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Augustinian Reading and the Fallen Corpus in Donne and Milton

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A corpus can mean both a human body and a body of writing, depending on how the reader encounters the word. The act of interpreting both kinds of corpora is, for many ancient and early modern thinkers, an active process that reveals, restricts, and reforms the reading and written self. In response to the question of the self's legibility, this paper explores the metaphoricity of the self as a text, an idea rooted in the ancient hermeneutics of Augustine of Hippo, and prevalent in the early modern religious poetry of John Donne and John Milton. Surveying the multivalent interpretability of language and bodies throughout Donne's Holy Sonnets and Milton's Paradise Lost, juxtaposed with Augustine's hermeneutics of the Biblical-textual self in the Confessions, this paper seeks to understand the limits of human intelligibility through the concept of the textual self which is both written and reading in relation to the divine. Symbolic and figurative reading practices, in tandem with theologies of original sin and fallenness, cultivate various interpretive models of legibility for these thinkers, figuring corpora as both texts and bodies that must be interpreted in order to access the innate nature of the human condition, circumscribed by unintelligible divinity. This paper is excerpted from my senior thesis. My participation in the Johns Hopkins University Richard Macksey Humanities Symposium was supported by the Paul K. Richter & Evalyn Elizabeth Cook Richter Memorial Fund.

In the early modern period, the self was inseparably understood within the context of religion, from theological language to embodied practice. The "I" of the speaking voice seems to relay the self, but the nature of this self is compounded by external systems. Throughout the ancient and early modern periods, original sin and the fallen human condition were significant essences of the self, obscuring and preventing intelligibility and harmony within the self, as well as between the self and the world. The self is understood and mediated through the textual corpus—written language and literature—as well as the corporeal corpus—the human body. Language and bodies are interpretable sites in and of themselves, yet they are also the means through which the rest of the world is made intelligible—or for some writers, unintelligible. In some contexts, the body is understood as a perpetrator of innate sinfulness, and language is a fallible end that fails to make

sense of the world; in other contexts, bodies and language are treated as material symbols for higher meaning, signifying the human soul and the divine Spirit.

The fallible word becomes a means of both despair and recovery for early modern writers like Donne or Milton. Donne's religious works present the struggle of interpreting the body, and his language stretches to accommodate his complex relationship with embodiment. Milton, on the other hand, has a different theology of the body, which prompts him to focus more on the fallen nature of language and the limits of human knowledge in *Paradise Lost*. The interpretable malleability with which Augustine treats himself cultivates an understanding of the self as a text, a legible interiority which can be read and thus written, or written and thus read. His idea of the divinely inscribed heart—the human heart with God's law written into it—along with his narrational structure support this idea of the written and read self.

Augustine's theology reveals that the complex legibility of original sin and divine essence in human language and bodies had been at issue since the rise of Christianity in West. In *The Book of the Heart*, Jager investigates how Augustine views the human heart as something upon which divine law is written, and consequently, as something that must be read in order to be granted grace by God.¹ Jager defines the Augustinian textualized heart as the center for writing, erasure, reading, and interpretation in relation to the moral conscience, intellectual understanding, and personal memory (Jager, 30-31). In Jager's words, the heart is a "true transcript of the self," but its legibility is complicated by its invisibility, unlike a written text which is a visibly legible but less accurate transcript of the self (Jager, 40). The act of writing the *Confessions* is thus an attempt to transcribe the heart, recognizing that the self as text is a potent yet limited metaphor, and that the true self will not be unveiled until the afterlife (Jager, 43). By

¹ Jager, Eric. *The Book of the Heart*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

writing a narrative of his life, Augustine attempts to transcribe the inner textuality of his heart into exterior Latin words as an attempt to explicitly move both himself and his reader back into a divine interior language, hidden within each person's heart.

