

THE PLEASURE IN ERROR:
EARLY MODERN ROMANCE AND POETIC FUTILITY

BY

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This dissertation by Corey William McEleney is accepted in its present form
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Vita

Corey William McEleney was born on October 22, 1982, in Torrance, California. After graduating with valedictorian honors from Dana Hills High School in Dana Point, California, he attended the University of California, Los Angeles, where he received a B.A. in English, with Departmental Highest Honors, in 2004. Since the fall of 2005, he has been a graduate student in the English Department at Brown University; he received his M.A. in 2009. He has been the recipient of the John Bragin Prize for Best Essay on Shakespeare and His Work at UCLA, the Ahmanson Undergraduate Research Fellowship at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles, the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching at Brown, and the Jean Starr Untermeyer Dissertation Fellowship at Brown. Articles based on his research are forthcoming in *English Literary History* and in a collection of essays on the life and work of Thomas Nashe.

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us is the knight and which of us the damsel in distress. Perhaps both of us are simply and always court jesters. In any case, that very ambiguity, I think, is what propels our story forward. I'd also like to thank her father, Robert Sheahen, for helping me see the contours and limits of this project.

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And sitting all in seates about me round
With pleasant tales (fit for that idle stound)
They cast in course to waste the wearie houres:
Some tolde of Ladies, and their Paramoures;
Some of braue Knights, and their renowned Squires;
Some of the Faeries and their strange attires;
And some of Giaunts hard to be beleued,
That the delight thereof me much releued.

EDMUND SPENSER

INTRODUCTION

The Pleasure in Error

This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant. It rolls this way and that like someone who has lost his way, who doesn't know where he is going, having strayed from the correct path, the right direction, the rule of rectitude, the norm; but also like someone who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum.

JACQUES DERRIDA

"No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en," says Tranio to Lucentio in *The Taming of the Shrew*.¹ The two have just arrived in Padua in order to study moral philosophy.

Tranio's comment comes at the climax of a brief speech in which he warns his master against being too severe in the study of virtue: "Let's be no stoics nor no stocks, I pray, / Or so devote to Aristotle's checks / As Ovid be an outcast quite abjured" (1.1.31–33). A healthy diet of the arts, particularly poetry and music, he recommends, will help counteract the austerity of moral philosophy. In suggesting that poetry will be most profitable not in spite but because of its pleasurable enticements, Tranio repeats the conventional logic of Renaissance defenses of literature.

The following study introduces a twist to that logic: even if pleasure is necessary for the production of profit, as any number of Renaissance writers reiterated to the point

¹ Quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997); citations will appear in the text.

of banality, there's still no assurance that profit will grow where pleasure *is* taken. Reconsidering the early modern period's official pronouncements about poetry's social use-value, I argue in these pages that contemporary critics have overlooked what such statements of intention are intended to guard against: the possibility that the pleasure of poetry is pointless at best and poisonous at worst. My elaboration of this argument will center on texts written in, and on debates about, the mode of romance, which I define here less as a genre than as an anti-narrative impulse or drive invested more in the journey than in the destination. Building on Jeff Dolven's assertion that romance is "the literary kind most tendentiously foreign to school"—most tendentiously foreign, that is, to the demand that poetry be profitably instructive—I demonstrate how and why romance is the literary kind most tendentiously hospitable to pleasure.² In doing so, I hope to provide a perverse perspective on early modern defenses of poetry, one that brings into view the shadow of futility that haunts any attempt to justify literature's civic value.

The vocabulary of "profit" that early modern writers attach to poetry's value would seem to suggest that such concerns are best analyzed by way of a socioeconomic or more broadly sociological approach. As my use of the word "perverse" is meant to imply, however, my own take on the subject is concerned more with the sexual implications of textual pleasure.³ In recent years, a number of critics have addressed the

² Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 8. My project thus unfolds in the space opened up by what Dolven deliberately doesn't cover. "It is the central commonplace of Renaissance literary theory," he writes at the opening of his book, "that the purpose of poetry is to please and instruct. Criticism's stewardship of poetic pleasure is not my subject here, at least not directly; what I am concerned with is teaching, toward which our attitude is often confused" (1).

³ This statement is not intended to suggest that these two approaches are mutually exclusive, but rather that a socioeconomic approach to Renaissance debates over poetic value has already been done: see, for e.g., Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000). Later in this introduction I'll have more to say about how my project differs from Matz's.

antisocial dimensions of early modern representations of perverse, queer, or non-reproductive sexuality.⁴ My study contributes to this conversation by paying attention less to the literature of queerness in the Renaissance and more to the queerness of literature itself. One of the guiding axioms of this project is that literariness and queerness are often linked through the mechanisms of Western culture's hedonophobia: both are always open to the charges of vanity, sterility, narcissism, passivity, and futility; both are seen as distractions away from the aims of (re)production; and both activate defense mechanisms that justify their pleasures, but only at the cost of bringing them in line with the straight and narrow path toward virtuous ends. As Stephen Guy-Bray explains: "Like sex, . . . texts are subjected to the calculus of profit and loss and are expected to lead to something, to be productive—not, indeed, to produce pleasure, since textual pleasure, like sexual pleasure, can only ever be a by-product of this process."⁵ What interests me about Renaissance writers is their persistent, though often unacknowledged or unarticulated, suspicion that textual pleasure, contrary to such expectations, may lead to nothing of value.

My aim, however, is not merely to provide a counterintuitive portrait of early modern English literary culture, not merely to recover or to add to the picture what contemporary scholarship leaves out. There's also a metacritical dimension to this project

⁴ See, for e.g., Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000); Graham Hammill, *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000); Daniel Juan Gil, *Before Intimacy: Asocial Sexuality in Early Modern England* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006); and the essays collected in *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011). As Schwarz writes: "Antisocial sexuality, as part of the early modern period's articulation of the abject, compels representation, appearing throughout the texts that—in their governing assumptions, their generic imperatives, their happy endings—should make it unthinkable" (8).

⁵ Stephen Guy-Bray, *Against Reproduction: Where Renaissance Texts Come From* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009), 15. For a different take on this issue, see David Glimp, *Increase and Multiply: Governing Cultural Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003).

that asks what such a distorted view of Renaissance humanism might tell us about our own relationship to the pleasures of reading poetry and literature.⁶ “In our present moment,” Barbara Johnson has written, “the one thing all critics seem to agree about is the danger and political retrogradedness of Art for Art’s Sake—literature detached from any connection with a referent.”⁷ The near-universality of this position suggests that the distrust of aesthetic pleasure in the name of ideology critique has itself become an ideological imperative. As such, it demands nothing less than a long-overdue critique. Whether *like* early modern England or *because* of early modern England (and this must, at least for the time being, remain an open question), contemporary Anglo-American critics operate according to an ends-oriented understanding of literature. Such an approach may assuage our moral anxieties about the utility of literary work, especially in the face of the growing corporatization of the academy and the concomitant crisis in the humanities. Nevertheless, our adherence to an instrumental view of aesthetics calls out for examination, I argue, because it diminishes rather than enhances what is most “useful” or “valuable” about poetry: namely, its distinctive ability to place the very notions of “use” and “value” in ironic quotation marks. This study examines what’s at stake, for early modern as well as modern literary theory, in writing and reading against the demand that poetry should be written and read with an eye toward utility, profitability, productivity, and value.

⁶ It should be noted here that I use “poetry” and “literature” somewhat interchangeably, under the premise that what Renaissance England called “poetry,” by which they meant pleasurable fictions in general, is equivalent to what we moderns call “literature” (and that what we call “poetry” is equivalent to what Renaissance England called “versifying”). Thus, I tend to use “poetry” when discussing Renaissance contexts and “literature” when discussing contemporary contexts.

⁷ Barbara Johnson, “Art for Something’s Sake,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36.3 (2002): 28.

Early modern English literature provides an especially difficult—though, for the same reason, an exceptionally important—site for such a project, because mainstream humanist thought in the period seems to defend the utility of poetry as an unquestioned presupposition. In the sixteenth century, Protestant hedonophobia collides and colludes with its Platonic counterpart to deem the superficial pleasures of poetry as nothing less, and nothing more, than disreputable, and thus in dire need of containment—in dire need, that is, of redirection toward culturally valuable ends outside of its own errant pleasures. The need for containment only intensifies on the eve of the modern era due to the political, theological, and philosophical revolutions that shook up England during the seventeenth century. Unlike the French and English decadents of the nineteenth century as well as their twentieth-century modernist heirs, Renaissance writers cannot adopt aestheticism, the doctrine of art for art’s sake, as a principle of purpose.⁸

This does not mean, however, that poetic futility was utterly unthinkable in the Renaissance. Indeed, futility is a primary concern of Renaissance writing and, as I demonstrate, shapes and misshapes its forms as well. The issue is simply that it cannot be articulated or faced directly, given what Jeff Dolven calls “the cultural imperative that

⁸ I address this historical difference here in order to head off at the pass the inevitable charge of anachronism to which my efforts in this project remain vulnerable. In preparing and presenting this study, I’ve been accused more than once (by myself included) of projecting backward *onto* the Renaissance a modern(ist) art for art’s sake reading *of* the Renaissance. But the argument that an art for art’s sake approach is anachronistic to the early modern period is no less anachronistic to the early modern period than an art for art’s sake approach. It’s just that some anachronisms are more acceptable than others. In fact, the problem with an art for art’s sake approach, I suspect, isn’t its anachronism (although that charge is a convenient and effective cover) so much as its patent decadence, perversity, and queerness. It makes sense, then, that, in early modern studies, the critique of historicism’s suspicion of anachronism has been launched mainly by critics working in the last decade from avowed queer perspectives. See, for example, Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), esp. 5–7 and 177–78; Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006); and Madhavi Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[poets] use poetry to teach virtue.”⁹ Rather, worries over poetic futility come into relief mainly implicitly or indirectly, like a photographic negative, or like the relationship of pictorial ground to figure, or like the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. The obliqueness of futility’s relationship to dominant strands of early modern literary theory requires, then, a different kind of reading practice. This chiefly involves rejecting what Cynthia Marshall identifies as historicist critics’ tendency “to affirm the goals of early moralists who counseled rational, ethical self-direction rather than to pay adequate heed to their anxious accounts of what they fight against.”¹⁰ It is necessary, in other words, to direct attention to what these moralists fight against or reject, especially where poetic value is concerned.

Consider, as a case in point, the following quotation from William Painter’s prefatory epistle to *The Palace of Pleasure* (1575): “And for that my privat reading might not delyte and pleasure me alone, to avoid the nature of that cankred churle and foe of humain companye, *Timon of Athens*, that lived but for him selfe, I have (after my skill) culled some floures and fruites from that pleasaunt store of those my readinges to impart for universal gayne and benefyte.”¹¹ Painter initially identifies poetry as potentially solitary, antisocial, and misanthropic (like Timon). But he does so only *in order* to repudiate such associations and assert in their stead the “universal gayne and benefyte” that poetry imparts. What would it mean, then, to read backward, against the grain of this narrative order? What would it mean to bring into focus precisely what Painter claims to

⁹ Jeff Dolven, “When to Stop Reading *The Faerie Queene*,” in *Never Again Would Birds’ Songs Be the Same: Essays on Early Modern and Modern Poetry in Honor of John Hollander*, ed. Jennifer Lewin (New Haven, CT: Beinecke Library, 2002), 54.

¹⁰ Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 23.

¹¹ Quoted in Schwarz, 129.

disclaim? Critics working in early modern studies have repeatedly emphasized what Renaissance writers *say* about what poetry does, but they haven't paid adequate attention to what Renaissance poetry actually *does*. At stake in this project's readings, then, is a methodological issue: in order to explore how the pleasure of poetry exceeds or confounds the good intentions made on its behalf, we must resist the predictable recourse to intention that continues to mark literary and cultural criticism. But first it is important to understand what those intentions were.

When sixteenth-century writers codified their conceptions of poetry, they joined Aristotle's poetics to Horace's ethics not only to make poetry, but also to make poetry safe—for consumption by civil society. As a result, they demanded that poetry be both *dulce* and *utile*: sweet and useful, pleasurable and profitable, delightful and instructive. Poets, according to Horace, “aim either to do good or to give pleasure—or, thirdly, to say things which are both pleasing and serviceable for life.”¹² But what was, for Horace, an either/or/or construction that permitted three options for the budding poet—*either* to please *or* to instruct *or* to please and instruct—was, at least for English humanists like Sir Philip Sidney, scarcely so flexible.¹³ English writers recast Horace's preference for the third option as a prescription, as the *only* option. In a sentence cited by everyone from Robert Greene to King James, Horace writes: *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit dulci utili* (“He who combines the sweet and the useful wins every vote”). For these writers, however, it is clear that the sole purpose of poetry was not merely to please “and” to instruct—a simple combination of the two, as the Horace motto suggests—but to please

¹² Horace, “The Art of Poetry,” in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*, ed. by D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2003), 288.

¹³ On this point see Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: Studies of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1954), 85–86; cited in Matz, 1.

in order to instruct. According to the demands of humanism, the pleasure of poetry must always be oriented toward the instruction of moral virtue, civic productivity, and therefore spiritual redemption.¹⁴ The pleasure of the text is nothing more, therefore, than a means to an end—which is to say, a means justified by the value of that end. Poetic pleasure, in other words, is just a spoonful of sugar to make the moral medicine go down.¹⁵

If pleasure, however, is merely supplementary to the more valuable ends toward which it must be directed, it is also a *necessary* supplement. For Renaissance writers, pleasure, not utility, distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing. Thus Sidney writes in his *Defence of Poesy* that “of all sciences . . . is our poet the monarch,” because “he doth not only show the way” to learning, virtuous action, and salvation, but also “giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it. Nay, he doth, as if your journey should lie through a fair vineyard, at the first give you a cluster of grapes, that full of that taste, you may long to pass further.”¹⁶ The preparatory stage of enticement is crucial, then, otherwise poetry would be as dull as moral philosophy or historiography. Pleasure, Sidney suggests, defines poetry as poetry. In making this point,

¹⁴ Hence John Milton, writing at the tail end of the Renaissance, claims that poetic “abilities . . . are the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed . . . and are of power beside the office of a pulpit to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility, to ally the perturbations of the mind and set the affections in right tune, to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God’s almightiness and what he works and what he suffers to be wrought with high providence in his church,” and so forth. See *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 841.

¹⁵ In his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), Torquato Tasso asserts that poetic pleasure “should be like the honey smeared on a cup when one gives medicine to a child,” an appraisal that Sir John Harington endorses in the “Apology” for poetry printed with his 1591 translation of *Orlando Furioso*. See Tasso, *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1973), 11; and Sir John Harington, “An Apology for Ariosto: Poetry, Epic, Morality (1591),” in *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 306–307.

¹⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry; or, The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, rev. R. W. Maslen (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2002), 95.

Sidney has recourse to an all-too-familiar metaphor: through pleasure, the poet “doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste.”¹⁷

Yet if pleasure is so central to the definition of poetry as such, then why must it serve more useful ends? We can gain some sense of an answer to this question by broadening our perspective beyond defensive apologists for poetry such as Sidney and taking into account those Renaissance writers who attacked its value. Take, for example, Stephen Gosson’s 1579 diatribe against poets and playwrights, *The School of Abuse*, to which Sidney’s *Defence* is generally thought to be a reply. Gosson twists the traditional figure of poetry as a honey-coated cup of medicine: “where hony and gall are mixed, it will be hard to seuer the one from the other. The deceitfull Phisition giueth sweete Syrropes to make his poyson goe downe the smother.”¹⁸ Taking this (in)version of the figure alongside its more commonplace manifestation, we may begin to see that poetry works as a drug, a *pharmakon*, in the double sense of poison *and* remedy that Jacques Derrida traces in his reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.¹⁹ Pleasure, then, is the misleading sweet varnish that prevents us from knowing in advance whether or not poetry offers useful benefits.

¹⁷ Sidney, 95.

¹⁸ Stephen Gosson, “*The Schoole of Abuse*” (1579) and “*A Short Apologie of ‘The School of Abuse’*” (1579), ed. Edward Arber (London: A. Murray and Son, 1869), 20.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 61–171. On literary writing as a drug, see Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (1992; rpt. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2004), esp. 78: “The horizon of drugs is the same as that of literature: they share the same line, depending on similar technologies and sometimes suffering analogous crackdowns before the law. They shoot up fictions, disjuncting a whole regime of consciousness. Someone once said that literature, as a modern phenomenon dating from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, was contemporaneous with European drug addiction.” See also Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2005).

If pleasure defines and distinguishes poetry, and if pleasure prevents us from knowing with certainty whether or not poetry is useful, then poetry can be defined as a mode of writing that lacks any guarantee of its own utility. The relationship between pleasure and utility is therefore more contradictory, or at least more convoluted, than a conventional means/ends understanding of Renaissance poetic theory may lead us to believe. Indeed, the complexity is inscribed within the very logic by which Renaissance writers theorize poetry and establish its value. This is not to say that textual pleasure *is* useless. The point is not that literature cannot produce useful effects, but that it always *can* not; its futility, like its utility, is an inherent possibility, not necessarily an actuality. As a way of revising the means/ends logic by which contemporary humanists, no less than their Renaissance counterparts, routinely and stridently measure literature, one must reckon with poetry's potential futility.

In the early modern period, the possibility of poetry's futility was pushed to the extreme in the case of romance, a mode of writing that was problematic for Renaissance writers because it produced an excess of pleasure over instruction. Or so its critics firmly alleged. As early as 1523, in his *Education of a Christian Woman*, for example, the exiled Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives condemned the dangers of reading romance. After cataloguing over a dozen titles of such texts, from the *Amadís de Gaula* to the *Decameron*, Vives launches his attack in the following manner:

All these books were written by idle, unoccupied, ignorant men, the slaves of vice and filth. I wonder what it is that delights us in these books unless it be that we are attracted by indecency. Learning is not to be expected from authors who never saw even a shadow of learning. As for their storytelling, what pleasure is to be derived from the things they invent, full of lies and stupidity?²⁰

²⁰ Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 75.

Vives goes on to enumerate examples of such “lies and stupidity”—unrealistic, purely escapist pleasures such as heroes who single-handedly kill twenty men and fabulous masses of treasures that no actual ship could possibly carry—but it is important to pause on the rhetorical question he asks. Given the context of his condemnation and the standard of “learning” to which he holds fiction, the answer to his question is fairly transparent: *no* pleasure should be derived from the fictions that romancers invent. Must we be compelled, though, to take Vives’s question *only* rhetorically? Considering that Vives, and other humanists of his kind and time, were hardly successful in halting the production of romances throughout Renaissance Europe, it is tempting to read his question as a literal question: what pleasure *is* to be derived from the things that poets invent? What is it that delights “us” in these books?

In a sense, romance harnesses for early modern England its own version of what Roland Barthes calls “the pleasure potential of a perversion”; Barthes himself has in mind homosexuality and hashish (“the two H.’s,” as memorably he calls them) when he writes that perversion “produces a *more*: I am more sensitive, more perceptive, more loquacious, more amused, etc.”²¹ The pleasure that perversion produces constitutes wasteful excess that cannot be redeemed in any economically useful way; it is an instance of hyperproductivity that can only be considered unproductive because it bursts the bounds of any normal aim toward which it might be directed. Perversions, as Freud

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 63–64; Barthes’ italics. This is perhaps the place to point out that Barthes’ first name is shared by one of the most paradigmatic heroes of romance in the Western tradition: Roland/Orlando. And as long as hashish is on the table, consider another quotation from Ronell’s *Crack Wars*: “[D]rugs are linked to a mode of departing, to desocialization—much like the activity of writing, to the extent that it exists without the assurance of arriving anywhere. Considered non-productive and somehow irresponsible, a compulsive player of destruction, Being-on-drugs resists the production of value which, on another, more Bataille register, indicates that it disrupts the production of meaning” (105–106).

famously defines them in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, involve, like romance, both spatial and temporal errancy: they are “sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim [i.e., reproduction].”²² To the extent that romance wanders beyond the bounds of poetic decorum, it cannot be wholly assimilated to useful ends, in the same way perversion, according to Freud, confounds the aims of reproduction.²³ Three decades have passed since Patricia Parker highlighted romance’s tendency toward errancy and dilation.²⁴ Yet, despite a profusion of studies on romance in the last decade, the perversity of that errancy has gone largely unexplored. It is worth revisiting such questions in light of recent attempts by queer theorists, both within and without early modern studies, to consider how pleasure exceeds the use value for which it must aim. Along these lines, sexual perversion can be correlated with the kind of textual perversion by which romance stalls the narrative push toward valued and valuable ends.

In Catholic Italy, Ludovico Ariosto’s sprawling poem, *Orlando Furioso*, provided the flashpoint for conflicts over romance.²⁵ Ariosto’s error, as Parker summarizes these debates, “was to come too close to the *dulce* side of the famous Horatian dictum, to

²² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic, 1962; rpt. 2002), 16.

²³ In this connection, it is worth citing the following comments made by Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976): “The central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union. Hence romance appears to be designed mainly to encourage irregular or excessive sexual activity. This may be masturbation, which is the usual model in the minds of those who speak with contempt of ‘escape’ reading, or it may be a form of voyeurism” (24).

²⁴ Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979).

²⁵ On these debates, see Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of “Orlando Furioso”* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

succumb to the attractions of diverting fable over the essential, if perhaps less interesting, moral kernel.”²⁶ When translated into a Protestant English context, the potential dangers of romance become ever more acute and thus require tampering for the sake of tempering its pleasures. Sir John Harington’s 1591 translation of *Orlando Furioso* provides a case in point: in translating Ariosto’s epic, Harington trims down the unwieldy and errant plot, eliminates authorial intrusions, and includes an allegorical key that moralizes the text. These maneuvers can be read together as an attempt to reform—in every sense of the word—the poem’s romance errors for an English Protestant audience. In all its loose errancy, romance provides an extreme case of what early modern writers found so problematic about poetry’s pleasurable means. It’s no surprise, then, that such writers should wish to subordinate those means to virtuous ends.

What *is* surprising is that contemporary critics reproduce rather than interrogate such assumptions. In recent years, there’s been no shortage of studies on Renaissance romance. Critics working from a wide variety of intellectual perspectives have analyzed romance in relation to an even wider variety of contexts and topics: gender, religion, race, empire, economics, the print marketplace, theories of the contract, even disease. For all their topical variability, the one premise these critics share is that romance provides a useful tool for thinking through, if not resolving, epistemological and ethical questions and tensions.²⁷ So persistently has this assumption been reproduced that it has passed,

²⁶ Parker, 19.

²⁷ Victoria Kahn, for example, argues that seventeenth-century romance “was particularly well suited to staging the problematic coexistence of coercion and consent, passion and interest, in contemporary theories of the contract” (*Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004], 195). Amelia Zurcher Sandy echoes Kahn’s statement when she writes that romance’s problematizing or ironizing of divine providence makes it “uniquely suited” for addressing questions of political ideology (*Seventeenth-Century English Romance: Allegory, Ethics, and Politics* [New York: Palgrave, 2007], 7). Benedict S. Robinson declares that “the genre of romance enabled new ways of

one might say, from being an *idée reçue* to being an *idée fixe*. If for only that reason, it demands to be called into question. “Attention to form,” writes Benedict Robinson in his study of romance and Islam, for instance, “does not distract from recognition of the historical productivity of a literary text but enables a more complex and wide-ranging sense of the text’s engagement with history.”²⁸ But why, one might ask, are literary critics still so committed to the notion that literature *is and ought to be* socially “productive”? This approach seems preferable to the belief that literature passively reflects or registers preexisting social tensions, and it seems more in line with early modern views of poetry’s rhetorical agency. But what if poetry’s attackers were right? What if poetic pleasure, like the necromancy of the enchanter and enchantresses who populate romance, *does* distract from utility? How, then, might we re-conceive early modern England’s (and, by extension, our own) relationship to poetic pleasure?

We are so accustomed to viewing Sidney, for instance, as the Elizabethan era’s most ardent defender of poetry’s value that it’s easy to forget how dismissive he could be toward poetry—both his own and others. I’m thinking not only of the preface he wrote for his unfinished romance, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, in which he characterizes his text as “this idle work of mine”;²⁹ nor am I thinking only of statements made by his poetic alter ego, the speaker of his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, where textual impotence becomes a metaphor for, if not a metonym of, sexual impotence.

thinking about identity and difference” as early modern England engaged in cross-cultural encounters, and that romance is therefore “affectively and ideologically productive” (*Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spenser to Milton* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007], 3, 16). And Brian C. Lockey demonstrates how romance—“a form condemned for frivolity”—“was able to accommodate the ethical and political issues of transnational justice and the laws of war” (*Law and Empire in English Renaissance Literature* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006], 7).

²⁸ Robinson, 18.

²⁹ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (New York: Penguin, 1977; rpt. Penguin Classics, 1987), 57.

I am thinking also, and primarily, of the often-ignored ambiguities and ambivalences in the *Defence*. In what is notably a digression from the main argument of the *Defence*, Sidney spends a good portion of his rhetorical energy denouncing English poetry for *failing* to live up to the poetic ideals that the *Defence* intends to set up.³⁰

Of course, Sidney may present a special case here. He was, after all, a courtier caught in the treacherously demanding networks of social duties centered on his beloved monarch. As such, he had to present himself as a mere amateur and poetry as an idle and vain pastime, pleasurable but hardly profitable. And yet, as Richard Helgerson has instructed us to see, not just amateur aristocrats but also professional writers—of the Elizabethan stage, for instance—rarely thought highly of their own work.³¹ Helgerson collapses the binary of the professional and the amateur by opposing to their shared assumptions those of what he categorizes as “the laureate,” of which Spenser, Jonson, and Milton are his prime examples. Among his poetic contemporaries, Spenser, for example, “alone presented himself as a poet, as a man who considered writing a duty rather than a distraction.”³² Notice, however, how both views—those shared by the professional and the amateur, on the one hand, and those professed by the laureate, on the other—use duty as the standard by which to measure the utility of poetry. In general, much of Renaissance literature can be seen as an attempt to answer the question that Piers poses in the October eclogue of Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*: “O pierlesse

³⁰ On this point, see Glimp, 37–62.

³¹ Helgerson writes: “In the theater the professional dramatist was visible, if at all, only as an actor. And when, on rare occasions, his work got into print, it was likely to be anonymous. In neither their acted nor their printed form were his plays exercises in self-presentation. . . . A professional, like Heywood in his *Apology for Actors*, or an amateur, like Sidney in his *Defence of Poesy*, could, in good humanist fashion, make a far higher claim for drama or poetry, but he rarely presented himself or his own work . . . in such lofty terms” (*Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1983], 35–36, 38).

³² Helgerson, 55.

Poesye, where is then thy place?”³³ The fear expressed, perhaps inadvertently, is that poetry *has no place* in civil society, that it is fundamentally irreconcilable with civic duty.

Nor is the contemporary academy exempt from such worries. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the academic publishing industry has churned out countless manifestoes and apologies for literature and the humanities.³⁴ These texts not only uncannily echo the titles of their early modern counterparts (*An Apology for Actors, A Defence of Poesy*); they also repeat the arguments that their early modern predecessors propounded, arguments that center on the humanistic belief that the value of poetry and the arts depends on how well they cultivate virtuous human subjects and on how well, therefore, their pleasure is reconciled to such virtue.³⁵ Rather than automatically defend literature against the charges of idleness, errancy, and escapism, however, it may be more helpful to critique the rhetorical and institutional forces that activate such defense mechanisms (and the charges to which they respond) in the first place. In reexamining Renaissance writers’ own struggles with such issues, we may be in a better position, then,

³³ Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (New York: Penguin, 1999), 131.

³⁴ What follows is only a partial list: Glenn Cannon Arbery, *Why Literature Matters: Permanence and the Politics of Reputation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001); Catherine Belsey, *A Future for Criticism* (forthcoming from Blackwell); Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008); Marjorie Garber, *A Manifesto for Literary Studies* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2003); Gregory Jusdanis, *Fiction Agonistes: In Defense of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010); Caroline Levine, *Provoking Democracy: Why We Need the Arts* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010); Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004); and Daniel Schwarz, *In Defense of Reading: Teaching Literature in the Twenty-First Century* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

³⁵ These values are most evident in Nussbaum’s recent book *Not for Profit*. Although Nussbaum argues against measuring the humanities and the arts in terms of their profitability in the global economy of late capitalism, her defense measures them in relation to different kinds of virtuous profit: namely, “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen of the world’; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (7). Thus Nussbaum shares with her opponents the notion that the value of literature and the arts depends on what they lead to, even if what they lead to is, for Nussbaum, more qualitatively than quantitatively profitable.

to reconsider the current crisis in the humanities and thus to imagine alternatives to the apologetic logic that marks current justifications of literature's civic value.

Now, the current critical climate in early modern studies would have us insist on the historical and cultural gulf that separates "them" and "us," requiring us to be suspicious of the connections I've just drawn. A historical gulf, however, need not necessarily be a cultural gulf, in the same way a transhistorical approach need not necessarily, if ever, be a universalizing approach. I know of only one other critic who has drawn connections between early modern and contemporary defensiveness toward literature. In *Defending Literature in Early Modern England*, Robert Matz demonstrates how New Historicism has implicitly taken up a very old tradition—the Horatian dictum so fundamental to Renaissance humanism—as the foundational premise of its project. "A Horatian poetics," he writes, "has enabled contemporary criticism's crossing between literature and history by helping to retain literature as a space of pleasure and play that nonetheless shapes political, social, and economic structures in the world of 'profit.'"³⁶

One can further Matz's observation here, historicizing this link by linking it, in turn, to any number of ideological structures. One such construct is obviously the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, to take Max Weber's concept as an example—an overdetermined web of values that took root in the Reformation, as Weber notes, and only intensified, one might add, as Calvinist Puritans closed down the London theaters, beheaded the monarch, and fled to America, disseminating their celebration of productivity and profitability through the educational, political, and religious institutions

³⁶ Matz, 17.

they formed in the colonies.³⁷ Such values, Weber hypothesizes, fed into the development of modern capitalism. They also fed as well, one can surmise, into the institutionalization of Anglo-American literary criticism. They can thus help explain why contemporary critics, even as they recoil from measuring the value of literature in terms of a market economy, nevertheless maintain a strong notion of value itself.

I am cautious, however, of using sociological concepts such as the Protestant ethic to supply *the* link between early modern humanism and the modern humanities. It is by way of this hesitation—namely, a hesitation to contextualize and ultimately explain debates over poetry’s value—that my own study parts ways with Matz’s project. “Contemporary historicist criticism,” he writes, “has found in the sixteenth century’s anxious defense of literature’s place an echo of its own concerns, and has responded by adopting rather than historicizing that defense.”³⁸ As this formulation implies, Matz’s study attempts to revise this blind spot in New Historicism by performing the reverse maneuver: by historicizing rather than adopting the logic of the Horatian dictum. My own take on this logic is different in two important respects.

In the first place, I assume that the defensive logic that Matz historicizes isn’t confined to New Historicism, but rather suffuses even those critical positions that define themselves *against* New Historicism. In the decade since Matz published his book, much has been written about the “New Formalism,” a phrase that designates a relatively undefined movement of critics who wish to bring studies of literary form back into conversation. In the realm of early modern studies, such critics question the historicist

³⁷ See Max Weber, “*The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism*” and *Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002); see also Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), esp. 37–39.

