

Grace Tipps
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Matter, Agency, and Transcendence in Milton's Prose and Verse

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At Grinnell I have completed coursework in a variety of disciplines, in addition to English, including the sciences, foreign language, social studies, and the performing arts. As an English major, I have worked to develop my critical reading and writing skills, and this particular project—originally an 18-page seminar paper—was an exercise in devising a creative, refutable thesis about a body of work, working closely with the text to compile evidence to support that thesis, and clearly communicating the logic of my argument. By participating in the Humanities Symposium I hope to gain experience formally presenting my work to an audience, and I also look forward to learning about the work of my peers.

John Milton has historically been regarded as a poet of the “sublime,” a label suggesting that, ultimately, his work was not concerned with the material world. Focusing on his definition of religious transcendence, I will argue that literal matter is, in fact, crucial to Milton’s conception of the sublime. Christian transcendence has traditionally been understood as a process by which the human soul rises above and beyond the domain of physical matter to the immaterial realm of God. In both his prose and his verse, John Milton challenges this definition’s presumptions about the role of matter and the division between the sublime and the material. Milton wrote at a time when the Calvinist doctrine of predestination featured prominently in England’s Christian theology, but his work also challenges this doctrine by restoring a degree of human agency to the process of salvation. In “Chaos, Creation, and the Political Science of *Paradise Lost*,” the critic John Rogers contends that Milton’s monistic materialism leads to the “emergence of the Satanic ideology of self-possession and self-authorization, and affirmation of creaturely autonomy from which the poem, in its more theological register, will be forced to distance itself” (Rogers 126). Rogers imagines that God’s agency is absolutely incompatible with “creaturely autonomy”; however, I will demonstrate that Milton’s materialism allows for a redefinition of Christian transcendence that affirms the agency of both God and his human subjects. This paper traces the notion of matter from Milton’s prose to his epic and dramatic poems and in so doing reveals Milton’s evolving conception of human agency in transcendence. In *Areopagitica*, Milton establishes a material basis for ethics that plays a key role in his radical redefinition of transcendence. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents transcendence as a material process that, surprisingly, requires a passive model of agency. Finally, in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton figures patience as the epitome of passive agency and the hero’s failure of patience as an obstacle to the material transcendence of salvation.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton's material framework emerges as he transitions from an epistemological discussion of good and evil to a discussion of ethics in terms of the matter of sin and virtue. Milton's language maintains a dichotomous relationship between good and evil as long as his subject is the *knowledge* of good and evil. He writes, "Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably" (*Areo.* 728). With the initial emphasis on that which "we know," Milton establishes the section's epistemological character. He goes on to describe the knowledge of good and of evil "as two twins cleaving together" (728). The verbal duality of "cleaving," which may signify either cohering or dividing, creates an impression of two corresponding, connected entities that are, nonetheless, pulling apart in opposition. While the above descriptions affirm the interconnectedness of the knowledge of good and evil which, according to Milton, necessitates "knowing good by evil" (728), they nevertheless maintain a binary opposition within the immaterial domain of epistemology. He signals a transition out of this abstract framework of knowledge and thought to action by repositioning and activating reason, situating it within the realm of ethics. He writes, "when God gave [Adam] reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing" (733). Having thus defined reason as an action to be executed by human agents, rather than simply an internal process, Milton begins his discussion of sin and virtue, which are, essentially, good and evil *enacted*. He goes even further, however, progressing from the action of sin and virtue to the *matter* of sin and virtue. In the same passage he writes, "They are not skillful considerers of human things who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin" which is "a huge heap increasing under the very act of diminishing" (733). Here Milton attributes tangible form and substance to sin by referring to the "matter of sin" and quantifying it in terms of a "huge heap." Milton goes on to argue that the primary reason purgation is a defective strategy for dealing with sin is that sin and virtue compose one unified matter. He writes, "Suppose we could expel sin by this means; look how

much we thus expel of sin, so much we expel of virtue: for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike” (733). Whereas the *knowledge* of good and of evil remain distinct in the epistemological context, sin and virtue, in this material context of ethics, are ultimately indivisible. By thus exposing the failure of purgation as a process by which to isolate sin or virtue, Milton deems erroneous a mode of *acting* on matter. In *Areopagitica*, this judgment following Milton’s shift to a material framework suggests that ethics concerns one’s relationship to matter—that is, how one chooses to act, or not act, upon the material world.