The Augustinian metaphor of self as text in the *Confessions* is not just an incidental connection between the state of the inner textual heart and interpretable writing: this relation is the very nature of his conversion. At the crux of the *Confessions*—the scene of his conversion in Book 8—a reading Augustine happens upon Romans 13:13-14 by chance, but interprets it as a divine revelation perfectly tailored to his own state, giving him the confirmation to convert: “I didn't want to read further, and there was no need. The instant I finished this sentence, my heart was virtually flooded with a light of relief and certitude, and all the darkness of my hesitation scattered away” (*Confessions*, 237). That same Bible which he deemed cryptic and ill-written as a youth is now the site of profound revelation, precisely through his new will to interpret. Because the scriptural text expounds his interiority beyond his own conscious capacity to do so, he comes into his self by coming into the text and bringing the text into him, or, put differently, through reading the text as self and the self as text. In the act of reading, the Word is neither ink on parchment nor codex-bound, but a truth inscribed within the reader, imparted by the divine author. Interior habitation of the Word is what converts Augustine, which must also be understood as a moment enabled by the will of God, communicated by Scripture. The metaphoricity of the self as text rooted in the *Confessions* establishes a contour of interiority which can be as legible as a text and as hermeneutically subjective as Scripture: reading the self is interconnected with the reading self.

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Throughout his religious poetry, Donne does not present a coherent theology of the body and soul, or even of grace and salvation, written against the backdrop of his own struggle between the Catholicism he was brought up with and the Protestant Church of England during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The *Holy Sonnets* have popularly been noted for their intensity, as their language conveys overwhelming emotional struggle within the regulated metrical demands of strict sonnet form. The poems are unified by a recurring use of the Petrarchan sonnet, a form historically associated with expressions of love, drawing attention to Donne's unique choice of subject matter, as he fluctuates between the registers of corporeal despair and divine hope to negotiate his redemption with an unresponsive God whose visage Donne can only fearfully anticipate. The opening lines Sonnet 15 figure the poem as a eucharistic object, as the speaker request his own soul, “digest, / My Soule, this wholesome

meditation” (ll. 1-2), presenting this meditation in the corpus of the sonnet.² The speaker foregrounds an intimate relationship between reading, or digesting, a penitent text, the inward contemplation it initiates, and the potential of this meditation to change the sinful self through self-revelation. These moments of hope for the reading, transcending self are contrasted with the bereaving recognition of a self who is deprived of divine knowledge, as Sonnet 16 laments the stasis of words without the Word, “None doth, but thy all-healing grace and spirit / Revive againe what law and letter kill” (ll. 11-12).

The question of the legibility of the divine, inextricably linked to the limitations of human interpretation, cultivates many speakers throughout the *Holy Sonnets*. Some speakers seek to understand how sin can afflict a creature made in God’s image; some attempt to transcend the human condition and join the divine; some plead for God’s forgiveness; and some lament the burden of the fleshly body. The speaker of Sonnet 1 loathes and fears his embodiment, lamenting, “my feeble flesh doth waste / By sinne in it, which it t’wards hell doth weigh” (ll. 7-8). The volta of the sonnet at line nine shifts his gaze from inward to upward, allowing him to imagine his ascent rather than his fall. The pun implicit in the pronunciation of the verb “leave” meaning permission, as the noun “leaf,” meaning manuscript pages, conflates God’s will with his word: “By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe,” (l. 10). In other words, “leave” implicitly references the Bible, another means to obey God by reading his words. At the end of the sonnet, the speaker asks for God’s love to move his sinful “iron heart” (l. 14), invoking powerful imagery of a heart, originally a place of light and divine inscription, as a heavy object hardened by sin.

² All sonnet numbers are according to *The Complete English Poems*, Knopf, 1991.

Sinful and obscure legibility of the self is consistently a point of anxiety for the speaker of the *Holy Sonnets* because of its potential to endanger his chances of salvation, and Sonnet 8 explicitly deals with the fear of being misinterpreted in the afterlife: “But if our minds to these souls be descry’d / By circumstances, and by signs that be / Apparent in us not immediately, / How shall my mind’s white truth by them be tried?” (ll. 5-8). In the first quatrain, the speaker imagines that redeemed souls, like his father’s, turn into angelic creatures in heaven, becoming the very beings that will judge his worthiness. However, the second quatrain reveals that the speaker is afraid of the consequences of his potential illegibility to these heavenly souls, since he will be read “by signs that be / Apparent in us not immediately.” This could mean two things: either he is afraid that the angels will not be able to discern him correctly, or he is afraid that they will interpret him based on a state within him of which he is not aware. While he knows his self in one way, these souls might know him in another way that is unintelligible to himself. The word “descry’d,” meaning “known,” is almost a homophone for “described,” emphasizing the potential for misreading on a metatextual level, since “descry’d” implies the fear of being known truly, whereas “described” implies the fear of being portrayed. The invisible line between appearance and truth, complicating the legibility of the self, confounds Donne as he attempts to write the self throughout his poems. The speaker of this sonnet questions how the mind can be deciphered in relation to “circumstances, and by signs” which are not even apparent to itself, let alone visible to its jurors.