³⁸ Matz, 17.

tendency to dissolve poetry into the vaguely general categories of “writing,” “letters,” or “discourse.” “For at least some Renaissance thinkers and writers,” as Stephen Cohen writes, “an understanding of the formal features of literature that distinguished it from other discourses did not inhibit but on the contrary enabled an understanding of its social efficacy.”³⁹ But what if the distinctive features of poetry *did* inhibit (an understanding of) its “social efficacy”? The claim Cohen makes here is helpful to the extent that it reveals the need to read poems as poems and not, for example, as conduct manuals or medical treatises. But it still presupposes the “social efficacy” of poetry. New Formalism, I would therefore argue, hasn’t broken completely enough from the assumptions that inform historicism. Indeed, in surveying this debate, one begins to suspect that critics posit the opposition between form and history only for the sake of resolving it in a neat dialectical synthesis: histories have forms, and forms have histories. By framing our methodological debates in these terms, I contend, we have papered over peskier, less easily resolvable oppositions, such as those between sign and referent (or *verba* and *res*), between pleasure and utility, and between *theory* and historicism.

This last opposition forms the second way in which my project differs from Matz’s: my aim is not to historicize humanism’s defense mechanisms in order to critique historicism, but rather to theorize those mechanisms by means of a critical break. My goal, in other words, is not to explain defensiveness about literature by way of reference to historical events or sociological patterns, but rather to analyze it in a more conceptually speculative fashion: to trace the symptomatic logics on which it depends for its coherency, to bring out that which it defines and excludes as incoherent, and thus to

³⁹ Stephen Cohen, “Between Form and Culture: New Historicism and the Promise of a Historical Formalism,” in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 31.

un-think the concealed process of naturalization that has firmly planted these logics in the assumptions and methodologies of contemporary criticism.

Chief among these logics is the means/ends economy that I traced in my discussion of Renaissance views of poetic pleasure. The intention of this economy is to sublimate poetry, to raise it out of its base potential for futility and thereby to endow it with culturally sanctioned value, much as early modern alchemists attempted to transmute base metals into gold. Only on the basis of this sublimation of its baseness into gold can poetry then be defended or justified. And yet, the very rhetoric of justification, defense, and apology is doomed to incoherency, if not utter failure, by a contradictory limit internal to its logic. As Mark C. Taylor explains:

An apology is, in effect, an exercise in translation. Writers or speakers attempt to make the viewpoints they are defending comprehensible by translating them into the language of their critics. . . . The problem with this *style* of argument . . . is that the distinctive traits of the viewpoint being defended tend to be lost in translation. More precisely, apologists unwittingly facilitate assimilation of their viewpoint to the perspective of hostile critics.⁴⁰

Any good apology or defense inevitably internalizes or reproduces fundamental aspects of the hostile position to which it responds and against which it defines itself. As a result, the logic of apology partakes, despite its best intentions, in the deprecation of the object it is defending. Let me repackage this notion in terms of the topic of this study. Although different periods may measure the socioethical value of literature according to different standards, the logic that guides the act of measurement remains the same. Embedded in the charge that poetry isn't a useful activity is the premise that poetry *should* be useful; the defensive insistence that poetry *is* useful merely repeats that premise. "It is as if the

⁴⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *Tears* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 100–101.

rhetorical, the performative, even the aesthetic as such,” Jonathan Crewe explains, “can be defended only with a bad conscience—as second-best—and with the help of gestures that instantly betray their own futility.”⁴¹ Through the very act of defending literature, literature’s defenders implicitly assume that literature requires a defense—the same assumption according to which literature’s attackers operate.

How, then, can we break out of this double bind? To a great degree, we can’t. “From now to the end of consciousness,” writes Susan Sontag, “we are stuck with the task of defending art. We can only quarrel with one or another means of defense.”⁴² Coming at this problem from a different perspective, Barbara Johnson suggests that the “sense of urgency” with which deconstructive criticism undoes systems of value “cannot help but imply that the critiquing of value systems is itself a valuable activity.”⁴³ If, however, the critiquing of value systems is itself valuable, then one must recognize that its value cannot be located in the same sphere as the value of value itself. If you read the stuttering repetitions of this last sentence only with difficulty, then you’ve already understood its point: the critique of value redoubles value in a way that doesn’t simply reproduce or enhance it, but rather sends us into the errant twists and turns of irony. And while the invocation of value may be inevitable, even desirable, we should try as hard as possible not to fall back on it as soon as we try to interrogate it. In the various venues where I presented portions of this project, the first question I was almost always asked, almost always immediately, was some version of the following: “Can’t that which lacks value also have value?” Of course it can; I’m not trying to assert otherwise. I’m simply

⁴¹ Jonathan Crewe, *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 8.

⁴² Susan Sontag, “*Against Interpretation*” and *Other Essays* (1966; rpt. New York: Picador, 2001), 5.

⁴³ Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987; paperback rpt. 1989), 17.

trying to question why we always feel the need to ask this question, why we feel so uncomfortable with the negation of value. The absolute negation of value may be impossible, but that impossibility doesn't make it any less of a crucial theoretical question. Indeed, it is all the more crucial *because* it is impossible.

Few critical enterprises have taken on this crucial task, perhaps because the stakes seem to be so high. For what kind of justification can one offer for one's commitments when one argues that one's commitments do nothing, or, more precisely, make *nothing* happen, ushering in the sorts of irredeemable negativity against which we so persistently defend ourselves? Hence Lee Edelman calls our attention to the theoretical "struggle to recognize" negativity "without reclaiming it for knowledge or intelligibility."⁴⁴ This is a struggle that engages Edelman's own work, particularly in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, where he argues that queers should perversely adopt rather than defensively refute the charges of negativity, irony, irresponsible jouissance, and antisocial transgression thrown their way by the ideological machinations of what he calls "reproductive futurism."⁴⁵ Like Leo Bersani, who infamously argued, in his groundbreaking essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?," for the necessity of "embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality,"⁴⁶ Edelman launches his polemic with the counterintuitive "dare" that "we should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction" (16). Such readings figure queerness as "the place of the social order's death drive," in his

⁴⁴ Lee Edelman, "I'm Not There: The Absence of Theory," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21.1 (2010): 158–59.

⁴⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004). Subsequent references will appear in the text.

⁴⁶ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" and *Other Essays* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 15 (the essay was originally published in *October* 43 [1987]: 197–222).

words, over and against the maintenance of civil society and optimism about the future, an optimism that gets condensed in the all-pervasive figure of the Child (3).⁴⁷

Edelman thereby calls for a massive revision of queer ethics. But he insists that such a revision should not be made to envision a version of positive value. “The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification,” he writes, “if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (6). The chapters that follow will return at various points to the critical substance of *No Future* in order to make claims for literature and poetry that are analogous to the claims that Edelman makes for queer sexuality, under the assumption that the ideology of Western humanism, as I’ve suggested already, constructs the analogy between literariness and queerness so as to devalue both. At this point, I’d like to highlight the more general ways in which Edelman’s arguments bear relevance for my aims in this study.

No Future chiefly engages how sexuality is inflected by the meaning of reproduction, but it also considers how sexuality inflects the reproduction of meaning itself. For Edelman, politics sustains itself on a specifically narrative fantasy, a belief in, and desire for, a temporal order that would culminate in the sublimation of negativity and the redemptive revelation of meaning. This is a fantasy that we might associate with conventional understandings of Hegel’s metaphysics, which transposes into a philosophical or quasi-secular register, one could argue, the eschatological and

⁴⁷ Edelman’s thesis has gone neither unacknowledged nor uncontested. For various critiques of *No Future*, see Tim Dean, “An Impossible Embrace: Queerness, Futurity, and the Death Drive,” in *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, ed. James J. Bono, Tim Dean, and Ewa Plonowska (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), 122–40; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); and Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2009).

salvational poetics developed by Renaissance humanism under the influence of Protestant theology. In both realms, the fantasy of revelation implies belief in a progressive dialectic, like that by which poetic pleasure is supposed to yield (to) profit. Such a dialectic, which aims to recuperate whatever attempts to escape from or disrupt its narrative order, is an operation always fueled by what Timothy Bewes, in a not-altogether-different context, calls “the idea that history’s narratives inevitably converge upon a point of transparency.”⁴⁸ Into the proper functioning of this narrative dialectics, Edelman interpolates the negativity of the queer. If, as Edelman maintains, “the fantasy on which desire subsists needs dialectic as temporalization, as the production of narrative sequence moving toward an always unrealized end” (91), then the queer functions as an obstacle to such narrative movement, in much the same way that romance’s nonteleological errancy functions. For Edelman, attending and attesting to queer negativity means, then, “approaching history . . . as a rhetoric or poetics rather than as the ongoing dialectic of meaning’s eventual realization through time” (135).

Edelman makes this argument using a predominantly Lacanian, and more broadly psychoanalytic, framework, but he also draws on deconstruction, particularly the work of Paul de Man. In fact, Edelman’s assertion that we need to approach history “as a rhetoric or poetics” alludes to de Man’s argument, in “The Return to Philology,” that literature “should be taught as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a

⁴⁸ Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), 35. As Bewes explains: “Hegelian dialectic is not the projection of the realization of *Geist* into the distant future; rather, the wager involved in the dialectic is one which, by the act of faith, wrests that moment of *Geist* into the here and now, simultaneously abolishing the metaphysical distinction between the imperfect present and the ideal future” (34). The aesthetic realm, as Bewes suggests, and as we know from Sidney, Milton, and any number of Renaissance writers, is implicated in this redemptive fantasy: “Art, like Christianity, bridges the gap between human inadequacy—the logic of the here and now—and the unknowable beyond, in a dialectically satisfactory way” (44).

history.”⁴⁹ De Man’s essay shows how the theoretical examination of language prior to the meaning it produces—the “return to philology” of the title—disrupts “the attribution of a reliable, or even exemplary, cognitive and, by extension, ethical function to literature”; theory’s return to philology therefore qualifies critics’ desire to “move so easily from literature to its apparent prolongations in the spheres of self-knowledge, of religion, and of politics.”⁵⁰ My own study tracks how Renaissance romance renders this all-too-“easy” move more difficult to make. But why turn to the Renaissance to make this case? De Man claims that the question of whether language and aesthetic value are compatible is “a recurrent philosophical quandary that has never been resolved. The latest version of the question, which still determines our present-day convictions about the aims of literature, goes back to the rise of aesthetics as an independent discipline in the later half of the eighteenth century.”⁵¹ The conflict between poetics and ethics could be traced back to Plato, of course, but there’s something particular, as de Man intimates, about how eighteenth-century aesthetics determines current debates. By zeroing in on the Renaissance, a moment just before the rise of philosophical aesthetics, we can see the closing of one chapter and the opening of the next, as well as highlight the transitions between the two.

As should by now be clear, de Man’s critical method of reading aesthetic theory against the grain of its explicit statements of intention is precisely the kind of reading I’ve employed here. I am thinking particularly of his work on Hegel, posthumously published in *Aesthetic Ideology*. In “Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” de Man begins with a

⁴⁹ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 25–26. On the distinction between poetics and hermeneutics, see 55–56.

⁵⁰ De Man, *Resistance to Theory*, 25.

⁵¹ De Man, *Resistance to Theory*, 25.

crux in the reception of Hegel's text—that Hegel is “a theoretician of the symbol who fails to respond to symbolic language”—and then poses the following question: “Could it be that Hegel is saying something more complex about the symbol and about language than what we recognize in him as so familiar to us, but that part of what he has to say is something that we cannot or will not hear because it upsets what we take for granted, the unassailable *value* of the aesthetic?”⁵² De Man's analysis was subsequently criticized, not surprisingly, by the eminent Hegel scholar Raymond Geuss, who accused de Man of overreading the *Lectures on Aesthetics*.⁵³ In “Reply to Raymond Geuss,” de Man answered this charge by arguing that “one not only listen to what Hegel openly, officially, literally, and canonically asserts but also to what is being said obliquely, figurally, and implicitly (though not less compellingly) in less conspicuous parts of the corpus.”⁵⁴

Notice how, in this last quote, the move from a canonical reading to a deconstructive reading is accompanied, grammatically, by a move from active voice to passive voice: from “what Hegel . . . asserts” to “what is being said.” One might thus characterize deconstructive reading as an attempt to bring out the passive, perverse, and oblique insistence of linguistic or rhetorical errancy in a text, independent of any will, agency, or intention. In a similar fashion, I have tried, in the chapters that follow, to consider “less conspicuous parts” of texts that cause friction with canonized statements of

⁵² Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 95; de Man's italics.

⁵³ Raymond Geuss, “A Response to Paul de Man,” *Critical Inquiry* 10.2 (1983): 375–82.

⁵⁴ De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 192. “Such a way of reading,” he goes on to add, “is by no means willful; it has its own constraints, perhaps more demanding than those of canonization. If one wishes to call it literary rather than philosophical, I'd be the last to object—literary theory can use all the compliments it can manage to get these days” (192).

intention and meaning. My practice often shades into what D. A. Miller has recently identified, by way of reference to Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, as "Too Close Reading."⁵⁵ I try, in other words, to pay attention to marginal, hardly noticeable, and often insignificant elements of the Renaissance corpus: digressions, interruptions, repetitions, cruxes, textual gaps and ellipses, excessive alliteration, puns, undervalued texts, contradictions, redundancies, and so forth. In these narrative side paths, rhetorical and grammatical stutters, and seemingly unimportant material inscriptions, one can witness the ironic strains of a perverse, errant, and futile textual pleasure that insists within the problematic of utility. As Miller explains: "If it is good for anything, then, Too Close Reading is good for measuring a text's drive to futility."⁵⁶

While not concerned with romance directly, Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the rest of this project by theorizing the disreputable vanity of pleasure. I read Shakespeare's *Richard II* in conjunction with a number of intertextual tropes and contexts where pleasure displays a disruptive, contentious, or antisocial function: the bonfire of the vanities in Renaissance Florence; the myth of Narcissus; early modern antitheatrical discourse; contemporary debates about the narcissistic navel-gazing of deconstructive theory. Through these juxtapositions, I show how the scapegoating of a vain (both narcissistic and futile) pleasure lubricates the joints of the play's ideological, rhetorical, and dramatic machinery. I demonstrate further that, as a play, *Richard II* is itself a manifestation of the forms of futile pleasure that the dramatic world within the play aims to abject. Finally, I glance ahead at the remainder of the second tetralogy, tracing how the

⁵⁵ D. A. Miller, "Hitchcock's Hidden Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 37.1 (2010): 126.

⁵⁶ Miller, 127.

futility of pleasure is reconstituted in the form of Prince Hal so that it can be reformed as useful once the prince is redeemed and assumes the throne as King Henry V.

Chapter 2 proceeds from the assumption that it is necessary to see the truth in the charges against romance and poetic pleasure levied in the Renaissance. For this reason, I turn to three Elizabethan texts frequently cited for their condemnations of romance:

Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* and Thomas Nashe's *The Anatomie of Absurditie* and *The Unfortunate Traveller*. Critics generally take these texts at face value as Protestant diatribes against the pleasures of romance, arguing that they project such pleasures onto the dangers of traveling abroad to Italy. Against these readings, I analyze how the rhetorical motions of the texts fail to line up with Ascham's and Nashe's more explicit condemnations of romance. Specifically, I show how the texts' impulses toward errancy, in the forms of digression, alliteration, and narrative interruptions, undercut their didactic intentions. The chapter relies on de Man's theory of irony in order to think about this disjunction between the texts' pedagogical statements, on the one hand, and the mode in which those statements are delivered, or undelivered, on the other.

Chapter 3 furthers my examination of how irony disrupts claims of intention. I argue that Spenser's intention to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" unravels in the Legend of Courtesy, the final completed book of *The Faerie Queene*. Placing the Legend of Courtesy in conversation with Michel Foucault's later work on askesis, or self-discipline, and recent work by Jonathan Goldberg on Spenser, Foucault, and St. Augustine, I analyze how pleasure confounds the goals of askesis in the same way irony, for de Man, disrupts the force of narrative. Like the texts of Ascham and Nashe, the Legend of Courtesy is marked by a persistent use of

parabasis—authorial interruptions and digressive disruptions that inhibit the teleological flow of the text. I demonstrate how these parabases are the source of romance’s pleasure as well as how that pleasure ironically pushes the limits of the demand that poetry should inculcate askesis.

The historical and cultural gap between Spenser and Milton is the starting point of my final chapter. Where Spenser’s aim is the relatively modest task of fashioning a gentleman in the ways of discipline, Milton’s aim is far less humble: to “justify the ways of God to men.” Although such aims were prefigured a century earlier in Sidney’s *Defence*, the turmoil of the seventeenth century raises the stakes for Milton. Criticism has routinely given us a Milton who must either reform or reject the romance tradition he inherited from Spenser. I argue, however, that with this increase in the loftiness of his intentions and the sublimity of poetry’s ends comes an increase in the risk of falling and ultimately failing. This risk, I argue further, accounts for many of the structural instabilities, textual cruxes, and unresolved questions in Milton’s corpus. More so than any other Renaissance writer, Milton continues to be read dialectically. Rather than usefully resolve or sublimate the friction between his poetry and his intentions, I argue, we need to develop a futilitarian criticism that widens and inhabits the gap between pleasure and utility.

CHAPTER ONE

Bonfire of the Vanities: Narcissism, Theory, and the Theater

Before coming here I read in Jones a kind of celebration of the sublime virtues of social pressure, without which our contemporaries, our fellow humans, would be vain, egotistical, sordid, sterile, etc. One is tempted to comment in the margin, “What are they but that?”

JACQUES LACAN

On Shrove Tuesday in 1497, supporters of the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola sparked in Florence’s Piazza della Signoria what has come to be known as the bonfire of the vanities. A *bon* friar opposed to earthly decadence in all its forms, Savonarola had become, a few years earlier, republican leader of Florence after the French King Charles VIII’s invasion of northern Italy led the city’s populace to expel the Medici family, the *de facto* tyrants that had ruled Florence for over a century. In an attempt to purify the city of its particularly egregious sins, its reputation for extravagance and lax morals (among which, most infamously, was its relatively lenient attitude toward that most abominable vice of sodomy), Savonarola’s followers erected in the piazza a wooden pyramid, sixty feet high and two hundred thirty feet in circumference, into which they threw, and then subsequently burned, a vast collection of vanities, things collected from Florence’s citizens that symbolized the frivolity and ultimate futility of earthly life. Among the objects thrown into the fire were “trinkets, obscene books such as Ovid and Boccaccio,

dice, games of chance, harps, mirrors, masks, cosmetics and portraits of beautiful women, and other objects of luxury.”¹

In surveying this list, I begin with a deceptively simple question: what do mirrors and obscene books have in common that bound them together, so to speak, in the same fiery fate? The obvious answer to this question, at least from a religious perspective, is that both function as icons in danger of becoming idols. Add to this iconophilia an unhealthy dose of illicit pleasure (self-love in the case of the mirror; a whole panoply of perversions in the case of obscene books), and it’s easy to see why Savonarola wanted to rid his adopted city of their pernicious influence. I’d like to suggest, however, that we miss a great deal of the import of this question if we consider it solely from a religious perspective. The bonfire of the vanities was an event caught up in a vast, intricately textured cultural network of not only religious but also philosophical, literary, political, economic, sexual, even mythological factors. That network, I suggest further, isn’t confined, historically or geographically, to Renaissance Florence. As I hope to show, it informs Renaissance England’s representations of poetic and theatrical pleasure. It also informs, in often surprising ways, those representations’ more contemporary avatars.

In 1597, exactly one hundred years after Savonarola’s bonfire of the vanities, Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, which represents the dethroning of a monarch on the charges of sexual, economic, and political wastefulness, was first published in quarto form.² It

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5, part 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 699. Two compelling recent biographies of Savonarola are Desmond Seward’s *The Burning of the Vanities: Savonarola and the Borgia Pope* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 2006), and Lauro Martines’s *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

² All quotations from *Richard II* will be taken from the Arden edition, third series, ed. Charles R. Forker (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002), while all quotations from Shakespeare’s other history plays will be taken from *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997); citations will refer to act, scene, and line numbers.

will be my contention that the play can be read as a bonfire of vanities: it attempts to purge its dramatic world of the vain pleasures associated with Richard II and his queer followers. As I will ultimately show, however, among the vanities thus burned must also be *Shakespeare's play*, for it is itself an example of the kinds of unproductive and antisocial pleasures that Henry Bolingbroke, the play's Savonarola figure, seeks to abject from the scene of representation. Where the specific aim of this chapter is to offer a reading of *Richard II* in these terms, my broader aim is to set the foundations for the rest of the project by attempting to theorize the concept of pleasure with which I will be working in the chapters to follow. Before turning to Shakespeare's play, then, I'd like to frame my analysis by engaging in a discussion about pleasure in a general sense—a daunting task, to be sure, which is why I will focus my attention on two particular questions: why is pleasure so difficult to define, and why is it so often seen as disreputable?

The Problem with Pleasure

"Pleasure," says Lord Henry Wotton in Oscar Wilde's classic futilitarian novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "is the only thing worth having a theory about."³ The blunt aristocratic confidence with which Lord Henry pronounces this declaration is belied, however, by the sheer difficulty involved in constructing any theory of pleasure. Consider the long list of modern thinkers for whom the category of pleasure has proven to be slippery. It was certainly so for Karl Marx; in the *Grundrisse*, he famously locates it at the limits of historical analysis: "[T]he difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2000), 75.

arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.”⁴ Nearly a century and a half later, Stephen Greenblatt cited Marx’s comment in his own attempt to come to terms with the contradiction between the historicity and transhistoricity of pleasure. At the end of his brief discussion, Greenblatt asserts that “neither the work of art nor the person experiencing the work of art nor the historical situation in which the work is produced or received fully *possesses* the pleasure that is art’s principle reason for being and its ticket to survival.”⁵ Pleasure, in this portrait, may be “*art’s* principle reason for being,” but it itself is an excessive remainder, something that cannot be possessed or mastered. That claim, though, still leaves open the issue of what it *is* and what it *does*. Does this mean that pleasure has no positive or stable *raison d’être* of its own?

The contours of this question help us to account for the tricky intricacies involved in attempts to cordon pleasure off from other, related terms. Think of that entire strain of French thought, from Jacques Lacan’s seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* and beyond, in which the theory of pleasure splits between *plaisir* (pleasure proper) and *jouissance* (orgasmic bliss). Any line that can be drawn between these two categories is, according to Barthes, difficult to maintain. Before he even demarcates the distinction, he collapses it: “terminologically,” he writes in a parenthetical comment, “there is always a vacillation . . . [T]he distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications, the paradigm will falter, the meaning will be

⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Pelican, 1973; rpt. Penguin, 1993), 111.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990; rpt. Routledge Classics, 2007), 15.

precarious, revocable, reversible, the discourse incomplete.”⁶ In his tendentiously titled essay “Pleasure: A Political Issue,” Fredric Jameson attempts to reread these French theories of *jouissance* in conjunction with the terms of certain strands of Anglo-American philosophy: while the essay begins by addressing the issue of pleasure, it ends by discussing the concept of the sublime.⁷

It would appear, then, that any attempt to confront pleasure head-on leads writers into other intersecting but not completely compatible categories of analysis. This kind of diversion-effect has a profound impact on the way any such endeavor takes shape. In his introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, Volume 2 of his monumental (and monumentally incomplete) *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault admits that his reconceptualization of pleasure led to a “long detour” between the publications of the first and second volumes of the project, so much so that he had to acknowledge “the likelihood of delaying and upsetting the publication schedule that [he] had projected.” In a gesture at once defensive and defiant, he then goes on to address his text “to those for whom to work hard, to begin and begin again, to attempt and be mistaken, to go back and rework everything from top to bottom, and still find reason to hesitate from one step to the next . . . to those, in short, for whom to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension is tantamount to failure”—to such people he bluntly says: “all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet.”⁸ Such examples of detour, delay, hesitation, difficulty, and failure accrue—

⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 4. On this quote, and on the difficulties of translating “*jouissance*” more generally, from a feminist perspective, see Jane Gallop, “Beyond the *Jouissance* Principle,” *Representations* 7 (1984): 110–115.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971–1986, Volume 2: Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), esp. 71.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of “The History of Sexuality,”* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985; rpt. Vintage, 1990), 7.

seemingly exponentially—the more one delves into modern commentaries on pleasure. They lead to the simple preliminary premise that pleasure eludes and deludes us.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to discussing pleasure, though, is that it slides far too easily into what the Western socioethical sphere designates as the negative registers of irresponsibility, disengagement, hedonism, self-indulgence, self-abuse, quietism, passivity, narcissism, errancy, foolishness, superficiality, excess, waste, vulgarity, in consequence, distractedness, irrelevance, irreverence, abandonment, insufficiency, and incoherence—the list could go on. There is something solipsistic about pleasure, something inimical to the stable forms of relationality on which collectivities and polities depend in order to ensure, and insure, their continued force and signification. Why else would the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips compose a poem “Against Pleasure,” in which she characterizes pleasure as “[t]he empty bribe of yielding souls” and associates it with “the fruit of Sodom”?⁹ Try as we might to redeem pleasure within an economy of value that would give it ethical currency, pleasure always at the same time comes to signal, if not effect, the antisocial, anti-epistemological, and anti-humanist negation of value, crashing, in the process, the sublime foundations on which systems of value can be constructed.

It is not shocking, therefore, that the vanity of pleasure tends to get troped onto, or troped off of, any number of marginal or otherwise dissolute cultural figures: poets, women, lovers, prostitutes, Catholics, pornographers, aristocrats, atheists, intellectuals, “the fruit of Sodom,” the French and the Italians, and even that stock character of deconstruction: the play of the signifier. Indeed, much like deconstruction, pleasure poses

⁹ Katherine Philips, *Poems* (London, 1664), sig. K4r–K4v.

a problem to both sides of the politico-economic arena. The capitalist or conservative insistence on “profitability” and “productivity,” on the one hand, and the Marxist or liberal insistence on “activism” and “engagement,” on the other, are two sides of the same coin to the extent that they *both* stand opposed to idle, narcissistic, or pointless pleasures. As Lee Edelman has argued in his essay “The Mirror and the Tank”:

[I]n our historical moment, it is easy to gain access to discursive authority by defining oneself, at least rhetorically, in opposition to narcissistic indulgences, by appropriating a resolutely aggressive, outwardly focused, and thus responsibly “political” position that claims to speak both from and for a populist perspective and against the perspective of intellectuals, academics, and other “special” interests.¹⁰

In the context of this particular essay, Edelman is anatomizing how the rhetoric of AIDS “activism” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, insofar as it defines itself against the “passivity,” political and otherwise, of hedonistic gay men, mirrors, however unwittingly, homophobic constructions of same-sex desire. Although the fervency of these issues in relation to AIDS has for the most part subsided, it has risen again, as Edelman’s more recent polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, has demonstrated, in a different form: in relation to debates over gay marriage and gay adoption.¹¹ My topic, of course, is not queer politics per se—although, needless to say, the discursive pose of narcissism is rarely unrelated to the role that those of us who are gay and lesbian play in the cultural imaginary.¹² Nevertheless, Edelman’s trenchant critique of such ideological constructs—of the mirror-effect by which both sides of the political arena oppose the

¹⁰ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 116.

¹¹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004).

¹² In addition to Edelman’s essay, see also Michael Warner, “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” in *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden (New York: Routledge, 1990), 190–206, and Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001).

narcissism figured by the figure of the mirror itself—may stand as a model for examining how similar entanglements get played out in relation to the position and status of literature, literary studies, and literary theory.

Take, for example, J. Hillis Miller's Presidential Address at the 1986 MLA convention. At a time when New Historicism had taken hold of the humanities, at a time when the backlash against theory was at its most vociferous high, at a time, therefore, when critics thought they were reconnecting with the material base located behind the wall of language, Miller offered a defense of theory, of reading, and of attention to language prior to the meaning it produces. Addressing the charge that deconstructive theory, in his words, "get[s] lost in the sterile meanderings of language playing with itself," Miller writes:

The word *sterile*, used in attacks from both sides as an epithet defining theory, carries a large sexual freight. The implication is that theory is narcissistic, even self-abusive. Theorists are impotent while the opponents of theory on both the left and the right are men and women of power. They make things happen in the real world in a way whose model is procreation—either male or female reproduction.¹³

Because the charges of sterility, narcissism, self-abuse, impotence, and a refusal to procreate and reproduce are so frequently attached to same-sex desire, it shouldn't be so difficult for us to recognize the periphrastic gymnastics by which Miller dares not name here the Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name. The indictment is unmistakable indeed, vaguely reminding us of what another Miller—D. A. Miller—has called the "homosexual's 'classic' pursuit of style . . . his heroic way of rising to meet the fate

¹³ J. Hillis Miller, "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base," *PMLA* 102.2 (1987): 284.

projected on him in any case by a culture fearful of the extreme, exclusive, emptying, ecstatic character of *any* serious experience with style.”¹⁴

In responding to these charges, however, J. Hillis Miller makes a defensive, not heroic, maneuver on behalf of his deconstructor colleagues. “Neither Derrida nor de Man,” he doesn’t hesitate to point out, “has ever sequestered his enterprise from politics or history. Quite the reverse. Each has in somewhat different ways insisted all along that one cannot fail to be engaged in history and in political action. Both see humanistic study and literary theory as active interventions in history and politics.”¹⁵ Notice how Miller’s defense instinctively dissociates Derrida and de Man and deconstruction from the fey queerness of which they are accused by reassuring his auditors that theory “make[s] things happen in the real world.” Whatever worries we may have had about deconstruction are ameliorated by Miller’s assurance that “language playing with itself” has a social use value after all, because “one *cannot fail* to be engaged in history and in political action.” It seems to me, however, that a deconstructive reading more perverse or queer—which is to say, more deconstructive—than Miller’s would seek to question the ideological coercion that always grades such disengagement as a failure in the first place.

Of course, Miller is far from alone in making these kinds of defensive maneuvers.¹⁶ Since the 1960s, and especially since the 1980s, such gestures constitute nothing less than common sense itself. To say this is not to invalidate the valuable work carried out by a generation of intellectuals who, through a combination of bold vision and steadfast practice, expanded the academy, as well as the canon, beyond the narrow

¹⁴ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 8; Miller’s italics.

¹⁵ J. Hillis Miller, 284.

¹⁶ With regard to deconstructive theory, see also Jonathan Loesberg, *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and de Man* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

conservative boundaries in which it had been imprisoned for far too long. Rather than demean such advances, it's worth asking whether the logic behind them projects the figural *position* of de-meaning onto the very figures that seem to benefit from a progressive political agenda.¹⁷

The charges of narcissism—and the gender and sexual implications of such charges—have attended deconstruction, to be sure, for several decades. Writing in the early 1980s, Frank Lentricchia claimed in *Criticism and Social Change*, for example, that deconstruction is “the best sign of all of where the American humanist intellectual stands today: feeling vaguely out of it, desiring change, but crushed, stifled, and enervated by the fear that the robust, active will may not succeed. . . . Politically, deconstruction translates into that passive kind of conservatism called quietism; it thereby plays into the hands of established power.”¹⁸ Writing nearly two decades later, David Scott Kastan argued in *Shakespeare after Theory* that “history functions as some apotropaic fetish to ward off our narcissism, or at least to prevent the premature imposition of present day interests and values. . . . To read Shakespeare historically would be to read the plays with a robust sense of their particularity and contingency.”¹⁹ The use of the word *robust* in

¹⁷ In thinking about these questions, I've been inspired by a number of comments regarding the politics of attacks against deconstruction. The first is Ellen Rooney's assertion, in *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), that pluralist attacks “may in fact have less to do with the play of the signifier than with the problem of sexual (or racial or class) difference” (38). Derrida himself has referred to one (anonymous) professor who claimed that deconstruction, as Derrida paraphrases, “was mostly supported, within the university, by homosexuals and feminists—a fact which seemed very significant to [this professor], and doubtless a sign of asexuality” (Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug, et. al. [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004], 132). In light of my analysis of J. Hillis Miller's statements against the sterility of deconstruction, these comments by Rooney and Derrida are doubly intriguing in their implications: the pernicious politics they expose seem to mark not only attacks against theory's narcissistic navel-gazing, but also even defenses of theory's value.

