

A Landscape of Linguistic Love: Milton's Mind as a Seat of Companionate Paradise

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Abstract

A survey of British poet John Milton's early and extensive initiation into the language(s) of scholarship highlights that, through his intensive immersion within it, the language of scholarship became fundamental to Milton's perception of reality, ultimately dictating and defining his notions of meritorious living. This preeminence of the language of scholarship within Milton's understanding of his world further led Milton to perceive the language of scholarship as the only truly satisfactory basis upon and means through which to pursue meaningful human relationships. Through a survey of a selection of Milton's shorter works—the Prolusions, “On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough,” “Ad Patrem,” and “Epitaphium Damonis”—as well as a detailed examination of his multilingual friendship with Charles Diodati, this paper demonstrates that Milton not only perceived a linkage between love and language, but actively employed each in the service of the other, leading to a richer understanding and experience of both.

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While studying for his master's degree at Christ's College, Cambridge, John Milton was summoned by his college to speak before their company—to regale them on the subject that bound them together: scholarship.¹ No longer the shy prodigy who had stood before their number years earlier as an undergraduate student, the adult Milton held forth grandly and at length before his audience, demonstrating the breadth of his learning by expounding knowledge's bearing upon virtue, vocation, companionship, and civilization in a proslution upon his chosen theme: *Whether Learning Makes Men Happier Than does Ignorance*. While musing upon the offences of uncivilized conversation in the midst of his speech, Milton let slip a curious admission of an unresolved point in his thought, conceding, "I have wondered whether those who had neither human mouths nor human powers of speech, could have any human feelings inside them."² Milton did not answer this question directly in the passages that follow—although his subsequent elevation of unspeaking animals over the man who refuses to improve himself through knowledge's offerings hints at his answer—nor did he build upon its theme as he advanced towards the crux of his argument. The statement simply stands, balking, in the middle of Milton's speech.

Some critics might argue that this statement does not deserve probing, that it was simply a throwaway comment—an aside—that strayed from Milton's purpose in his proslution. To such an objection I might drily respond that Milton, not unlike Milton's God, worked all things for a purpose in accordance with his divine plan—I might indeed argue that Milton never "threw away" a word in his life. The very fact that Milton decided to include this outburst of feeling in the final draft of his speech despite its providing no essential evidence in support of his argument demonstrates that, far from being disposable, the statement must be regarded as one of supreme importance by students of Milton. Its obtrusion into the argument indicates the extent to which Milton must already have ruminated

1. Opinion varies regarding the precise period in which Milton delivered this proslution, with Gregory Chaplin dubbing it Milton's 1632 "farewell to Cambridge" and Campbell and Corns rejoining, "It is not possible to map Milton's proslutions onto the exercises required by the university." Despite this confusion, the piece is universally regarded as having figured into Milton's graduate requirements. For Chaplin's comments see Gregory Chaplin, "Education," in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 281. For Campbell and Corns see Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought*, (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36.

2. John Milton, "Proslution VII," in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 627.

upon the line of inquiry it proposes and foreshadows its ongoing importance to Milton and, therefore, necessarily, to us. Indeed, a close examination of Milton's life and canon provides evidence that, within Milton's thought, the usage of elevated language and the ability to feel and to love were curiously intertwined. To Milton, the elevated modes of expression found in the forms and language of scholarship served not merely as amusing or enjoyable activities in which to engage as a scholar, but rather formed a foundational template through which the deepest companionship might be achieved: companionship that, in its turn, might elevate the language through which it was formed.

Although Milton would later formalize his conception of the universal priority of the language of scholarship through his writings, that perspective's origins in Miltonic thought date to the period of life in which one does not form opinions but is formed by others' opinions: childhood. Indeed, an examination of this childhood reveals that it was structured in terms of the very prioritization of scholarship that Milton would later espouse, for he spent his earliest moments immersed in linguistic expression. This prioritization was initiated by Milton's father, John Milton, Sr., whose own high appreciation of art's offerings, as well as his desire to equip his son to occupy a superior social station, led to his determination to provide Milton with an education of the highest quality. This education began under the care of several private tutors, who introduced the young boy into a language-based program that not only inflamed his imagination but also rendered him proficient in the classical languages of Latin and Greek. Upon witnessing his son's prodigious aptitude for language, the elder Milton encouraged his son to widen his language studies to the artistic European tongues of Italy and France; thus, by the time he was a student at St. Paul's School, Milton already spoke five languages.³

3. Due to a scarcity of records, the timing of Milton's education—including when he began his studies at St. Paul's—is difficult to establish, as is forcibly evidenced by the fact that Milton's most revered biographers, including not only Campbell and Corns but also Barbara Lewalski, are unwilling to hazard any more definite opinion regarding his enrollment at St. Paul's than that it must have occurred between 1615 and 1621. The available evidence is sufficient, however, for Campbell and Corns to provide the following timeline of Milton's language acquisition: "Milton's education began at home. In *Ad Patrem* ('To my Father') Milton was later to express his gratitude that his father had paid for lessons in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and Italian. It is likely that instruction in these languages began with private tutors; although Milton went on to study the ancient languages at school, modern languages were not taught in schools, and it seems likely that all of Milton's instruction in French and Italian (and possibly Spanish) was given in the domestic setting." (See Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 16.) For Bar-

At St. Paul's School, then widely considered one of the best schools in London, the young Milton plunged into a humanist curriculum that, reminiscent of his earlier education, was largely language-based.⁴ Here, Milton spent hours translating classical Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts as well as writing original compositions imitating the classical texts he had studied in each language.⁵ Among the impactful exercises he encountered during this period was a translation exercise commonly dubbed "circle" or "double" translation, which required the student first to translate a text into an alternative language or mode and then to translate the translation, either into a third language or mode, or back into the original.⁶ Each of these three exercises elevated Milton's command over and estimation of language, honing his ability to pierce through to the most essential or dynamic aspects of the texts he processed in order to separate the syntactic from the semiotic and deal in raw meaning. These exercises provided him with a meta-perspective of the mode-aspect of language, a perspective that transformed the budding language-user into a mature language-wielder.