Continuing to investigate the innate nature of the self, the speaker of Sonnet 4 bereaves, “Oh my black Soule!” (l. 1); his self-address interconnects the decay of the sinful body to the suffering soul, and he goes on to figure the body as a prison, only desired by the soul as an alternative to its own death (ll. 5-8). Although Donne does invoke platonic dualism here, the

body and soul both suffer from sin: the form and the matter are equally impure because they cultivate one another. The speaker begs his soul, “Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke, / And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne; / Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might / That being red, it dyed soules to white” (ll. 11-14), imagining a color code for the self in which its most debased condition, black (l. 1), is indistinguishable from its most penitent state, also black (l. 11), emphasizing just how misleading appearances can be. Moreover, the word “red” can be sounded as “read,” and in fact, replacing “red” with its homophone makes even more meaning in the poem: the speaker asks to be “read” through his shameful blushing, to be legible in terms of his penitence; and he figures Christ’s blood as something that is both red and “read”—like in the Gospels—to redeem the human soul.

Christ’s redeeming legibility is located within the self, according to Sonnet 13, in which the speaker asks his soul to locate the image of the crucifixion contained within his heart: “Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell, / The picture of Christ crucified...” (ll. 2-3). Here, Donne defines the heart as the place where both the soul and the imprint of crucifixion live. The idea that a means for redemption is located within the human heart evokes the Augustinian divinely inscribed heart, identifying that inscription as the crucifixion, and the reader of the legible heart as the human soul. Imagining Christ’s merciful continence, the speaker wonders whether Christ is capable of dealing out harsh punishment in the afterlife. The sonnet’s sestet answers this question:

No, no; but as in my idolatrie
 I said to all my profane mistresses,
 Beauty, of pittie, foulennesse onely is
 A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign’d,
 This beauteous forme assures a piteous minde. (ll. 9-14)

Here, Donne recalls the Neoplatonic aesthetics he used in his profane love poetry. Ironically, perhaps even hastily, he transfixes this rhetoric onto his theology of Christ's mercy. These lines are much more syntactically difficult than the straightforward ideology they outline, arguing that beauty signifies mercy and ugliness indicates severity. The difficult syntax reflects the speaker's effort to make this ideology work, so that he can guarantee his own salvation through rhetorical language. This is more of an attempt than a success: if the ideology of the couplet is true, then this poses a severe problem for the speaker, who has consistently berated his sinful body and soul throughout the *Holy Sonnets*, as if it were one of the "horrid shapes assign'd." The same ideology of legible forms that give rise to his salvation also potentially defines the terms of his fallenness. While the confident flow of the couplet seems to resolve the preceding syntax, severe tension also remains in the fact that the speaker has appropriated his past rhetoric of seduction, used on "profane mistresses," to persuade his soul to understand Christ's mercy as correlated with Christ's beauty. By refiguring his previous, idolatrous love—one that would have been apt for the Petrarchan sonnet form of this poem—as a misplacement of Neoplatonic aesthetics, he attempts to unveil his own fate by refiguring language and legible forms.

Donne attempts to have some autonomy over deciphering his redemption, as well as his current self, but while rendering Christ's disposition as an intelligible form in Sonnet 13, he completely submits himself to God in Sonnet 14. The speaker of this sonnet requests militant retribution from God, and his language conveys an antithetical desire of destruction alongside reconstruction: "Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you / As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend / That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend / Your force, to breake, blow, burn and make me new" (ll. 1-4). The rapid scansion of these lines, caused by overwhelming lists of verbs, draw attention to the intensity of both what the speaker is asking