¹⁸ Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), 51.

¹⁹ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17. Madhavi Menon offers a trenchant critique of this quote in particular, in *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in*

both of these quotations should come as no surprise given the ground I've already covered, but it calls out for analysis nonetheless. The word appeals to a fantasy of straight male potency and entitlement that can only serve to demonize the "enervated" impotency or passivity explicitly figured, in these discussions, by the narcissism of theory, and obliquely figured by the narcissism of women and queers. This is an impotence that must cower before the importance of effecting historical or political understanding, difference, and change.

The assumptions evinced by Lentricchia's and Kastan's respective excoriations of theory could be traced back, in many ways, to the polemic advanced by the *German Ideology*, in which Marx and Engels oppose the passive, head-in-the-clouds abstractions of German idealism with a historical materialism that aims, by contrast, and quite tellingly, to "set out from real, active men."²⁰ In invoking the *German Ideology* as an early expression of Lentricchia's and Kastan's resistance to (the queerness of) theory, one should probably bear in mind Paul de Man's memorable assertion in his essay "The Resistance to Theory": "Those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx's *German Ideology*."²¹ It is beyond the scope of this project to undertake the kind of critical reading of the *German Ideology* that de Man implicitly calls for here, and that he himself projected he would—but never, of course,

Shakespearean Literature and Film (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2; see 52–55 for her more general critique of Kastan's book.

²⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology (Selections)*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1947; rpt. 2001), 47.

²¹ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 11.

did—write.²² Such a reading would have to begin by interpreting the *German Ideology* against the grain of its explicit statements against idealism and theory, which have been rendered commonplace over the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in order to stick to the immediate concerns of this chapter, I cite Marx and Engel’s comment and take it at face value even at the risk of reducing the *German Ideology* to the kind of commonplaces toward which a de Manian reading of the text would have most certainly been skeptical. Coursing through twentieth-century critical thought, naturalized to the extent of being the primary source of energy that sustains intellectual vitality, such assumptions are, just to reiterate, no surprise at all when they appear in Lentricchia’s and Kastan’s polemics, condensed in the form of the word “robust.”

Nor is it a surprise, then, that the same word pops up, curiously enough, in the work of at least one conservative commentator to whom both Lentricchia and Kastan would likely be resolutely opposed—and who would surely return the favor by opposing Lentricchia and Kastan in turn. In the preface to the second edition of *Tenured Radicals*, his notorious reactionary manifesto from the era of the culture wars (the first edition was published in 1990), Roger Kimball writes an elegy for the fact that “until at least the early 1960s there was robust agreement about the intellectual and moral goals of a liberal arts education even if those goals seemed impossible to achieve.”²³ The implicit difference between Lentricchia and Kastan, on the one hand, and Kimball, on the other, is that the former critics (or at least Lentricchia) might identify the 1960s as Paradise Lost, while

²² Given de Man’s project in his late essays, one can guess the direction in which his reading of Marx might have taken him: toward what he calls, in his essay “Kant’s Materialism,” “a materialism much more radical than what can be conveyed by such terms as ‘realism’ or ‘empiricism.’” See de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 121.

²³ Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Elephant, 1998), ix.

the latter would identify the same period as the Fall. The difference between these radical and reactionary perspectives—a minor difference, to make my point as clear as possible—shouldn’t obscure what demands to be called the “robust agreement” they share: a nostalgia for a prelapsarian robustness and a distaste for postlapsarian limpness, however they define the moment of lapse. And, in a perfect illustration of the maxim that nothing unites warring parties so much as a common enemy, Lentricchia and Kimball direct their animosity toward the same figure: none other than Paul de Man.²⁴

As Barbara Johnson has pointed out, the discovery, in the late 1980s, of de Man’s collaborationist journalism from the early 1940s “has only intensified a fear of being politically suspect that started well before that.”²⁵ Johnson, however, isn’t specific about *when* such fears “started.” I do not wish to claim that the Renaissance marks such an origin; these fears may be as old as Plato, and besides, it isn’t their historical provenance that interests me, but rather their figural or structural logic. Nevertheless, I would say that the Renaissance, as we saw in the Introduction, marks a moment when the vanity and futility of aesthetic pleasure was the cause of intense worry because the fear of being politically suspect (simply by virtue of being a poet) was so robust. The strategies by which aesthetic pleasure was thus devalued continue to inform, or deform, our own fear of being politically suspect, toward which Johnson calls our attention.

Nowhere have these fears received more polemical airplay than in the so-called “culture wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, wars whose effects we still feel today.

²⁴ For a reading of Lentricchia’s critique of de Man, in the context of a discussion of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, see Stephen Bretzius, *Shakespeare in Theory: The Postmodern Academy and the Early Modern Theater* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997), 75–92. Rooney also discusses Lentricchia’s view of de Man, in *Seductive Reasoning*, 172–73.

²⁵ Barbara Johnson, “Art for Something’s Sake,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36.3 (2002): 28.

These debates over the value of humanities education can be thrown into striking relief by considering a belated entry to those wars: a collection of essays by three classics professors titled, not incidentally, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age*.²⁶ To the extent that it reproduces a litany of ill-informed, ill-read, and illogical charges made more forcefully over a decade earlier by commentators such as Kimball, the collection *Bonfire of the Humanities* seems hardly worthy of notice, let alone analysis. Yet in attacking the political correctness that has spread, like a “cancer” (79), according to the authors, through the humanities—a “silly form of liberal guilt” (71) that is formally manifested, they claim, in the “ego-disease” (103) of leftist critics’ narcissistic insistence on the first-person, the personal, and the autobiographical—the authors rely on inflamed language that speaks directly to the web of associations I’ve traced thus far in this chapter. “The study of ancient Greek and Latin language and civilization,” they write, “has been immolated in various bonfires lit by any number of modern Savonarolas, the ideologues of the multicultural and postmodern Left who wish to destroy the beauty and brilliance they cannot acknowledge or appreciate” (ix).

It doesn’t necessarily take a deconstructive reader—although some training in deconstruction certainly helps—to note how the authors’ invocation of the bonfire of the vanities works against the stated intentions of the volume as a whole. For while this particular quote seeks to figure the liberal academic elite as a collection of Savonarolas, and thus to establish the populist street cred that the authors seek to maintain throughout, it is worth recalling that Savonarola, like the authors of the book, was operating in the name of the people *against* the Florentine elite. So, too, do Hanson, Heath, and Thornton

²⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, John Heath, and Bruce S. Thornton, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001); subsequent citations will appear in the text.

aim to stake a claim to what Edelman identifies, in a sentence I quoted earlier, as the anti-narcissistic desire to “speak from and for a populist perspective,” against what they see as the passively isolated and effete elite who act as the Medicis of the contemporary academic left. While the collection, therefore, attaches the name “Savonarola” to the elitist academic leftists who supposedly extinguish the canon in book-burning bonfires, the authors’ own claim to be speaking in the name of a healthy “academic populism” (x) casts *them* as Savonarolas. This is an unstated point of comparison that the authors unwittingly reinforce by titling their collection “Bonfire of the Humanities”: the very title, in other words, suggests that the authors’ book is *itself* the kind of bonfire they otherwise wish to attribute to their opponents.

As this constellation of examples helps us to see, the more general rhetoric with which critics tarnish theoretical work depends on and regenerates a charged set of binary oppositions: populism vs. narcissism, health vs. disease, exteriority vs. interiority, activity vs. passivity, productivity vs. sterility, union vs. division, fullness vs. emptiness, meaning vs. futility. Such binaries are inhospitable to any negative forms of being and knowing that are themselves inhospitable to forms of identity and community. Moreover, this rhetorical network is as likely to inform so-called “progressive” work as it is to inform so-called “conservative” work. Indeed, “progressive” work, *so called*, is fundamentally regressive to the extent that it values healthy developmental narratives of progression over the supposedly unhealthy errancy of digression or transgression. It thereby reinforces the repressive ideological operations it supposedly seeks to counter.

Here’s where the question of pleasure—and especially the pleasure of literature—comes back into play. If the deconstructive theory revolution was and still is disreputable,

inevitably tainted with charges of vanity and futility, that can only be because deconstruction, as Derrida maintained in an interview with Derek Attridge, “perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*. . . . [T]here is no efficient deconstruction without the greatest possible pleasure.”²⁷ Nostalgically reflecting on the impact of the theory revolution, Barbara Johnson characterizes this pleasure in a variety of ways: it is the pleasure of “focusing on rhetorical structures without grounding their effects in the world”; of “enjoying, analyzing, and *enjoying analyzing* a literary structure for its own sake”; of “analyz[ing] with amazement and excitement what a metaphor [can] do”; of “see[ing] not what [can] be covered but what [can] be uncovered”; of “spend[ing] a week on a sentence”; and finally, of more generally “enjoy[ing] something so much that you forget the world.”²⁸ Such characterizations help explain why this pleasure must always occupy the discursive position of narcissism. Not narcissism in the sense of a mirror stage in which the self can generate some Imaginary semblance of cohesive form: the *jouissance* of reading neither stems from nor produces the satisfaction of finding our desires reflected back to us from literary representation. Rather, literary narcissism is more like Narcissus’s narcissism, for *jouissance*, as critics ranging from Lacan and Barthes to Edelman and Bersani have explored, effects a sort of self-division and self-shattering that marks our subjection to the death drive.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 56. Derrida explains that such pleasure accounts for the persistent attacks against deconstruction: “It is perhaps those *jouissance* which most irritates the all-out adversaries of ‘deconstruction.’ Who, moreover, blame those they call the ‘deconstructionists’ for depriving them of their habitual delectation in the reading of the great works or the rich treasures of tradition, and simultaneously for being too playful, for taking too much pleasure, for saying what they like for their own pleasure, etc” (56).

²⁸ Johnson, 29; her italics. Stanley Fish makes similar claims for the pleasures of literary criticism in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 110–111.

Drawing on such work, Cynthia Marshall has shown how early modern literature, particularly dramatic tragedy, insistently represents forms of dissolution—or, more properly, the dissolution of forms—and thereby dramatizes the implication of its own pleasures in what she calls “subjective instability.”²⁹ As we are about to see, Shakespeare’s *Richard II* is invested in the kind of self-shattering that Marshall traces, as the titular king is forced to encounter the hollow void that constitutes his selfhood by the end of the play. But the story hardly ends there. The play also operates according to an overdetermined ideological narrative that requires us to regard such self-shattering as just retribution for the narcissistic self-regard that Richard repeatedly displays throughout the play—a kind of vanity of which the play, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, could just as easily stand accused. The play, then, both represents and enacts a tension between individual pleasure and social cohesion, a tension that leaves King Richard, like deconstruction, quite literally, as we will see, in the dust.

The Problem with Richard

Criticism on *Richard II* can be roughly divided into three groups or trends. The first is a psychological or characterological approach that reads the play as a clash between two opposed personalities: the masculine, active, rational, and popular Henry Bolingbroke, and the feminine, passive, irrational, and elitist King Richard. The second is a linguistic or rhetorical reading that analyzes the speech acts, tropes, and metalanguage of this most lyrical of Shakespeare’s histories. And the third is a political or historical criticism that

²⁹ Cynthia Marshall, *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and Early Modern Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), 22. Interestingly enough, Marshall accuses historicist criticism of narcissism: “The self-regarding aspect of all scholarship of the Renaissance, but perhaps especially that concerned with tracing an emergent subjectivity, is striking: critics seem condemned to discovering their own self-image in those remote ancestors” (23).

examines the play's entanglements with the tumultuous events and conflicts of Elizabethan England, whether from a narrowly topical perspective (such as the Earl of Essex's rebellion) or from more broadly ideological considerations (such as divine-right kingship or debates over succession).

Of these three approaches, the first has perhaps most fallen into critical disrepute in recent decades. Poststructuralist theory has questioned belief in a cohesive self unencumbered by subjection to the order of language, while New Historicism has exposed such a self as a historically contingent product of modern bourgeois culture. Nevertheless, in order to gain some purchase on the hedonophobic operations of the play, we would do well to rehabilitate character criticism—with some modifications.³⁰ How we read the play's relationship to pleasure depends on how we read Richard's *ethos*—both his character and his ethics—in relation to Bolingbroke's. The opposition between the characters' characters—which is to say, their actions and their language—is caught up in both the political and the rhetorical operations of the play. All of this is simply to say that the three approaches I've just outlined are not as discrete or antagonistic as we might initially suppose. First, let me rehearse the ideological dilemma that Shakespeare faced in writing a play about the deposition of King Richard II. Much of what I have to say will be familiar territory to those who work on early modern English culture, but it bears repeating nonetheless.

A few years prior to writing *Richard II*, Shakespeare had composed four plays about the Wars of the Roses, the civil conflicts that took place between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, which had rival claims to the throne. This first

³⁰ Helpful in such an endeavor is Christy Desmet's *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992).

tetralogy—the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*—concludes with the defeat of Richard III by Henry Tudor, who goes on to reign as King Henry VII and is, in fact, Elizabeth I’s grandfather. With *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*—the second tetralogy more commonly known as the “Henriad”—Shakespeare writes the prequels to the Wars of the Roses plays. In doing so, he searches out the roots of English civil war and disorder, for Richard II’s reign was, as Marjorie Garber puts it, “the beginning of the end of a certain idea of English unity.”³¹ The question, then, that *Richard II* poses is this: what were the forces that caused England to divide internally, to make “a shameful conquest of itself,” as the character John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, puts it in the play (2.1.66)? This is not a neutral question. Answering it, even simply asking it, requires Shakespeare to walk a political tight rope. Let me explain why.

For over two hundred years prior to the events of *Richard II*, since the reign of Henry II, the crown had passed patrilineally, from father to eldest son, with only a couple of minor hiccups: once from brother (Richard I) to brother (John), and once from grandfather (Edward III) to grandson (Richard II). Bolingbroke’s usurpation of the throne—the key event on which the action of *Richard II* pivots—disrupts this chain, a chain otherwise consolidated by what the Duke of York calls “fair sequence and succession” (2.1.199). In order to understand why this is significant, we must recognize that the play depicts events that took place two hundred years prior to Shakespeare’s own time. A current analogy would be someone writing a play or a movie about the presidency of James Madison and the years leading up to the War of 1812, except in Shakespeare’s case the connection between the play’s present context and its past content

³¹ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 239.

is much stronger because Elizabeth is a direct descendent of the historical figure on whom the character of John of Gaunt is based. The historical John of Gaunt was Elizabeth's great-great-great-great-grandfather, and Henry Bolingbroke is the half-brother of Elizabeth's great-great-great-grandfather.

This link puts Shakespeare in a profound double bind. On the one hand, because the Tudor dynasty descends from the House of Lancaster, and because Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII, deposed Richard III, Elizabeth's claim to the throne is based on the usurpation of it. In this regard, Shakespeare has to paint Bolingbroke's actions in a positive light. On the other hand, deposing a monarch (or even imagining the act of deposition) is an act of treason. In this regard, Shakespeare cannot endorse Bolingbroke's actions. To sum up: Shakespeare *has* to justify something he *cannot* justify—namely the deposition, and subsequent murder, of a monarch.

Some sense of this dilemma, and of the kind of resonance it would have had for Elizabethan England, can be gained by pointing to a few well-known historical details:

1. When the Earl of Essex attempted his rebellion against Elizabeth, his followers commissioned a production of *Richard II* from Shakespeare's company in order to raise support.
2. Elizabeth herself is reported to have said, "I am Richard II, know ye not that?"—a remarkable statement, given that the descendent of the House of Lancaster supposedly identified with King Richard.
3. The scene that depicted Richard's deposition wasn't included in printings of the play until the Fourth Quarto of 1608, five years after Elizabeth had died.

4. At the time Shakespeare was writing, the English Revolution, and in particular the regicide of King Charles I, was right around the historical bend. Charles was a fierce advocate of divine right. On the scaffold, before he was beheaded, he pleaded his case by saying, “A subject and a sovereign are clean different things,” a statement which uncannily echoes the following words of the Bishop of Carlisle, one of Richard’s supporters in Shakespeare’s play: “What subject can give sentence on his king? / And who sits here that is not Richard’s subject?” (4.1.122–23).

Whether these details are facts or fictions is beside the point; in either case, they underscore the fraught ideological tensions within which Shakespeare’s play is entangled. The content of *Richard II* carries quite a charge in Shakespeare’s day, making his work tricky. The political stakes are high for Shakespeare, higher than they usually are. Given all these ideological tensions and contradictions, one is bound to ask how Shakespeare negotiates these dilemmas. How does he resolve them? *Does* he resolve them? Or does he simply pose the problem without solving it?

From a purely legal standpoint, the entire ideological dilemma is resolved in the first scene of Act 4 when the Duke of York reports to Bolingbroke:

Great Duke of Lancaster, I come to thee
From plume-plucked Richard, who with willing soul
Adopts thee heir, and his high sceptre yields
To the possession of thy royal hand.
Ascend his throne, descending now from him,
And long live Henry, of that name the fourth!

(4.1.108–113)

Thus Bolingbroke is adopted as Richard’s legal heir. That way, what York earlier called “fair sequence and succession” can continue uninterrupted, and Bolingbroke’s ascension

to the throne can be viewed as legitimate. Such legitimation is prefigured even in Act 1, in the repeated emphasis on Bolingbroke as Richard's "kin," for example. Or consider Bolingbroke's charge that Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk, his rival in the first act, "is a traitor foul and dangerous / To God of heaven, King Richard and to me" (1.3.39–40). The very succession of Bolingbroke's grammar inscribes him in a grammar of succession, reinforcing the ideology of divine right kingship by naturalizing a line that extends from God to Richard to himself. Even at the minute level of language, then, the play works toward establishing Bolingbroke as a figure of sequence and succession.

But it isn't enough to legitimize the usurper's act. Shakespeare also has to justify it. That is to say, the legal resolution to the dilemma is only part of the story; given the ongoing, unresolved significance that the play carried in Elizabethan England, there also has to be at the very least an attempt at an ethical resolution. Key to this ethics is the central polarity driving the action of the play: the characterological opposition between Richard and Bolingbroke.

If Bolingbroke is a figure of succession, Richard comes to be a figure of disruption. For one thing, Richard is a non-genitor; like Queen Elizabeth, he and his own Queen, Isabel, have no heir. Although the second half of the play depicts in elegiac tones the affectionate relationship between Richard and Isabel, the play skirts around, and thereby generates, the sneaking suspicion that their relationship doesn't generate: that their relationship, in other words, generates only a gap in generative succession through which Bolingbroke is able to seize the throne. The play, though, doesn't simply present Richard as a non-genitor; it also pointedly portrays him as an anti-genitor. York, for example, provides a list of Richard's crimes, among which is the bizarrely specific and

arcane charge, taken from Holinshed, that Richard effected “the prevention of poor Bolingbroke / Against his marriage” (2.1.167–68). Such “prevention” is, of course, a royal prerogative, as it was for Queen Elizabeth in Shakespeare’s own day, but when coupled with Richard’s spilling of “kindred blood” more generally (2.1.182), Richard’s hostility to genealogical stability becomes far more insidious than any royal prerogative would justify. It thus comes as no surprise that Northumberland calls Richard a “[m]ost degenerate King” (2.1.262), for the word “degenerate” precisely encapsulates the problem with Richard.³² Against this degeneracy, Leonard Tennenhouse writes, “Shakespeare makes the displaced and dispossessed Bullingbroke into the figure who rescues the principle of genealogy and links it to the law.”³³

Furthermore, if not more importantly, Richard’s degeneracy gets coded, both within and without the play, as an indulgence in vain, excessive, and idle pleasures.³⁴ In their felicitously titled study *Engendering a Nation*, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin repeatedly emphasize this point in their brief discussion of *Richard II*. They write that Richard “wastes his kingdom’s treasure by indulging in excessive luxuries”; that he “is addicted to luxurious pleasures”; that he “waste[s] the land’s wealth in luxurious pleasures and courtly extravagance”; that he “wastes the land’s wealth and honor on

³² As Jean Feerick explains: “In emphasizing the unstable and variable properties of bloodlines, the language of degeneracy pointed to the fault lines that hovered beneath the ideal language of blood as securing an intergenerational continuity of identity” (*Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* [Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2010], 16).

³³ Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare’s Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 76.

³⁴ As Judith Brown writes, Richard’s is “a reign more thoroughly, openly, and delightedly sensual than it is cautious, abstemious, or juridical” (“Pretty Richard [in Three Parts],” in *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* [Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011], 287).

luxurious pleasures.”³⁵ In the insistent repetition of this claim, the word “luxurious” stands out, for it is not a word that appears at all, in any of its forms, in the play. The common definition used here of “luxurious” as wasteful and extravagant does capture, to some degree, Richard’s crime, but it is also worth pointing out an early definition of “luxurious,” now obsolete but current in Shakespeare’s day, as “lascivious, lecherous, unchaste” (*OED* “luxurious,” *a.* 1.). Howard and Rackin’s discussion of Richard’s luxury conveys, however indirectly, the extent to which his crimes are as much sexual and erotic as they are economic and political. Indeed, the economic and the political charges may be a cover or screen for, or a mere effect of, the more occluded, but nonetheless potent, sexual crimes that lead to Richard’s conviction and justify his deposition.³⁶

In these various ways, Richard serves as a notable early modern instance of what Lee Edelman calls “*sinthomosexuality*,” a term which grafts “homosexuality” to the Lacanian *sinthome*. For Lacan, Edelman explains, the *sinthome* designates “a locus of enjoyment beyond the logic of interpretation, and thus beyond the correlative logic of the symptom and its cure”; it “refers to the mode of jouissance constitutive of the subject,” an enjoyment which “defines” the subject “no longer as subject of desire” (and thus of a teleological push toward a Symbolic future conceived as a restoration of the Imaginary past), “but as subject of the drive” (and thus of a perversely senseless and repetitive jouissance by which the subject is folded into the Real).³⁷ By the portmanteau

³⁵ Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare’s English Histories* (London: Routledge, 1997), 142, 143, 146, 148.

³⁶ This point is confirmed by the monologue Richard delivers in one of Shakespeare’s source texts, *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), in which the King admits that he “ruled all by lust” and refers to his “lecherous minde that must / To Venus pleasures always be in awe”; Richard’s farming of his realm is merely an action designed for “mayntenaunce” of his erotic hedonism. See *The Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Lily B. Campbell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1873), 113.

³⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 113.

“*sinthomosexuality*,” then, Edelman means to convey “the positioning of the queer as a figure for the subject’s unthinkable implication in the Real as evinced by the meaningless jouissance made available through the *sinthome*.”³⁸ The *sinthomosexual* or queer, in other words, serves the Symbolic as a repository for the senseless jouissance that must be evacuated or abjected in order to sustain the fantasy of political cohesion.

None of Edelman’s primary examples of *sinthomosexuals*—Ebenezer Scrooge, Silas Marner, Leonard in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, and the birds in Hitchcock’s eponymous film—could be described as “gay” in modern identitarian terms, but all of them *are* recognizably *modern* characters. Only in scattered references to Shakespeare does Edelman address the potential for an early modern version of *sinthomosexuality*; in a lengthy footnote on why our culture so rarely imagines female figures as *sinthomosexuals*, for example, Edelman adduces Katherine, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as a potential counterexample.³⁹ Surely the meanings of *sinthomosexuality* are inflected differently in the milieu of Elizabethan England, colored by constructions of status, politics, and theology pointedly different from our own supposedly bourgeois, democratic, and secular modernity. But what Katherine and Richard share with each other and with Edelman’s more modern examples is an unremitting refusal of sociality and desire.

To this brief list of *sinthomosexuals* on the early modern stage one could also add Marlowe’s Edward II and Gaveston, as well as Shakespeare’s Mercutio, Malvolio, Angelo, Claudius, Timon, Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra, and, from the realm of the histories, Richard III. Instead of submitting to communal law, all these characters indulge

³⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 72–73.

³⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 165n10.

in unworthy pleasures that must register, in the realm of the Symbolic, as profoundly narcissistic because they disrupt the meaning of sociality and the sociality of meaning. As Coppélia Kahn, comparing and contrasting Shakespeare's two Richards, has written: "Though Richard III is aggressive, cunning, and ruthless, while the other Richard is passive, naive, and impotent, both are narcissists unable to form or sustain bonds with others; they are fundamentally alone with themselves."⁴⁰ What does it mean to call Richard II a "narcissist"? Let me exfoliate the implications of this question by turning briefly to the locus classicus of narcissism: the story of the beautiful, prideful Narcissus as recounted in the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Shortly after his birth, Narcissus's mother, Leiropé, asks the blind prophet Tiresias if her son "should live to many yeares of age," to which Tiresias answers: "Yea full long, so that him selfe he does not know."⁴¹ Years later, scorning the company of both men and women, Echo in particular, Narcissus stumbles across a pristine pool where he spies his own reflection, with which he falls vainly—in every sense of the word—in love. Frozen in a specular relation to the image of his face, he wastes away. Commonplace understandings of the Narcissus myth have tended to focus on the fact that he falls in love with an image of *himself*, but it is also important to consider how he falls in love with an *image* and, at least from his perspective for the first half of the tale, with an image of *another male*. These two details, the second more easily passed over than the first, are profoundly interrelated. To take the second detail first: until Narcissus realizes

⁴⁰ Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 66–67.

⁴¹ All quotations from the *Metamorphoses* are taken from *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567*, ed. John Frederick Nims (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2000); citations will appear in the text and refer to book and line numbers.

that the reflection is an image of himself, he has fallen in love with what he thinks is a fair youth specified as male: “It is but even a little droppe that keepes us two asunder. / *He would be had*” (3.565; my italics). This use of the third-person male pronoun comes a full forty-five lines after Narcissus first notices the image; in the interim, the narrator makes it abundantly clear to us readers that this is a pitiable example of *self*-love. The purpose of such moralizing is ostensibly to warn of the dangers of mistaking a sign for a referent, but that moralizing also serves the function of papering over the more intriguing homoeroticism that constitutes Narcissus’s desire at first. In other words, the narrator’s interventions serve to correct two delusions: the first is the more general semiotic delusion of confusing image and reality; the second is the more specific, though less explicit, delusion of Narcissus falling in love with another male when he’s actually fallen in love with himself.

In her discussion of the myth in *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson highlights the didactic impulses of the narrative voice, commenting that the narrator “make[s] sure we know right away that Narcissus is suffering from a delusion.” “There is almost a taboo,” she goes on to say, “against sharing in that delusion, remaining in the space of desire, taking a shadow for a substance. Falling in love with a beautiful form, however, suggests more than emptiness: it suggests a realm of aesthetics.”⁴² Indeed, the language that Ovid uses to characterize the youth’s delusion echoes descriptions, in antiquity as well as the Renaissance, of the seductive power of poetry: “He knowes not what it was he sawe. And yet the foolish elfe / Doth burne in ardent love thereof. The very selfsame thing / That doth bewitch and blinde his eyes, encreaseth all his sting” (3.540–42). The

⁴² Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007), 49.

story of Narcissus being enchanted by his own image can thus be read as an allegory for readers being enchanted by the very poem in which they are reading the story of Narcissus. This *mise-en-abyme* effect perhaps helps explain why Ovid ended up being burned alongside mirrors in Savonarola's bonfire of vanities.

At the precise moment when Narcissus realizes his delusion, he says: "It is my selfe I well perceyve, it is mine Image sure" (3.582). The comma splice here in Golding's translation softens the distinction between "selfe" and "Image," a softening that forms the basis of not just Narcissus's specific misapprehension, but the misapprehension that forms the very basis of aesthetics as well. Kathryn Schwarz succinctly encapsulates this danger as follows: "In failing to distinguish between other and self, Narcissus might lose himself entirely."⁴³ If the narrator, as Johnson writes, warns against "taking a shadow for a substance," that can only be because the act of taking a shadow for a substance can lead to the opposite, complementary, and perhaps more insidious maneuver: taking a substance for a shadow. One might read the myth metatextually, then: just as Tiresias predicted, Narcissus's undoing comes when he knows himself, but only when he knows himself *as a signifier*—an image, a character, a sign, a figure locked within Ovid's text. The narrative arc of the myth therefore dramatizes the principle whereby "vanity as narcissism," in the words of Joseph Litvak, "cannot help turning into vanity as futility."⁴⁴ Like those countless *sinthomosexuals* in Elizabethan drama who, depending on the genre, must be either reformed or deformed, subjected or abjected, lest they continue to block the teleological push toward the survival of the social order, Narcissus must be punished

⁴³ Kathryn Schwarz, *Tough Love: Amazon Encounters in the English Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000), 25.

⁴⁴ Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 73.

for spurning the company of others. According to the overdetermined logic that marks so many of Ovid's myths in the *Metamorphoses*, the act of rejecting companionship, society, and civilization *for* the self leads to the dissolution *of* the self, the one human attachment Narcissus has.

In an apparent attempt to resolve the ideological contradictions in which it is entangled, *Richard II* displays the same narrative arc as well. "To enter Richard II," writes Judith Brown, "is to enter negative space, a queer cavity of undoing."⁴⁵ The dissolution of Richard's sovereign selfhood (as if he were tossed into a bonfire of vanities) is figured throughout the play as a violent act of de-spiritualization or desublimation, an undoing manifested in three key tropes: disintegration into dust, the hollow crown, and the cracked mirror. When Richard, for example, realizes that he's doomed, he reduces his body spiritual—the more sublime half of the king's two bodies—to the mere status of his body material:

Of comfort no man speak!
Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs,
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.

(3.2.145–48)

The language of dust returns in the final act of the play in the Duke of York's description of the now-deposed Richard's "rude" reception by the commoners of London. After the Duchess of York asks about the "rude misgoverned hands [that] from windows' tops / Threw dust and rubbish on King Richard's head," her husband reports that "No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home, / But dust was thrown upon his sacred head" (5.2.5–6, 29–30). This tableau, with its emphasis on Richard's "sacred head," his crown in more

⁴⁵ Brown, 288.

ways than one, indirectly confirms a proleptic vision Richard had earlier articulated: “I’ll be buried in the King’s highway, / Some way of common trade, where subjects’ feet / May hourly trample on their sovereign’s head” (3.3.155–57).

Lest we view this reduction of Richard to dust as unjust, it’s important to recall that the play establishes a narrative logic, similar to that which governs the myth of Narcissus, that requires us to view this as the correct and natural punishment for crimes Richard has committed. Consider the primary goal of the rebels, as expressed by Willoughby, one of Bolingbroke’s supporters, in Act 2: they aim to “[r]edeem from broking pawn the blemished crown, / Wipe off the dust that hides our sceptre’s gilt / And make high majesty look like itself” (2.1.293–95). In other words, the de-spiritualization of the crown is not a tragedy that happens *to* Richard, but a tragedy already effected *by* Richard. Hence it is insistently *articulated* by Richard, chiefly in the middle of Act 3:

For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit

(3.2.160–166)

The logic by which Richard expresses that for which he is responsible—his reduction of the crown to a “hollow” void—helps the play skirt around the issue of charging Bolingbroke with treason: even though Bolingbroke de-sublimates the crown’s “high majesty” by seizing it, the play portrays him as redeeming it from Richard’s debasement of it. Hence Richard is made (out) to play a key role in the de-sublimation of the monarchy, if not directly, then at least by giving his

soul's consent
T'undec the pompous body of a king,
Ma[king] Glory base and Sovereignty a slave,
Proud Majesty a subject, State a peasant.