Milton himself thrived on these exercises and, indeed, excelled at them

bara Lewalski's observations, see Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 6.

4. Gregory Chaplin identifies St. Paul's School as being not only "one of the finest grammar schools in England" but also as being "at the forefront of humanist education in England." (See Chaplin, "Education," 282.)

5. Of the purpose of these exercises, Chaplin writes, "Imitation was at the center of humanist education: Students were taught to write with the eloquence of Cicero or Virgil through the careful study and emulation of their works" while Lewalski notes that Milton himself became skillful in imitating specific models in different genres—"Cicero for letters and orations, Ovid and Propertius for elegiac verse, verse letters and brief narratives, and Virgil for other poetic styles and genres." (See Chaplin, "Education," 287 and Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, 10.)

6. The virtues of "circle" translation are eloquently expounded by linguist John Hale: "The value of the 'circle' method is that where words and ornaments are bound to be left behind, the thought is seized, ready to be expressed in whatever tongue. Paradoxically, then, so verbal an exercise trains one in skills of thought, as much as skills of words." (See John Hale, *Milton's Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on Style* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.) More fundamentally, Estelle Haan notes of this era's emphasis on translation that "'Translations' into and out of a variety of languages formed a central part of the core educational system of the day." (See Estelle Haan, "The 'Adorning of my Native Tongue': Latin Poetry and Linguistic Metamorphosis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55.) For an extensive discussion of the types of translations Milton would have practiced in school and their effect on Milton's writings, see either Hale or Haan.

from an early age.⁷ His talent at language, clearly rooted in natural proclivity, exploded to genius through the facilitation of his studies. Given his intrinsic affinity for the ideals and modes of scholarship, it is unsurprising that the immersion of his mind in scholarship during its formative years served to mold Milton's mind, and thus his perception of and expressions regarding reality, wholly in terms of those ideals and modes. Any analysis of Milton's prescriptions for superior living must root itself in a recognition of the thoroughness with which scholarly motions had infiltrated his perception of day-to-day activities by prescribing to him what was normal, what was preferable, or how one might go about accomplishing anything. Indeed, both Milton's own professions and the mute testimony of his life demonstrate his overweening admiration of and delight in scholarship. Such professions abound in Milton's canon, but we need look no further than the text of the very Prolusion in which we began our study to find Milton joyously singing the praises of scholarship:

Without learning, the mind is quite sterile and unhappy, and amounts to nothing. For who can rightly observe and consider the ideas of things human and divine, about which he can know almost nothing, unless his spirit has been enriched and cultivated by learning and discipline? So the man who knows nothing of the liberal arts seems to be cut off from all access to the happy life.⁸

In succeeding decades, Milton would masterfully develop his theories of knowledge's merits through his tracts *Of Education and Areopagitica*. However, it is his early formulations on the subject with which we are concerned, and thus we turn to his prolusions' ample provisions for our study. In the same passage as that quoted, Milton removes any possible doubt of his high conception of the scholarly life's surpassing superiorities by anchoring that life squarely to divinity itself: "Contemplation is by almost universal consent the only means whereby the mind can... concentrate its powers for the unbelievable delight of participating in the life of the immortal gods."⁹ This obliquely Platonic and Boethian statement of sentiment reinforces his more Christianized, but otherwise corresponding declaration in a previous Prolusion regarding his own ongoing intent to pursue "the

7. Haan highlights the excellence of Milton's early efforts both in translation and imitation, while in her biography Lewalski describes Milton's accounts of his early study as ultimately emitting "the image of a delighted child enthralled by learning and literature." (See Haan, "The Adorning," 58 and Lewalski, *The Life of Milton*, 6.)

8. Milton, "Prolusion VII," 623.

9. *Ibid.*

scholarly leisure which is the kind of life that I believe that the souls in heaven enjoy.”¹⁰ Together these statements demonstrate that, to Milton, scholarship was next to—and possibly overlapped with—godliness. The extreme antecedence of scholarship in Milton’s mind manifests itself elsewhere in the Prolusions, in which we see Milton evaluating the merits even of non-scholarly activities through scholarship’s scrupulous lens. The most memorable of these evaluations occurs in “Prolusion VI,” where Milton proclaims, “no one can jest gracefully and handsomely unless he has first learned how to handle serious business” to his fellow schoolmates.¹¹ Even joking, Milton would have us believe, requires the reasoned pace of scholarship to be rightly performed.

Given this preeminence of the language of scholarship in his theoretical and pragmatic perception of reality, it comes as little shock to find that, as Milton began to cast about himself for a means to interact meaningfully with other humans, he once again adopted the forms of scholarship as his template. Development of one’s mind to its use of reason was the primary means by which an individual might achieve personal superiority; ergo, a bonding of minds through scholarly forms was the primary means by which to achieve the highest forms of interpersonal concourse. Milton himself confirms this, once again, in “Prolusion VII,” in which he dramatically proclaims, “what is more pleasant—what can be imagined more delightful than the talks of learned and serious men together... But stupid talk or what goes on among those who encourage one another in extravagance and debauchery, is the friendship of ignorance, or, rather, *it is ignorance of what friendship is.*”¹² His dependence upon learned language for his own sense of identity led Milton to idealize those elements of a relationship that were based upon the language of scholarship and could therefore be achieved through bonding over shared valuation of reason and knowledge.

As we have already noted, Milton completed “Prolusion VII,” with its grand theories of knowledge and human companionship, as he was nearing the completion of his master’s degree. By this juncture, Milton had earned the leisure to theorize grandly on the cardinal themes debated by classical authors; however, a closer examination of Milton’s young years reveals that these later abstractions on human feeling were forged through a rather more intense search for companionship in which Milton not only utilized but actively relied upon the scholarly

10. John Milton, “Prolusion VI,” in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 613.

11. Milton, “Prolusion VI,” 617.

12. Milton, “Prolusion VII,” 625, emphasis added.

language with which he was so familiar.