The notion of material ethics emerges and develops in Milton’s epic verse. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton classifies agency in terms of the manipulation of matter. Satan and the fallen angels are agents of physical change in Book I as they manipulate the material environment of Hell to conform to their own will while maintaining fixed internal states. Satan exemplifies this colonizing mentality when he proclaims, “thou profoundest Hell / Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings / A mind not to be chang’d by Place or Time,” (*PL* I. 251-253) thus claiming dominion over Hell while asserting the fixity of his mind. The other angels follow suit, aggressively imposing their will on the matter of Hell through a large-scale metallurgical enterprise for the construction of *Pandaemonium*. Milton’s language in this section suggests that their industry is the work of a negative agency. As the construction begins, the angels advance on a hill that shows “a glossy scurf, undoubted sign / That in his womb was hid metallic Ore,” (I. 672-673) and Milton describes how *Mammon*’s crew of Angels “Op’n’d into the Hill a spacious wound / And digg’d out ribs of Gold” (I. 688-690). Milton’s violently corporal language equates the excavation with the violation of the sacred space of a womb and further bodily harm. Milton’s language also points to the temporal dimension of the fallen angels’ material agency, linking speed to degenerate, unethical behavior. He describes how the “Strength and Art” of mankind’s greatest architectural feats are “easily outdone / By Spirits reprobate, and in an hour”

(I. 696-697). Milton links this “reprobate” condition to the span of a single “hour,” thus signaling the speed of the angel’s transgressive material agency.

This metallurgical process finally works toward a farcical, if not simply bad, end. The angels continue with the formation of “A various mold, and from the boiling cells, / By strange conveyance fill’d each hollow nook” (I. 706-707). The “strange conveyance” by which the angels fill the mold is vaguely suggestive of some dubious operation, and Milton’s language retains this ambiguity as he describes the culminating moment where the completed structure of *Pandaemonium* finally emerges: “Anon out of the earth a Fabric huge / Rose like an Exhalation” (I. 710-711). The temporal marker, “Anon,” is consistent with the temporal character of the angels’ work so far; and this critical phase of *Pandaemonium*’s construction is curiously instantaneous. Milton’s final image of *Pandaemonium* at the end of Book I reveals the true defectiveness of the rebel angels’ agency as it relates to matter. As the angels finally enter their supposedly grand structure, they diminish in stature: “they but now who seem’d / In bigness to surpass Earth’s Giant Sons / Now less than smallest Dwarfs, in narrow room / Throng numberless” (I. 777-779). Here the transgressive agency of Satan and the rebel angels gives rise to a farce as they must ultimately shrink from their monumental size to fit inside the structure. However, even as the angels diminish in size, they remain “far within / And in thir own dimensions like themselves” (I. 792-793). Internally remaining “like themselves,” each retains that stubborn fixity of mind which impels them to manipulate the matter of Hell in the first place. The farcical outcome of their enterprise works to demonstrate how their aggressive material agency is essentially faulty.

In the latter part of the epic, Eve’s material agency parallels that of the fallen angels when she initiates the fall of mankind by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. As she commits the fatal act, Milton writes, “her rash hand in evil hour / Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck’d, she eat: /

Earth felt the wound” (IX. 780-782). The terms of her transgression are two simple, active verbs, “plucked” and “eat,” which fall in an abrupt sequence, and the wounded Earth recalls the wounds inflicted by the rebel angels’ mining. Finally, by locating Eve’s lapse within an “evil hour,” Milton consolidates the parallel with a temporal link. Through material consequences, Milton attributes the same active model of material agency to both Eve and Satan’s rebel angels, thereby suggesting the temporal and ethical failings of that model.

In Book V of *Paradise Lost* Milton proposes a different model of agency that comes about through the matter of the body and serves as a counterpoint to the swift, transgressive agency of Eve at the fall and of Satan’s rebel angels. He arrives at this new model of agency through his radical redefinition of transcendence as a material process of the body. Raphael delivers an account of this model of transcendence to Adam, and he begins by describing how God “created all / Such to perfection, one first matter all, / Indu’d with various forms, various degrees / Of substance” (V. 471-474). Thus, the same essential substance, “one first matter,” constitutes all things but exists in different forms and degrees, and this notion is consistent with Milton’s conception of sin and virtue as sharing one unified matter in *Areopagitica*. Raphael goes on to say that each being is “more refined, more spiritous, and pure, / As nearer to [the Almighty] plac’t or nearer tending” (V. 475-476). Thus, a being’s purity in terms of substantial makeup corresponds to its proximity to God. The many levels of this proximity constitute a physical link between the material universe and the spiritual domain of Heaven: “Each in thir several active Spheres assign’d / Till body up to spirit work, in bounds / Proportion’d to each kind” (V. 477-479). All of creation exists within a hierarchical spectrum of material “Spheres” and “bounds,” with the “body” near the bottom and pure “spirit” at the top. According to Raphael, beings that occupy different spheres, such as humans and angels, share a common substance, “Differing but in degree, of kind the same” (V. 490). More importantly, however,

Milton imagines that the material spheres of this hierarchical spectrum are traversable. Humans may progress up the spectrum through the transformation and purification of their physical bodies, “by gradual scale sublim’d” (V. 483). Thus, some external divine power renders them sublime. Raphael tells Adam, “Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit” (V. 497). Quite literally, physical bodies may turn into purely spiritual ones. By traversing this material scale, humans may eventually attain a divine body and transcend earthly existence without any division or distinction between the soul and the body.