(4.1.249–52)

Richard isn't reduced to nothing by forces of predation *external* to himself. Rather, like Narcissus, *he* is the means by which he's undone, split as subject and object, predator and prey. As Gaunt puts it, characteristically prophetically, on his deathbed in Act 2: "Light vanity, insatiate cormorant, / Consuming means, soon preys upon itself" (2.1.38–39).

Thus when Richard, in Act 4, calls for a mirror, explaining "[t]hat it may show me what a face I have, / Since it is *bankrupt* of his majesty" (4.1.266–67; my italics), we should hear an echo of Willoughby's earlier charge that "[t]he King's grown *bankrupt* like a broken man," a charge for which Northumberland provides the natural, inevitable, forecasted retribution: "Reproach and dissolution hangeth over him" (2.1.257–58; my italics). The mirror scene literalizes what this earlier exchange figures: when Richard comes face-to-face with his vanity—his narcissism as well as the futility of his indulgence in *jouissance*—he confronts "a broken man" indeed and thus, not surprisingly, breaks the mirror. In his introduction to the Arden 3 edition of the play, Charles Forker claims that the "solipsistic exhibitionism" of this scene can be read on two levels:

At one level the episode can be read as extravagant escapism, a means by which Richard narcissistically evades a reality he himself has invited. . . . But the mirror, as a reflector of truth (as well as of vanity), also allows the fallen King a moment of deeper insight into his own nature. . . . The brittleness of the glass symbolizes for Richard the fragility and impermanence of life itself and links up thematically with the "hollow crown" speech of 3.2 with its effect of expanded consciousness and deepened self-perception.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Forker, Introduction to *King Richard III* (cited in n2 above), 36–38.

Notice the haste with which Forker attempts to recycle the waste, the vanity and meaninglessness, of the first level of interpretation into the second level's production of "truth," "deeper insight," "expanded consciousness and deepened self-perception." Given the play's repeated association of Richard with that which is "vain," "hollow," and "nothing," an association that reaches a breaking point, literally and figuratively, in the mirror scene, I would claim, contra Forker, that the only "truth" the scene reveals is the "truth" with which Richard comes face-to-face: the "truth" that he has only ever defaced the "truth," evacuating the signs and symbols of kingship, the very center around which his society revolves, of all their meaning and, in the process, dissolving himself, his self, into the void, the nothing, the meaningless *jouissance*, in which he indulged like the classic narcissist or *sinthomosexual* he always was.

To claim, however, that the play's conflicts and tragedy are caused by Richard's vanity is to beg the questions raised by the ideological dilemma that I addressed at the outset of this section: the play cannot vilify Bolingbroke, to be sure, but it also cannot wholly condemn Richard. Elizabeth, we will recall, supposedly identified with the latter, and in any case the deposition of Richard cannot escape implications of sedition and treason. To solve this dilemma, or at least *attempt* to solve it, the play explicitly identifies a number of scapegoats—Richard's councilors: Bushy, Green, Bagot, and the Earl of Wiltshire—who are abjected so as to absolve Richard of some of the guilt that the play generates around his irresponsible *jouissance*. It is to those councilors that I now wish to turn.

Caterpillars of the Commonwealth

One of Bolingbroke's first actions upon returning to England from his banishment is to execute two of Richard's favorites: Bushy and Green. The charges that Bolingbroke levies against them have to do with what he identifies as their offenses against Richard:

You have misled a prince, a royal king,
A happy gentleman in blood and lineaments,
By you unhappied and disfigured clean.
You have in manner with your sinful hours
Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him,
Broke the possession of a royal bed
And stained the beauty of a fair queen's cheeks
With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs.

(3.1.8–15)

Notably, Bolingbroke condemns Bushy and Green for doing to Richard what Richard, as I pointed out earlier, was condemned for doing to Bolingbroke: they function as anti-genitors, splitting up the happy heterosexual couple. Insofar as they “broke” up the royal bed, they can be viewed as a direct cause of Richard becoming a “broken man.” The question of whether or not they’ve taken Queen Isabel’s place in bed is an intriguing one, less for any determinate answer we can come up with than for the anxiety with which centuries’ worth of criticism has ignored the possibility that they *might* have.⁴⁷ The rhetoric of *sinthomosexuality* is thus displaced from Richard onto his favorites, such that,

⁴⁷ Only in the last few decades have critics been willing to bring out the sodomitical implications of Richard’s relationship with his favorites. See Paul Gaudet, “The ‘Parasitical’ Counselors in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*: A Problem in Dramatic Interpretation,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33.2 (1982): 147; Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997); 117–119; and Madhavi Menon, “*Richard II* and the Taint of Metonymy,” *ELH* 70.3 (2003): 666–67. (DiGangi and Menon, it should be noted, are more open to the possibility of sodomy than Gaudet is.) Even if these implications are only connotative, that shouldn’t lead us to dismiss their *possibility*. As D. A. Miller has shown in a foundational analysis of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*, the subjection of same-sex desire to the status of connotation has a contradictory effect. The very logic of connotation renders such desire not only invisible, but hyper-visible as well: “[I]f connotation, as the dominant signifying practice of homophobia, has the advantage of constructing an essentially insubstantial homosexuality, it has the corresponding inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place.” See D. A. Miller, “Anal *Rope*,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1994), 125.

like the scapegoats they are, or are made out to be, they are made to take some, if not all, of the blame.

But the charges don't end there. Bolingbroke continues by rebuking Bushy and Green for committing offenses against not only Richard, but also himself:

Myself, a prince by fortune of my birth,
Near to the King in blood, and near in love
Till you did make him misinterpret me,
Have stooped my neck under your injuries
And sighed my English breath in foreign clouds,
Eating the bitter bread of banishment,
Whilst you have fed upon my signories,
Disparked my parks and felled my forest woods,
From my own windows torn my household coat,
Rased out my imprese, leaving me no sign
Save men's opinions and my living blood
To show the world I am a gentleman.

(3.1.16–27)

Once again the councilors are made to take the blame for offenses committed by Richard, whose performative command, we will recall, deprived Bolingbroke of his patrimony following the death of John of Gaunt.⁴⁸ At the very least, they are blamed for carrying out Richard's actions to a significant degree—and I use the word “significant” deliberately: where Richard deprives Bolingbroke of the materials of his inheritance, Bushy and Green have deprived Bolingbroke of the *signs* and symbols of his *signories*.

At the very most, however, Bolingbroke's accusation that Bushy and Green have “fed upon my signories” and “[d]isparked my parks and felled my forest woods” means that their offenses are directed against the very land of England, as if they were pests who lay rampage to the English nation-garden. Bolingbroke's charges are thus inextricably

⁴⁸ After Gaunt dies, Richard seizes his estate, Bolingbroke's rightful inheritance, to fund his wars in Ireland: “Towards our assistance we do seize to us / The plate, coin, revenues and moveables / Whereof our uncle Gaunt did stand possessed” (2.1.160–62). This seizure prompts York to censure Richard for “tak[ing] from Time / His charters and his customary rights” (195–96), and also prompts Bolingbroke to return from banishment.

linked with a network of images that are condensed, as if by centripetal force, in the play's emblematic core: the conversation, overheard by Queen Isabel and her ladies-in-waiting, that takes place between the gardener and his assistants. Because this exchange allegorically refigures the disfigurements associated with Richard and his councilors, it is worth quoting nearly in full:

GARDENER [*to one Man*]

Go bind thou up young dangling apricocks,
Which, like unruly children, make their sire
Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight.
Give some supportance to the bending twigs.

[*to the other Man*]

Go thou, and, like an executioner,
Cut of the heads of too fast-growing sprays
That look too lofty in our commonwealth.
All must be even in our government.
You thus employed, I will go root away
The noisome weeds, which without profit suck
The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.

1 MAN

Why should we in the compass of a pale
Keep law and form and due proportion,
Showing, as in a model, our firm estate,
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined,
Her knots disordered and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars?

GARDENER

Hold thy peace.

He that hath suffered this disordered spring
Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf.
The weeds which his broad-spreading leaves did shelter,
That seemed in eating him to hold him up,
Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke—
I mean the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Green.

(3.4.29–53)

Much can be said about this loaded exchange. First let me note how Richard's role in the wasting of England is far from unambiguous: insofar as he "suffered this disordered spring," he is both the object and the subject, the victim and the perpetrator,

for the verb “suffer” can mean either to “undergo, endure” or to “tolerate, allow” (*OED suffer*, v. I. and II.). That ambiguity, however, is resolved by the explicit identification of his councilors as the “weeds” and “caterpillars” who lay waste to the land, an identification that’s prefigured in Bolingbroke’s previous characterization of them as “caterpillars of the commonwealth, / Which I have sworn to weed and pluck away” (2.3.166–67). And where Gaunt, as I pointed out, earlier figures Richard as an “insatiate cormorant” that “feeds upon itself” (2.1.38–39), here it is the councilors who “seemed in eating [Richard] to hold him up.”

By the end of the exchange, then, the insidious role of the councilors becomes clear: they assume the rhetorical position that the play had earlier attributed to Richard.⁴⁹ As Madhavi Menon enticingly explains, the councilors “have clogged up King Richard’s productivity and have, so to speak, sucked him dry.”⁵⁰ Menon’s intensive reading of the play uses the garden scene to open up a whole set of issues regarding the play’s rhetorical logic, aligning the play’s investment in language with the sexual issues that pop up between the lines. Indeed, as she writes, “the former *figures* the latter.”⁵¹ Menon’s interpretations are undoubtedly useful, not least because she dares to name the love that dare not speak its name, but I’d like to push them further in directions she doesn’t pursue. Let me begin by underlining Bolingbroke’s phrase, “caterpillars of the commonwealth.”

⁴⁹ At the end of the play, Richard ironically and ingeniously turns the same garden of signifiers against *Bolingbroke’s* supporters. Just prior to being separated from Isabel, Richard warns Northumberland that the newly crowned King Henry “shall think that thou, which knowst the way / To *plant* unrightful kings, *wilt* know again / . . . / To *pluck* him headlong from the usurped throne,” an accusation to which Richard adds: “Doubly divorced! Bad men, you violate / A twofold marriage, ’twixt my crown and me / And then betwixt me and my married wife” (5.1.62–73; my italics).

⁵⁰ Menon, “*Richard II*,” 666.

⁵¹ Menon, “*Richard II*,” 668; her italics.

First, why “caterpillars”? This may seem like a bizarrely specific, pedantic, or trivial question, but it’s not for nothing that Shakespeare chooses this particular signifier. As the larval forms of butterflies, caterpillars function as figures of immaturity, prematurity, and unripeness, associations that contrast with the garden scene’s repetition of the words “whole” or “wholesome.” That contrast, in turn, chiefly signals the disintegration of English unity that the play depicts and attributes first to Richard and then, by scapegoating displacement, to his favorites. Moreover, caterpillars are figures of rapaciousness because they’re horticultural pests that feed and destroy. As Karen Edwards explains, the figure is “appropriate for a furtive destroyer and devourer”; not surprisingly, caterpillars show up, as Edwards notes, in Milton’s *Of Reformation* “when he calls the papacy ‘a Caterpillar secretly gnawing at *Monarchy*.’”⁵² Caterpillars, then, are like weeds insofar as they stand in contrast to fertility and productivity and, as such, they conjure up connotations that recall the connotatively sodomitical way in which Richard and his councilors stand against *reproduction* as well as *production*. Because, as Edelman maintains, “the *sinthomosexual* has no privileged relation to any sex or sexuality—or even, indeed, to any species,” caterpillars, like the titular birds of Hitchcock’s film as analyzed in the last chapter of *No Future*, are, one might say, the animal kingdom’s *sinthomosexuals* par excellence.⁵³

⁵² Karen Edwards, “Caterpillar,” *Milton Quarterly* 39.4 (2005): 251. This association of caterpillars with papistry helps explain why Richard’s indulgent court is said to be under the reprehensible influence of Italy; hence York refers to “fashions in proud Italy, / Whose manners still our tardy-apish nation / Limp after in base imitation” (2.1.21–23). In the following chapter, I will explore, through an analysis of the texts of Roger Ascham and Thomas Nashe, the ways in which antipoetic and anti-romance attitudes overlap with anti-Italian sentiment. As Steve Mentz notes, such sentiment can be read in conjunction with the Francophobia that animates attacks against deconstruction (Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* [Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006], 130n16). Indeed, York sounds like nothing so much as Anglo-American critics who accuse deconstructive critics of aping “fashionable” Continental theories.

⁵³ Edelman, *No Future*, 164n10.

Just as Hitchcock's birds lay waste to the meaningfulness that structures social cohesion, so do Shakespeare's caterpillars come to figure the routine forces (Catholicism, sodomy) that threaten to unravel the very fabric of early modern England's social reality. These associations help explain why Bolingbroke refers to Richard's councilors not merely as caterpillars, but as caterpillars *of the commonwealth*. The word "common" reverberates throughout the play. Notice, for example, how the gardener refers to "our commonwealth," not "our kingdom," defining England as a property of the people rather than the monarch. Indeed, it is along the fault lines of this issue that the characterological opposition between Richard and Bolingbroke becomes most stark. From the first act, Richard notes the populist support that Bolingbroke has: "Ourself and Bushy, Bagot here and Green / Observed his courtship to the common people" (1.4.23–24). That "courtship," compounded by what Richard, in the same speech, calls Bolingbroke's "humble and familiar *courtesy*" (1.4.26) contrasts with the courtly, elitist disdain that Richard and his followers express toward what Bagot calls "the wavering commons" and what Bushy calls "the hateful commons" (2.2.128, 137). And the feeling, it seems, is mutual. Ross, one of Bolingbroke's supporters, notes that Richard "hath . . . pilled [the commons] with grievous taxes, / And quite lost their hearts" (2.1.246–47), the word "pilled" partially inscribing that signifier so central to the play's later condemnation of the king's councilors.⁵⁴ All of this is to show how the narcissistic and vain jouissance of Richard and his followers is profoundly antisocial and anti-populist in nature.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ As Forker notes in his annotation to this line, *pilled* "is cognate with modern 'pillage' and was associated through false etymology with 'caterpillars.'"

⁵⁵ Exemplifying this point well, Holinshed writes about how this antisocial jouissance disseminates, in a trickle-down economics, across the land: Richard, he writes, "was prodigall, ambitious, and much given to the pleasure of the bodie. . . . And this vanitie was not onelie used in the court in those daies, but also

Yet the associations clustered around the epithet “caterpillars of the commonwealth” indict not only Richard II and his councilors, but also *Richard II*. While searching for other references to caterpillars (and commonwealths), I was surprised to find that the phrase appears on the title page of Stephen Gosson’s 1579 antipoetic and antitheatrical tract, *The Schoole of Abuse*: “*The Shoole [sic] of abuse, conteining a plesaunt inuective against poets, pipers, plaiers, jesters, and such like caterpillers of a commonwelth.*” In his diatribe, Gosson writes that, if one were to “pul off the visard that Poets maske in,” one would “disclose their reproach, bewray their wantonnesse, lament their follie,” and that, because of this tendency among poets toward licentious vanity, it’s “[n]o marueyle [that] *Plato* shut them out of his Schoole, and banished them quite from his common wealth, as effeminate writers, vnprofitable members, and vtter enimies to vertue.”⁵⁶ This language should sound familiar: it is as if Gosson were writing not about poets, players, and pipers, but about Richard, Bushy, and Green. Surely it’s significant that poetry and the theater were charged, in Elizabethan England, with the same kinds of indulgences in pleasure that Richard and his followers are charged with.

In that case, then, we can extend our analysis of Bushy, Bagot, and Green as scapegoats. These sodomitical flatterers, I’ve argued, draw off the charges of excessive vanity from Richard. But they also function as abject lightning rods in a different way, according to a logic outlined by D. A. Miller in reference to some modern *sinthomosexuals*: “From Wilde’s too-pretty Dorian Gray, to Hitchcock’s anal murderers with their ‘neat little touches,’ to Fellini’s affected fairies . . . examples abound of a

[among] other people abroad in the towns and countries . . . to the great hinderaunce and decaie of the common-wealth” (48).

⁵⁶ Stephen Gosson, “*The Schoole of Abuse*” (1579) and “*A Short Apologie of ‘The Schoole of Abuse’*” (1579), ed. Edward Arber (London: A. Murray and Son, 1869), 20.

homosexual or analogously queered figure meant to draw off the charges of excess and aberrance from the excessive and aberrant oeuvre under construction.”⁵⁷ In a similar way, Shakespeare’s play scapegoats those figures within the play that best represent the play’s own disreputable pleasures.

To be sure, critics have hardly failed to consider the play’s metapoetic dimensions—at least not to the extent that they’ve shied away from acknowledging its sodomitical subtext. Nevertheless, they tend to sublimate the play’s poetic language, redeeming Richard and, by extension, the play itself from any irresponsible jouissance. Such sublimation manifests itself in the most conventional claim about this play: the judgment that Richard is a bad king but a great poet. This mainstream reading of Richard as sublime poet has been critiqued by Leonard Tennenhouse. “In actuality,” he writes, “it is Henry IV rather than Richard in whom Shakespeare invests the power of the artist, not a power detached from matters political, that is, but the power to incorporate disruptive cultural elements within the official rituals of state.”⁵⁸ Richard, I would add, lacks this power because he is himself a “disruptive” cultural element, narcissistically fixated on his own pleasure rather than the health of the commonwealth.

The play characterizes Bolingbroke, by contrast, as the perfect Horatian poet. Upon Bolingbroke’s return to England through the mountainous north, Northumberland praises him in such terms:

These high wild hills and rough uneven ways
Draws out our miles and makes them wearisome.
And yet your fair discourse hath been as sugar,
Making the hard way sweet and delectable.
But I bethink me what a weary way

⁵⁷ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen*, 8.

⁵⁸ Tennenhouse, 81.

From Ravenspurgh to Cotshall will be found
In Ross and Willoughby, wanting your company,
Which I protest hath very much beguiled
The tediousness and process of my travel.
But theirs is sweetened with the hope to have
The present benefit which I possess

(2.3.4–14)

In contrast to the vain pleasures of Richard and his followers—pleasures that are, as the Gardener intimates, “without profit”—Bolingbroke’s use of pleasurable discourse generates a useful “benefit,” alleviating, as the ideal poet according to Horace and Sidney is supposed to do, the “hard way.”

To help explicate the claim that Richard lacks the power of poetry, that he performs poetry in its most futile and disreputable forms, let me cite the following comments made by Jonas Barish in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*:

In the case of Richard II we find a tinge of slightly feverish excess. When this king drapes himself in the trappings of his office, chants melodious verses, and basks in the gaze of his court, what he is really signalling to us is a defect of function. His characteristic reaction, in a crisis, is not to do what a king should do but to try to look as a king should look, to strike kingly poses. . . . But to do this is precisely to behave theatrically, to concern oneself with creating an illusion rather than grappling with substance. Richard cannot cope with substance, and is not interested in doing so.⁵⁹

Richard, then, may be a good actor, but that doesn’t mean he’s a good poet.⁶⁰ He is too much the narcissist. Indeed, he exemplifies all the traits that Gosson, like other

⁵⁹ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), 188.

⁶⁰ He may not even be a good actor. After all, he’s compared to a bad actor. Consider York’s description, in a brilliant metatheatrical simile, of Richard being abjectly paraded, after Bolingbroke’s grand entrance, through the streets of London:

As in a theater the eyes of men,
After a well-graced actor leaves the stage,
Are idly bent on him that enters next,
Thinking his prattle to be tedious,
Even so, or with much more contempt, men’s eyes
Did scowl on gentle Richard.

(5.2.23–28)

antitheatricalists of his day, attributed to bad poetry. Nowhere is this clearer than in the very speech that criticism has touted as Richard's most glorified piece of poetry: the lengthy soliloquy that he delivers in prison. Let me quote the beginning of this famous speech:

I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world;
And, for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it. Yet I'll hammer't out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts;
And these same thoughts people this little world,
For no thought is contented.

(5.5.1–11)

We do not need to cast aside recognition of Shakespeare's poetic virtuosity—although we might well ask what ideological and institutional ends are served when critics constantly feel the need to ascribe such value—to recognize that the speech is about the *lack* of poetic virtuosity. Although Menon doesn't address this monologue, it exemplifies her claim that “neither [Richard's] language nor his sexuality is metaphoric enough.”⁶¹ After all, the monologue opens with his admission that he cannot create a metaphor, that most essentially poetic of tropes. Moreover, the terms he is attempting to compare are not insignificant: he cannot forge a comparison between the world and the solitary prison in which he resides. Given the narcissism and vanity that I've traced throughout this chapter, such failure to make sense makes sense: of course Richard cannot create a poetic link between his narcissistic self and the world; that has been his problem all along. His

⁶¹ Menon, “*Richard II*,” 669.

feeble attempt to “hammer’t out” anyway—not insignificantly by recourse to the language of “generation”—merely calls further attention to the failure of the comparison.

At the end of the play, all Richard can do instead is play with illusions without content, “thoughts” that are not “*contented*.” He is, in more than one sense, reduced to the “nothing” he always already was:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. Sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I kinged again, and by and by
Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. But whate’er I be,
Nor I nor any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
With being nothing.

(5.5.31–41)

And yet, we should not view this speech solely as an expression of Richard’s personal narcissistic crisis. Just as Richard’s councilors, those caterpillars of the commonwealth, are abjected so as to alleviate the blame directed toward their beloved king, so too must Richard articulate his status as nothing only to take our suspicion off the play itself—the suspicion, articulated so vehemently by Gosson, that the play, as such, is a caterpillar of the commonwealth as well, that it, too, takes pleasure in “being nothing.”

Coda: Redeeming Hal

Not long after Richard is undone, the discursive materials that went into the making of his persona resurface in the guise of a character who doesn’t appear at all in this play: Bolingbroke’s son, Prince Hal, the future King Henry V. Toward the end of *Richard II*, after he has ascended to the throne, Henry IV, in a brief speech that functions, whether

intentionally or not, as a nice teaser for the *Henry IV* plays, indicts the behavior of his “unthrifty son” in telling terms: Hal, according to Henry, “doth frequent / With unrestrained loose companions,” a “dissolute” crew, and thus amounts, thus far, to nothing more than a “young wanton and effeminate boy” (5.3.1–12). The remainder of the second tetralogy limns the stakes, consequences, and redemption of Hal’s “unrestrained” pleasure with lowly friends. The young prince’s commitment to getting down and dirty with the commoners who haunt the taverns of Eastcheap cannot be problematic in itself, however. As we’ve seen, the ability to interact with and appeal to the “commons” constitutes a large part of Henry’s success (and Hal’s own future success as represented in *Henry V*). Something else must be at work, or at play, in Hal’s actions to render them “dissolute.” Something more insidious must be factored in to explain why Hal’s behavior aligns him more with Richard than with Henry.

The gluttony and petty thievery practiced by Hal’s companions can help us reach an explanation, but only to a certain extent. More revealing is the language by which Henry, in *1 Henry IV*, censures his son when their long-anticipated and rehearsed confrontation takes center stage; Henry poses the following rhetorical question to his prodigal son:

Could such inordinate and low desires,
Such poor, such bare, such lewd, such mean attempts,
Such barren pleasures, rude society,
As thou art matched withal and grafted to,
Accompany the greatness of thy blood,
And hold their level with thy princely heart?

(3.2.12–17)

As this question moves toward its climax, the problem with Hal’s pleasure becomes clear: the heir apparent has failed to live up to the sublime and stately expectations that

his aristocratic, now royal, heritage demands of him. Before this general charge, though, Henry characterizes the pleasure Hal practices in strikingly erotic terms. The *Norton Shakespeare* annotates the phrase “barren pleasures” as follows: “Unprofitable habits; nonreproductive erotic pursuits.” Would it not be fair to say, then, that the language of sodomy, or *sinthomosexuality*, is clustered around Hal and his companions nearly as much as it was clustered around Richard and his companions?⁶² In fact, the comparison between Richard and Hal is driven home by King Henry, in *2 Henry IV*, through a figure of speech familiar from *Richard II*: “Most subject is the fattest soil to weeds, / And [Hal], the noble image of my youth, / Is overspread with them” (4.3.54–56).

Beyond the portrait of pleasure thereby painted, what’s instructive about the plays’ treatment of Hal’s misspent youth is that his indulgence in *jouissance* can be redeemed only when it’s treated *as* instructive, when it’s reinscribed, that is, as a means to more useful ends. In *2 Henry IV*, the Earl of Warwick defends Hal to Henry according to this logic of instructive utility:

My gracious lord, you look beyond him quite.
 The Prince but studies his companions,
 Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
 ’Tis needful that the most immodest word
 Be looked upon and learnt, which once attained,
 Your highness knows, comes to not further use
 But to be known and hated, so, like gross terms,
 The Prince will in the perfectness of time
 Cast off his followers, and their memory
 Shall as a pattern or a measure live
 By which his grace must mete the lives of other,

⁶² On the homoeroticism that pervades the plays’ representations of Hal, see Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992; rpt. New York: Fordham UP, 2010), 145–75; Richard Corum, “Henry’s Desires,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 71–97; and Vin Nardizzi, “Grafted to Falstaff and Compounded with Catherine: Mingling Hal in the Second Tetralogy,” in *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze*, ed. Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Will Stockton (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 149–69.

Turning past evils to advantages.

(4.3.67–78)

Goldberg points out that here Warwick “speaks within the language of humanist pedagogy.”⁶³ More specifically, Warwick echoes those countless Reformation-era defenders of literature who insisted that aesthetic representations of disreputable pleasure on the page or on the stage are a pedagogical means of counteracting such pleasures in life, a way of gaining “advantages” from seemingly profitless activities. Henry is hardly convinced by this appeal to utility, though. “’Tis seldom,” he says in response, “when the bee doth leave her comb / In the dead carrion” (4.3.79–80). A little later on in the scene, when Henry, on his deathbed, awakens from a nap thinking that Hal has stolen the crown, he returns to the image of the bee in order to figure the futility of his own fatherly efforts:

like the bee
Culling from every flower the virtuous sweets,
Our thighs packed with wax, our mouths with honey,
We bring it to the hive; and, like the bees,
Are murdered with our pains.

(4.3.202–206)⁶⁴

⁶³ Goldberg, 160.

⁶⁴ Throughout the course of working on this project, I have encountered, again and again, the figure of the bee, even in the unlikeliest and most disparate of contexts. In his essay “The Principle of Reason,” which critiques an ends-oriented conception of the university, Derrida cites Aristotle, Marx, and Schelling “on the philosophical *topos* of the bee, the sense and senses of the bee, and the bee’s reason for being” (in *Eyes of the University* [cited in n16 above], 131). In his book *Against Reproduction: Where Renaissance Poems Come From* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009), Stephen Guy-Bray consistently returns to the image of the bee’s asexual reproduction, as presented in Virgil’s *Georgics*, as a counter-model to the heteronormative reproductive metaphor by which early modern writers determined the creation and value of poetry. In *Loiterature* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999), his study of digression and errancy in modern literature, Ross Chambers does a brilliant riff on the idiom of a “beeline”—a straight, uninterrupted path transgressed by errancy (see 26ff.). In *The School of Abuse*, Stephen Gosson writes: “*Aristotle* thinketh that in greate windes, the Bees carry little stones in their mouthes to peyse their bodyes, least they be carried away, or kepte from their Hiues, vnto which they desire to retorne with the fruited of their labour” (43). In *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson cites Lacan on the difference between human language and bee language: bees lack the capacity that humans have to tell lies (58). I’m still not quite sure what to make of this uncanny return or repetition except to say that it has produced the feeling of being (or bee-ing) caught in a labyrinth, if not a romance, and also that the bee, as a contradictory figure of both industrious utility and poisonous disruption, is a nice emblem for poetry as the Renaissance conceptualized it.

In the face of Henry's initial skepticism, however, Warwick's defensive appraisal comes true: Hal is ultimately redeemed and assumes the throne as Henry V. In the play that bears his royal name, we will recall, the recently crowned Henry V receives a mocking gift of tennis balls from the haughty Dauphin, the Prince of France, to whose ambassador the King replies: "[W]e understand [the Dauphin] well, / How he comes o'er us with our wilder days, / Not measuring what *use* we made of them" (1.2.266–68; my italics).

The overall narrative arc of the second tetralogy therefore dramatizes what happens when pleasure is submitted to the demands of utility. The plays thus *ultimately* reinforce the ideology of socially useful ends to which narcissistic pleasures must always, in "the perfectness of time," be submitted. Until Hal is redeemed, however, the plays are quite insistent about depicting what a futile, non-teleological pleasure looks like. Consider, in this regard, the succinct formulation that King Henry uses, in *2 Henry IV*, to forecast what *could* happen if Hal were not reformed, what *could* happen if abject pleasures were raised to the high status normally accorded to more reputable sublimities. The king's statement may also be taken as the insistent, though disavowed, slogan of poetry, including those forms of poetry that go by the names of theater and theory: "Up, vanity! / Down, royal state!" (4.3.247–48).

CHAPTER TWO

Nothing to Say: Digression and Irony in Ascham and Nashe

I have no other resource but this *irony*: to speak of the “nothing to say.”

ROLAND BARTHES

At first glance, no two Elizabethan writers could appear more different than Roger Ascham and Thomas Nashe. Ascham was a high-minded authority on education, childhood tutor to the Tudor queen; his subject matter consisted of pedagogical strategies for reading and translating the great books of antiquity. Nashe, on the other hand, was a prodigal proto-journalist whose favored topics included the putrid alleyways of London and the disreputable cities of early modern Italy. Ascham enjoyed positive relations with his patrons, including the supreme patron in all the land, Queen Elizabeth, who, on hearing news of his death, reportedly said: “I would rather have cast £10,000 in the sea than parted with my Ascham.”¹ Nashe, by contrast, went to his grave a poor man, cursing his misfortune. The pattern of dissimilarity extends to their respective styles of writing, too: where Ascham, for the most part, writes with a didactic sobriety characteristic of a man of his profession and milieu, Nashe’s style can be characterized as a slight and scintillating semiotic soup that provides not even the slightest scintilla or soupçon of sociocultural value.

¹ Quoted in Lawrence V. Ryan, *Roger Ascham* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1963), 1.

Given these stark contrasts, one can be forgiven for reading a ton of significance out of any common ground the two men share. Any similarities to be found between such different Elizabethan writers may reveal something unexpected, though fundamental, about the environment in which they wrote and about the limits of literary value. It cannot be insignificant, for instance, that Ascham and Nashe share an alma mater: St. John's College, Cambridge.² Beyond, however, these mere biographical correspondences, and more to the point of this project, it's worth noting that both men are frequently cited for their hostile attitudes toward romance. In Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570) and in Nashe's *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (1589) and *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), the two writers both attempt to project the vagaries of romance onto Italy in general and Rome in particular by censuring those Italianate Englishmen who fall victim to the enchantments of Circe, the classical figure that emblemizes the potential degeneration caused by romance's errant pleasures. Taking these explicit statements at face value, critics have generally read these texts as Protestant diatribes against the romance of travel abroad, especially to Catholic Rome. Yet what seem, at first glance, to be polemics against romance turn out, ironically enough, to take the form of the kinds of errant pleasures against which the stated arguments are directed. Indeed, it is precisely such irony—its forms and its stakes—that this chapter seeks to investigate.