Among the earliest of Milton's extant texts is a piece that demonstrates just such a reliance—the unusual and somewhat mystifying poem, “On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough,” commonly held to have been written by Milton when he was seventeen. In this poem, Milton memorializes the recently-deceased daughter of his sister, Anne, by embedding the child in a series of classical images before ultimately offering a consolation on her loss to his sister. The language of this piece is striking in its grandeur, a grandeur that impresses the reader as being contextually discordant given the non-scholarly status of its recipient. In Milton's reimagining of the loss, the infant's illness is personified as Ovid's northeast wind, Aquilo, her death compared to Apollo's accidental slaying of his beloved Hyacinth, and her person itself addressed as a figure of ancient mythology, as in the following stanza in which Milton apostrophizes the infant directly:

Wert thou some Star which from the ruin'd roof
Of shak't Olympus by mischance didst fall;
Which careful *Jove* in nature's true behoof
Took up, and in fit place did reinstall?¹³

Given the context of this poem, its tone feels almost artificial. If Milton's purpose in penning the piece were simply to console his sister, he might easily—and more effectively—have achieved this end by writing a letter couched in simple tones that she would more readily understand. Indeed, Milton himself seems, hazily, to recognize the misdirection of his poem given its audience, and at its end he remodulates that tone to address his sister not as a fabled goddess of old, but as “the mother of so sweet a child” in a stanza that includes no classical references but only straightforward—if straitlaced—Christian consolation.¹⁴

A second text that merits examination in this survey of Milton's searching after companionship is “Ad Patrem,” a poem-letter Milton wrote to his father approximately twelve years after penning “On the Death of a Fair Infant” to his sister. Although the poem is written in the high classical tongue of Latin and contains an equal if not greater number of allusions to classical subjects as “On the Death of a Fair Infant,” its integration of those allusions into the overarching theme of the letter is much more sophisticated. Indeed, Milton utilizes these al-

13. John Milton, “On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough,” in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 36, lines 43-46.

14. Milton, “Fair Infant,” 37, line 71.

lusions not simply to decorate or even to elevate his missal, but rather to advance the theme of that missal—the consolidation of his relationship with his father. In a series of classical images, Milton reframes and reinforces their relationship by positing language itself as the binding or fundamental element in his relationship with his musician-father. He accomplishes this by homogenizing their separate languages—poetry and music—into the single, united language of *song*, parading a series of classical figures in whom these arts are united—the ministrants of the gods, the priest-bard or vates, the Muses, and, lastly, the god Phoebus—to reinforce this union not only of poetry and music, but of father and son:

Now, since it is my lot to have been born a poet, why does it seem strange to you that we, who are so closely united by blood, should pursue sister arts and kindred interests? Phoebus himself, wishing to part himself between us too, gave some gifts to me and others to my father; and, father and son, we share the possession of the divided god.¹⁵

Where Milton failed to adapt his classicism to his audience in “On the Death of a Fair Infant,” here he achieves a far more considerable degree of success.¹⁶ Although we have no extant evidence of a response from his father, the subtle attendance to the details of their relationship evident throughout the verse-letter makes it impossible that the elder Milton’s response could have been any other than one of appreciation, and possibly admiration, for the skill with which his son had plied his high artistic language to create a piece that so thoroughly reflected and celebrated their relationship.

Milton’s employment of elevated scholarly language in his correspondence was not wholly original, as classical authors had emphasized the priority of elevated discourse in the interactions between scholars long before Milton attached himself to the discussion.¹⁷ However, Milton’s personal interpretation

15. John Milton, “Ad Patrem,” in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 84.

16. M. N. K. Mander describes this verse-letter as “a brilliant *apologia pro arte sua*, in itself witness to his poetic ability.” For a full exploration of Milton’s adept conflation of poetry and music and the effect of his early exposure to music on his poetry see M. N. K. Mander “The ‘Epistola ad Patrem’: Milton’s Apology for Poetry,” *Milton Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1989): 159.

17. Gregory Chaplin provides a fascinating overview of classical views of elevated friendships (see Gregory Chaplin, “One Flesh, One Heart, One Soul’: Renaissance Friendship and Miltonic Marriage,” *Modern Philology* 99, no. 2 (2001): 267-69) while Cedric B. Brown embarks upon an examination of specific instances of language offerings within those elevated friendships (see Cedric B. Brown, “Letters, verse letters, and gift-texts,” in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge

of that emphasis, as manifested in the two texts just examined, feature original characteristics that sharply differentiate his version from the archetypal one. The most striking of these characteristics revolves around the question of audience. Whereas classical tradition dictated only that scholars employ their high language in interaction with their intellectual cohorts, Milton did not reserve elevated language for his fellow scholars; on the contrary, as in his offerings to his father and sister, we see him attempting to universalize this language as a means of elevating not only his scholarly relationships, but also the non-scholarly relationships he most valued.

When reexamined in light of this discovery, both of the two pieces just reviewed—but particularly “On the Death of a Fair Infant”—assume new significance within Milton’s canon and further display new features to our probing eyes. Indeed, when approached through the lens we have just been establishing, the ornamental language of “Fair Infant,” so baffling when read solely as an attempt at consolation, becomes comprehensible as an exercise in elevation. In writing this poem on the subject of his niece’s death to gift to his sister, Milton was attempting not only to console his sister but also to communicate the deep regard in which he held both his sister and his niece, an effect he believed he could only accomplish through elevated language. The discordance of the attempt fell less to Milton’s motives and more to his immaturity—to his lack of experience in modulating his pen to establish a common language with his audience. Likewise, “Ad Patrem,” already an admirable piece that is far better modulated than “Fair Infant” to the personal audience for whom it is intended, shines brighter through this lens. While Milton’s attentiveness to rhetorical positioning within this poem is admirable through any reading, the intensity of his desire to establish a common language—and the integrity of his belief that Muse-inspired song might form that language—becomes all the more compelling in light of this new interpretive position.

