within his work, Habermas traces the origins of the public sphere as it emanated from England and spread to the rest of the continent in order to “put the state in touch with the needs of society” (Habermas 30-31). The new functional role of the public then led to a formational shift, dislocating social discourse from the peripheral, aristocratic social spaces to the centrally located “town,” which created a “principally inclusive” public sphere” (31, 37). Habermas identifies the 1700s as the beginnings of an unprecedented relationship between public authority and private individuals as a result of this formational and functional shift, but Milton presents the tension between public and private much earlier in his treatise, *Areopagitica*.

Like Habermas, Milton identifies a clear disparity between private individuals and public authority, but he phrases the tension in different terms—common and courts¹. The function of the courts, as Milton describes, is to regulate knowledge within the community, so that “there may be else no mean mistakes in the censure of what is passable or not” (734). Here, Milton uses “mean” to signify both “common to two or more persons” as well as “of low social status,” and by entertaining both the communal and class-based definitions, he identifies a society in which an inept lower class plays no role in knowledge regulation (“Mean,” OED definition). Instead, knowledge is formed by the court’s licensors and trickles downward in taproot fashion to the rest of English society. Within this system, the lower class is portrayed as in “such a sick and weak state of faith and discretion as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licensor” (737). Although the licensor—here portrayed as a doctor—has good intentions, his oral remedy literally suppresses patient’s voice. Though Milton identifies a simultaneously reliant and repressive relationship between the courts and the commons, Milton creates a notion of “public” that bridges the two sides of English society, which parallels Habermas’ triadization of the public sphere presented 300 years later.

Although they have similar notions of the emergence of the public sphere, Milton and Habermas disagree about its function. Whereas Habermas saw the public sphere as a spatial shift from periphery to center, Milton defines an abstract notion of the public free from temporal and spatial relationships, which allows for an active role in knowledge production:

Christ urged it as wherewith to justify himself that he preached in public; yet writing is more public than preaching; and more easy to refutation if need be, there being so many

¹ Milton describes the “studious, learned, and judicious” court licensor as a man “above the common measure” (*Areopagitica* 734). Negatively defining this relationship, Milton invites the reader to consider each side in opposition.

whose business and profession merely it is to be the champions of truth; which if they neglect what can be imputed but their sloth or inability? (741)

Within this sentence, Milton uses two completely different notions of public. By saying Christ “preached in public”, he identifies what Michael Warner calls a public “bounded by the event or by the shared physical space,” but this notion is overshadowed by the public formed through writing that “comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (Warner 50). It is this second sense of the public with which the rest of this essay concerns itself.

The public constituted through writing has several distinct advantages over the public constituted through a spatial context. Written publics determine members “through discourse rather than through an external framework,” so the once-needed taproot structure of the public sphere dissipates, giving way to a rhizomatic notion of public as a relationship among strangers (52). The written public, then, no longer needs to act as a mediator between private individual and public authority. Instead, the “principally inclusive” public serves to flatten distinctions between the two and, hence, eliminates notions of class altogether. Written as a speech but distributed as a pamphlet, *Areopagitica* embodies this relationship. As opposed to a speech delivered to a passive audience, the pamphlet requires readers to become “champions of the truth” because his words are “more easy to refutation.” This active nature, coupled with such a low barrier to entry, allows the public to become rhizomatic and proliferative, since “any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other,” which stands directly in contrast to the tap root, which “plots a point” and “fixes an order” (Deleuze 7). Milton’s conception of the rhizomatic, written public uproots the previous system that kept separate the roles of the licensing and lower classes.

Thus far, we have shown that Milton, in much the same way as Habermas, identifies a marked distinction between private individual and public authority, but Milton’s articulation differs from Habermas’ insofar as creates an abstract republic of writing, independent of the

spatial restriction of Habermas'. Leaving the argument here, though, would not faithfully represent Milton's notion of the public. Not only does Milton identify a rhizomatic public sphere, but by doing so, he also blurs the distinction between common and court, thereby lessening the need for separate social spheres.