² Witness Nashe's comments on Ascham in his *Lenten Stuffe*: "Well, he was her Maiesties Schoolemaster, and a *S. Johns* man in Cambridge, in which house once I tooke vp my inne for seuen yere together lacking a quarter, and yet love it still, for its and euer was the sweetest nurse of knowledge in all that Vniversity. Therefore I will keepe faire quarter with him . . ." In *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald McKerrow (London: A. H. Bullen, 1904–10; rpt. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 6 vols., 3:181. All quotations from Nashe's texts are taken from this edition and will be cited in the text by volume and page number. All italics are in the original unless otherwise noted. On Nashe's intellectual relationship with Ascham, see Marshall McLuhan, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko, 2005), 213–17.

Pastime and Pleasure

On December 10, 1563, while the plague raged in London, a group of Elizabethan statesmen gathered at Windsor Castle in the private chamber of Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who, at that time, was England's Secretary of State and chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth. At dinner, Lord Burghley reported that a number of students had run away from Eton because they feared being beaten. This comment soon sparked a provocative debate among the dinner guests about the proper place of pleasure and punishment in the schoolroom. Among the men in attendance was Roger Ascham, who reports that he would have kept quiet among these great men had Lord Burghley not asked him to voice his expert opinion on the matter: that pleasure and love, not fear and punishment, entice children to learn. After dinner, Ascham retired to the Queen's chamber to read Greek with her and was soon approached by Sir Richard Sackville, Treasurer of the Exchequer; the two men continued the evening's conversation, and the Treasurer requested that Ascham put into writing his advice about the education of young gentlemen, particularly for Sackville's grandson Robert.

So began, and so begins, Ascham's *The Scholemaster*.³ I open with this anecdote not because I wish, as it might appear, to situate my own study as a New Historicist project, but because *The Scholemaster* itself opens by recounting this event. Due to the position of primacy Ascham grants to this anecdote, little ingenuity is required on our behalf to speculate about his reasons for including it at all. In narrating this event, Ascham clearly establishes his schoolmasterly authority by anchoring his text to

³ Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP for Folger Shakespeare Library, 1967), 5–9. Subsequent citations are to this edition and will appear in the text.

authorities far greater than his own. The scene depicted might seem, then, to be nothing more than a spectacle of opportunistic name-dropping, of the kind one might expect from a writer caught, like all writers of his day, in a patronage economy. Yet the anecdote serves a further, and just as obvious, function for Ascham: it anchors his text in the real, or at the very least produces what Joel Fineman, writing of the genre of the anecdote in terms that recall Roland Barthes, calls “the effect of the real.”⁴ The conjunction of power and realism serves to signify to Ascham’s readers in advance that *The Scholemaster* is no idle or inane, no prodigal or improvident, work. It is, in short, not poetry—and certainly not romance.

Whatever textual authority is generated by the realism of this anecdote is simultaneously shorn, however, by the sharp ironic cut of a remarkable, though likely unintentional, intertextual echo. A group of nobles gather in a magnificent country estate while plague devastates the city, and the discussion that occurs subsequently authorizes (the) text: this is the story, or rather the frame story, of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, which exemplifies the kind of idle, pleasurable, sprawling, and errant romance text that Renaissance humanists found so problematic. Its implicit cameo at the beginning of *The Scholemaster* (to say nothing, yet, of its explicit cameos) is therefore noteworthy because it helps put pressure on the standard critical view of Ascham as a fiercely Protestant humanist schoolmaster opposed to reading romance—and especially Italian romances, like the *Decameron*.⁵ As I will show, the place of romance and pleasure in *The Scholemaster* is far less certain than this view of Ascham implies.

⁴ Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 61.

⁵ For paraphrases of Ascham’s evident hostility toward romance, see Robert Adams, “Bold Bawdry and Open Manslaughter: The English New Humanist Attack on Medieval Romance,” *The Huntington Library*

Consider, for instance, another anecdote in which Ascham interacts with a notable figure of the times; I am referring to Ascham's conversation with Lady Jane Grey:

Her parents, the duke and the duchess, with all the household, gentlemen and gentlewomen, were hunting in the park. I found her in her chamber reading *Phaedon Platonis* [i.e., Plato's *Phaedo*] in Greek, and that with as much delight as some gentleman would read a merry tale in Boccaccio. After salutation and duty done, with some other talk, I asked her why she would lose such pastime in the park. Smiling she answered me, "Iwis, all their sport in the park is but a shadow to that pleasure that I find in Plato. Alas, good folk, they never felt what true pleasure meant."

(35–36)

The whole point of the anecdote—and, one might add, the whole point of *The Scholemaster*—is to establish a preference for learning-by-reading over learning-by-experience. As Lady Grey says to Ascham (or so Ascham reports): "And thus my book hath been so much my pleasure, and bringeth daily to me more pleasure and more, than in respect of it all other pleasures in deed be but trifles and troubles unto me" (36). Among these trifles and troubles is surely the mere pastime of hunting. And by calling the aristocratic pastime of hunting a "shadow" of the "true" pleasure to be found in Plato, Lady Grey performs a patently Platonic gesture. But what of that other Platonic shadow, the "merry tale in Boccaccio"? If the passage trivializes aristocratic pastimes in relation to true Platonic pleasure, then what are we to make of the rhetoric of equivalence with which Ascham compares Plato to Boccaccio? If Lady Grey reads the *Phaedo* with "as

Quarterly 23.1 (1959): 33–48; Carol Kaske, "How Spenser Really Used Stephen Hawes in the Legend of Holiness," in *Unfolded Tales: Essays on Renaissance Romance*, ed. George M. Logan and Gordon Teskey (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), 119–21; Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 42; R. W. Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-Espionage, and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1997), 2–7, 40–52; Alex Davis, *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance* (Woodbridge, UK: D. S Brewer, 2003), 7; Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 33–34; Joshua Phillips, "Chronicles of Wasted Time: Anthony Munday, Tudor Romance, and Literary Labor," *ELH* 73 (2006): 788; and Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 77–78.

much” pleasure as one would read a tale from Boccaccio, then on what epistemological grounds can one distinguish true pleasure from false pleasure?

Pleasure, for Ascham, is the means by which the pupil will be allured to education and will thereby gain the judgment to distinguish honest pleasure from dishonest pleasure. Pleasure is thus the means by which to figure out whether pleasure can ever be a valid and valuable means in the first place. This kind of circular slippage, implicit throughout *The Scholemaster*, evinces what Melanie Ord calls “a certain ambivalence in Ascham’s project,” such that the word *pleasure* itself is, as Ord astutely writes, a “leaky signifier” in Ascham’s text.⁶ Notice, as a preliminary example, how Ascham prefaces his anecdote about Lady Jane Grey with the acknowledgment that it “may be heard with some pleasure and followed with more profit” (35). This typically Horatian comment should come as no surprise: pleasure and profit are so often linked in Renaissance writing that Ascham may be seen as merely rehearsing common sense. But there’s something peculiar about Ascham’s particular use of this commonplace: the phrase “and followed,” which can imply either causality or contingency. That is, the sentence can be interpreted to mean that profit is *caused* by pleasure—and thus, as Renaissance literary theory would have it, pleasure is the means to the end of profit—or it can be interpreted to mean that profit comes after pleasure in a non-causal sequence. This second reading, which disjoins pleasure and profit from a means/ends economy, shadows the Horatian truth on which Ascham bases his argument.

To be sure, Ascham hardly stands opposed to pleasure tout court—and that is, in fact, the problem. Later in the text he defends his arguments against potential charges of

⁶ Melanie Ord, *Travel and Experience in Early Modern English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 206.

austerity and asceticism: “And I do not mean by all this my talk that young gentlemen should always be poring on a book, and by using good studies should lose honest pleasure and haunt no good pastime. . . . I was never either Stoic in doctrine or Anabaptist in religion, to mislike a merry, pleasant, and playful nature, if no outrage be committed against law, measure, and good order” (52). Despite the subjunctive qualification tacked on (as if parenthetically) to the end of this last sentence, Ascham gives no *clear* indication of how to distinguish “honest pleasure” and “good pastime” from the kinds of pastimes and pleasures with which he associates Boccaccio and hunting.

The intricacies of Ascham’s relationship to pleasure are concentrated in one of the text’s most frequently cited passages: his discussion of Arthurian romances. After he specifically indicts books translated from Italian into English (about which I will shortly have more to say), Ascham denounces a time when reading such romances for pleasure was an English pastime:

In our forefathers’ time, when papistry as a standing pool covered and overflowed all England, few books were read in our tongue, saving certain books of chivalry, as they said, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in monasteries by idle monks or wanton canons; as one for example, *Morte Darthur*, the whole pleasure of which book standeth in two special points—in open manslaughter and bold bawdry; in which book those be counted the noblest knights that do kill most men without any quarrel and commit foulest adulteries by subtlest shifts: as Sir Lancelot with the wife of King Arthur his master, Sir Tristram with the wife of King Mark his uncle, sir Lamorak with the wife of King Lot that was his own aunt. This is good stuff for wise men to laugh at or honest men to take pleasure at. Yet I know when God’s Bible was banished the court and *Morte Darthur* received into the prince’s chamber. What toys the daily reading of such a book may work in the will of a young gentleman or a young maid that liveth wealthily and idly, wise men can judge and honest men do pity.

(68–69)

The polemical vehemence of Ascham's attack shouldn't keep us from realizing that his arguments are mostly unoriginal. Scholars ranging from Arthur Ferguson to Alex Davis have offered comprehensive surveys of what Davis calls "the war between 'the humanists' and 'chivalry.'"⁷ In the context of such a war, Ascham clearly stands on the side of the humanists, offering a reiteration of attacks made earlier in the century by More, Erasmus, and Vives, who charged chivalric romance with disrupting the cultivation of wholesome, virtuous, socially responsible noble subjects that was humanism's primary aim. Before capitulating to this understanding of Ascham's condemnation, though, it would be helpful to pause on the passage to see if its rhetorical somersaults can be completely accounted for by the polarized structure implied by the notion of a "war."⁸

Ascham's main charge of "open manslaughter and bold bawdry" gives the impression that the problem with romance lies in its content: it is the *representation* of violence and cupidity, of murder and adultery, that will "work" "toys" "in the will of a young gentleman or a young maid." But what makes Ascham's young gentleman and young maid particularly susceptible to such toys isn't merely their tender juvenescence, but the fact that they "liveth wealthily and idly." "The fear of idleness," writes Shannon Miller, "took multiple forms in sixteenth-century England."⁹ According to Miller, "idleness signifies nonaction," but also becomes, in this period, "a metaphor

⁷ Davis, 7. See also Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry: Studies in the Decline and Transformation of Chivalric Idealism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1960).

⁸ To be fair, Davis insists that "ascriptions of a taste for chivalric literature were in fact far more complex than a formulaic opposition between humanism and chivalry might suggest" (9). In the case of *The Scholemaster*, however, Davis declines the opportunity to analyze the text and thereby joins company with the critics whom he criticizes for engaging merely in the "selective quotation of detractors such as Ascham" (24).

⁹ Shannon Miller, *Invested with Meaning: The Raleigh Circle in the New World* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998), 27.

encompassing a wide range of threats to England: no New World involvement, no religious conversions, no sexual reproduction.”¹⁰ One should also consider the charge of idleness more specifically in relation to the other adverb to which Ascham links it: “wealthily.” Robert Matz, drawing from the work of Lawrence Stone on the crisis of the aristocracy, informs us that “humanist education was intended to reduce the idleness of the aristocracy and to emphasize the importance of aristocratic service to the state.”¹¹ As Matz (writing about early modern England) and Virginia Krause (writing about early modern France) have, in different ways, taught us to see, Renaissance aristocrats defined themselves in a contradictory relationship with idleness—accepting it, on the one hand, as a sign of noble leisure and rejecting it, on the other hand, as a sign of wasted time.¹²

When read in terms of what Max Weber calls the Protestant work ethic, however, the culture’s suspicion of idleness becomes less ambivalent. “According to God’s unambiguously revealed will,” Weber emphatically asserts, “it is *only* action, not idleness and indulgence, that serves to increase his glory. *Wasting time* is therefore the first and most serious of all sins.”¹³ In idle hands, then, the idylls of romance may easily constitute an idol that distracts readers from the proper pursuit of virtuous action and spiritual truth, from one’s calling and thus from nothing less than salvation itself; hence Ascham’s reference to a time “when God’s Bible was banished the court and *Morte Darthur* received into the prince’s chamber.” But the text is even more specific about the problem

¹⁰ Miller, 28.

¹¹ Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000), 17–18.

¹² See Virginia Krause, *Idle Pursuits: Literature and Oisiveté in the French Renaissance* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2003).

¹³ Max Weber, “*The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism*” and *Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), 106; Weber’s italics.

with romance. The charge of idleness is attached not only to the young aristocratic gentlemen and ladies who live “wealthily and idly,” but also to the “idle monks or wanton canons” who, “as some say,” according to Ascham, wrote these romances in the first place. Why does Catholicism enter this discussion? Why does Ascham associate the Arthurian romances native to Britain with papistry? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to retrace the errant course of Ascham’s argument, an errancy that is far from incidental, I hope to show, in what is, after all, a polemic against the errancy of travel and romance.

The Enchantments of Circe

The context for Ascham’s attack against romance, as I’ve noted, is the danger of learning by experience. The phrase “learning by experience” may even be considered too oxymoronic: as Jeff Dolven explains, in the early modern period “experience was often invoked as the opposite of school, associated with debauchery and travel to the Catholic south.”¹⁴ Nowhere is such an invocation more vivid than in the following passage from

The Scholemaster:

Learning teacheth more in one year than experience in twenty, and learning teacheth safely, when experience maketh more miserable than wise. He hazardeth sore that waxeth wise by experience. An unhappy master he is that is made cunning by many shipwrecks; a miserable merchant, that is neither rich nor wise but after some bankrupts. It is costly wisdom that is bought by experience. We know by experience itself that it is a marvelous pain to find out but a short way by long wandering.

(50)

The governing figure of this passage—the shipwreck—echoes an earlier moment in the text in which Ascham uses the ship as a figure for self-government:

¹⁴ Dolven, 68.

But nobility governed by learning and wisdom is indeed most like a fair ship, having tide and wind at will, under the rule of a skillful master, when contrariwise a ship carried, yea, with the highest tide and greatest wind, lacking a skillful master, most commonly doth either sink itself upon sands or break itself upon rocks. And even so, how many have been either drowned in vain pleasure or overwhelmed by stout willfulness, the histories of England be able to afford overmany examples unto us.

(41)

It might be useful to interpret the language of hazards, shipwrecks, and wandering as contextual references to the instability of commercial ventures at sea. Even if Ascham may not have had literal experiences of shipwreck in mind while constructing his rant against experience, he at least draws on a long-standing emblematic topos that figures self-discipline as a well-helmed ship. For a counterexample of this trope, recall Phaedria's "litle Gondelay" in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, a "shallow ship" that wanders the Idle Lake "[w]ithouten oare or Pilot it to guide."¹⁵ Certainly the horror that Ascham imagines is akin to the horror that Spenser imagines: that of a ship, and therefore a gentleman, always at risk of running off course.

These contextual paths are by no means unrelated to romance, but the route of Ascham's own argumentation leads us to consider more specific frames of reference. From his general condemnation of learning by experience, Ascham is carried into an intense denunciation of travel to Italy in particular. What is most pertinent to note is that he uses the *Odyssey*, the paradigmatic romance text, as a framework for his discussion: "Yet if a gentleman will needs travel into Italy, he shall do well to look on the life of the wisest traveler that ever traveled hither, set out by the wisest writer that ever spake with tongue (God's doctrine only excepted), and that is Ulysses in Homer" (61). Ascham thus

¹⁵ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2d ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007), 2.2.6.2–10.

deploys the travels of romance as an allegory for the romance of travel. In the first place, the *Odyssey* provides a local habitation and name for the general language of shipwreck and “long wandering” I just noted. Within Ascham’s rhetorical constellation, moreover, the *Odyssey* supplies an array of figures for the dangers that Ascham writes against: the Cyclops, Dame Calypso, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and above all “the enchantments of Circe,” which serve repeatedly in the subsequent discussion as a trope for Italian sin.

Most importantly, however, the *Odyssey* furnishes Ascham with classical images of the best *defenses* against Circean seductions. He admits that Ulysses would have “run headlong into overmany jeopardies . . . if Pallas had not always governed him, if he had not used to stop his ears with wax, to bind himself to the mast of his ship, to feed daily upon that sweet herb *moly* . . . given unto him by Mercury to avoid all the enchantments of Circe” (63). Of course, Ascham the Christian cannot rest content with this *locus classicus* of askesis. Like all good humanists he supplements his classical allegory with Biblical allegoresis. After identifying *moly* as an effective defense, he writes of the herb: “Whereby the divine poet Homer meant covertly (as wise and godly men do judge) that love of honesty and hatred of ill which David more plainly doth call the fear of God, the only remedy against all enchantments of sin” (63). The word “whereby” indicates that reconciling the classical and Christian traditions is as easy as fashioning a grammatical transition.

Less easy to reconcile is the schism *within* Christianity between Protestantism and Catholicism. Now, it’s hardly surprising that an Elizabethan diatribe against travel to Italy would be colored by complaints against Catholicism. As a matter of fact, there may

be localized historical reasons for the intensity of Ascham's attack: although Ascham died in 1568 before he could finish *The Scholemaster* (his wife published it posthumously, and in incomplete form, in 1570), it was written in the midst of escalating tension between England and Rome, tension that culminated in the Northern Rebellion of 1569 and Pope Pius V's excommunication of Queen Elizabeth in 1570. Such information gives credence to Ryan J. Stark's claim that *The Scholemaster* "ought to be understood as one part of the larger Protestant effort to dissociate England from Rome."¹⁶ Yet Catholicism, we will recall, enters Ascham's text not in direct reference to Italy or Rome but through the indirect mediation of Arthurian romance, which would seem to associate England with, rather than dissociate it from, Rome.

My reading thus far still hasn't accounted for this mediation because I've been working in merely spatial terms, casting the ideological tensions of *The Scholemaster*, in the same way Stark does, as stark oppositions between England and Italy, London and Rome. Such a reading papers over a small but not unimportant detail. The passage in which Ascham attacks Arthurian romance begins with a key *temporal* signpost ("In our forefathers' time, when papistry as a standing pool covered and overflowed all England"). Let me juxtapose this demarcation between a past England and a contemporary England to an earlier moment in the text when Ascham carefully distinguishes between "old" Italy and "present" Italy: there was a time, he admits, "when Italy and Rome have been, to the great good of us that now live, the best breeders and bringers-up of the worthiest men . . . But now that time is gone and, though the place remain, yet the old and present manners do differ as far as black and white, as virtue and

¹⁶ Ryan J. Stark, "Protestant Theology and Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69.4 (2008): 520.

vice” (60–61). Superimposing the temporal and spatial axes of Ascham’s schema yields four quadrants: present England, past England, present Italy, and past Italy. The correlation between romance and Catholicism serves as a means of connecting England’s Catholic past with Italy’s Catholic present. And establishing *that* connection allows Ascham to resolve, on a symbolic level, the contradiction of turning to ancient pagan texts as instruments of humanist education. Plato may be a pagan, the implication seems to be, but at least he’s not a papist like Petrarch—or Malory for that matter.

As we soon find out, though, Ascham’s attack against Arthurian legend functions not, or not only, as an elaborate system for resolving Elizabethan England’s contradictory relationship with classical/Catholic Rome; rather, it serves merely as a rhetorical waystation, a tropological pawn in an attempt to set up a hyperbolic comparison with books translated out of Italy: “And yet ten *Morte Darthurs* do not the tenth part so much harm as one of these books made in Italy and translated in England” (69). In addition, Ascham doesn’t unequivocally celebrate the authority of classical pagan texts. We’ve seen how Homer and Plato, at earlier moments in the text, occupy a position of privilege set against the licentious vanity of texts by Boccaccio or Malory, but the two anchors of the classical canon now pale in comparison to “God’s word.” After attacking Italianate Englishmen for “willingly” and “freely say[ing] their minds to the open contempt of God and all godliness both in living and doctrine,” Ascham writes: “And how? I will express how, not by a fable of Homer nor by the philosophy of Plato, but by a plain truth of God’s word . . .” (70). Because of their mediated nature, neither “fable” nor “philosophy” can supply the transparent signifier or transcendental signified guaranteed by scriptural authority.

But the “plain truth of God’s word” is not, for Ascham, the last word. Like so many homilists and defenders of the faith who resort (by what forces, we can only speculate) to *paralepsis*, Ascham, after quoting Psalm 14, is compelled to mention precisely the kinds of mediated texts he has just cast out from his discourse in favor of Scripture: the Italianate Englishmen, in his words, “have in more reverence the *Triumphs* of Petrarch than the Genesis of Moses; they make more account of Tully’s *Offices* than St. Paul’s Epistles, of a tale in Boccaccio than a story of the Bible. Then they count as fables the holy mysteries of Christian religion” (70). At first the real danger seems, for Ascham, to be to read Petrarch, Cicero, and Boccaccio *in place of* the Bible. But then the problem is to read the Bible *as if it were* a text by Petrarch, Cicero, or Boccaccio, or even Homer or Plato—which is to say, as if it were a fable or a fiction. A lot hinges on how we read the “then” in the phrase “Then they count as fables”: like the phrase “and followed” that we discussed earlier, “then” can convey mere consecution, but it can also establish a causal chain. In the second case, reading romance is a means, but not a means to virtuous profit; instead it’s a means to reading religion as a romance, a means, that is, to atheism.

Is atheism, then, the ultimate object of Ascham’s scorn? According to Ascham, Italianate Englishmen

boldly laugh to scorn both Protestant and papist. They care for no Scripture; they make no count of general councils; they contemn the consent of the church; they pass for no doctors; they mock the Pope; they rail on Luther; they allow neither side; they like none but only themselves; the mark they shoot at, the end they look for, the heaven they desire, is only their own present pleasure and private profit; whereby they plainly declare of whose school, or what religion, they be; that is, epicures in living and [atheists] in doctrine.

(71)

Considering the virulent anti-Catholic context of this section of *The Scholemaster*, one cannot help but be struck by the juxtaposition of “Protestant and papist,” of “Pope” and “Luther,” in the same sentences. Ascham has now imagined a third term against which *both* Catholicism and Protestantism are able to establish their common Christian ground: the narcissistic atheists or epicures who “like none but only themselves” and aim only for “present pleasure and private profit,” wasting time in a manner that makes no allowances for, no investment in, either the civic realm or eternal life. But just when we think that Ascham has finally fixed the object of his disparagement, he returns to his vehement scorn for Catholicism, sniping that “Christ’s true religion set no sure footing where the Pope hath any jurisdiction” (73).

The Scholemaster thus produces the impression of a writer eternally in pursuit of a protean foe always just beyond his grasp. Ascham’s contempt both is and is not directed to pleasure, is and is not directed to romance, is and is not directed to Italy, and to Rome, and to Catholicism, is and is not directed to experience and to atheism. By pursuing a negative path, by attempting to grasp what a virtuous education is *not*, Ascham warps his project beyond repair. The text wanders to the extent that, at the conclusion to Part I, Ascham himself indicts his waywardness: “And thus far have I wandered from my first purpose of teaching a child, yet not altogether out of the way, because this whole talk hath tended to the only advancement of truth in religion and honesty of living. . .” This self-indictment is only partial. Ascham subsequently insists that his wandering “hath been wholly within the compass” of his subject (and the word “compass” is especially resonant in the context of what is mainly a discussion about travel). He then expresses an assured desire to get completely back on track: “But to my matter. As I began plainly and simply

with my young scholar, so will I not leave him, God willing, until I have brought him a perfect scholar out of the school and placed him in the university to become a fit student for logic and rhetoric, and so after to physic, law, or divinity, as aptness of nature, advice of friends and God's disposition shall lead him" (75).

And yet despite Ascham's claims for an ordered discourse, the specter of errancy is difficult to exorcise. After the first part of the text ends, Ascham abruptly moves to the more pragmatic and methodical discussion of the instruction of Latin. But even in Part II, in the midst of his more technically pedagogical discussion, Ascham must repeatedly remind himself to stay on track. For example, after characterizing imitation as a "large and wide" topic because "all the works of nature in a manner be examples for art to follow," he writes: "But to our purpose. All languages, both learned and mother tongues, be gotten, and gotten only, by imitation" (114). As one might expect, the subsequent discussion wanders from the topic of imitation, into a general discussion of rudeness of learning and God's providence, so much so that Ascham reminds himself "to return to imitation again" (116). If the second half of *The Scholemaster* is supposed to function as a pragmatic corrective to the errancy of the first part's indictment of errancy, then it can hardly be characterized as an effective corrective. In fact, because the text's organizational signposts are frequently phrased in passive terms, the reader is led to believe that the text is writing itself: "In this place, or I proceed farther, I will now declare by whose authority *I am led*" (82; my italics); "By this small mention of Cambridge *I am carried* into three imaginations" (132; my italics). It is as if *The Scholemaster* is animated, in spite of Ascham's best intentions, by the same kinds of

forces—romance, pleasure, errancy—which it rails against. It is as if Ascham, Elizabethan England’s most vehement critic of romance, has written an endless romance.

Bable Bookmungers

Ascham’s waywardness, his frequent interruptions of the order of his discourse, and his disavowal of authorial agency all point to a disjunction between what the text says and what it does. On the face of it, such a tension could never be characterized as particularly shocking.¹⁷ But for the Renaissance in particular, it taps into deep fears about the futility of poetry. According to Alex Davis: “The portrait of the reader of romance painted by many Renaissance authors is . . . an image of the humanistic nightmare: of books that gain mastery over their readers.”¹⁸ The errancy of Ascham’s text paints the portrait of a similar nightmare: of a book that gains mastery over its *writer*. In this regard, it is worth citing Roland Barthes’ claim that the pleasure of the text “can very well take the form of a drift [*dérive*].” “*Drifting*,” Barthes goes on to add, “occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations, like a cork on the waves [*la vague*], I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world).”¹⁹ Bearing in mind that *vague*, the French word for “wave,” bears the etymological connotation of wandering, we might be compelled to say that the kind of d(é)rive of which Barthes

¹⁷ As D. A. Miller dryly asserts: “[E]ven a hack may be shown to be strangely drawn to the thing he loves to hate, or, not at all strangely, dependent on the thing he makes his name and his living by belittling: you will never catch him writing about the sober prose that he claims to be speaking for; it probably bores him, and certainly could never spur him to the opinionated vehemence with which he is asked to ‘make new’ our continued submission to the most familiar social demands” (*Jane Austen; or, the Secret of Style* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003], 22).

¹⁸ Davis, 15.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 18 [*Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), 32–33]; Barthes’ italics.

speaks bespeaks the vagaries of a compulsion—a compulsion to err as much as a compulsion to repeat—that leads texts like *The Scholemaster* down the dark path of vagrancy.

Given the frequency and evident self-consciousness with which Ascham succumbs to this compulsion, however, it might be claimed that his digressions signal not a text that has run out of control, but rather a text very much in control—a text that purposely leads its readers astray, using romance to annul romance. If it's easy to highlight moments in Renaissance texts when the writer seems to take pleasure in error—moments when the narrative runs astray, wandering beyond the bounds of decorum into territories that are connected to the main narrative thread only by the flimsiest of associations—it's less easy to argue that the writer is indulging in pleasure for pleasure's sake. No wonder, then, that the temptation to sublimate pleasure to a purposeful end would be so strong. Consider, for a moment, as an exemplary instance of such sublimation, one of the only studies to discuss explicitly the period's rhetoric of digression: Anne Cotterill's *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature*, which announces, at its very beginning, how it “begins and ends with the intellectual and imaginative pleasures of narrative wandering.”²⁰ “Traditionally,” Cotterill writes, “the practice of digression has been linked to the capture of a listener's desire for forbidden pleasure: the delight in escape from time's inexorable forward movement and in passion's transport out of time.”²¹ In her readings of seventeenth-century writers such as Donne, Marvell, Browne, Milton, and Dryden, Cotterill is certainly attentive to the

²⁰ Anne Cotterill, *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2004), 1.

²¹ Cotterill, 30.

pleasure of digressive moments. And yet for these writers, according to her analysis, these structures of escape and evasion ultimately have a purposeful social function—granted, a function that deconstructs the foundational dichotomies on which the social is based, but that is nevertheless “turned *outward* for purposes of self-defence and self-portraiture.”²² Even if we grant the validity of this reading for later, seventeenth-century writers, it applies less easily to writers like Ascham, who contradictorily rely on the pleasurable means *least* suited to their purposeful ends. Furthermore, insofar as it relocates the ironic contradictions of the text within an economy of purpose determined by either authorial volition or cultural forces or a combination of both, this kind of interpretation stands guilty of committing the intentional fallacy. It might be better to take a lead instead from Paul de Man’s attempt to locate irony apart from—because it is a permanent disruption of—self-conscious intent or purpose.

In the midst of his lecture “The Concept of Irony,” de Man focuses on a short chapter in Friedrich Schlegel’s incomplete novel, *Lucinde*. According to de Man, the fragment “reads like a philosophical treatise or argument,” but, he hastens to add, “it doesn’t take a very perverse mind, only a slightly perverse one, to see that what is actually being described is not a philosophical argument at all but is—well, how should I put it?—a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse.”²³ One might be compelled to analyze the chaste hesitation (“how should I put it?”) with which de Man names sexual pleasure as the seedy underbelly of the Schlegel passage, or to analyze his invocation of perversion as the critical position necessary to bring this irony

²² Cotterill, 44; my italics.

²³ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 168.

into relief, but for now I merely wish to highlight the theoretical implications that he draws from his reading of the passage:

There seems to be a particular threat emanating from this double relationship in the writing, which is not just a double code. It's not just that there is a philosophical code and then another code describing sexual activities. These two codes are radically incompatible with each other. They interrupt, they disrupt, each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions one has about what a text should be.²⁴

De Man goes on to argue that critical thought defuses the “particular threat” performed by irony by recourse to three maneuvers: first, by reducing irony “to an aesthetic practice or artistic device, . . . an artistic effect, something a text does for aesthetic reasons, to heighten or diversify the aesthetic appeal”; second, by reducing irony “to a dialectic of the self as a reflexive structure . . . within which the self looks at itself from a certain distance”; and third, by “insert[ing] ironic moments or ironic structures into a dialectic of history.”²⁵ De Man’s subsequent analysis calls these three maneuvers into question by viewing irony as a function of language, not of aesthetic value, self-consciousness, or history. “Words have a way of saying things,” de Man says, “which are not at all what you want them to say. You are writing a splendid and coherent philosophical argument but, lo and behold, you are describing sexual intercourse. Or you are writing a fine compliment for somebody and without your knowledge, just because words have a way of doing things, it’s sheer insult and obscenity that you are really saying.”²⁶ Or, as in the case of Ascham’s *The Scholemaster*, you are outlining an educational plan that you claim is “straight, plain, and easy” but that takes the form of precisely the kind of pleasurable

²⁴ De Man, 169.

²⁵ De Man, 169–70.

²⁶ De Man, 181.

wandering, the kind of going “ever out of the way,” that your plan is designed to counteract (79). In order to think further about this kind of ironic split, let me now turn to the work of a later Elizabethan writer who, like Ascham, relies on excessive or perverse textual pleasure even as he appears to heap a mass of words against it.