Thus, we begin to see that the young Milton, as he struggled toward adulthood, used language as a reaching out point, a means of feeling about for relationships and establishing rapport of mind with those he desired to engage. Moreover, by extending the language of scholarship to his personal relationships, Milton proved how unusually high his estimation of that language’s value towered. To employ this language in scholarly interactions was to involve oneself in a longstanding tradition—to play at a clever game and possibly even to engage in

University Press, 2010), 35-45.)

self-aggrandizing posturing. To employ that language in personal relationships, however, evidenced an inordinate trust in the language itself, and further a linkage of it not only to cerebral activities, but also to deep feelings and emotions. Thus, we see that the language of scholarship, holding as it did profound meaning to Milton, had become integral to Milton's attempts to establish meaning in his personal relationships; high language and deep feeling had quietly conjoined in Milton's mind.

The most dramatic instance, of course, of Milton employing heightened academic language to elevate a valued relationship may be found in his decades-long correspondence with his closest friend and fellow schoolmate, Charles Diodati. Indeed, it was likely the success of his early scholarly missives to Diodati that emboldened Milton to extend a similar offering to his sister, and it was certainly through his correspondence with Diodati that Milton cultivated the adaptive skill so boldly on display in "Ad Patrem." The friendship between Diodati and Milton commenced while both lads were students at St. Paul's School where, together, they studied the language-offerings of scholarship.¹⁸ Although several months younger than Milton, Diodati moved through the program more swiftly, and his advancement to university prior to Milton's completion at St. Paul's precipitated the intermittent correspondence that would prove the basis for and chief example of Milton's treasured conceptions of companionate love.¹⁹

While this love was undoubtedly rooted in a mutual enjoyment of the other's personality, it was equally predicated upon their possession of and delight in the language of scholarship. Although not as technically proficient as his more meticulous friend, Diodati was a polyglot of no mean ability and he, like Milton, was fluent in Latin and Greek.²⁰ Moreover, their participation in the same scholastic program at St. Paul's School ensured that their knowledge of fundamental texts, both classical and modern, would have been very similar if not almost identical. Thus, in discovering Diodati, Milton discovered a person in whom a responsive spirit was wed not only to a ready wit, but also to a love of the same language that Milton himself valued. Perhaps more than any other human that Milton would ever meet, Diodati *spoke Milton's language*, and their friendship

18. Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 21.

19. Chaplin, "Education," 287.

20. Campbell and Corns drily remark of Diodati's two extant letters to Milton that, "the Greek... is unambitious and not perfect, and in one of the letters there is a marginal correction in what seems to be Milton's hand." (See Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 31.)

bound tightly upon that shared language, expanding to heights neither could have achieved singly through an exchange of intellect that was also an encrypted language of love.

A full sense of the vivacity, the urbanity, and the jubilation at play in this exchange cannot be provided in so short a space as we have here. Cedric C. Brown, a scholar who has plunged the exchanges' depths in several lengthy analyses, summatively describes the correspondence as one in which "mastery of Ovidian elegiac style sits easily with the role-play and the manner of a familiar letter to a friend."²¹ In their affectionate missals, the men write of themselves, of each other, of meeting together and of the pleasure they anticipate those meetings will entail; equally as often, however, their writing tends towards the scholastic subjects and forms that bound them together. Their exchanges are often witty, often artistic, often dramatic, but always calculated towards the engagement of their scholastic selves. Occasionally this emphasis manifests through a discussion of their studies, as when Milton, in his last extant letter to Diodati, grandiosely describes his recent absorption of Greek and Italian history before begging Diodati to send him a history of Genoa.²² Milton even makes Cambridge itself the subject of a witty elegy in which he playfully muses upon the nature of exile and complains of the university city's inelegance.²³

The majority of their correspondence, however, concerns itself with writing, both as a subject and as a mode. Indeed, the two men seem fully to have recognized the rare advantages of their friendship as a platform for composition, and they capitalized on the opportunity it provided them to air their full linguistic capabilities before their most "fit" possible audience. As Cedric Brown further proclaims in his study of their textual exchanges, "in exercising their linguis-

21. Cedric C. Brown, "John Milton and Charles Diodati: Reading the Textual Exchanges of Friends," in *Young Milton*, ed. Edward Jones (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013), 115.

22. John Milton to Charles Diodati, September 23, 1637, in *Milton's Familiar Letters*, trans. John Hall (Philadelphia: E. Littell, 1829), 33-34.

23. In "Elegia Prima" Milton makes light of his temporary "exile" from Cambridge, proclaiming, "At present I feel no concern about returning to the sedgy Cam and I am troubled by no nostalgia for my forbidden quarters there. The bare fields, so niggardly of pleasant shade, have no charm for me. How wretchedly suited that place is to the worshippers of Phoebus!" After thus jibing at the city's environs, he then offers a contrasting view of his hometown and current seat, London, where he professes to derive deep pleasure from the great wealth of art, theater, and beauty that grace her streets. (See John Milton, "Elegia Prima," in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 8.)

tic skills, the two young students often wrote in verse, thus raising the level of difficulty in congenial competition.”²⁴ The mere fact that they could write to one another in this vein and be understood amplified their pleasure in the writing and inspired them to an exchange of pieces that sprawled across the vales of Latin, Greek, and Italian. The men wrote letters, verse-letters, elegies, and sonnets to one another, always expecting—and sometimes soliciting—better in return.

Perhaps the best example of this dynamic exchange may be found in “Elegia Sexta,” a Latin elegy Milton wrote to Diodati in 1630. In his letter of the previous month, Diodati had evidently sent through a number of his own poems together with a complaint regarding the mirthful occasions that had distracted his pen from its occupation and a request that Milton write a song to him in return. What he received in reply was a Latin elegy written in a tone of jocular but prolusion-like pugilism upon the question of his poetic impotence. With the assured ease characteristic of their correspondence, Milton flatly contradicts Diodati’s position that merry-making is the enemy of poetry-making, remarking, “But why do you complain that poetry is a fugitive from wine and feasting? Song loves Bacchus and Bacchus loves songs.”²⁵ He then proceeds to marshal a litany of classical evidence to controvert Diodati’s claims and, eventually, to generously praise his friend’s poetry by naming the gods as the source of his inspiration: “In your single self the favor of Bacchus, Apollo, and Ceres is united. No wonder, then, if the three gods by their combined potency should have brought forth such sweet songs through you!”²⁶ Milton’s wholesale lack of explanation of his prolusion-elegy signals that this type of extravagance was common in their friendship—was appreciated and possibly even anticipated.