and how he his voice sounds. Synaeresis, abundant throughout the entire sonnet, and alliteration foreground the physicality of the speaker's rapid voice, as his breathlessness finds relief in the final lines, where his language becomes overtly sexual: "Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee" (ll. 11-14). While this sonnet ends with the suggestive metaphor of the self enraptured, but also violated, by God, the carnal language only serves to figure the self in desperate need of divine repair, but possibly incapable of it due to the sheer oxymoronic nature of his request. The speaker is consumed by this desire for divine restoration, complicating the legibility of his own poetic voice precisely because he cannot find a path which exhumes him from the brokenness of his selfhood, reenacted in the quick rhythm and relentless paradox of his language. His request for complete divine revitalization is nearly ineffable, but poetry allows metaphor to make these pleas more intelligible. The presence of both violent and erotic language transfigure this seemingly impossible request into a reading experience of palpable force. This force, though directed towards the listening God, only impacts the self: language allows Donne to imagine a means to the repair and salvation in the face of a God who remains silent.

While it is difficult to decipher Donne's religious orientation towards Protestant or Catholic ideas about death and salvation in any one of his poems, the *Holy Sonnets* convey a severe anxiety about the incoherent state of the self—perhaps due to this very tension of internal theological schism—and its viability for redemption. The lyrical "I" of the speaker is especially ambiguous about whether it is the body, soul, or both in Sonnet 6, when he imagines that "gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt / My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space, / But my'ever-waking part shall see that face" (ll. 5-7).³ After the body is separated from the soul, it is

³ Line seven is also literally ambiguous in Donne's manuscripts, as Helen Gardner notes that this line is replaced with "Or presently (I knowe not) see that face" in other versions (Targoff, 115).

unclear which “I” is experiencing sleep, and how the self that is witnessing God is only a “part.” He goes on to imagine his soul flying up to heaven (l. 9), his body remaining on earth (l. 10), and his sins falling down to hell (l. 11-12), freeing the self entirely from original sin (ll. 13-14). Here, and indeed throughout most of the sonnets, Donne seems to be struggling with his belief that souls *and* their bodies populate heaven, as he is unable to reconcile the fallen condition of fleshly original sin with an embodied heavenly afterlife. The bodily corpus and the textual corpus intersect on the basis of making the self legible, as the body becomes a site of metaphorical reading. For Donne, mankind can only overcome the obscurity of selfhood by submitting to another unknown: God. Whereas Donne incorporates the depraved human condition into his narrative to reveal difficulty of reading the self, Milton understands corporeality quite differently and derives a very different lesson from reading the fallen self, presenting a model of selfhood that is more theologically self-sufficient.

The epic project of *Paradise Lost* challenges and reinforces these limits of human knowledge. Milton writes the Fall of mankind as an epistemological and semantic event, exemplified and experienced through the process of reading the poem and the difficulty of interpreting its language and meaning. *Paradise Lost* addresses what fallen humans have the right to know, through what corporeal means they might attain knowledge, and to what extent, promoting an ideology of epistemological temperance:

But knowledge is as food, and needs no less
Her temperance over appetite, to know
In measure what the mind may well contain,
Oppresses else with surfeit, and soon turns
Wisdom to folly[.] (Book 7, ll. 128-130)⁴

⁴ All citations of *Paradise Lost* are from *The Major Works* and will appear parenthetically with line numbers.

The complex connection between the knowledge of good and the knowledge of evil is, first and foremost, understood through Satan's dependence on language. *Paradise Lost* opens with alluring rhetoric and captivating sentiment, containing some of the most famous lines from the entire epic, such as "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (Book 1, ll. 224-225) and "Better to reign in hell, then serve in heaven" (l. 263), all uttered by Satan. These particular lines capture the seductive rhetoric of Satan's language, tempting the religious reader to agree with sinful ideas that forsake God. Satan's fall begins with his own misinterpretation of his servile status in relation to the omnipotent God. As critic Liam Haydon writes, "In this allegorical scheme, it demonstrates Satan's belief that the elevation of Messiah entails an eclipsing of all other forms of angelic virtue. Satan's misunderstanding of his relationship with God impinges upon all of his understanding of His creation."⁵ Satan fails to understand the divine hierarchy and his own subordinate place within it, and consequently he prompts his own fall, the rebel angels' fall, and eventually, mankind's fall through this same inability to apprehend, coupled with deceitful language. By realizing the dangers of language and the fallibility of human reason in these opening books, the reader begins to understand Milton's difficult requirement to be an alert reader in order to resist seductive language throughout *Paradise Lost*.