Thomas Nashe, according to Jonathan Crewe, began his career by “identifying himself explicitly with the dogmas and values enshrined in Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster*.”²⁷ This identification is especially evident in Nashe’s 1589 misogynistic rant, *The Anatomie of Absurditie*, in which he launches his own attack against what he calls the “babe bookemungers” who produce romances, those who “endeauor,” as he puts it, “to repaire the ruinous wals of *Venus Court*, to restore to the worlde that forgotten Legendary licence of lying, to imitate a fresh the fantasticall dreames of those exiled Abbie-lubbers, from whose idle pens proceeded those worne out impressions of the feyned no where acts, of Arthur of the rounde table, Arthur of little Brittain, sir Tristram,” and so on, “with infinite others.” (1:11). The canon of Arthurian legends, the association with Catholicism (“exiled Abbie-lubbers”), the accusations of illicit desire (“*Venus Court*”) and idleness: all these features of anti-romance discourse are commonplace to the point of being clichés, familiar from *The Scholemaster*.

Already in this early Nashe text, though, we can catch sight of a less austere kind of writing, however didactic the passage’s diatribe may be. Take the phrases “babe bookemungers” and “Legendary licence of lying,” for instance. Alliteration, as George Puttenham characterizes it in *The Art of English Poesy* (a text published, as it happens, the same year as *The Anatomie of Absurditie*), occurs when a poet “takes too much

²⁷ Jonathan Crewe, *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 23.

delight to fill his verse with words beginning all with a letter.”²⁸ Granted, Puttenham goes on to “confess” that alliteration, which he identifies as *tautologia*, or the “Figure of Self-Saying,” “doth not ill but prettily becomes the meter.” In Nashe’s case, however, where the alliteration appears in prose, not verse, alliteration especially exceeds any useful or purposeful telos to which it might be directed. It thus exemplifies what Crewe calls “a linguistic excess surpassing any functional explanation, any acceptable rationale, or any power of repression.”²⁹

This is not to say that functional signification plays no role over the course of Nashe’s sentence. Surely the meanings of the signifier “babe,” for instance, convey some significance. To *babble*, according to the *OED*, is to talk incoherently, childishly, excessively, and inopportunately, and, in a transitive sense, to “repeat or utter [something] with meaningless iteration.”³⁰ The *OED* also informs us that the word *bauble*—meaning a mere toy—was frequently spelled, in the early modern period, as “babe.” And especially considering Barthes’ characterization of the text of pleasure as a *Babel heureuse*—a “sanctioned Babel,” as Richard Miller translates the phrase, or, even better, a “fortunate Babel”—it would be difficult to ignore how Nashe’s “babe” plays on the homonym “Babel,” which designates, of course, *the* Judeo-Christian myth of linguistic incoherence.³¹ All of this is to say that the word “babe” *means* meaninglessness and thus instantiates meaning above, or after, all.

²⁸ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), 340.

²⁹ Crewe, 20.

³⁰ This may be an opportune moment, then, to cite Virginia Krause’s observation that early modern European humanists “increasingly likened romance to babble—volumes without end” (137).

³¹ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 4 [*Le plaisir du texte*, 10].

Yet even if the various signifieds attached to “bale” make sense in light of Nashe’s attempt to cast romance as senseless, we shouldn’t cast aside the possibility that the *signifier* “bale” imposes itself more on the basis of sound than of sense—not only because it alliterates with the first letter of “bookmungers,” but also because the two *bs* within “bale” stutteringly echo each other. Insofar as it distracts or drives the reader’s attention to the form or materiality of the signifier at the expense of sense, alliteration, like a necromancer who disrupts the progress of a knight’s quest, interrupts the orderly flow of meaning guaranteed by the armature of syntax. Or, to put the point another way, sound robs Nashe’s sentence of sense (and soundness) as that sentence stumbles over alliterative hurdles on its way to making a point.³²

Curiously enough, neither is *The Scholemaster* immune to such alliteration. In the “Preface to the Reader,” Ascham recalls his follow-up talk with Sir Richard Sackville in the following terms: “We passed from children and came to young men, namely, gentlemen. We talked of their too much *liberty to live as they lust*; of their *letting loose* too soon to overmuch experience of ill . . .” (8; my italics). While such petty indulgences ought to be allowed in so august an educational authority as Ascham, the stakes are higher in the case of Nashe, who has always been seen, in a way Ascham never was, as a particularly prodigal writer, as always potentially deserving C. S. Lewis’s often-quoted assessment of him: “In a certain sense of the word ‘say,’ if asked what Nashe ‘says,’ we should have to reply, ‘Nothing.’”³³ In a literal sense of the word “say,” of course, Lewis

³² Confirming these claims beyond any doubt I may have had, a reader of an earlier version of this argument commented on my own writing: “I could have done without *your* alliteration.” That is exactly the point. Alliteration, like paronomasia, is something futile and excessive—indeed, futile because excessive. It is a linguistic feature one could (and probably should) *do without*.

³³ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1954), 416.

is completely wrong: Nashe all too often has *too much* to say. Yet in the economy of Elizabethan poetics, having too much to say amounts to having nothing to say; hyperproductivity and unproductivity are two sides of the same futile coin. Lewis's appraisal points to the ways in which Nashe's style leaves him open to the charge of a pleasure so excessive that it offers, in the end, "nothing" of value.

In Nashe's alliterative play, then, we can begin to see him indulging in the kind of stylistic virtuosity—a virtuosity of excessive pleasure, of "too much delight," as Puttenham phrases it—with which subsequent readers like Lewis would associate him. We can see, that is, the pleasure of the text, *even as* that pleasure is subordinated to didactic ends that resemble Ascham's: namely, an attack against the very dangers of idle poetic pleasures. I emphasize the phrase "even as" in order to underscore the ironic simultaneity by which this pleasure unfolds itself. In her study *Thomas Nashe in Context*, Lorna Hutson comments on how Nashe "abandon[ed] the protestant-humanist notion of reading for profit . . . at the very beginning of his career, even while he was busy sifting the provident profits of poetry from its licentious abuses in the didactic *Anatomie of Abuses* [*sic*]." ³⁴ However much Hutson may overstate the case—however impossible the abandonment of reading for profit may, in fact, ultimately be—it would not be a stretch to say that Nashe comes closer than any other Elizabethan writer to approaching the asymptote of absolute futility. In reading Nashe, generations of critics have struggled to grasp, and thus to come to grips with, what Crewe identifies as "the phenomenon of an unreduced excess of 'rhetoric.'" ³⁵ After Nashe's themes have been catalogued, after his

³⁴ Lorna Hutson, *Thomas Nashe in Context* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1989), 120. (*The Anatomie of Abuses* is the title of Phillip Stubbes' 1583 antitheatrical tract, whereas the title of Nashe's text is *The Anatomie of Absurditie*.)

³⁵ Crewe, 17.

content has been paraphrased, after his logic has been parsed, after his irony has been ironed and, in the process, straightened out, there remains a residue of superficial superfluity, a rhetorical surplus exemplified in one form, as we have seen, by the rapid-fire bursts of functionless and valueless alliteration in *The Anatomie of Absurditie*. This kind of futile excess has always put critics in a double bind. As Crewe writes: “The defense of rhetoric as an opposing and putatively superior *principle* to that of logic is liable to degenerate into transparent bluster or to become a defense of the palpably indefensible—the defense, for example, of irrational excess, of logical incoherence, of narcissistic display, of violence, and of injustice.”³⁶ With this observation in mind, I would now like to turn to Nashe’s notoriously prodigal picaresque adventure tale, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, which could easily be characterized as a text precisely *about* irrational excess, logical incoherence, narcissistic display, violence, and injustice. It can therefore provide us with a better view of the perversity, as well as the costs, of Nashe’s improvident and indulgent textuality.

Nashe’s Text Machine

Nashe focalizes the violent excesses and incoherencies of *The Unforuntate Traveller* through his unreliable narrator, Jack Wilton, an “appendix or page” in the court of Henry VIII during the French Wars (2:209). While the bulk of the text represents Jack’s misadventures on the European continent, the opening episodes of the narrative establish both the thematic tenor of Jack’s tale and also the narrative vehicle: Jack narrates a series of plots that reflect back on how narrative plots are constructed in the first place. In the

³⁶ Crewe, 8; his italics.

first plot, for instance, Jack directs his trickster energies toward a “Lord of misrule” (2:210), an ale-dealer in the English camp, for whom he constructs a “holiday lye” that serves no other purpose than to make the other men in the camp “merrie . . . manie a Winters euening after” (2:216). The lie runs as follows: Jack begins by flattering the ale-dealer “with a long circumstaunce” (2:211), thus enticing him with a dilated discourse; that enticement is so effective that, when the tapster barges in, the ale-dealer “was readie,” Jack reports, “to haue stricken his tapster for interrupting him in attention of this his so much desired relation, but for feare of displeasing mee hee moderated his furie . . . Well, at his earnest importunitie, after I had moistned my lippes to make my lie run glibbe to his iourneie’s end, forward I went as followeth” (2:212); Jack then begins to say that he happened to overhear the King and the royal advisors speaking about the ale-dealer; the knowledge of what they said, however, Jack further withholds, a lacuna graphically marked in the text by a series of interruptions: “it was,” Jack says to the man, “priuily informed (no villains to these priuie informers) that you, euen you that I now speake to, had—(Oh, would I had no tong to tell the rest; by this drinke it grieues me so I am not able to repeate it)” (2:212–213). To the reader, Jack then says: “Now was my dronken Lord readie to hang himselfe for the ende of the full point” (2:213).

In this opening episode Jack thus plays with an excess of pleasure—a ton of will, we might call it, keeping Jack’s last name in mind—that simultaneously flames and frustrates the lord’s desire for satisfactory narrative fulfillment. As Jack’s meta-plot thus plays with the frustration of narrative satisfaction, it exemplifies in miniature the decisively anti-teleological drive—a death drive, to be sure, given the fact that the lord is “readie to hang himselfe” for such satisfaction—associated with romance, particularly in

its Ariostan strand. *The Unfortunate Traveller* as a whole also wanders into Ariostan territory by way of frequent narrative interruptions.³⁷ Like Ascham's signals to his readers that he is or is not on track, Nashe's interruptions, via his narrator, call attention to the text's circumlocutory straying. "Iost a little neerer to the matter & the purpose," Jack says toward the beginning of the narrative (2:207), but over the course of *The Unfortunate Traveller* one receives the impression that the tale is wandering further and further from a matter and a purpose that do not exist in the first place.

There is, in fact, a rhetorical term that covers both the digressiveness of the text and Jack's narrative interruptions. "Parabasis" refers to the moment in Greek Old Comedy when the chorus punctures the drama's illusion by addressing the audience directly, but it is also more broadly a term for digression. In fact, "*parecbasis*" is the term that Puttenham uses in *The Arte of English Poesy* to designate digression, a term that he translates into English as "the Straggler."³⁸ Not incidentally, parabasis is also the term that Paul de Man uses to characterize irony. "Parabasis," de Man says in "The Concept of Irony," "is the interruption of a discourse by a shift in rhetorical register. It's what you would get in [Lawrence] Sterne, precisely, the constant interruption of the narrative illusion by intrusion . . ."³⁹ In the parabasis of irony one may find, as de Man suggests, "a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness . . . which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and dialectical model, both of which

³⁷ On this aspect of *Orlando Furioso*, to which many critics of Ariosto were allergic, see Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of "Orlando Furioso"* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 86–105.

³⁸ Puttenham, 318.

³⁹ De Man, 178.

are, as you know, the basis of any narration.”⁴⁰ The interruptions of *The Unfortunate Traveller* enact precisely the kind of disruptions that de Man associates with ironic parabasis; every time Jack calls attention to the text’s attempts *not* to stray, he nevertheless threatens to halt the narrative’s progress, the “consistency” of its narrative “lines.”

Keeping the image of de Man’s “text machine,” in particular, in mind, I would now like to quote from the most famous set piece in Nashe’s text: the mechanical summer banqueting house that Jack encounters while roaming through Rome:

I sawe a summer banketting house belonging to a merchaunt, that was the meruaile of the world, & could not be matcht except God should make another paradise. It was builte round of greene marble like a Theater without: within there was a heauen and earth comprehended both vnder one rooffe; the heauen was a cleere ouerhanging vault of christall, wherein the Sunne and Moone and each visible Starre had his true similitude, shine, scituation, and motion, and, by what enwrapped arte I cannot conceiue, these spheares in their proper orbes obserued their circular wheelinges and turnings, making a certaine kinde of soft angelical murmuring musicke in their often windings & going about; which musick the philosophers say in the true heauen, by reason of the grosenes of our senses, we are not capable of. [. . .] On the wel clothed boughs of this conspiracie of pine trees against the resembled Sun beames, were pearcht as many sortes of shrill breasted birdes as the Summer hath allowed for singing men in hir siluane chapels. Who though they were bodies without soules, and sweete resembled substances without sense, yet by the mathematicall experimentes of long siluer pipes secretlye inrinded in the intrailles of the boughs whereon they satw, and vndiscerneable conuaid vnder their bellies into their small throats sloaping, they whistled and freely carold theyr naturall field note.

(2:282–283)

⁴⁰ De Man, 181. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), Lee Edelman offers a particularly compelling explication of the stakes involved in de Man’s theory of irony: “The mindless violence of this textual machine, so arbitrary, so implacable, threatens, like a guillotine, to sever the genealogy that narrative syntax labors to affirm . . . Irony, whose effect de Man likens to the syntactical violence of anacoluthon, thus severs the continuity essential to the very logic of making sense” (23–24).

In approaching this lengthy and difficult passage, which actually continues for a couple more pages, we should first note that the mechanics by which the summer banqueting house operates have specific referents. As Jonathan Sawday points out in his study *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine*, early modern travel writers such as Fynes Moryson supplied descriptions of the complex hydraulics of pleasure gardens in Italy, descriptions from which Nashe is clearly drawing for his own, albeit fictional, description. “To populate such theaters of what Nashe termed ‘soul-exalting objects,’” Sawday writes, “Renaissance designers became skilled in creating bestiaries of moving mechanical animals and figures.” According to Sawday, these mechanical figures served primarily an ornamental function, the function of “adorn[ing] the tables of the wealthy,” but they also had a political purpose insofar as they “could be considered as a form of clockwork diplomacy, designed to impress the recipient with the technological prowess of the culture able to produce such an artefact.”⁴¹

As much as Nashe’s banqueting house may derive some of its significance from these material and political machines, one shouldn’t let that fact distract from what Nashe takes great pains to stress: the banqueting house is more a figural topos than a literal one. Beyond simply representing, via its literal dimension, the latest in Renaissance technology, the banqueting house figures the oldest of symbolic sites. It is the Garden of Eden, as Jack tells us, “counterfeited in that liknes that Adam lorded [over] before his fall” (2:283). And, according to a sentence that evokes Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of*

⁴¹ Jonathan Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 190.

Poesy, the banqueting house re-creates the Ovidian golden age: “Such a golden age, such a good age, such an honest age was set forth in this banqueting house” (2:285).⁴²

If the banqueting house is composed out of thoroughly familiar classical and biblical tropes—the privileged, sublime tropes of high humanism—it can also be read as a *mise en abyme* of romance, a fact that has prompted several critics to invoke implicit intertexts. Julian Yates, for example, associates the banqueting house with Reynaldo’s fountain in *Orlando Furioso*.⁴³ In summarizing readings of this passage, moreover, Steve Mentz tellingly writes: “Criticism remains divided about whether this house is Nashe’s ideal or his version of the Bower of Bliss.”⁴⁴ The text itself is explicit about another intertextual referent, one that, as we have seen, frequently animates and orients English humanist attacks on romance (including Nashe’s own attack in *The Anatomie of Absurditie*): “A wide vast spacious roome [the banqueting house] was, such as we would conceit prince Arthurs hall to be, where he feasted all his knights of the round table together euerie pentecost” (2:283). Though less obvious and central than the biblical and classical references, the Ariostan, Spenserian, and Arthurian echoes figure the banqueting house as a conventional romance topos.

From the moment when the Earl of Surrey arrives on the scene (and I will consider the Earl of Surrey in fuller detail later on), *The Unfortunate Traveller* swerves into the orbit of the semiotics of romance, allegorized here, as if in conversation with

⁴² “Nature,” Sidney writes in the *Defence*, “never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.” Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry; or, The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, rev. R. W. Maslen (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2002), 85.

⁴³ Julian Yates, *Error, Misuse, Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 128–29.

⁴⁴ Mentz, 197. Aside from these parallels, Spenser’s influence on *The Unfortunate Traveller*, and on Nashe’s work more generally, constitutes a conspicuous lacuna in Nashe criticism.

Ascham, as a tour of Catholic Italy. The final third of the text marshals a series of genres, from the tragedies of Heraclide and Cutwolfe to the banished English earl's Aschamesque lecture about the dangers of travel abroad, in order to reform the text, and its narrator and readers, following its tempting, pleasurable, *deforming* digressions into romance. As the last bit of romance before these reforming genres, the summer banqueting house represents romance in its purest form, a moment of perfect *otium* before the text revs up its well-oiled ascetic machinery in an attempt to counteract the stalling effects of its ironic aesthetics. As stylistically overindulgent as it is symbolically overdetermined, the passage says a whole lot about very little. Indeed, it functions as a kind of narrative parabasis, an interruption of the flow of the plot.

Even still, critics have recoiled from considering the passage in these terms. Implicitly channeling twentieth-century condemnations of *l'art pour l'art*, Alexander Leggatt, for example, maintains that the description of the summer banqueting house is “not . . . simply a piece of ‘fine writing’ indulged in for its own sake”⁴⁵ Yet attention should be paid to how long Nashe lingers over the description, which runs on and on for several pages. Indeed, the only descriptive passages in the text that run longer are those of the tournament scene and the rape of Heraclide, but in these cases the purposes of the descriptions are clear: witty satire in the case of the former, horrific tragedy in the case of the latter. The purpose of the summer banqueting house description, on the other hand, is far less clear. If it's not written, as Leggatt writes, “for its own sake,” then for what's sake *is* it written? What is its function? Following Leggatt, critics often interpret the

⁴⁵ Alexander Leggatt, “Artistic Coherence in *The Unfortunate Traveller*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 14.1 (1974): 32.

banqueting house in opposition to the plague-ridden Italian society outside it.⁴⁶ Seeing no such contrast, Jessica Wolfe, on the other hand, argues that the banqueting house serves to satirize Italian “artifice,” its hydraulic machinery symbolizing Italian machinations.⁴⁷ Despite superficial differences, these two readings share the assumption that Nashe, like Ascham, is invested in condemning the Italians.

One might be inclined to reinforce such an assumption were it not for certain assertions in the paragraph that immediately follows Jack’s description of the banqueting house:

O *Rome*, if thou hast in thee such soul-exalting objects [as the banqueting house], what a thing is heauen in comparison of thee, of which *Mercators* globe is a perfecter modell than thou art? Yet this I must saie to the shame of vs protestants; if good workes may merite heauen, they doe them, we talke of them. Whether supersticion or no makes them vnprofitable seruants, that let pulpits decide; but there you shall haue the brauest ladies, in gownes of beaten golde, washing pilgrimes & poore souldiers feete, and doing nothing, they and their waiting maides, all the yeare long, but making shirts and bands for them against they come by in distresse. Their hospitals are more lyke noble mens houses than otherwise; so richly furnished, cleane kept, and hot perfumed, that a souldier would thinke it a sufficient recompence for all his trauell and his wounds, to haue such a heauenly retyring place. For the Pope and his pontificalibus I will not deale with; onely I will dilate vnto you what happened whilest I was in *Rome*.

(2:285–86)

From this paragraph, Jack proceeds to narrate the plague that fell down on Rome during the “vehement hot summer when [he] was a sojourner there.” Critics generally pass over this paragraph, though, in order to focus on the plague itself, which marks the beginning of an escalating series of violent episodes in Italy before Jack returns, in conclusion, to

⁴⁶ In addition to Leggatt, see Stephen S. Hilliard, *The Singularity of Thomas Nashe* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986), 126: “The banqueting house is put in perspective by the plague and civic disorder outside its walls. . . . The plague and the breakdown of order that it causes are the norms of human experience; the banqueting house is an artificial glimpse of a better life.”

⁴⁷ Jessica Wolfe, *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004), 57.

Henry VIII's dominion. Leggatt, for example, refers to this paragraph as a merely "brief interlude," a marginal status that he reinforces by relegating the phrase to a parenthetical space: "[T]he fact that Nashe moves (with only a brief interlude) from the garden to a startling description of the plague would seem to indicate that the contrast is intentional."⁴⁸

Why does this "brief interlude" receive such short shrift? For one thing, Jack's praise of the Italians undermines any "contrast" between England and Rome, or between inside and outside, that common sense dictates we must draw. One's uncertainty in relation to this passage increases still insofar as it's difficult to tell whether or not the irony of Jack's praise is *itself* ironic, in which case one would have irony to the second degree. The situation can only be resolved in a circular fashion, by recourse to the very opposition between England and Italy that the first degree of irony—the irony of Jack's praise of the Italians—calls into question. Whether or not Nashe intends his readers to take Jack's praise at face value is beside the point: even if the passage aims for blame by way of praise, it does so by way of praise, to the extent, even, that the only explicit blame here is directed to "the shame of vs protestants." Evoking the possibility that "good workes may merite heauen"—Calvinist theology, we will recall, emphatically asserts that good works *do not* merit heaven—Jack lauds the social efficacy of the Roman Catholic matrons, the "brauest ladies, in gownes of beaten golde," who wash the feet of pilgrims and soldiers in "richly furnished" hospitals. One should be careful, however, of reaching the conclusion that, in praising such civic engagement, Jack endorses some quasi-Horatian view of aesthetics. The passage establishes no causal relation between the guilt

⁴⁸ Leggatt, 33.

ornament of the ladies' gowns and their good social works; the latter may very well take place in spite of the former. More importantly, the aesthetics of the summer banqueting house—as well as the aesthetics of Rome(ance) more generally—do not lead *Jack* to perform such charitable actions. In talking about these actions rather than doing them, Jack reduplicates the shame of “vs” Protestants.

This passage, so easily passed over, thus makes it difficult to localize Jack's murky—and by even murkier extension, Nashe's—position in relation to Rome. In other words, one cannot be so sure that the text is *simply* invested in condemning the seductively romantic extravagances of Rome. On the one hand, Jack ironically praises the Catholic ladies who perform good social works regardless of their indulgence in excessive pleasures. On the other hand, that irony could be read as ironic—probably should, in fact, be read as ironic, at least as long as one wishes to operate within a dichotomous scheme that pits England against Italy. From a contextual perspective, it would be perverse to argue that Nashe is secretly pro-Catholic, but from a textual perspective such an argument would not be completely out of the question.⁴⁹ These two positions cannot be resolved in any synthetically stable manner. The text machine that is the summer banqueting house extends its pulsating ironic effects across the perverse Italian romance landscape of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, compromising any stable moral one might try to glean from such a prodigal text.

⁴⁹ As Nashe's contemporary biographer, Charles Nicholl, writes, Nashe's “praise of the Catholic emphasis on ‘good workes’ sounds suspiciously sincere” (*A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* [London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984], 159).

A Tale of Two Earls

The summer banqueting house can be interpreted, then, as the ironic heart of the narrative or the heart of the narrative's irony. It is a figurative site on which the contradictory valences attached to romance, which assumes the allegorical form of Rome, converge in ways that confound commonsense understandings of what Nashe's text means—and means to say. If these antithetical valences cannot be dialectically resolved, at least insofar as they exemplify the kind of "radically incompatible" double code of which de Man speaks in "The Concept of Irony," they can, nevertheless, be fractured, such that one can see the antithesis more clearly *as an antithesis*. Interestingly enough, the text assigns each pole of this antithesis to a respective English earl: Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, exemplifies the text's attraction to pointless pleasures; the unnamed banished English earl figures the text's repulsion toward such pleasures.

Earlier I claimed that the summer banqueting house should be read as a conventional romance topos; similarly, the Earl of Surrey should be read as a conventional romance character. And just as the summer banqueting house's literal dimension, I argued, shouldn't obscure its figurative function, neither should the fact that the Earl of Surrey was a real person and poet distract from *his* figurative function in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. His account of falling in love with his paramour, Geraldine, materializes all the discursive materials of romance: metamorphosis, exoticism, sweet passions, enchanted castles, peregrination in general and travel to Italy in particular (Geraldine even compares Surrey to Aeneas) (2:243–45). These rhetorical cues give us the impression that the Earl comes to us directly from Sidney's *Arcadia* or Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

Such an impression is reinforced when the text inscribes Surrey in a tournament scene that evokes not only those found in the *Arcadia*, as Katherine Duncan-Jones has shown,⁵⁰ but also the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in Spenser's House of Pride. Jack offers the reader an elaborate description of Surrey's armor and regalia, the centerpiece of which is a "rough plumed siluer plush, in full proportion and shape of an Estrich," or ostrich, on his horse. Jack interprets the significance of these tournament ornaments as follows:

The morall of the whole is this, that as the estrich, the most burning sighted bird of all others, insomuch as the female of them hatcheth not her eggs by couering them, but by the effectual rayes of her eyes, as he, I say, outstrippeth the nimblest trippers of his feathered condition in footmanship, onely spurd on with the needle quickening goad vnder his side, so he, no less burning sighted than the estrich, spurde on to the race of honor by the sweet rayes of his mistres eyes, perswaded himselfe he should outstrip all other in running to the goale of glorie, onely animated and incited by hir excellence. And as the estrich will eate yron, swallow anie hard mettall whatsoeuer, so woulde he refuse no iron aduenture, no hard taske whatsoeuer, to sit in the grace of so fayre a commander.

(2:273)

It is tempting to let this passage stand on its own, as a particularly bold, and bald, example of Nashe's wanton wit. Yet the way in which it renders ridiculous any attempt to glean a "morall" from artifice is too important to pass unremarked. Where one would expect a pithy maxim, a *sententia* or adage fit for a commonplace book, which sums up the profitable precept to be learned here, Nashe gives only a rambling sentence, a perfect instance of what Renaissance humanists would call indecorousness, that swallows up whatever point is to be made, such that the only point the sentence ever seems to reach is the period mark that draws it to its arbitrary conclusion. And just when we think the

⁵⁰ See Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Nashe and Sidney: The Tournament Scene in *The Unfortunate Traveller*," *Modern Language Review* 63 (1968): 3-7.

conclusion has, finally, been reached, Nashe extends the point beyond the bounds of the sentence, attaching *another* sentence by a flimsy conjunction, an added sentence, we should add, that adds very little to the already paltry moral content conveyed by the previous sentence. Insofar as it says too much, Surrey's armor, like the earl to whom it is metonymically attached, has nothing to say.

If the Earl of Surrey serves any purpose in this text, then, his function is to personify the ironic machinery by which the text confounds the civic demand that any piece of art must serve a purpose. In another text—like the *Arcadia* or *The Faerie Queene*—he would likely appear as a personified figure of enervation; he would probably, in fact, go by the name of Romance or Pleasure or even Error. By way of contrast, let me now turn to the other pole of the text's ambivalence, to the figure that, in Sidney or Spenser, would stand *against* the kinds of pointless pleasures Surrey represents: the figure that would probably, in such texts, be designated as Instruction.

After Jack surveys the summer banqueting house, he finds himself, as I noted earlier, in the midst of a particularly vicious plague, and so he takes refuge in the home of the Roman matron Heraclide. While Jack is there, two *banditti*—Esdras, a Spaniard, and Bartol, an Italian—break into the house and rape Heraclide before stealing away with the house's riches. Heraclide, in the tradition of Lucrece, consequently commits suicide. As if witnessing this horrific tragedy weren't punishment enough for Jack's knavery, what he calls his own "purgatorie" begins only when Heraclide's husband returns home: finding his wife "defiled and massacred," and Jack locked in a bedroom with "rapier vnsheathed," the husband draws the logical conclusion that Jack committed the rape (2:295). Jack is thus led to prison and from there to be hanged—or so it seems: "a banisht

English Earle” arrives, *ex machina*, to save the day, by reporting that he had happened to overhear “one *Bartoll*, an *Italian*, greeuously wounded and bloodie,” confess the rape of Heraclide (2:296). As a result of the earl’s testimony, Jack’s execution is stayed. “[T]o the banisht Earle I came to render thanks,” Jack tells us, “when thus he examined and schoold me” (2:297). As Jack’s extemporal schoolmaster, the banished earl takes a page out of Ascham’s *The Scholemaster*, launching a lengthy diatribe against the dangers of traveling in foreign countries.

Reinforcing his arguments with reference to Icarus, to Cain, to the Israelites in Egypt, and to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the earl attempts to draw, as starkly as possible, the kind of opposition between England and abroad that the text elsewhere ironically blurs. Additionally, his arguments against travel abroad turn primarily on the issue of perverse pleasure. Asserting that “nought but lasciuiousnesse is to be learned” in places like Italy (2:297), the earl goes on to claim that from such sites a traveler will learn unnatural lessons such as “the art of atheisme, the art of epicurising, the art of whoring, the art of poysoning, the art of Sodomitrie” (2:301).⁵¹ The earl rehearses all the standard sixteenth-century stereotypes about not only the Italians, but also the French, the Spanish, the Danish, and the Dutch, before concluding his lecture to Jack with a succinct statement of the value of “home”: “Let no man for anie transitorie pleasure sell away the inheritance he hath of breathing in the place where hee was borne. Get thee home, my yong lad, laye thy bones peaceably in the sepulcher of thy fathers, waxe olde in ouerlooking thy grounds, be at hand to close the eyes of thy kinred. The diuel and I am desperate, he of being restored to heauen, I of being recalled home” (2:302–303).

⁵¹ As if we missed the point implied by the last perversion in this list, Jack tells us, at the conclusion of the narrative, how he “hasted so fast out of the *Sodom of Italy*” (2:327).

The length of this sermon, the amount of space that Nashe devotes to it, might lead us to the conclusion that it is intended to be taken seriously—intended, that is, to be an elaborate resolution to the text’s own ambivalent position regarding the issue of the harmful pleasures of places like Rome. The speech’s span, in that case, suits its social sobriety. But in a text that elsewhere satirizes bloated orators and orations—Jack’s caricaturization of the humanists at Wittenberg provides a particularly memorable example (2:246–49)—the very lengthiness of the banished earl’s speech might lead us to the opposite conclusion: that the opinions it expresses are expressly *not* to be taken seriously. Moreover, surely the unequivocal value that the earl attaches to home in opposition to Rome must be considered in relation to the fact that he himself was banished from England, for reasons the text never divulges: “I am a banisht exile from my country,” the earl says, “though nere linked in consanguinitie to the best: an Earle borne by birth, but a beggar now as thou seest. These manie years in *Italy* have I liued an outlaw” (2:302). The fact that the earl speaks from a position of abject experience might make him more of an authority on the abjectness of experience. That this is not quite the perspective the text has in mind, though, can be illustrated by recalling the striking analogy by which the earl, in the culminating sentence of his speech, compares himself to Satan: “The diuel and I am desperate, he of being restored to heauen, I of being recalled home.” Notice the singular verb “am” in this sentence that bears two subjects: the devil and the earl. Because the earl is grammatically and semantically linked to Satan, the duplicitous orator *par excellence*, it is difficult to take the earl’s arguments as gospel.