Nor does the significance of “Elegia Sexta” as an example of the Diodati-Milton exchange end here. In this letter that is itself an act of poetry, poetry itself is enthroned as the regal theme. This theme manifests both in the abstract as Milton’s pen cavorts betwixt the gods of poetry, the poetic temperament, and the lifestyle of the poet with playful panache, as well as in the specific when Milton writes revealingly of the poetic endeavors on which he has been engaged—the verses he has been stocking up for Diodati’s pleasure and evaluation. Indeed, Brown proclaims of this poem that, “*Elegy 6* shows Milton’s practice of submitting poems for Diodati’s comment,” a practice he observes “became very import-

24. Brown, “John Milton and Charles Diodati,” 109.

25. John Milton, “Elegia Sexta,” in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 50-51.

26. Milton “Elegia Sexta,” 51.

ant” in their developing relationship.²⁷ In this elegy alone, Milton hints definitely at his English ode “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” and his Italian sonnet sequence, the fourth of which was explicitly addressed to Diodati. Milton clearly valued Diodati’s engagement with his work, just as Diodati sought Milton’s; this ability to act as a meaningful audience for one another was wholly rooted in their shared languages and was thus another means by which language advanced their friendship.

Among the metaphorical languages the men shared was undoubtedly numbered that disseminated by Renaissance friendship, which was, itself, based on classical conceptions of male friendships transmuted into sixteenth- and seventeenth- century forms. This ideal of friendship, Gregory Chaplin explains, held that “a friendship between two men, if practiced properly, was the perfect human relationship,” one that was characterized by an “absolute equality and [an] intellectual and spiritual intimacy.”²⁸ This description sounds very like the friendship between Diodati and Milton, a perspective Chaplin presses as not only his own but also as Milton’s, claiming, “Milton saw his intimacy with Diodati in this light: they were partners on a divinely inspired quest toward virtue and self-perfection.”²⁹ Indeed, Milton himself frames their friendship as one that is compulsive to him on this very basis of questing after perfection when he posits that his love for Diodati wells up involuntarily in him, explaining, “whenever I find any one who despises the opinions of the vulgar, in their erroneous estimation of things, and dares to judge, and speak, and be that which the highest wisdom has in every age taught to be best, impelled by some necessity, I join myself to him.”³⁰ In Diodati, Milton found a man sculpted by application to scholarship, schooled in wisdom and uprightness, in pursuit of highest beauty; their language-mediated relationship was predicated upon and involved their usage of language as a sculpting tool, deliberately deployed to improve the inner man.

In writing within the vein of this archetypal relationship, the men adhered to its ideals while improving brilliantly upon them in exchanges that the multilingual Miltonist John Hale describes as characterized, particularly on Milton’s part, by “Ovidian flourish[es].”³¹ Participation in the Renaissance friend-

27. Brown, “John Milton and Charles Diodati,” 114.

28. Chaplin, “One Flesh, One Heart,” 267, 269.

29. *Ibid.*, 276.

30. Milton to Diodati, 31-32.

31. Hale, *Milton’s Languages*, 35. In this passage, Hale embarks upon an intensive examination of Ovidian traits in Milton’s canon.

ship tradition involved a number of tropes including intellectual banter, which dominates their writing, and role playing, which appears as both Milton and Diodati cast Milton as a more restrained, disciplined scholar and Diodati as the more vivacious, spontaneous spirit.³² Indeed, portions of their communications rise to extreme levels of playfulness such that they might even be regarded as examples of Milton's toffish theory that intellectualism is an ineludible prerequisite for jest. The men posture and tease, proclaim and demur, and engage in the sorts of reversals and ironies that only a close friend could appreciate, as when Milton responds to Diodati's request for a song by complaining "but why does your Muse provoke mine, instead of permitting her to seek the obscurity that she craves?" before proceeding to catalogue the many poems that his Muse has stored up for Diodati's at the end of his letter.³³ For his part, Diodati cajoles Milton over his unwavering application to his books and playfully tempts him to a day of mirthful relaxation, which he justifies by declaring it will allow them to "feast on one another's philosophical and well-bred words."³⁴ This exchange highlights the easy intellectualism the two enjoyed through their mutual knowledge of one another, a knowledge that allows them to anticipate the thoughts of the other, divulge their plans for future writings, and *experiment with their friendship* through experiments in word-play across their many gift-texts. The men partake in the forms of friendships provided them by tradition but improve upon them by insistently elevating both the traditions and themselves while striving towards a more soulish connection through the tongue of scholarship.

Tragically, that soulish connection was snapped after nearly twenty years of careful cultivation when Diodati died in 1638 while Milton was engaged upon his first and only tour of the European continent.³⁵ Upon his return to England, Milton's grief, though inexpressible, found expression in a final gift-act to Diodati—*Epitaphium Damonis*. In this text, Milton memorializes Diodati's memory through the grief-stricken tongue of the shepherd Thyrsis, who mourns the loss

32. Brown discusses these tropes—and Milton and Diodati's participation in them—in his examination of their textual exchange, noting particularly the way in which the codes of Renaissance friendship "govern the discourse" of Milton and Diodati's correspondence. He further identifies Diodati's early letters to Milton and Milton's September 1637 letter to Diodati as significant examples of their ritual role-play. (See Brown, "John Milton and Charles Diodati," 109, 113.)

33. Milton, "Elegia Sexta," 50.

34. This translation of a line from Diodati's earliest Greek letter to Milton appears to be Brown's own. (See Brown, "John Milton and Charles Diodati," 111.)

35. Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 135.

of his closest companion, Damon, in a series of shattered wails. In his evaluation of *Epitaphium Damonis*, Raymond Mackenzie observes that Thyrsis—and possibly Milton himself as represented by Thyrsis—seems to have “slipped into despair that is a kind of living death,” further asserting that we see a oneness with his companion in the way that Thyrsis seems to have suffered a death blow of his own; an erasure of his will to live.³⁶ Thyrsis’s pain is so profound, so acute, that, rather than enticing its onlookers to join his lamentations in the role of mourners, instead rouses in those onlookers an astonishment that causes them to gape in wonder as Thyrsis’s voice rises to an acme of anguish over his singular loss of his singular friend:

But what at last is to become of me? What faithful companion will stay by my side as you always did when the cold was cruel and the frost thick on the ground, and when the herbs were dying of thirst under a consuming sun... Who now is to beguile my days with conversation and song? Go home unfed, for your master has no time for you, my lambs. To whom shall I confide my heart? Who will teach me to alleviate my mordant cares and shorten the long night with delightful conversation while the ripe pear simmers before the grateful fire?³⁷

This passage reveals Milton expending the fever of his grief in the full strength of his lyrical eloquence. Milton’s pain is palpable, and it pervades even the most inconsequential aspects of his life. His words are haunting in their plaintiveness—and in their simplicity. The poem is, simply, a paean of pain. A closer examination of the poem, however, reveals that pain is not the only presence channeled in its body; in its lines we see not only the visage of grief, but also the resurgence of the hallmark themes of Milton and Diodati’s singular relationship. The intellectual aspect of their relationship surfaces in Milton’s clamor for the one who would “teach” him; their easy comradery lurks in his moan for beguiling “conversation and song.” The playful linguistic role-play that had proven such a delight in their correspondence reemerges in Milton’s almost bitter reflection on the inefficacy to his dead friend of the language-roles they had mutually prized, a reflection that is expressed through a conditional clause that is actually, elementally, a stark expression of doubt—a desperate query to the gods as to—“if there be any profit

36. Raymond N. MacKenzie, “Rethinking Rhyme, Signifying Friendship: Milton’s *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*,” *Modern Philology* 106, no. 3 (2009): 548.

37. John Milton, “*Epitaphium Damonis*,” in *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1957), 133.

in having cultivated the ancient faith and piety and the arts of Pallas Athene, and in having possessed a comrade who was a poet.”³⁸ The pain of the poet’s loss has caused him to doubt the schema on which his identity-role is based, and Thyrsis here grapples not only with the death of his friend, but also with the assault that death has launched upon his understanding of universal justice—his belief that those who through application, deprivation, and discipline pursue the arts of Pallas Athene will receive any reward of the gods for their agonizing self-consecration. Through these grapplings with the gods, Milton engages in a role-play that is more than play and embarks on a search for meaning that yields a tortured yet clear definition of role: Thyrsis—Milton—is not simply a friend mourning a friend; he is a poet mourning a poet.

Near the conclusion of the piece, a subtler theme from their correspondence emerges when Milton embarks upon a catalogue of the subjects to which he intends to address his pen as he attempts to function in the wake of his grief.³⁹ Upon an initial reading, this section of the text jars upon the inward ear, erupting forcibly as it does from a rubble of grief and focusing perversely on Milton alone rather than on Milton’s love for or loss of Diodati. However, when the piece is read in light of the men’s previous correspondence, we recognize in this passage not a burst of ego on Milton’s part but rather a continuation of the men’s treasured habit of sharing their writing with one another. This passage, though it hardly mentions Diodati, is the deepest possible description of him, for this passage casts him finally and forever as Milton’s confidence-receiver, the perfect audience of a poet’s Muse.

The final manner in which the piece evidences the themes of Milton and Diodati’s scholarly love for one another is in its very essence—in its status as a high classic pastoral elegy written in Latin and in its transmutation of the men themselves into Greek figures within a classical landscape. As such, *Epitaphium Damonis* stands as the final offering in a lofty chain of gift-texts, an offering that is not only an eternal memorialization of the themes that had both constructed and been constructed by that relationship—an ultimate summation of the singular elements of their friendship—but also the greatest, most sophisticated

38. Milton, “Epitaphium Damonis,” 133.

39. His catalogue proceeds thus: “I, for my part, am resolved to tell the story of the Trojan ships in the Rutupian sea and of the ancient kingdom of Inogene, the daughter of Pandrasus, and of the chiefs, Brennus and Arviragus, and of old Belinus, and of the Armorican settlers who came at last under British law. Then I shall tell of Igraine pregnant with Arthur by fatal deception, the counterfeiting of Gorlois’ features and arms by Merlin’s treachery.” (See Milton, “Epitaphium Damonis,” 137.)

text that this friendship produced. As that summation of the highest elements of the highest friendship Milton ever achieved, *Epitaphium Damonis* stands as an unparalleled testimony of the many ways in which Milton imagined language as a means of elevating, commemorating, and sculpting relationships. Moreover, as that testimony, *Epitaphium Damonis* provides us with incomparable insight into Milton's conception of the relationship between scholarly language and ideal companionship, for in producing a piece that so thoroughly captured their friendship, Milton shed light on the salient themes of that friendship—themes that, when examined, reveal a startling reversal.

Heretofore in this essay, we have clearly established that Milton utilized languages to elevate and commemorate his relationships and have further demonstrated that his conception of an ideal relationship was one in which the measured languages of scholarship reigned supreme. This conception resulted in his employment of a variety of language practices to reinforce and magnify those relationships, practices that we see captured ineffably in *Epitaphium Damonis*. However, a closer examination of the hallmarks of Miltonic friendship unmasks a further dimension to its integration of elevated language and feeling. This examination reveals that, within its system, friendship was not only *elevated* by but also itself *serviced* language. The relationship between elevating scholarly language and the ideal companionate relationship was not one in which only one member benefited; just as surely as the usage of scholarly language elevated the ideal friendship, so too the ideal friendship was one whose mechanics acted as a catalyst to developing the skilled usage of that scholarly language.