Contrasting Satan's speech with that of the unfallen angels further unveils the limits and powers of language that reinforce the divine hierarchy. While reason and language are Satan's tools of damnation, they are means of transcendence for the angels, who also advise Adam to explore knowledge within human limits because that limitation is the best means to understand divinity. Whereas Satan uses language to deceive himself and others, the angel Raphael rejoices

⁵ Haydon, Liam D. "Ambiguous Words: Post-Lapsarian Language in *Paradise Lost*." *Renaissance Studies*, 2016, p. 186.

in explaining the limitations of human intelligibility, as he is ‘likening spiritual to corporeal forms, / As may express them best’ (Book 5, ll. 572-573), and “measuring things in heaven by things on earth” (Book 6, l. 893). According to Raphael, the corporeal condition of bodies and earthly perception are not a lack meant to be despaired, but an adequate means to understand an appropriate amount of information about the divine ineffable. The very act of speaking, confined by temporal syllables and somatic experience, is inherently incapable of capturing a being who supersedes time and space.

As Adam and Eve prove through their dialogues, the postlapsarian reader is highly prone to misinterpretation. Before the Fall, there is correlation between semantic and corporeal sensibility. Milton imagines that the unfallen human has an innate ability to know his natural surroundings simultaneously with language. Adam’s first moments of existence are acts of knowing: the first thing he ever does is stand up straight and gaze towards the heavens, as if his body innately knows where truth rests. The next thing he does is move his body and take account of the nature and animals he is surrounded by, identifying them automatically: “But who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not; to speak I tried, and forthwith spake, / My tongue obeyed and readily could name / What ever I saw” (Book 8, ll. 270-273). His ability to name these animals is in harmony with his knowledge of them, both emerging simultaneously from within himself.⁶ Although he does know himself yet, he is given the reason necessary to develop this knowledge, as he later does inquire about his creation in discussion with God. In the Garden of Eden, human corporeality is not an indicator of lowliness, but a unique factor of

⁶ A landmark in Milton criticism, John Leonard’s *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (1990) thoroughly analyzes how the act of naming misleads, confines, and constructs characters’ (and readers’) knowledge of themselves and others. Leonard argues that Milton’s take on language is novel because God grants Adam and Eve “the reason to form an accurate language for themselves (p. 12). Stanley Fish opposes this claim, arguing that Adam and Eve are endowed with *a priori* language reflecting accurate knowledge (*Surprised by Sin*, 1997).

human experience which allows man to perceive life in relation to God's greatness, ultimately leading to an admiration of what one can and cannot know. Milton the narrator also refers to Creation as "the book of knowledge fair," (Book 3, l. 47) which he is unable to read because of his blindness. In place of the lost ability to see the text of the outward world, Milton asks God to grant him the inward illumination of divine light, which is not a legible means to truth, but rather, the instantaneous knowledge of truth. Even the poet acting as a *vates*, skidding the line between human and divine, is part of a postlapsarian subjectivity which orients knowledge in terms of reading practices.

After the Fall, the book of God becomes even more mysterious and veiled, subject to misinterpretation. Milton locates the fallen reader within *Paradise Lost* by subtly prompting the reader to misinterpret innocent language which fallen connotations. Scholars have duly noted the cunning diction of the narrator, Adam, and Eve for its deceptive wordplay, tempting readers to interpret prelapsarian words and descriptions with unchaste dual meanings.⁷ In line with Fish's approach to the Miltonic corpus, *Paradise Lost* is a text made to test the reader's susceptibility to seductive language, tempting the postlapsarian reader to perform his fallenness through the act of reading and interpretation. A careful reader can see through not only the deceptive reason of the fallen angels and the serpent, but also through the fallibility of human reason—not just that which causes Adam's and Eve's disobedience, but which constructs this epic. This reader will recognize both the subjection of fallenness and the rehabilitating empowerment of free will.