After he establishes that a public is constituted through writing, Milton decries the notion of a private self because it contributes nothing to the community. Milton begins his attack by saying "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue... that never sallies out and sees her adversary" (Areopagitica 728). Given Milton's preoccupation with refutation, and the structural similarity of "praise" to "appraise," he not only disparages the idea of a private self, but also clues us in to why. Milton cannot praise the "unbreathed" and "unexercised" virtue because it remains in the realm of the private self, and as such, it is not "open to refutation." Thus, the licensing act is only an instantiation of the much larger problem of self-censorship. Within the context of the licensing system, Milton places the blame of censorship on licensors who were "made to judge to sit upon the birth or death of books" (734). Within the new context that he describes, however, Milton shifts the blame to the individual, whose "unbreathed" thought is lifeless. Books, however, are not:

For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. (720)

In contrast to the "unbreathed" virtue, a book's "potency of life" creates an "active" soul, and Milton, by changing the copula in both tense and plurality, makes this distinction clear. Prior to writing, the soul "was," but precisely at the moment of literary creation, books take on an "extraction of that living intellect" and become their own "progeny," that is, the soul is reborn in multiple. Since Milton points to books as the site of the soul, he can then make the claim that "as

good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image: but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself (720). Although this seems like an outlandish claim, the passage firmly cements Milton's position that the public individual is the only individual of worth to the community. The private man is only "reasonable," whereas the public man, who is made manifest through literature, embodies reason, and as such he becomes the fundamental source of knowledge within the community.

While in *Areopagitica* Milton concerns himself with the development of the public individual through writing, he stresses what this conception of public implies for the entire community in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Within this text, Milton claims, using a synecdochic relationship between the private man and the commonwealth as whole, that it is a "law of nature" that a "private man may lawfully defend himself," and when we carry this logic to its extreme, "justice done upon a tyrant is no more but the necessary self defense of a whole commonwealth" (*Tenure* 778). Milton, just as he did when discussing writing in *Areopagitica*, transitions from the singular man to the plural commonwealth. This time, however, the moment of transition from singular to plural is not within the context of writing. Rather, the switch occurs when justice is enacted upon the king. Not only does the structural relationship entail a multiplication of the individual at the moment of action, but it also carries over to the flattening of the divide between common and courts through his use of the golden ratio. Milton reasons that if "one wicked action" from the king warrants the people to "restrain him," then "forty times as many tyrannies" will warrant further restraint by the people until "the restraint becomes total" (778). Milton claims that, by setting up this proportional relationship, which holds for "justice and morality as well as of arithmetic," we can "out of three terms... certainly and unavoidably bring out the fourth," and by doing so, he creates an algebraic relationship solved via a chiasmic

process² (778). This chiasmic relationship implies a balancing of king and constituents, for the ordering of the pair is reversed on each side of the chiasmus, and the king must derive his value from the commoners and vice versa. Thus, Milton describes a situation in which the king and the commoners are equally privileged, creating a socially flattened public in which the king and the common are equally privileged, thereby eliminating the need for the public to serve as mediator between the two. Instead, Milton creates a commonwealth that requires no mediation, that is, a commonwealth that is entirely public.

Although we have established that Milton seeks to create an entirely public commonwealth, if we were to claim that this envisioned public is an historical reality, we cannot ignore the inaccuracy that such a reading would suggest. Milton is writing within an English commonwealth that maintains a clear division between the court and the commonwealth, and even in his poetry, this divide is clearly evident. After the fall, for example, Adam and Eve are “loath,” discount’ nanc’t,” and “discompos’d” as they realize their nudity belongs to the private sphere (*Paradise Lost* 10.109-110). What Milton offers, then, is not a description of the public sphere as it at his time of writing; rather, just as Habermas looks backward to identify the origin of his public sphere, Milton offers a look back to identify the disintegration of his. As he writes in *Areopagitica*, “those books, and those in great abundance which are likeliest to taint both life and doctrine, cannot be suppressed without the fall of learning” (*Areopagitica* 730). The fall, then, marks the beginning of the self-censorship that plagues Milton’s English commonwealth. By analyzing the relationship between Milton’s ideal pre-fallen public, and his lived experience in the post-fallen one, we see that *Paradise Lost* recounts the fall of the public sphere.