A brief recapitulation of the themes of Milton's friendship with Diodati serves to reinforce this reversal. Brown's observation that "in exercising their linguistic skills, the two young students often wrote in verse, thus raising the level of difficulty in congenial competition," earlier employed to demonstrate the enthusiasm Diodati and Milton felt upon finding a fit partner who spoke the language prerequisite to appreciating those texts, now also highlights the manner in which the relationship drove each man to produce better, more finely spun instances of scholarly work.⁴⁰ Not only this, but the relationship between the students also elevated the materials they could both write and *have understood*, a phenomena whose rarity is proven by Milton's unavailing attempts to establish audience with his sister and father.

Indeed, the effect of possessing perpetual audience with Diodati cannot

40. Brown, "John Milton and Charles Diodati," 109.

be overstated when evaluating Milton's productions of this time, for the knowledge that Diodati stood and waited for his texts was clearly a source of pleasure and inspiration for Milton.⁴¹ An author can feel almost no greater spur to writing than the knowledge that an eager, intelligent reader awaits one's offering, and, just as the chief desire of friendship is to be known and valued upon the basis of intimate knowledge, the chief desire of authorship is to find an audience who will read one's work and both know and value what it is that one has read. In Diodati, these roles of friend and audience merged seamlessly, providing Milton with an impetus to write. In this sense, Diodati, as the fit reader, can have figured second only to the inspiration—or indeed have performed the role—of Milton's muse. That Diodati was that fit reader-friend for Milton is proven over and over again not only by the texts addressed to him, but also by the many texts Milton eagerly shared and spoke of sharing with him. Perhaps the most blatant example of the latter—and of Diodati's perpetual reader-presence in Milton's mind—is Milton's Italian sonnet sequence which, though ostensibly written for an Italian woman, gives textual evidence of having been written with the multilingual Diodati in view as its fittest audience.⁴²

Progressing further into the theme of multilingual exchange, we find that this shared multilingualism itself furnished significant scope to the friendship's efficacy as a sculpting tool for advancing each man's practice of language. As John Hale has explained in his inimitable work *Milton's Languages*, scholars of the seventeenth century inherited a centuries-long struggle between the various classical and modern languages, each of which carried particular cultural and classist connotations and each of which was favored within particular genres of writ-

41. Milton himself explicitly describes his delight in his audience in his earliest preserved missive to Diodati: "There is great delight, believe me, in the fact that remote regions have bred a heart that is so loving and a head so devoted to me, that I have a claim for a charming comrade upon a distant land, which is willing soon to return him to me at my bidding." See Milton, "Elegia Prima," 7.

42. In his examination of the sequence, John Hale identifies Diodati as a primary audience of these poems while Brown proposes him as their most quintessential reader: "Who better to relish the playful change than half-Italian Charles? The confession about neglecting religious reading also fits, both friends having been thought of for the ministry. So does the bold literary exploration: Diodati, friend of multiculturalism, stands out from the skeptical, more insular others. There may be self-reflexive revelation in the series, and Diodati, from the community that probably supported Milton's Italian studies when he was immersing himself in Italian sonnets, may be the supportive reader best placed to understand." (See Brown, "John Milton and Charles Diodati, 116.) For Hale's evaluation of the sequence's linguistic intricacies, see Hale, *Milton's Languages*, 49.

ing.⁴³ To write in any given language, therefore, was not simply to write in that language, but rather to participate in a complex semiotic system; one occupied a different language-role, exuded a different author-persona when one wrote in one of the several languages one could command. An author's decision regarding which language to employ in any given piece of prose, poetry, or correspondence, therefore, both reflected his sense of and determined his position within the scene of letters.⁴⁴ Language choice was as much an act of identity construction as one of textual construction.

Clearly, then, experimenting with and choosing language was a significant endeavor for the would-be author and, indeed, was linked to determining the vocational office of that author. It is at this juncture that the Diodati-Milton friendship once again emerges as inimitable, for the fact that the two men shared at least four languages (English, Greek, Latin, and Italian) meant that, in addition to engaging in role play as a means for cementing their Renaissance friendship, the men were also able to use their friendship as a scene for engaging in role-play of an *authorial* nature. With Diodati, Milton was able to explore multiple presentations of himself—to be known in many faces—and he utilized their friendship as a means to engage in self-constructionist toying with language-mediated roles. Moreover, the fact that Diodati spoke many of the languages that Milton knew meant that the friendship provided Milton with the rare opportunity of having his many-languaged offerings evaluated by a *single* ear, one that could develop familiarity with his strengths and weaknesses across languages. So successful was this role-playing that, by the time Milton wrote his last text to Diodati, it had enabled Milton to make his decision regarding his vocational future: his pipe would

43. In the introductory chapter to his scintillating examination of Milton's multilingualism, Hale provides a miniscule history of various languages' battle for dominance in the linguistic hierarchy of European scholasticism dating from the year 1300 to Milton's present. Unsurprisingly, Latin often held sway in this milieu although, Hale notes, by the seventeenth century French was favored by many cultures in the realm of poetry and England had adopted its own vernacular for legal and ecclesiastical matters. (See Hale, *Milton's Languages*, 4.)