The foundational significance of free will becomes the means through which Milton can complete his project to "justify the ways of God to men" (Book 1, l. 26). God makes two things

⁷ Robert Entzminger examines this dynamic thoroughly in *Divine Word: Milton and the Redemption of Language*, arguing that Milton's elaborate style makes readers conscious of their interpretive—and ultimately self-serving—power to understand ambiguous language in fallen or redeeming terms.

clear to Adam: First, he gives Adam absolute freedom in Eden, with the exception of “the Tree whose operation brings / Knowledge of good and ill,” (Book 8, ll. 323-324). Secondly, God praises Adam’s ability to comprehend not only the animals, but his own human self: “Thus far to try thee, Adam, I was pleased, / And find thee knowing not of beasts alone, / Which thou hast rightly named, but of thy self, / Expressing well the spirit within the free, / My image” (ll. 397-441). Again, the poem foregrounds the idea that everything that is meant to be legible and intelligible is circumscribed within the epistemological means of the earthly body and mind. The Fall is a dangerous possibility, but Adam and Eve were also given the free will to resist the fall. In the passage cited above, God even draws a parallel specifically between the freedom of human will and the image of God, with “My image” modifying “the spirit within thee free,” which modifies “knowing... of thy self.” By writing these three conditions as interconnected ones, Milton figures self-knowledge and free will as the most divine aspect of mankind, before and after the Fall.

The task of reading and interpreting the world correctly, evidently posed as a difficult metatextual challenge in the language of the poem, falls upon the shoulders of each individual. Readers are tempted back and forth between placing blame on Adam or on Eve for the Fall, between finding fault in human reason, which the serpent uses to tempt Eve to eat the fruit, and in human emotion, which guides Adam to eat the fruit so that he does not have to live without his beloved. Additionally, the verse leading up to Eve’s bite is sensually descriptive, depicting her decision as the result of both rhetorical temptation and the somatic desire for food in that moment. *Paradise Lost* does not afford one cause to the Fall of mankind, and instead, Milton reads and writes the self through complex systems the bodily desire, human reason, and individual choice. Freedom of choice must remain constant, but the Fall has its consequences on

the human condition, especially on self-knowledge. If the prelapsarian state is captured by Adam's "sudden apprehension" (Book 8, ll. 354)—his God-given ability to know himself and his earth innately and appropriately—then the postlapsarian state is understood as a disconnect between the self and language, prompted by a disobedience which not only betrays God, but also the self. Commenting on the intellectual trajectory of Milton's ideas on self-knowledge, Kathleen Swain writes that

consciousness becomes, not stable, but a multiple and fluid function, and the thinking being simultaneously apprehends itself both from outside and inside. Additionally, the consciousness becomes divided, split between a projection of an unlimited deity in which it participates and a self-conscious realization of its own limitation, and therefore a realization that it should aspire to abandon a lesser self in favor of one that more fully partakes of the deity it expansively apprehends. (Swain, 69)

Because the human and the divine are interconnected, man's disobedience to God causes not only a fracture in the harmony between the self, the world, and God, but also within the inner functions of the self, manifesting as misreadings and illegibility in the fallen state. After Adam and Eve both eat the fruit and are overtaken by lustful desire, they learn the knowledge of evil through the newfound feeling of shame. Their fallen state gives them access to new, dismal ways of reading the self: "Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds / How darkened; innocence, that as a veil / Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone" (Book 9, ll. 1053-1055).

The postlapsarian body is now legible to Adam and Eve through additional knowledge, perceived through inflamed senses, in terms of the lust and carnal desire (Book 9, ll. 1031). This sensual overdrive completely unveils the appetite so that the self is susceptible to gluttony and lust alike. After the Fall, the body becomes a problem for the will because it competes with and overwhelms reason, and so, this new kind of legibility obstructs proper and good intelligibility. The somatic appetite itself is not a change, since it had already existed in Adam and Eve before

the Fall, but its pure paradisaical functionality is lost. It takes on new, sinful meanings because the postlapsarian mind's eye is permanently opened to good and evil alike, and the fallible man is simultaneously aware of both presence and loss, causing cognitive dissonance within the self. For instance, when Adam first rebukes Eve, he accuses her of being like the serpent, deceiving and false (Book 10, ll.867-873), when in reality, Eve never intended evil. His intimate knowledge of Eve's inner condition has been severed. This interpretive discord affects man's relationship with the entire world, fracturing mankind's once-innate ability to read the earthly world properly. It even changes the nature of the world itself: as soon as Eve takes a bite of the fruit, "Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat / Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" (Book 9, ll. 782-784). The very animals that Adam once as well as his own speech now escape his knowledge and exist in disharmony, as the animals "not stood much in awe / Of man but fled him, or with countenance grim / Glared on him passing" (Book 10, ll. 712-714).