A crucial aspect of Milton’s material definition of agency as it relates to transcendence is its temporal condition. Eve sought instantaneous transcendence by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, but in Raphael’s description, the “gradual scale” of sublimation indicates that this material transcendence proceeds slowly and incrementally, not by leaps and bounds or by some swift flight of the soul, as the traditional model imagines. Furthermore, according to Raphael, bodies may “at last” become spirit, “Improv’d by tract of time” (V. 497-498). This temporal scale directly opposes the haste of Satan’s rebel angels and the time frame of Eve’s precipitous fall.

Finally, through his material definition of transcendence, Milton presents an alternative model of agency that is chiefly characterized, ironically, by passivity. Milton presents the passive agency of Christian subjects in terms of choosing *not* to act on matter, thereby demonstrating obedience and allowing external forces to activate the bodily transformation of transcendence. In Raphael’s description of this transformation, the use of passive verbs—“sublim’d” and “improv’d”—convey the necessarily passive position of a Christian subject undergoing the process. Furthermore, Raphael specifies obedience as the final condition of material transcendence. Human bodies may turn to spirit, “If ye be found obedient” (V. 501). In Book IV, God’s instructions for Adam and Eve indicate that he demands an essentially passive obedience.

Adam tells Eve that God requires “no other service than to keep / This one, this easy charge,” which is merely “not to taste that only Tree / Of Knowledge” (IV. 420-424). Here, obedience to God does not involve compulsory action; rather, it concerns that which Adam and Eve must *not* do and how they must *not* act on matter. They must not “taste that only tree.” Adam goes on to say, “God hath pronounc’t it death to taste that Tree, / The only sign of our obedience” (IV. 427-428). The Tree of Knowledge is the material “sign” of their passive obedience so long as they refrain from acting upon it. Therefore, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton shows how the Christian subject possesses agency in salvation insofar as he or she has the agency to choose obedience and patience, the requisite conditions of his model of material transcendence. Beyond this choice, it seems that God’s subjects need only occupy a passive role. After the fall in Book IX, Adam chastises Eve for her lapse, claiming, “confidence then bore thee on, secure / Either to meet no danger, or to find / Matter of glorious trial” (IX.1175-1177). The “matter” of this “trial” is the literal matter of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and Milton’s use of “matter” here reinforces the notion that matter is the locus of agency. Eve’s choice to seek out and act upon this “matter of glorious trial,” which leads to the ultimate failure, reveals the defects of her agency.

In *Samson Agonistes*, his final published work, Milton presents patience as the ultimate exercise of the passive agency necessary for transcendence. In the latter part of the poem, the Chorus proclaims, “patience is more oft the exercise / Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude, Making them each his own Deliverer” (SA 1287-1289). Here Milton defines “patience” as an “exercise” and a “trial,” thereby moving patience into the sphere of action. Furthermore, “each his own Deliverer” indicates that through patience, people have agency in salvation. At the end of *Samson Agonistes*, however, Samson chooses to act on matter in a dramatic way, and in so doing he fails to demonstrate the passive agency of patience. Before pulling down the pillars in a violent act of revenge, Samson proclaims, “Now of my own accord such other trial / I mean to

show you” (1643-1644). Here “trial” recalls Eve’s “glorious trial,” which links this critical moment to the moment of the fall. Finally, Milton writes, “those two massy Pillars / with horrible convulsion to and fro / He tugg’d, he shook” (1648-1650). The sequence of active verbs—“He tugg’d, he shook”—is distinctly identical in structure to the sequence that describes Eve’s actions at the fall in *Paradise Lost*: “she pluck’d, she eat” (IX.781). Two simple, active verbs communicate the very same precipitous, transgressive material agency.

Samson’s failure to demonstrate the passive agency of patience serves to affirm the crucial role of this kind of agency in Milton’s material process of transcendence. We recall that in Book V of *Paradise Lost*, Raphael describes transcendence as a process by which the body becomes “more spirituous, and pure” (V.475); however, at the end of *Samson Agonistes*, Milton represents Samson in markedly material terms which suggest a failure of his body to transcend its basic material state. The last images of Samson, as conveyed by Manoa, are of his inanimate body and his tomb. After Samson’s death Manoa says, “Let us go find the body where it lies / Soak’t in his enemies’ blood, and from the stream / ...wash off / The clotted gore” (1725-1728). This image presents Samson in terms of the inert matter of dead bodies—his own and others’. Furthermore, Manoa claims that he will “build him / A Monument” (1734). This “Monument” is a physical memorial to Samson that serves to situate him more firmly within the realm of matter. At the end of the epic, Milton’s language suggests that after Samson’s death he becomes *more* a part of matter, firmly bound to the material world. His final transgressive act demonstrates a failure of passive agency; consequently, despite claims of his heroism and fame, he is not seen to achieve salvation through material transcendence. Samson’s failure marks the final gesture of Milton’s career and serves to affirm the crucial role of a material framework in his evolving notions of agency and salvation from his prose to his epic and dramatic verse.

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