44. Hale remarks of Milton's own participation within this milieu that, "Languages grant access for their reader to intellectual and spiritual diversity. Milton seized his chances, in an all-round way worthy of humanist aspiration. Languages in use release the speaker or writer into new roles, and a modified self. Milton relished this release, at times for its own sake, often later to play a series of humanist roles. Surveying the number of his languages and of the genres in which he wrote (and not forgetting sub-genres like satire and insult within his major work), I infer that he relished the entering by his languages into as many personae as possible. They show he shared the renaissance eagerness for versatility." (See Hale, *Milton's Languages*, 15.)

sound forth, he declared, “a British theme to [its] native Muses.”⁴⁵

Even this declaration of the future is, in itself, an example of how the relationship serviced the language. To bestow the confidence of one’s plans for future attempts at language is surely one of the highest expressions of friendship an author can bestow, but just as certainly it is a means of hammering out—of testing and trying—those plans. Declaring the nature of his writings, both real and imagined, to Diodati as he does in *Elegia Sexta* and *Epitaphium Damonis* enabled Milton to feel what it was to be the author of those texts and thus to make decisions about that authorship. The men’s divulgence of language-aspirations to one another not only ratified their sense of friendship but also, in much the same way that their playful competitiveness led them to produce better texts, inspired them to aspire to greater linguistic heights. Thus in his last extant letter to Diodati, Milton may confide, “Do you ask what I am thinking of?—so may Providence protect me—of immortality! What am I doing? ‘I am pluming,’ and meditate a flight,” and, through writing it, make it something nearer reality.⁴⁶

Although the manner in which each of these employments of their friendship served to improve Milton and Diodati’s language practices is individually evident, it is only as we collect those practices together that we begin to grasp how forcefully they demonstrate the manner in which Milton and Diodati utilized tropes within their friendship to improve their language. This discovery enables us to perceive the underlying theme of those practices—the final means by which the friendship advanced each’s language. In reading Diodati’s desire that the men might “feast on one another’s philosophical and well-bred words” and in witnessing Milton’s proclamation of his love for Diodati as proceeding compulsively from his love of truth’s beauties, we realize that not simply the practices of the friendship but also the *friendship itself—the bond of love* between the men—serviced their pursuit of elevated language.⁴⁷ The knowledge of the other—each’s simple existence as a vessel of virtue, language, and beauty—served itself as a wellspring of inspiration; the communion of their spirits fueled each man’s creative urge—their ability to conceive and construct linguistic beauty. Their love for one another was linked to a sharp hunger for intellectual, generative creativity, which they found in the other’s rejuvenating philosophical companionship. Through this simple linkage between two souls joined in worship of beauty, those

45. Milton, “Epitaphium Damonis,” 137.

46. Milton to Diodati, 33.

47. Diodati translated in Brown, “John Milton and Charles Diodati,” 111. For Milton’s professions see Milton to Diodati, 32

souls might dwell within an elevated plane of scholarship occupied only by themselves—each other the dominant figure, their muses interlinked.⁴⁸

Thus, the loss of Diodati was not simply the loss of a friend, but the wreckage of a scene of creation, an intellectual Eden. We see the effects of this blow to Milton's creative landscape in *Epitaphium Damonis*, in which he declares, "I do not know what grand song my pipe was sounding—it is now eleven nights and a day—perhaps I was setting my lips to new pipes, but their fastenings snapped and they fell asunder and could carry the grave no further."⁴⁹ These lines bespeak not merely soulish sadness but linguistic disorientation. The loss of the speaker's friend has interrupted his song; with the disappearance of his coparticipant in the creative endeavour, his tune also has vanished.⁵⁰ In this, his ideal friendship, Milton transformed that friendship into nothing less than an exalted handmaiden of his Muse.

That Milton's view of relationships represented a complex interlinkage of love and language has been amply demonstrated by the preceding pages. The degree to which Milton was cognizant of the extent of that interlinkage is, however, a matter for speculation. He was certainly conscious of and, indeed, explicit in his linkage of elevated language to love, having celebrated the elevating effect that the language of scholarship has upon relationships in the passage from "Prolusion VII" quoted earlier: "What is more pleasant—what can be imagined

48. In their respective pieces on Milton's relationship with Diodati, John Rumrich and Gregory Chaplin each separately identify this intense bond as an instance of "Platonic eroticism," a term that clangs suggestively upon our modern ears, but which both Rumrich and Chaplin take pains to establish did not necessarily entail sexual behavior in classical dialogue. Indeed, Chaplin assures us, "As Socrates describes it using several myths, *eros* stems from the soul's longing to regain sight of the realm of absolute beauty and knowledge," while Rumrich relies on both Plato and Freud in his clarification that, "although it is risky to speak synthetically and summarily of such a large, complex, long-lived, and easily misconstrued notion, Plato and Freud agree on this: *eros* is a constitutional human drive motivating creative endeavor, one that is expressed in sexual reproduction, but also in the arts of civilization." In this sense—in the sense that Milton and Diodati's relationship was characterized by an amorous passion for beauty and ardent pursuit of its creation—that relationship was erotic. (See Chaplin, "One Heart, One Flesh," 274 and John Rumrich, "The Erotic Milton," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41, no. 2 (1999): 131.)

49. Milton, "Epitaphium Damonis," 137.

50. In her brief sketch of Milton's life, Annabel Patterson notes just such an interruption in Milton's productivity, musing immediately following her analysis of "Epitaphium Damonis" that "After [the writing of Epitaphium] there were no signs of poetic activity for several years." (See Annabel Patterson, "Biography," in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.)

more delightful *than the talks of learned and serious men together.*"⁵¹ Indeed, as the entire weight of Milton's canon proves, Milton believed that the language of scholarship—the reasoned pursuit of knowledge—improved all it touched. But was Milton aware that the reverse was also true in his practices—that the notion of companionship he idealized was one which served to elevate his usage of language? Or was this motion the unconscious act of a man for whom language was the greatest love? We have seen that Milton used his language as a reaching out point—was it equally his language as his heart that sought a companion?

The answers to these questions may be impossible to determine. What is clear is that Milton believed and, indeed, demonstrated, that language and love where *conjoined* are both *improved*. Love and language were in a sense a two-handed engine; Milton's love found its greatest expression in his offerings of language, and, where he was able to share the language he loved, there he loved best. Where he loved he attempted to give that love higher life in language, and he best loved those friendships that best served his language. Whether ultimately either language or love rose higher than its mate in Milton's estimation may never be determined; that they resided in indissoluble union in his language-loving mind, his own eloquent testimony places beyond any shadow of dispute. As that testimony proves, love and language found truly in Milton's mind the idyllic landscape of companionate paradise that he, through them, strove to achieve throughout his long and lyrical lifetime; in this manner Milton's life elevated his ideals' strains just as surely as their presiding presences had so enriched his own.

51. Milton, "Proclusion VII," 625.

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