While the fallen natural world is one way Milton portrays postlapsarian divisiveness, death is the other alienating consequence introduced to mankind, semantically and conceptually misinterpreted. In the same way Milton has treated most subject matter throughout the poem, the writer subtly figures death as a linguistic problem of intelligibility and consciousness, rather than as an immediate physical consequence to Adam and Eve. Adam's inability to understand death is evident before and after the fall. His illogical determination to embrace death in order to remain as "One flesh" with Eve reveals his misunderstanding of it, since death is the very thing that will end their union, literally causing their flesh to decay:

if death
 Consort with thee, death is to me as life;
 So forcible within my heart I feel
 The bond of nature draw me to my own,

My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;
 Our state cannot be severed, we are one,
 One flesh; to loose thee were to loose my self.
 (Book 9, ll. 953-959)

Because Adam's unfallen state prevents him from parsing and speaking through figurative language, he sincerely understands Eve as the vital essence of his own self. Adam's love is not just metaphor or hyperbole, but a true expression of emotion. Consequently, the issue at hand—the meaning of “death”—is a matter of translation from heavenly, to Edenic, to earthly, so that concepts which evade fallenness must somehow be made effable to the fallen reader through fallible language. By choosing death, Adam is choosing an unknown word and concept, causing him to deteriorate in like manner: his Eve, his God, and his world all become obscured to him as he bites into the abyss of knowledge.

Having eaten the fruit, Adam and Eve suffer the despair of death precisely by the torture of not knowing what it is. Before the fall, their innate knowledge guided them to goodness. After the fall, the consciousness of unintelligibility becomes a means of inciting mental chaos with the introduction of the new epistemological categories of sin and death, causing internal decay due to fallibility of discernment and its effects on rational thought. Adam's reaction to death in his initial soliloquy and in response to Michael's vision might recall the tortured and paradoxical voices of Donne's religious texts, as Adam laments, “Did I request thee, maker, from my clay / To mould me man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me, or here place / In this delicious garden?” (Book 10, ll. 743-746).

Adam's plaguing uncertainty about what death means reflects the fractured consciousness which Swain identifies: “the thinking being simultaneously apprehends itself from both outside and inside” (Swain, 69). For the first time, Adam feels the pain of living through the experience and recognition of loss; his perception of self is now broken, scattered, and obscured. While

Donne and Milton both acknowledge these limits of self-intelligibility and the fracture it creates, Miltonic selfhood anticipates eventual disembodiment which allows angelic transcendence. Whereas Donne fears death because of the inseparability of body and soul in the afterlife, Milton imagines death as a means to incorporeal immortal existence, and as God proclaims in *Paradise Lost*, “so death becomes / His final remedy” (Book 11, ll. 61-62). Milton does not take much issue with mortal corporeality, and handles embodiment and death in a metaphorical and symbolic sense as earthly symbols that anticipate the disembodied and spiritual end for mankind. For Milton, these material symbols of bodies and language are only necessary as interpretive objects, inhabiting divine meaning which superscribes the materiality of the corpus. This innate and overt meaning will eventually allow the self, after death, to become what could only be signified through speech: the ineffable soul, pure and complete.