But perhaps the clearest indication that the earl’s sermon is to be taken as a lampoon can be gleaned from Jack’s reaction of indifference, if not open hostility, to the

lesson: “Heeres a stir, thought I to my selfe after I was set at libertie, that is worse than an vpbraiding lesson after a britching” (2:303). Let me juxtapose this quotation to Jack’s reaction, earlier in the text, to the Earl of Surrey’s account of being bewitched by Geraldine: “Not a little was I delighted with this vnexpected loue storie, especially from a mouth out of which was nought wont to march but sterne precepts of grauetie & modestie. I sweare vnto you I thought his companie the better by a thousand crownes, because hee had discarded those nice tearmes of chastitie and continencie” (2:245). The Earl of Surrey relates a tale of bewitchment and Circean enchantment and travel to Italy—relates, that is, a romance; Jack responds with patent pleasure. The unnamed banished earl presents a long-winded diatribe, *à la* Ascham, *against* bewitchment, Circean enchantments, and travel to Italy; Jack responds with indifference. The counterpoetics modeled in the text seems to operate, then, according to a simple principle: pleasure sticks, instruction fails.

Such a formula should not, however, be taken to argue that the text’s ambivalence can be resolved squarely on the side of indulgence in pleasure. In other words, just because Jack disregards the banished earl’s heavy-handed advice doesn’t mean that the text does. The narrative events of the rest of *The Unfortunate Traveller* could be read as Jack’s punishments for not taking the earl’s lecture seriously. Just as the text pushes Surrey into the tournament arena, and thus into the generic arena of romance, it causes Jack to fall, literally as well as figuratively, into the violent realm of revenge tragedy, as if the text were taking revenge *on* its protagonist. After departing from the earl, Jack wanders Rome in search of his courtesan, Diamante, and by chance (which is to say, by the text’s narrative machinery) he falls into the cellar door of a house owned by a Jew

named Zadoch. If the anti-Semitic portrait of Zadoch were not indication enough that Jack has fallen into a Marlovian drama, Nashe presents the threat of dismemberment (Zadoch sells Jack to Doctor Zacharie, who intends to use him for an anatomy), machinations in and around the Vatican, and, as the text's set piece *de la resistance*, the gruesome execution of one Cutwolfe, who had gruesomely killed Esdras, the man who raped Heraclide. After this heavy load of tragic events, *The Unfortunate Traveller* hastily concludes in the following manner:

Vnsearchable is the booke of our destinies. One murder begetteth another: was neuer yet bloud-shed barren from the beginning of the world to this daie. Mortifiedly abiected and danted was I with this truculent tragedie of *Cutwolfe* and *Esdras*. To such straight life did it thence forward incite me that ere I went out of *Bologna* I married my curtizan, performed many almes deedes; and hasted so fast out of the *Sodom of Italy*, that within fortie daies I arriued at the king of *Englands* campe twixt *Ardes* and *Guines* in *France*, where he with great triumphs met and entertained the Emperour and the French king, and feasted many daies. And so as my storie began with the king at *Turnay* and *Turwin*, I thinke meete here to end it with the king at *Ardes* and *Guines*. All the conclusiue epilogue I wil make is this; that if herein I haue pleased anie, it shall animat me to more paines in this kind.

Otherwise I will swear vpon an English Chronicle
 neuer to bee out-landish Chronicler more
 while I liue. Farewell as many
 as wish me well.

(2:327–28)

If the banished earl's lecture was not enough to reform Jack—if it had been, Jack would have returned to England, and the text would have thus concluded, at that point—then clearly “the truculent tragedy of *Cutwolfe* and *Esdras*” is enough. Not only does the text return Jack to King Henry's purview; it also reorients him to the teleology of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage—the teleology of what Nashe, in a phrase that has more uncanny resonance for us than it could have had for him, calls the “straight life.”

Has Jack learned his lesson, then? Has the reader? What is that lesson? These are questions that cannot be easily answered. The text, to be sure, ends with a clear moral: “Vnsearchable is the booke of our destinies. One murder begetteth another: was neuer yet bloud-shed barren from the beginning of the world to this daie.” Moreover, the circularity of the tale’s narrative arc (“as my storie began with the king at *Turnay* and *Turwin*, I thinke meete here to end it with the king at *Ardes* and *Guines*”) might lead us to consider *The Unfortunate Traveller* as a typical Prodigal Son story, with its *fort-da* pattern of departure and return, of repentance after a literally and figuratively “outlandish” period of license and licentiousness.⁵² Unlike *The Faerie Queene* or the revised *Arcadia* or even *The Scholemaster*, *The Unfortunate Traveller* is not an unfinished text.

At the same time, however, the text’s “conclusiue epilogue” is too hasty, too tacked-on—almost as if it were a parenthesis, a supplement or appendix—to a narrative that has failed to prepare the way for it. Yes, the text ends. And yes, it ends by rejecting the excesses of romance, travel, and licentious pleasure. This rejection takes the form of abjection, or projection, a displacement of these excesses onto “the *Sodom of Italy*.” To emphasize the ending, however, is to provide only a partial picture of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, of what I’ve traced, throughout this chapter, as a radically incompatible ironic doubling between the pleasurable means and apparently virtuous ends of the text. However, in making even this claim, I’m still operating under the assumption that the containment of pleasure *is* the “end” of the text—its goal or function as well as its conclusion. Is it, though? “All the conclusiue epilogue I wil make is this; that if herein I haue pleased anie, it shall animat me to more paines in this kind.” This statement is

⁵² See Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976).

difficult to interpret, phrased as it is in the uncertainty of a conditional statement. Yet the fulcrum on which this conditional pivots is clearly the notion of pleasure—a reader’s pleasure, no less, that will generate more text beyond the closed system that this very statement seeks to effect. By way of pleasure, the ending of the text contradictorily opens (up) the text.

The passages I’ve examined here from *The Anatomie of Absurditie* and *The Unfortunate Traveller* expose and enact the tension, implicit throughout Nashe’s work, between his propensity for prodigal play, on the one hand, and the humanist program of civic and ethical profitability, on the other. Regarding this tension, Lorna Hutson asserts that the humanist “need to inculcate responsible social attitudes through literature produced a schematically pre-fabricated or compendious style of discourse which could not but frustrate a writer whose special talent was, as was Nashe’s, for improvisation.”⁵³ From the microscopic level of alliteration to the macroscopic level of narrative structure, Nashe’s improvisationally improvident texts fail to practice what, according to the demands of Renaissance humanism, they must preach, a point too-easily overlooked if we pay attention only to what Nashe must preach, if we therefore fail to pay attention to the rhetorical motions of the text, independent of the stated intentions, thematic content, and conventional meanings that can be paraphrased and summarized with facility.

And yet, precisely because Nashe’s style is so prodigal, outlandish, and ironic, the temptation is great to redeem, recuperate, or sublimate his writing by reinscribing it within a value system. Hence Georgia Brown argues that writers of the 1590s replaced the older humanist defense of literature—that poetry expresses moral and political

⁵³ Hutson, 72.

values—with a newer model that reveled in poetic prodigality. This “new kind of defense,” Brown writes, “does not deny the traditional association of literature with the trivial and transgressive, but *capitalizes* upon it to uncover the paradoxical *value* of marginality, error, ornamentality and excess.”⁵⁴ In the context of this model, Nashe is Brown’s exemplary writer: she writes that “while Nashe was associated with the unbridled excesses of satirical wit, he was also the personification of a particular kind of literariness, of an easy and highly *productive* relationship with words” (259; my italics). It may be true that Nashe, like other writers of the 1590s, aimed to find “value in the valueless,” in Brown’s words, in order to assert authorial autonomy, authority, and originality (22). But to adopt such an aim as the teleology of one’s readings would be to commit the intentional fallacy, to rely on an under-theorized notion of authorial individuality, and to overlook the fact that, from the perspective of Elizabethan literary culture, Nashe’s style was anything *but* “productive.”

Indeed, the literary market of Elizabethan England was not so kind to Nashe, a point that Brown’s study glosses over. After claiming that critics have inaccurately painted a portrait of Nashe as a victim of the patronage system, she writes in a brief footnote (as if it were a mere afterthought): “This is not to deny that Nashe led an increasingly precarious existence towards the end of his career” (59n15). If Nashe, as Lorna Hutson writes in a sentence I quoted earlier, “abandon[ed] the protestant-humanist notion of reading for profit,” he also seems to have abandoned any notion of *writing* for profit—or rather, that notion abandoned him, as the name of his alter ego, “Pierce

⁵⁴ Georgia Brown, *Redefining Elizabethan Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005), 6; my italics. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

Pennilesse,” suggests. Here is Nashe, in the text that bears his alter ego’s name, depicting his own indigence:

But all in vaine, I sate up late and rose earely, contended with the cold,
and conuersed with scarcitie: for all my labours turned to losse, my vulgar
Muse was despised and neglected, my paines not rewarded, or slightly
rewarded, and I my selfe (in prime of my best wit) laide open to pouertie.
Whereupon (in a malecontent humour) I accused my fortune, raild on my
patrones, bit my pen, and ragde in all parts like a mad man.

(1:157)

Nashe can be in the “prime” of his “best wit,” but that primacy functions in inverse proportion to his ability to produce anything of value. All his “labors” turn to “losse.”⁵⁵ It is not, then, that Nashe found value in the valueless, but that he dwelled in the negation of value at all costs. In this respect, he may stand as a model not only for the practice of a virtuosity without virtue, but also for a new futilitarian criticism not constrained by standard notions of utility and value.

⁵⁵ Nashe goes on to bemoan what he calls “the lamentable condition of our Times, that men of Arte must seeke almes of Cormorantes” (1:160). Recall, from the previous chapter, how John of Gaunt, in *Richard II*, disparages the King as an “insatiate cormorant.” These are not the last cormorants we will encounter in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Spenser's Unredemptive Romance: The Legend of Courtesy

We are much more impressed by cases where the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality.

SIGMUND FREUD

Edmund Spenser, wrote William Butler Yeats, always loved “the journey more than its end . . . and the tale less than its telling.”¹ Endorsing such a reading of Spenser these days means opening oneself to the charge of anachronism, of projecting backward onto the Renaissance a post-Romantic or modernist aesthetic ideology that values art for art’s sake. As Jane Grogan has recently reminded us in her pedagogical reading of *The Faerie Queene*, the poem “takes its place in a tradition of English writing which strove to transmit the *utile* by means of the *dulce* without concealing its didactic agenda or selling out to the surface pleasures of the text.”² Yeats’s bifurcation of the journey and its end, of the tale’s telling and the tale itself, of the text’s pleasurable form and moral content, would not, in that case, square well with this “tradition of English writing,” the mainstream of Renaissance humanism. Certainly one only has to cite Spenser’s own Letter to Raleigh, in which he expounds the “generall intention and end” of *The Faerie*

¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Cutting of an Agate* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 213–214.

² Jane Grogan, *Exemplary Spenser: Visual and Poetic Pedagogy in “The Faerie Queene”* (Surrey, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 15.

Queene—namely, to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline”—in order to argue that Spenser was more concerned with the “end” than Yeats would have us believe.³

Such invocations of intention pervade Spenser criticism in general, which tends to operate in the face of *le morte d’auteur*. Even Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*—the founding text of New Historicism, which has guided the direction that Spenser studies, and early modern studies in general, has taken in the last few decades—circumscribes its reading of *The Faerie Queene*, despite its ostensible hostility to the kind of liberal humanism against which it is directed, within the bounds of what it calls Spenser’s “stated intention.”⁴ According to that intention, Spenser must construct a “distinction,” precarious though it may be, “between a pleasure that serves some useful purpose, some virtuous end, and a pleasure that does not” (176). This virtuous end, this “agency of purposeful direction,” is, according to Greenblatt, “expressed in *The Faerie Queene* as a whole by the idea of the *quest*” and is heteronormatively directed toward a “sexuality found in the power of love to inspire virtuous action and ultimately, with the sanctification of marriage, in the generation of offspring” (176). The kind of generation of which Greenblatt speaks “restores the sense of linear progression to an experience that threatens to turn in upon itself, reveling”—like a Wildean aesthete, the implication seems to be—“in its own exquisite beauty” (176). Without this restorative generation, one is left with a more insidious pleasure that “serves as its own end, that claims to be self-

³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2d ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007), 714. All subsequent citations are to this edition and will appear in the text. Citations of the poem itself refer to book, canto, and stanza numbers; citations of the Letter to Raleigh refer to page number. All italics are present in this edition, not added by me, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980; rpt. 2005), 175. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

justifying rather than instrumental, purposeless rather than generative,” a pleasure that is therefore “immoderate and must be destroyed,” says Greenblatt, “lest it undermine the power that Spenser worships” (176–77).

Greenblatt’s reading of the tension between pleasure and discipline in *The Faerie Queene* has come under fire in the last decade or so, most particularly in Jonathan Goldberg’s recent study *The Seeds of Things*.⁵ Where and when scholars have critiqued Greenblatt’s discussion, however, they’ve tended to do so on the very textual site where Greenblatt develops his claims: the Legend of Temperance, the second book of the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene*. Hence Goldberg’s claim that the 1590 edition can be read as a “project in askesis,” or self-discipline, an assertion that reproduces Spenser’s intentions even as it questions Greenblatt’s reading of Spenser’s intentions *as* reproductive.⁶ My effort in this chapter is to revise such readings by redirecting our critical gaze from the 1590 *Faerie Queene* to the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, the second edition that added the final three completed books (the legends of Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy), revised the ending of the Legend of Chastity, and was notably printed without the Letter to Raleigh. If the 1590 edition can be read, as Goldberg suggests, as a project in askesis, then the 1596 edition can be read, I argue, as a project in the ironic undoing of askesis. In order to make this case, I will focus my attention in particular on Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*, the Legend of Courtesy, where Spenser’s didactic aims unravel and

⁵ Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 63–121. See also Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999), 52–71, and Paul Cefalu, *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004), 190–91.

⁶ Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 67.

romance errancy subsumes the ethical substance of his plot.⁷ Through its emphasis on contingency over causality, errancy over linearity, and misconduct over askesis, the Legend of Courtesy qualifies the virtuous standards according to which Renaissance theorists measured the value of poetry.

Irony, Narrative, Askesis

In the previous chapter, I examined the ironic forces by which Ascham's and Nashe's texts fall victim, independently of any intention, to the same kinds of idle and errant pleasures that they seem, at the level of content or statement, to demonize. At the level of rhetorical structure, these pleasures take the form of digressions, alliteration, and narrative interruptions and thus exemplify, as I showed, the kind of disruptive parabasis that Paul de Man associates with irony itself. Before turning to the ascetics of *The Faerie Queene*, I'd like to explore de Man's theory of irony in more detail, focusing on the hostile relationship that he establishes between irony and the disciplinary vigor of narrative. A sustained look at de Man's discussions of irony will allow us to re-view recent work on the ethics and politics of askesis, as influenced by the late writings of Michel Foucault, from a more rhetorical or narrative perspective than is the custom in Foucault-inspired criticism. As I will show, such work frames the tension between askesis and pleasure in terms akin to those that de Man uses to characterize the conflict between narrative and irony, in ways that shed light on *both* the form *and* the ethics of *The Faerie Queene*.

⁷ Grogan grants this point in her book on Spenser, but for her it is the virtue of courtesy itself, rather than romance, which effects that unraveling. Indeed, as Grogan states, romance "is not necessarily anathema to didactic poetics, particularly one as flexible and sensible as Spenser's" (157). My argument is that romance, especially in the Legend of Courtesy, is not necessarily hospitable to didactic poetics either.

Let me begin by recalling how de Man, following Friedrich Schlegel, establishes irony as the permanent parabasis of narrative lines, offering a disruption akin to the grammatical interruptions of anacoluthon or to what Schlegel identifies as the *buffo* of *commedia dell'arte*, the figure who offers comic asides to the audience and thereby punctures the dramatic illusion. "There is no narration without reflection, no narrative without dialectic," de Man states in his lecture on "The Concept of Irony," "and what irony disrupts (according to Friedrich Schlegel) is precisely that dialectic and that reflexivity."⁸ In the face of valiant Hegelian efforts (on behalf of thinkers ranging from Kierkegaard and Walter Benjamin to Peter Szondi) to reinscribe the parabasis of irony within a dialectical system that would recuperate the value of narrative and history, de Man concludes his lecture by maintaining that narrative is "suspended, interrupted, disrupted" where irony is concerned ("CI" 184).⁹

The successive, dialectical temporal structure that goes by the name of "narrative" in "The Concept of Irony" is the reappearance, in a different guise, of what de Man, in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," calls "allegory." According to the earlier essay, the "fundamental structure of allegory" occurs "in the tendency of language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject." Irony, by contrast, is "the reversed mirror-

⁸ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 181. Subsequent citations to "The Concept of Irony" will appear in the text and will be designated by the abbreviation "CI."

⁹ Avital Ronell, in her painstakingly close reading of "The Concept of Irony" in *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2002), calls attention to de Man's dismissals of acts of attempted recuperation. Surveying the disruptive force of irony, Ronell "caution[s] that we bear in mind the Heideggerian distinction between destruction and devastation," but she goes on to qualify such a distinction: "This [qualification] is not because I want to offer a recuperative gesture that holds back on ironic range and velocity but simply because I want to maintain the rigidity of focus, to prevent us from slipping noisily into undeveloped pronouncements of nihilism. . . . Let us bear this distinction [between destruction and devastation] in mind, though de Man himself might want to court-martial me for working as a Szondi spy. In fact, anyone caught committing recuperative acts is hauled in by the de Manian sweep" (122).

image” of allegory: it “appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single moment.”¹⁰ Whereas allegory, then, is a diachronic structure for de Man, irony is synchronic. However, synchronic and diachronic temporalities don’t necessarily exclude each other, so why does de Man view irony and narrative, or irony and allegory, as antagonists in a perpetual struggle?

The de Manian relationship between irony and narrative can perhaps best be illustrated by evoking the figure of the Moebius strip. At any given point along its structure, the Moebius strip has two sides, front and back. When one traces a continuous line across the surface, however, the two sides of the structure feed into each other, so that the Moebius strip is one-sided rather than double-sided in the final analysis. Such is the case with irony and narrative. At any given point—indeed, at every point—irony divides a text into a radically incompatible double code. The diachronic, successive perspective of narrative flattens or straightens out this duplicity, sublimating the division in a dialectical synthesis that allows for narrative resolution and thus for knowledge of the self and of the world.

Much in the same way that the sort of generation Greenblatt identifies in *The Faerie Queene* “restores,” as I quoted earlier, a “sense of linear progression to an experience that threatens to turn in upon itself,” narrative, by way of unfolding a dialectical sequence, according to de Man, strives to subordinate the instantaneous disruptions of irony to the telos of meaning and knowledge. Thus while de Man, in both of his essays, stresses the disruptive effect that irony has on narrative, it is just as easy to emphasize, though de Man himself wouldn’t, the disciplinary effect that narrative has on

¹⁰ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 225. Subsequent citations to “The Rhetoric of Temporality” will appear in the text and will be designated by the abbreviation “RT.”

irony. As a matter of fact, narrative's submission of irony gets inscribed in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" at the precise moment when the essay establishes irony's curious temporality: "The act of irony, as we know [*sic*] understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality" ("RT" 222). The typographical error in this sentence serves as a perfect micrograph of narrative's success: any attempt to "understand" irony necessarily purges its instantaneity ("now") in the name of, or with the aim of, epistemological clarity ("know").

There are many narrative paradigms that seem to effectively subordinate irony to the straightforward diachronic force of allegory. One thinks, for instance, of the bildungsroman, the conversion narrative, or even, as de Man himself suggested in a 1980 interview with Robert Moynihan, the quest romance.¹¹ In each case, narrative redirects the division or multiplicity or partialness contained in irony's chaos toward a wholeness or fullness that retrospectively establishes the cultivation and coherence of meaning: maturation in the case of the bildungsroman; the attainment of atonement (*at-one-ment*) in the case of the conversion narrative; the successful securing of an object or objective in the case of the quest romance.

In his *Confessions*, that most exemplary of conversion narratives, for instance, Saint Augustine characterizes his sins and his reformation as just such a passage from

¹¹ In response to Moynihan's question about whether "Kierkegaard's later interest in the quest as a literary and philosophical topic add[s] to the ironic," de Man asserted: "The quest motif in itself is not an ironic motif. The quest is a story that has a beginning and an end, which sets its own aim, and which then proceeds, as a continuity, to the end. A quest romance, myth, story, is a linear and coherent narrative which allows us to order a variety of episodes to a totalizing principle in which the elements converge. Such a process is not incompatible with irony, but on the other hand, irony would always undo or undermine that type of narrative. So there is indeed a relationship between quest and irony, but it is itself ironic." In Robert Moynihan, *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1986), 138.

multiplicity to wholeness. Addressing God directly, as he does throughout the text, Augustine writes at the beginning of Book II: “You gathered me together from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided.”¹² The “state of disintegration,” Augustine makes clear, results from the ways in which he fell victim to the pursuit of *jouissance*, the ways in which he “followed the driving force of [his] impulse” and so “abandon[ed]” God (II.ii.4). From a post-conversion backward glance, he laments the fact that his conversion narrative did not curb his impulse sooner: “If only someone could have *imposed restraint* on my disorder. That would have *transformed to good purpose* the fleeting experiences of beauty in these lowest of things, and *fixed limits* to indulgence in their charms. Then the stormy waves of my youth would have finally broken on the shore of marriage” (II.ii.3; my italics). The rectification of *jouissance*, its rerouting in the direction of a purposeful telos, is perfectly captured by Augustine’s oceanic metaphor: the automatic, repetitive, and tempestuous waves of sexual will are shored up by, and on, the sure shore of God’s goodwill, as manifested in the sanctity of marriage. Just as narrative, in de Man’s words, carries out the “anamorphosis of the tropes, the transformations of the tropes, into the system of tropes, to which the corresponding experience is that of the self standing above its own experiences” (“CI” 177), so will Augustine’s hoped-for conversion narrative “transform” his impulses “to good purpose.”

In time, Augustine finds security on the uninterrupted and incorruptible path of the righteous. The course of narrative, of course, would have it no other way. Spiritual reformation may seem, in this light, to be too specific, extreme, and overdetermined an instance to allow us to generalize about its significance for a theory of narrative, but the

¹² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1991), II.i.1. Subsequent citations will appear in the text and refer to book, chapter, and paragraph numbers.

narrative of conversion nonetheless thematizes the conversion of narrative—the work of conversion performed *by* narrative on the multiplicity figured by irony. Augustine indicates as much when he revisits the writings of the apostle Paul, the very pattern of Christian converts. “Where at one time,” Augustine confesses, “I used to think [Paul] contradicted himself and the text of his words disagreed with the testimonies of the law and the prophets, the problems simply vanished. The holy oracles now presented to me a simple face . . .” (VII.xxi.27). No longer a proto-deconstructive reader, attuned to the ironic contradictions of the text, Augustine fulfills the fantasy subtending any hermeneutic endeavor: he “simply” becomes a reader for whom the word of the Word presents itself as a “simple face” and can thus be taken *prima facie*.

With this elimination of contradiction and irony, the royal road to Augustine’s conversion is paved over, cleared of all potholes that might stand in his way. Conversing with, and converting because of, his pious mother Monica just prior to her death at Ostia, Augustine assents to the pursuit of wisdom, becoming, to recall de Man’s words, a “self standing above its own experiences” as it experiences the rising gradations of salvation:

The conversation led us towards the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily senses [*carnalium sensuum delectatio*], however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering. Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed [*perambulavimus gradatim*] beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself . . . We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works . . . We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food.

(IX.x.24)

Figuring conversion as a stairway to heaven, so to speak, the ascent narrative presents us with a perfect illustration of sublimation, which Lacan, in his seminar on *The Ethics of*

Psychoanalysis, characterizes as “moral and spiritual elevation” or “the scale of values.”¹³ Much can be said about Augustine’s description of his sublimation—and I’ll have much more to say about sublimation in general in the next chapter—but for now I merely wish to point out that the passage from carnality to spiritual truth is accompanied by a passage from passivity to activity and, therefore, to control. Notice how the very grammar of the passage moves Augustine and his mother from an object position (“The conversation *led us*”) to a subject position (“*We* climbed . . . *We* ascended . . . *We* moved up”). The self’s passivity in relation to terrestrial pleasure, its lack of control or agency vis-à-vis the divided and dividing will—a passivity that is, as we will see, central to the plot of Spenser’s Legend of Courtesy—constitutes the strongest point of comparison to irony. For irony, as de Man explains in the interview with Moynihan, “comes into being precisely when self-consciousness loses its control over itself” (137).

This passage through the *Confessions* should allow us, then, to begin to view the relationship between irony and narrative in relation to questions of ethics and pleasure, particularly carnal or sexual pleasure. To say this, though, is not to suggest that de Man’s discussions of irony are completely devoid of attention to such issues. Remember, from Chapter 2, that the passage from Schlegel’s *Lucinde* on which de Man focuses in “The Concept of Irony” evinces, on close inspection, “a reflection on the very physical questions involved in sexual intercourse” (“CI” 168). And when, in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” de Man, underscoring Baudelaire’s description of “*la puissance d’être*,” asserts that “irony is instantaneous like an ‘explosion’ and the fall is sudden” (“RT” 222), it is hard not to read this explosive “*puissance*” as an explosive *jouissance*, an orgasmic

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Potter (New York: Norton, 1992), 87.

eruption. Yet whereas in these essays the sexual subtext is merely that—subtext—there is another essay of de Man’s where the question of sexual desire comes closer to the forefront. I am thinking of his essay “Excuses,” the last chapter of *Allegories of Reading*, which offers a detailed reading of the *Confessions*—not Augustine’s *Confessions*, but Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s.¹⁴

In the scene on which de Man’s reading focuses, Rousseau narrates how he stole a small ribbon from the aristocratic household where he was once employed as a servant. “When the theft is discovered,” as de Man summarizes the scene, Rousseau “accuses a young maidservant [named Marion] of having given him the ribbon, the implication being that *she was trying to seduce him*” (“E” 279; my italics). Over the course of his interpretation, de Man unravels the complex threads of rhetoric that motivate Rousseau’s attempt to understand the logic that motivated him to steal the ribbon and blame Marion in the first place. At first glance, Rousseau excuses himself on the basis of the fact that the ribbon seems to function as a substitute, a trope, for (Rousseau’s desire for) Marion. De Man claims, however, that this reading is hardly sufficient to account for the gratuitous functioning of the text.¹⁵ He then proceeds to develop a supplementary reading of the scene as a desire for self-exposure: “What Rousseau *really* wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets” (“E” 285; de

¹⁴ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 278–301. Subsequent citations will appear in the text and will be designated by the abbreviation “E.” In his own extended reading of “Excuses,” Jacques Derrida identifies Augustine as a conspicuous absence in de Man’s essay. Pointing out “an archive of confession” in Christianity that includes both Augustine’s and Rousseau’s texts, Derrida writes: “I must recall, in this context, that in the course of his exemplary and from now on canonical reading of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, de Man never speaks of Augustine and of this Christian history” (*Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002], 80).

¹⁵ As de Man puts it with typical wit: “Substitution is indeed bizarre (it is odd to take a ribbon for a person) but since it reveals motives, causes, and desires, the oddity is quickly reduced back to sense. The story may be a rebus or a riddle in which a ribbon is made to signify a desire, but the riddle can be solved. The delivery of meaning is delayed but by no means impossible” (“E” 284).

Man's italics). As soon as he establishes this reading, however, he rejects it as well. Why? Because both of these initial explanations "converge towards a unified signification," de Man explains, "and the shame experienced at the desire to possess dovetails with the deeper shame felt at self-exposure" ("E" 286–87).

After the first phase of his reading is rejected, de Man's true reading begins as he hones in on a grammatically odd sentence in the text. Speaking of Marion, Rousseau writes: "She was present to my mind, I excused myself on the first thing that offered itself" (qtd. in de Man, "E" 288). According to de Man, this sentence undermines the text's intention to search for the *cause* of Rousseau's transgression, a cause that the text had seemed to locate in Rousseau's desire for Marion and/or for self-exposure. "[T]he use of a vocabulary of contingency ['the first thing that offered itself'] within an argument of causality is arresting and disruptive," de Man explains, "for the sentence is phrased in such a way as to allow for a complete disjunction between Rousseau's desires and interests and the selection of this particular name" ("E" 288). De Man thus identifies the sentence as an anacoluthon, a grammatical interruption or discontinuity that, at the end of the essay, he reads in terms of parabasis and irony, thus paving the way for his claims in "The Concept of Irony."

From the interpretation of Rousseau's anacoluthon, de Man draws a number of radical conclusions about the nature of (the) text. Picking up the image of the machine from another text by Rousseau, de Man highlights a "threatening loss of control," an "entirely gratuitous and irresponsible text" ("E" 296)—a "text machine," as he calls it in "The Concept of Irony" ("CI" 181)—that threatens the text's figural mastery. This threat "takes place," de Man writes, "independently of any desire; as such it is not unconscious

but mechanical, systematic in its performance but arbitrary in its principle, like a grammar” (“E” 298). A different kind of will is at work in the text, then: a passive, arbitrary, and random will effected by language itself—insofar as language can even be characterized as having a “will” and a “self,” for such characterizations can only ever be catachreses, figures of something for which no literal term exists.¹⁶ In any case, this will works *on* the subject so that the subject is an effect of language rather than a cause of its use. “Far from seeing language as an instrument in the service of a psychic energy,” de Man says, “the possibility now arises that the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions, and representations is the aberrant, metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning” (“E” 299).¹⁷ What are the implications of such a reading for an understanding of sexual and textual pleasure?

The terms of de Man’s double reading—of the text as a desire for Marion and for self-exposure, on the one hand, and of the text as an arbitrary machine that disrupts the possibility of any desire *for* an object, on the other—can be seen as corresponding to the two states of *jouissance* outlined by Lee Edelman. The first form of *jouissance* is a *jouissance*, in fact, *of form*, a pleasure that “gets attached to a particular object or end,” in Edelman’s words, and thus “congeal[s] identity around the fantasy of satisfaction or fulfillment by means of that object” (as in the case of Rousseau’s *Confessions* according

¹⁶ On de Man’s characteristic catachrestic personifications of language, see J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 152–53.

¹⁷ In her essay “Rigorous Unreliability,” Barbara Johnson offers a brilliant observation about the grammar of de Man’s claim here. “What is striking about this sentence,” she writes, “is that it is itself a grammatical anacoluthon: the participle ‘seeing’ in the introductory subordinate clause demands a corresponding subject in the main clause, but in the main clause that subject is replaced by an abstraction: ‘Far from seeing X, the possibility now arises that Y.’ The grammar of the anacoluthon thus *enacts* the eclipse of the interpreting subject that it describes. The ‘we’ that would situate *us* as readers who are far from seeing drops out of the sentence that describes that very dropping out” (*A World of Difference* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987], 24; Johnson’s italics).

to the first phase of de Man's reading). Edelman continues: "At the same time, however, this jouissance dissolves such fetishistic investments, undoing the consistency of a social reality that relies on Imaginary identifications, on the structures of Symbolic law, and on the paternal metaphor of the name."¹⁸ Two states of jouissance, then: the latter is a "corrosive enjoyment" that "annihilates" the first form of jouissance, that "fetishistic jouissance that works to *consolidate* identity" (30; Edelman's italics). And the "corrosive enjoyment" of the second version of jouissance echoes what Edelman, earlier in the essay, addresses as "the corrosive force of irony"—de Man's text machine—which, Edelman points out, "carries a charge for de Man quite similar to that of the death drive as understood by Lacan" (23). This comparison between the (Lacanian) death drive and (de Manian) irony retrospectively explains the mechanistic vocabulary Edelman uses on the previous page to describe the drive: "As the name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal" (22).¹⁹

I imagine that this vocabulary—of a "mechanistic compulsion," a "formal excess," and a "death drive"—may strike some readers as awkwardly anachronistic to the early modern terrain this project covers. Indeed, some readers may wish to interpret the insistence of such terms as the symptom of a specifically modern post-industrial or post-atomic epoch in which humanity, wounded and feeble, is forced to come to grips with its loss of control over meaning in the face of life's increasing, and increasingly

¹⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 25. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

¹⁹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek's claim that the drive is "a 'mechanical' insistence that cannot be caught up in dialectical trickery"; this definition would apply as well, with almost uncanny specificity, to irony as theorized by de Man. See Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1991), 21.

overwhelming, automaticity. While poststructuralism's posthumanism may receive its specific inflection in an a(u)tom(at)ic age, that fact shouldn't obscure the degree to which early modern writers similarly grappled with concern over a lack of agency or human will. Surely Nashe's summer banqueting house, as I showed in the previous chapter, provides one memorable emblem of such machinery.