² Using a Euclidian method to solve the relationship Milton describes requires that we begin with three known quantities—a single transgression, the people’s reaction to it, and the king’s repeated transgressions—and solve for the fourth by constructing a chiasmic relationship. That is, the king’s many transgressions are to the people’s single reaction as the king’s single transgression is to the reaction to multiple transgressions.

When describing the relationship between upper and lower classes, Milton frequently uses the word “tyranny.” For example, Milton begins with *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* by saying “if men within themselves would be governed by reason” and not succumb to the “double tyranny” of “custom” and “blind affections,” then they would “discern better what it is to favor and uphold the tyrant of a nation” (*Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* 750). The two forms of governance introduced here—the self governance of the individual and the king’s “tyranny of custom”—manifest themselves within *Paradise Lost*, but we only see evidence of the latter in a post fallen context. The first use of tyranny comes from post-fallen Satan as he curses God, “our grand foe”, whose “sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heav’n” (1.120-122). Milton associates the fall with an entrance into a society that is necessarily split from the ruler—that is, God—that controls it. Later, as the fallen angels assemble in Pandemonium, Moloch suggests to the crowd that they should rise up in arms against God, who has banished them to the “Prison of his Tyranny” (2.59). His speech, however, goes unacknowledged, as Belial immediately succeeds him. In effect, Moloch’s speech does absolutely nothing. Belial’s speech, too, is “false and hollow” and contains no semblance of argument. As Stanley Fish explains, “Belial’s appeal is a skillful union of logical machinery... and rhetorical insinuation” but in getting caught up within the language “we forget the entire counsel is baseless” (Fish 15-16). Within the spoken public of post-fallen hell, the angels accomplish nothing. There is no refutation of ideas, as the angels simply roar in approval of the most recent idea. Reason does not govern their decision, but rather, as passive recipients of knowledge, words alone dictate their actions.

The fallen angels of Pandemonium stand in stark contrast to Adam and Eve pre fall. Prior to the fall, the humans’ knowledge comes from Adam’s conversation with Raphael, who is commanded by God to speak to them “as friend with friend” (5.229). Although they inhabit different spiritual planes, God defines a parallel relationship between the two, which eliminates

the hierarchical relationship between them and creates a classless public system. “Left to his own free will, his will though free,” Adam is able to engage Raphael in a dialectic that leads him to knowledge of angels, the battle of heaven, and the creation of earth (5.236). Although God originally instructed his angel to approach Adam on equal terms, he gives commands to Michael that take an opposite tone. As God tells Michael to drive out Adam and Eve from the garden, he says, “if patiently thy bidding they obey... reveal to Adam what shall come in future days.” In this instance, the use of the conditional marks an imbalance of power within the relationship between heaven and earth. Michael bears privileged knowledge that he, like a censor, can choose to disperse as he sees fit. Furthermore, the humans become passive recipients of knowledge, rather than seeking it out for themselves. Although structurally similar, Raphael and Michael’s speeches couldn’t differ more. When taken together, the angels’ visits demonstrate the difference between the rhizomatic pre-fall public and the taproot post-fall public.

Using *Paradise Lost* as a guide, we can trace the disappearance of the Miltonic public sphere, which, unlike the Habermassian notion, calls for an abolition of the private self through writing. Milton, who despises the notion of a closeted, private individual operating within a public discourse, calls for a return to the pre-fallen public of Adam and Eve, which allowed for an unmediated, active, and rhizomatic relationship to knowledge acquisition. Although our connection to the free flowing knowledge of the pre-fallen world was severed when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, Milton argues that we can return to the Eden of knowledge whence we came through a proliferation of writing that forces us to seek knowledge for ourselves. Thus, Milton offers us a history of the public sphere to create a role for the poet in a democratic public. That is, he seeks to get rid of the legislation of the word to make room for the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

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