What remains in place of material loss are symbols and signs of what was once known, words in place of the Word. Although God is no longer visible to Adam and Eve once they have been exiled from Eden, the angel Michael comforts them with the fact that the Word is still interpretable through signs after the Fall:

Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain
 God is as here, and will be found alike
 Present, and of his presence many a sign
 Still following thee, still compassing thee round
 With goodness and paternal love, his face
 Express, and of his steps the track divine.
 (Book 11, ll. 350-354)

God’s presence “in valley and in plain” has dual connotations, because while he can be represented and read in the geological crevices of the new fallen world, he is actually no longer known to man in the other, non-geographical sense of “in plain”: easily intelligible, free from ambiguity, and clear to the senses (*Oxford English Dictionary*, plain, *adj.*, III). Parallelisms and

multivalence permeate the poem's language to produce as many readings of the text as there are readers, but as endless as this multiplicity seems, it is also the vessel of *Paradise Lost's* resolution. Because of the remanence of divine signs, enabling such interpretability, Milton is able to reform the meanings of conditions like fallenness and death—the most destabilizing aspects of human life—into sites for redemption and remedy, the most hopeful aspect of living.

Paradise Lost treats death in many different ways, from figurative to literal definitions, from linguistic to corporeal meanings, depicting multivalence as inextricably entangled with human language and interpretive practice. Christ's redemption of mankind is figured as a redefinition death, as he requests the Father, "let me / Interpret for him," (Book 11, ll. 32-33), upon hearing Adam and Eve's penitent prayers, offering to translate mankind's silent woes into language legible that moves the Father. The Son anticipates his own death as a means to reinterpret mankind and give man the potential for salvation. That same event of death, which causes man's postlapsarian dissimilitude from God's image, is also what produces their eventual return to God—both by man's own death, and by Christ's death. As death becomes symbolically reformed by Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, so does the legibility of the self in relation to reformed meanings and symbolic interpretations. The symbolism of divine presence takes shape in the redemptive Augustinian heart inscribed with divine verse, as God "Working through love, upon their hearts shall write, / To guide them in all truth" (Book 12, ll. 490-491), which Michael reveals to Adam as a protective force in the foretold history of false prophets and corrupt churches. Even when the word of God is violently appropriated by these liars, the truth of the Word remains engraved in the heart, the essence of the corporeal and textual corpus.

Milton, like Augustine, writes of man as a written creature, reading and interpreting the self as a text. The poet leads the audience to this idea through the temptations and challenges of his

language, unfolding the necessity of active reading practice to make sense of the self and the world. Within the poetic escapade of *Paradise Lost*, the reader comes to terms with the self by being thrust out of the semantic and corporeal registers that he usually inhabits, confronting the severe limitations of his knowledge, while simultaneously realizing that the trial he has been put on is the test of choice, both obscured by the fallibility of postlapsarian words and required for the salvation of his soul.

Donne's and Milton's textual renditions of selfhood in poetry and prose speak to a metaphorical transmission between the body and book, established in the writings of Augustine. The conception of self as corporeal and textual corpora saturates a Western literary tradition which tests, reforms, and distinguishes the limits of realizing an effable and legible self. The effable and the divine mingle in the selfhood of Christ, whose body and words represented complete self-knowledge. The idea of embodied perfection, or more generally, an ineffable internal identity, becomes a double-edged sword for Western consciousness: on one hand, bodies could be vessels for divine grace, but on the other hand, the construction of self became a task defined by fallible reading practices.

Throughout the works examined in this paper, we see a unifying aspect of the Christian self: it is a self that is lost and regained in language; it recognizes the disharmony between its embodied state and its spirit; and it senses something ineffable, silent, and invisible from its interior that must be interpreted. Donne relies on language to express his paradoxical existence, attempting to cultivate the self in relation to both secular and divine love, navigating a perplexingly restricting corporeality, and entangling his language with metaphor because it is the only means to locate the self within the obscure book of nature. Milton uses language to reflect the human condition, not just narrating his theologies of the Fall, but cultivating the interpretive

practices he believes man needs in order to know himself and his God better. The self is the speaker behind and beyond the lyrical “I,” behind and beyond the human heart engraved with divine law, the body remade by the blood of Christ, and the fallen language of the speaker. This palimpsestic model of the self underscores the difficulty of reading “the” self as text. Such multivalent reading practices are essential in the formation of Western consciousness. Medieval and early modern thinkers make the self literary, as they treat materials, bodies, and language with figuration, symbolism, and multiple meanings. Mortal reading practices can temporarily replace, productively reflect, or indefinitely defer divine truth until it unveils itself. The theories and philosophies that come about after the early modern period continue to seek to understand the limits of legibility; to explain different external and internal systems of being, driven by the desire to postulate the perplexing truths of the human condition.

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