I've dwelled at length on de Man's reading of Rousseau—and established, via Edelman's work, the connection between irony and the corrosive *jouissance* that insists in the death drive—for a variety of reasons that will become clearer over the course of this chapter. For now let me just say that in his own *Confessions*, coincidentally enough, Augustine, like Rousseau, also confesses a theft he committed as a young man—in his case, a theft of pears. And he, too, explains that crime in terms of a mechanistic drive: “I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was not to enjoy not what I should by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong” (II.iv.9). Because Augustine was motivated not by a desire *for the object* he stole, but rather by an autotelic wickedness (“I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself,” he goes on to say), this is no fetishistic *jouissance* of the kind that Edelman describes. Inscribing himself as the passive object of a more corrosive and perverse drive (“Wickedness filled *me*”), Augustine confesses to a trajectory toward annihilation that reverses sublimation's upward motion: “It was foul, and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself. My depraved soul leaped down from your firmament to ruin” (II.iv.9).

Yet Augustine's "fall," of course, is not just particular to his individual biography; it is a repetition of *the* Fall, the primal scene of transgression. In *City of God*, written some fifteen to twenty years after the *Confessions*, Augustine revisits the same territory but casts it in more universal terms: the spirit's loss of control over material flesh is seen as a direct result of, indeed as retribution for, Original Sin. When Adam and Eve fell, "man's nature suffered a change for the worse," Augustine writes at the beginning of Book XIV; "and bondage to sin and inevitable death was the legacy handed on to their posterity."²⁰ Later in the same book, he reflects on the carnal consequences of this death drive. "The important point," he writes, "is that through the justice of God, who is our Lord and master and whom we refused to serve as his subjects, our flesh, which had been subject to us, now gives us trouble through its non-compliance" (XIV.15). Like language according to de Man's reading of Rousseau, lust has a will of its own. The subject is now subjected to it. For Augustine, the best illustration of this subjection is unwilling, involuntary erection, which happens regardless of any fetishistic attachment or self-control:

We see then that there are lusts for many things, and yet when lust is mentioned *without the specification of its object* the only thing that normally occurs to the mind is the lust that excites the indecent parts of the body. This lust assumes power not only over the whole body, and not only from the outside, but also internally; it *disturbs the whole man*, when the mental emotion combines and mingles with the physical craving, resulting in a pleasure surpassing all physical delights. So intense is the pleasure that when it reaches its climax there is an *almost total extinction* of mental alertness; the intellectual sentries, as it were, are overwhelmed.

(XIV.16; my italics)

²⁰ Saint Augustitne, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972; rpt. 2003), XIV.1. Subsequent citations will appear in the text and refer to book and chapter numbers.

Incidentally, this passage forms the basis of one of Michel Foucault's late lectures, "Sexuality and Solitude," which stands as a fragment of the unpublished fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In that volume, *The Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault intended to address the doctrine of the flesh in early Christianity. "Sexuality and Solitude" broaches that issue by way of a comparison between *City of God* and the ancient Greek diviner Artemidorus's treatise on the interpretation of dreams. Out of this comparison, Foucault draws a distinction between Greco-Roman and Christian views of askesis: whereas in Artemidorus the concern is penetration, and thus "the problem of a relationship to other people," in Augustine the concern is erection, and thus "the problem of the relationship of oneself to oneself, or, more precisely, the relationship between one's will and involuntary assertions."²¹ Augustine's term for these "involuntary assertions" of the sexual organs is *libido*.

As much as Foucault is finally invested in tracing this epistemic rupture, however, it is important to bear in mind his working premise that "Christianity did not invent this code of sexual behavior."²² Christianity's doctrine of the flesh may be a repetition with a difference—with profound differences, in fact—but it is still, in many respects, a mere repetition of Greek and Roman codes of conduct. Foucault outlines those codes in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. One of the primary differences between the Greco-Roman and Christian systems of askesis, according to Foucault, is that the former proposed, whereas the latter imposed, techniques of moderation. But both systems can nevertheless be

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 186.

²² Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 184.

viewed in terms of what Foucault, in *The Care of the Self*, calls an “ethics of control.”²³ That control, which “constitutes . . . the final goal of all the practices of the self,” is the source of a pleasure of satisfaction that stands in stark contrast to *voluptas*, which, according to Foucault, “denotes a pleasure whose origin is to be placed outside us and in objects whose presence we cannot be sure of: a pleasure, therefore, which is precarious in itself, undermined by the fear of loss, and *to which we are drawn* by the force of a desire that may or may not find satisfaction.”²⁴ Alongside this quotation, let me cite Foucault’s comment, in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, that antiquity placed emphasis “on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from *being carried away* by the appetites and pleasures.”²⁵ And now consider his characterization, a little later in *The Use of Pleasure*, of the “continent” man as one who “experiences pleasures that are not in accord with reason, but [who] no longer allows himself *to be carried away* by them.”²⁶ The concern expressed in each of these three quotations is not a concern with pleasure per se, but a concern over an involuntary submission to pleasure, a loss of control.

The last of the three quotations is taken from Foucault’s summary of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and it is from this oblique direction that Spenser enters the tale. The Greek words that Aristotle uses for continence and incontinence, respectively, are *enkrateia* and *akrasia*; “Acrasia” is the name of the Circean witch who inhabits the Bower of Bliss in Spenser’s Legend of Temperance. In *The Seeds of Things*, Goldberg highlights this connection: “Naming his sorceress from the Greek term for ‘incontinence,’

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of “The History of Sexuality,”* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986; rpt. Vintage, 1988), 65.

²⁴ Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 66; my italics.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of “The History of Sexuality,”* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985; rpt. Vintage, 1990), 31; my italics.

²⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 65; my italics.

lack of self-control, Spenser picks up a word in the ancient lexicon roughly proximate to the Augustinian *libido*, for, as Foucault comments, *akrasia* indicates a state of being overcome despite oneself . . . and thus marks a division within.”²⁷ Although Goldberg’s reading usefully brings Spenser’s concerns into conversation with Foucault and Augustine, his analysis, as I claimed in the introduction to this chapter, reconfirms the authority of Spenser’s intentions and the 1590 edition of the poem, particularly the Legend of Temperance, where *akrasia* is explicitly allegorized so as to be defeated by the force of askesis. As we are about to see, the Legend of Courtesy ironically unravels this narrative trajectory and thereby calls into question the utility of Spenser’s intentions as an explanatory model.

It is worth noting, at the outset, that critics tend to overlook the Legend of Courtesy. This may be because the other legends of *The Faerie Queene* engage the more favored topics of recent criticism: religion in the Legend of Holiness, the body in the Legend of Temperance, gender in the Legend of Chastity, sexuality in the Legend of Friendship, and law and colonialism in the Legend of Justice. Courtesy and the court, while formerly central to early new historicism, are no longer central concerns; indeed, early new historicism has frequently been criticized for its obsessive and limited interest in court politics.²⁸ But the resistance to reading the Legend of Courtesy may be more than simply a thematic or topical resistance. The Legend of Courtesy not only betrays ambivalence toward the virtue of courtesy—the point on which most scholars agree—but also questions the ability of poetry to supply *any* “vertuous and gentle discipline.” The

²⁷ Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 91.

²⁸ See, for e.g., Patricia Fumerton, “Introduction: A New New Historicism,” in *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*, ed. Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), esp. 3–4.

resistance to reading the Legend of Courtesy may therefore be a resistance to reading the pleasure that romance takes in error. As I've been arguing, however, the justification of poetry's socioethical value is incomplete until and unless it at least confronts the possibility that the pleasure of the text is futile—a possibility that romance raises most acutely and that Spenser confronts most directly in the Legend of Courtesy.

Hard Adventures and Unhappy Ends

In the Legend of Courtesy, the fulfillment of Spenser's intention—the instruction of askesis—is indeed not so easy to achieve. Calidore, the Knight of Courtesy, serves as the example by which the legend attempts to fashion its readers in the ways of the titular virtue that he personifies, but he famously drops out for nearly half the narrative. When the narration returns to him at long last, after following various forking paths of plot into thickets of digression and dead ends, the reader learns that the knight has been sojourning in the realm of pastoral *otium*, attracted by the charms of the damsel Pastorella. And when Calidore finally returns to his proper quest, he fails to keep the Blatant Beast, whose capture constitutes the objective of that quest, under wraps. If Calidore, as the Legend of Courtesy's exemplary hero, emblemizes the object of the legend's instruction, then it is to be expected that the reader, upon finishing the legend, will have learned nothing of value. I will return to Calidore, and the topic of his truancy, around which much critical debate has been generated, later in this chapter. At the moment, he must drop out of my own narrative nearly as abruptly as he drops out of Spenser's (I write “nearly” because I've at least signaled Calidore's departure, whereas Spenser offers no such signal). My immediate interest is directed toward one of the digressive subplots

that take place during Calidore's absence from the plot. It is in this subplot, as I will show, that the Legend of Courtesy unravels the ideology of intention and action on which the forward momentum of the romance quest depends.

The middle cantos of the legend follow, for the most part, the misfortunes of the knight Calepine and his lady, Serena, after the Blatant Beast bites her. Calepine, with Serena on his horse, goes in search of aid for her and is subsequently attacked and wounded by the profoundly discourteous knight Turpine—until, that is, the couple is rescued by a Salvage Man who is able to cure Calepine's wounds but not Serena's. One day when Calepine is strong enough, he leaves the Salvage Man's abode in order to take fresh air. Spenser is careful to note that the knight, as he enters the wood, is "Vnarm'd, as fearing neither foe nor frend, / And without sword his person to defend"; suddenly a "cruell Beare" barges out of the forest, bearing an infant "Betwixt his bloodie iawes, besprinckled all with gore" (6.4.17). Calepine pursues the bear, defeats it, and rescues the bloodied infant, but then quickly realizes that he is lost in the dense forest. "[A]ll that day in wandring vainely he did spend" until he comes upon a woman, Matilda, who is crying and complaining about fate and fortune (6.4.25). At Calepine's entreaty, Matilda reveals the "cause" of her "griefe" (6.4.33): she is the wife of Sir Bruin, who recently conquered and seized lands from a giant named Cormoraunt, but while this victory assures their "prosperitie," as Matilda puts it, they have not been blessed with "posteritie" (6.4.31), without which the lands will fall back into Cormoraunt's hands and Sir Bruin into ruin. Matilda does express a glimmer of hope, however:

Yet was it sayd, there should to [Sir Bruin] a sonne
Be gotten, not begotten, which should drinke
And dry vp all the water, which doth ronne
In the next brooke, by whom that feend shold be fordonne.

(6.4.32)

Putting two and two together, and in a neat fulfillment of the prophecy, Calepine offers to Matilda the infant he rescued. Spenser seems to resolve the subplot as follows:

Right glad was *Calepine* to be so rid
Of his young charge, whereof he skilled nought:
Ne she lesse glad; for she so wisely did,
And with her husband vnder hand so wrought,
That when that infant vnto him she brought,
She made him thinke it surely was his owne,
And it in goodly thewes so well vpbrought,
That it became a famous knight well knowne
And did right noble deedes, the which elsewhere are showne.

(6.4.38)

Setting aside for a moment the question of where those “right noble deedes” are “elsewhere” shown (surely not in *The Faerie Queene*, for this is the first and last time we encounter Matilda and Sir Bruin and their only “gotten, not begotten” son), the first observation we can make about this episode is that it seems to offer, in a legend with so many loose threads, a happy ending.

Along these lines, the episode can be read as the manifestation of a particular version or understanding of romance: as an end-oriented, wish-fulfillment narrative that revolves around the miraculous recovery of displaced origins and disrupted genealogies. This redemptive reading of romance, this reading of romance *as* redemptive, forms the basis of Northrop Frye’s discussions of the mode, and it constitutes romance’s most recognizable avatar in contemporary criticism.²⁹ The narratives that follow this pattern of loss–wandering–recovery derive from the Hellenistic prose fiction of Heliodorus and

²⁹ See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), esp. 186–206; and *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976).

others, so popular among Elizabethan writers.³⁰ In *The Secular Scripture*, Frye offers a catalogue of the narrative devices common to these redemptive romances: “In the Greek romances we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine.”³¹ These narrative conventions are also recognizable as the discursive materials out of which works of dramatic tragicomedy—Shakespeare’s late plays, for example—are constructed. The problematic conflation of romance with tragicomedy has no doubt reinforced a view of romance as an “end-determined” fiction, to cite Steve Mentz’s use of Frank Kermode’s term.³² Yet the word *romance* was used most often in Renaissance England and Italy to refer to the expansive, digressive medieval and Italian verse poems so problematic for humanism.³³ Spenser’s use of romance, especially in Books 4, 5, and 6, draws more from these precursors—Ariosto chief among them—and from the less easily resolved contortions of *their* plots than from the coherently ended Heliodoran paradigm so perfectly suited for prose fiction and for the two-hours’ traffic of the stage.

³⁰ For a discussion of Heliodorus’s influence on Elizabethan prose fiction, see Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

³¹ Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, 4.

³² Mentz, 43; see also Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford UP, 1966), 6.

³³ George Puttenham, for example, in *The Art of English Poesy*, writes: “And we ourselves who compiled this treatise have written for pleasure a little brief romance or historical ditty in the English tongue of the Isle of Great Britain in short and long meters, and by breaches or divisions to be more commodiously sung to the harp in places of assembly, where the company shall be desirous to hear of old adventures and valiances of noble knights in times past, as are those of King Arthur and his knights of the round table, Sir Bevis of Southhampton, Guy of Warwick, and others like” (*The Arte of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007], 131).

Nevertheless, the episode of Matilda and Sir Bruin may be seen to exemplify the neatly resolved redemptive romance. And indeed, many critics have offered just such a reading of their story. In a brief discussion of the episode, for example, Jonathan Goldberg highlights its perfect circularity, which operates by way of a fortuitous pun: the child passes from “beare” to “Bruin” (a name which means “brown bear”) and is thus Sir Bruin’s “fitting heir,” as Goldberg puts it. “Matilde demonstrates that a child—one’s own child—can be gotten even if it is not begotten. The babe is generated doubly, like Cupid in the proem to *The Faerie Queene*, imp and child.”³⁴ Echoing Matilda’s own language of “prosperity,” Humphrey Tonkin, in his book-length study of the Legend of Courtesy, reveals just what is at stake in such narratives: “stories of the *enfance* of heroes, like Tristram and Matilda’s babe, bring promise of future prosperity and social order.”³⁵ At stake in this “promise of future prosperity and social order” is nothing less than what Lee Edelman has identified as “the promissory note, the guarantee of futurity,” the ideology of what he calls “reproductive futurism” as it is condensed in the figure of the Child (149). This is the very stuff of redemptive romance, particularly as manifested on the Jacobean stage. One might, for example, briefly compare the role that Matilda and Sir Bruin’s son plays in Spenser’s mini-romance to the function played by Mamillius, Hermione and Leontes’s son, at the beginning of *The Winter’s Tale*. The chief difference between these two figures is that Mamillius’s death, among other events, veers Shakespeare’s play toward tragedy, whereas the life of Matilda and Sir Bruin’s son ensures a happy ending. That very difference, however, reinforces the same ideological

³⁴ Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981), 26.

³⁵ Humphrey Tonkin, *Spenser’s Courteous Pastoral: Book Six of “The Faerie Queene”* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1972), 69.

structure; Matilda and Sir Bruin's son "stands," like Mamillius in the words of Leonard Tennenhouse, "as the living symbol of the genealogical principle."³⁶ Redemptive romances such as these strive to redeem precisely this genealogical principle—what Edelman elsewhere calls "the fetishistic prestige of origin, genealogy, telos"³⁷—and thus the survival of the social order and the hope of the future.

In addition, Matilda and Sir Bruin's story is graced with a happy ending not only in the colloquial sense of the word "happy," but also in a more literal, or etymological, sense, to the extent that it repeatedly emphasizes the machinery of good fortune, or hap, that produces it. This emphasis on providential fortune is another key feature of redemptive romance. Mentz, for instance, documents its centrality to the Heliodoran paradigm, and Spenser seems in this episode to be drawing on such models.³⁸ Fortune has the uncanny tendency to pop up whenever the narrative force of the episode breaks through whatever impasses momentarily preclude the move toward a point or end, as it does when Calepine's seemingly endless wandering finally brings him out of the forest: "Him selfe out of the forest he did wynd, / And by good fortune the plaine champion wonne" (6.4.26); or as it does when Calepine hands the baby over to Matilda: "Lo how good fortune doth to you present / This little babe, of sweete and louely face" (6.4.35). These references to fortune establish that there is a divinity that not only shapes our ends, but also shapes our ends in the right direction, toward a happy ending. This recourse to fortune and providence as explanations for the episode's narrative structure is therefore

³⁶ Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (London: Methuen, 1986), 175.

³⁷ Lee Edelman, "Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007): 470.

³⁸ See Mentz, esp. 51–53.

animated, to a large degree, by the poem itself. But that explanation can only carry us so far. Matilda and Sir Bruin's story is resolved, thanks to providence, with a happy ending; if that is the case, though, then why does Spenser, at the moment when the bear shows up with baby betwixt its jaws, introduce this strand of plot by characterizing it as "An hard aduerture with vnhappy end" (6.4.17)?

When Calepine arrives with babe in tow, he certainly provides an expedient resolution, as if he were a *deus ex machina*, to Matilda and Sir Bruin's story. But the resolution to their story is not the resolution to his story. It is necessary, then, to identify and schematize, as in a Venn diagram, two overlapping but no less distinct narrative arcs in this subplot: one is Calepine's, the other is Sir Bruin and Matilda's. Calepine's story is not as fortunate as the Bruins'; he is now lost, without armor, far away from his love Serena. After resolving the Bruins' story, Calepine, like Calidore, drops out of the narrative and is not reunited with Serena until several cantos later. At this point Serena has been captured by members of a Salvage Nation and is about to be cannibalistically sacrificed by them when Calepine again arrives on the scene. The poem does emphasize the role that fortune plays in reuniting the two lovers:

Now mote ye vnderstand that to this groue
Sir *Calepine* by chaunce, more then by choyce,
The selfe same euening fortune hether droue,
As he to seeke *Serena* through the woods did roue

(6.8.46)

But that reunion is 1) ironically futile, in that Calepine does not at first recognize Serena, and 2) indefinitely deferred, in that the two are never shown again despite Spenser's promise of a future continuation of their story:

So all that night to him vnknown she past.
But day, that discouer bad and good,

Ensewing, made her knowen to him at last:
The end whereof Ile keepe vntill another cast.

(6.8.51)

At this point canto viii ends, and the narrative returns, finally, to Calidore, never to revisit the unresolved reunion of Calepine and Serena. The recognition scene by which Serena would, in Heliodorus or Sidney or late Shakespeare, be “made knowen” to Calepine does not appear in Spenser’s poem. In fact, not only does it not appear, but also Spenser’s parabasis at the end of the canto, precisely by promising such an ending, draws attention to the fact that it does not appear. Calepine, then, is resolutely deprived of the kind of happy resolution bestowed upon the Bruins and characteristic of redemptive romance.

Then again, *is* the Bruins’ narrative as happy, as resolved, and as redemptive as a first-glance reading of it would suggest? As is the case with the incompleteness of Calepine and Serena’s tale, Spenser’s cryptic glance at the possible continuation of the Bruins’ story—the fact that the child’s subsequent knightly deeds are “elsewhere shown”—functions as a loose thread that never gets tied back into the sort of coherency one might expect from a redemptive romance such as this. One might plunder the prophetic dimension of the episode for a supply of at least some degree of that missing coherency. Yet while the prophecy, as a prophecy, reinforces the sense of fortune or providence guiding the events of the episode, the very terms of the prophecy negate such explanations: “Yet was it sayd, there should to [Sir Bruin] a sonne / *Be gotten, not begotten.*” The contingency of “be gotten” instantiates a gap—figuratively as well as literally literally (i.e., at the level of the letter)—within the order of causality implied by “begotten.” The phrase thereby denies the Bruins any agency in their own subplot, insofar as the child is “gotten” *to* them rather than “begotten” *by* them. If genealogy

functions to secure reference to a locatable origin, the prophecy's emphasis on the contingency of that genealogy reminds the reader of the fact that the child has no origin.³⁹ But the prophecy also denies Calepine's agency in the scene, insofar as the passive-voice construction erases him as the subject who "gets" the baby to the Bruins. In a legend that repeatedly emphasizes the active practice of courtesy, the way in which "The gentle minde by gentle *deeds* is knowne" (6.3.1; my italics), it is notable that this episode would emphasize the fact that its story is something over which Calepine has little control.

I claimed earlier that the Bruins' tale turns on the survival of the social order. That survival depends on two important factors: first, the Bruins must act as if their heir were "begotten" rather than merely "gotten" (Spenser makes a point of stressing how Matilda makes Sir Bruin think the son is his own, and how they raise it *as if* it were their own child); second, the Bruins must inculcate askesis by using good pedagogy to raise their

³⁹ On Renaissance English fears about the contingency of genealogy, in the particular context of colonial transplantation and Spenser's Legend of Temperance, see Jean E. Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2010).

Interestingly enough, the un-tethering of story and origin *in the story of Sir Bruin and Matilda* extends, by some sort of strange textual effect, to *the story itself*: Tonkin notes that the episode is "curious primarily because it is such a strange mixture of materials, for which no single source has ever been found, nor is it likely to be found" (65). In one of the few recent readings of the Bruins' mini-romance, Brian C. Lockey, in *Law and Empire in English Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), observes that "the episode alludes directly to the Old English families in Ireland" (136); in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, in fact, Spenser makes mention, as Lockey notes, of a family called the Fitz-Ursulas ("Sons of Bears"), an echo that leads Lockey to argue that "The Bruins, like the Fitz-Ursulas, are menaced by the impinging forces of Irish 'degeneracy,' in this case symbolized by the giant [Cormoraunt]" (137). What is striking about Lockey's reading is neither the plausibility nor the implausibility of its political-allegorical interpretation, but rather the fact that his attempt to locate a historical source for the episode gets inscribed as a symptomatic oxymoron: "alludes directly"; if an allusion is, per definition, a "covert, implied, or indirect reference" (*OED* I.4), how could a text ever allude *directly*? Again, the point here is not to undermine Lockey's reading, but to show how the episode itself seems to replicate the undoing of origins upon which its narrative content pivots. It is also worth acknowledging that Lockey was not the first critic to point out the Bruin/Fitz-Ursula connection: see also Robert E. Stillman, "Spenserian Autonomy and the Trial of New Historicism: Book Six of *The Faerie Queene*," *ELR* 22.3 (1992): 306–307; and, even earlier, Arnold Williams, *Flower on a Lowly Stalk: The Sixth Book of the Faerie Queene* ([East Lansing, MI: Michigan State UP, 1967], 71.

heir in “goodly thewes,” or good manners.⁴⁰ I have just shown how the prophecy ironically disrupts the success of the first of these factors. But the poem takes great pains to stress that divine providence has a hand in assuring the second factor. Speaking of the kinds of foundlings so typical of redemptive romance, Calepine, upon handing the baby over to Matilda, says: “Therefore some thought, that those braue imps were / Here by the Gods, and fed with heauenly sap, (sowen / That made them grow so high t’all honorable hap” (6.4.36); this interpretation of the foundling narrative is readily accepted by Matilda: “The Ladie hearkening to his sensefull speach, / Found nothing that he said, vnmeet nor geason, / Having oft seene it tryde, as he did teach” (6.4.37). One assumes that the reader of *The Faerie Queene* is supposed to accept this interpretation as well, that Calepine’s “teach[ing]” of Matilda is the means for teaching the reader to appeal to divine providence as a causal explanation for the success of askesis despite the lack of any clear origin or genealogy. Maybe so, but that interpretation is belied by the hesitancy with which Calepine introduces his redemptive reading of the scene: only a vague “some” thought that foundlings were “fed with heauenly sap.” It is also belied by the passive constructions that mark the lead-up to his interpretation:

And certes it hath oftentimes *bene seene*,
 That of the like, whose lineage was vnknowne,
 More braue and noble knights *haue raysed beene*,
 As their victorious deedes haue often shoven,
 Being with fame through many Nations blowen,
 Then those, which *haue bene dandled* in the lap.

(6.4.36; my italics)

⁴⁰ Cf. Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale: “she hadde / Mo goode thewes than her vices badde” (ll. 1541–42), in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

The passivity with which this passage ironizes askesis, pedagogy, and providence—all of which depend on an ideology of action, intention, and design—leads me to agree with Clare Regan Kinney when she states that she herself

cannot agree with those readers who equate the fortune of Book VI with the providence that guides events in Book I. . . . Indeed, in [Book VI], the supposition that causality is at the mercy of blind chance is wholly congruent with the breakdown of moral cause and effect in a universe where the [Blatant] Beast savages innocent and guilty alike and injury is not necessarily the result of a fall into error.⁴¹

Through its structures of contingency and passivity, the episode of Sir Bruin and Matilda provides a strong countercurrent to the providential logic of redemption that seems, at first glance, to overdetermine the subplot as well as *The Faerie Queene* in general.

Moreover, when considered from the perspective of Renaissance humanism, such passivity can only be viewed in a negative light. Action is one of the primary standards by which the value of poetry—both writing and reading—was established. When poetry is denigrated, it is denigrated as passive. When poetry is defended, it is defended as active. In both cases, then, passivity is denigrated. Thus when Sir Philip Sidney begins his *Defence of Poesy* with a characteristically humble dismissal of poetry, he casts not only his vocation but also his subsequent defense of that vocation in passive, accidental terms: “I will give you a nearer example of myself, who (I know not *by what mischance*) in these my not old years and idlest times *having slipped* into the title of a poet, *am provoked* to say something unto you in the defence of that my *unelected* vocation.”⁴²

Whereas the *situation* of Sidney’s *Defence* is thus written in terms of passivity, the

⁴¹ Clare Regan Kinney, *Strategies of Poetic Narrative: Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Eliot* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1992), 92–93.

⁴² Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or, The Defence of Poesy)*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, rev. ed. R. W. Maslen (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2002), 81; my italics. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

logical argument of his defense stresses poetry's activity. All of Sidney's major statements about poetry take the same grammatical form: "poetry" and/or "poets" as the subject, followed by an active verb: "grow," "goeth," "deliver," "bestow," "imitate to teach and delight," "range," "move men," and "make them know." The action of these activities is condensed in the very etymology of the word *poetry*: *poiein*, "to make."

Sidney's strongest defense of the value of poetry rests on its ability to inspire noble action in its readers. Shortly after claiming that the "final end" of all learning is "to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of," Sidney asserts that "the ending end of all earthly learning" is "virtuous action" and goes on to establish poetry as the mode in which such action is best imitated (88).⁴³ How does this insistence on action work out in a given literary text? To illustrate how Sidney seems to practice, or at least model, in his fiction what he preaches in his *Defence*, I would now like to digress briefly in order to consider an early episode in the revised edition of his own romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

While staying in the house of Kalander, Musidorus, going by the name of Palladius (the name by which I will refer to him), is puzzled when his host suddenly changes countenance after receiving some sort of startling information from a servant.

⁴³ It is worth calling attention to the text's split "ends" here. Which is the *actual* end of learning: the "final end" or the "ending end"? Logically, virtuous action (the ending end) is the means to the perfection of our degenerate souls (the final end). The sequence of Sidney's writing, however, seems to invert the causality insofar as the ending end actually ends the paragraph. In other words, the ending end subverts, insofar as it follows, the finality of the final end. The path of Sidney's rhetoric could perhaps be read in terms of Calvinism's reversal of virtue's causality: where Catholicism asserts that humans are chosen to receive salvation because they perform virtuous action, Calvinism asserts that humans perform virtuous action because they are chosen to receive salvation. In any case, the quote enacts the ways in which the "ends" of poetry are neither self-evident nor self-identical, and therefore far more problematic than early modern studies has heretofore established.

Kalander retreats into his study, and leaves Palladius in the hands of his household staff. Palladius asks one of Kalander's stewards to explain this abrupt shift in behavior, and the steward fulfills this request by explaining how Kalander's son, Clitophon, has been captured by the neighboring, warring Helots. The tale that the steward tells sounds like a romance fiction to the extreme: a valorous young man, Argalus, comes to Arcadia and befriends Clitophon; Argalus falls in love with Clitophon's cousin, the beautiful Parthenia, but she is already betrothed to a proud, vehement man named Demagorus; when Parthenia chooses Argalus over him, Demagorus disfigures her by throwing poison all over her face; Demagorus is promptly banished, and he joins up with the Helots; the noble Argalus accepts Parthenia despite the loss of her beauty, but she flees in shame; Argalus, seeking to be revenged against Demagorus, goes in disguise among the Helots but is soon captured and held prisoner; Clitophon, attempting to rescue his good friend, is also captured. Thus Palladius is brought up to date, and the steward ends with the following words: "I have delivered all I understand touching the loss of my lord's son, and the cause thereof: which though it was not necessary to Clitophon's case to be so particularly old, yet the strangeness of it made me think it would not be unpleasant unto you." Here Sidney gives us a chapter break; the next chapter begins: "Palladius thanked [the Steward] greatly for it, being even passionately delighted with hearing so strange an accident of a knight so famous over the world as Argalus, with whom he had himself a long desire to meet: so had fame poured a noble emulation in him towards him."⁴⁴

Demonstrating the Horatian dictum at its best, its most effective, this episode models in miniature how the incitement to action should properly work by means of a

⁴⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (New York: Penguin, 1977; rpt. Penguin Classics, 1987), 93.

pleasurable tale. The “strange accident” of the steward’s mini-romance stirs Palladius’s passions, but directs that “passionate delight” toward a virtuous end: it reinforces the “noble emulation” that Palladius feels for Argalus, recalling Sidney’s arguments in the *Defence* that the poet will “bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses” (85) and that the poet “nameth Cyrus and Aeneas no other way than to show what men of their fames, fortunes, and estates should do” (103)—for who, asks Sidney, “readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act” (95)? In Sidney’s universe the contemporary phrase “action hero” would be redundant, for heroism *is* action. And indeed, the steward’s romance inspires Palladius to assemble an army and rescue Argalus and Clitophon from the Helots’ evil clutches. The episode can thus be read as the *Arcadia*’s set of instructions for proper reader response: Sidney’s readers are taught to respond to his romance in the same way Palladius responds to the steward’s romance. The proper reaction is action.

And yet, the move from pleasurable tale to virtuous action in this episode is not as easy or direct as it may first appear. The fact that the move is stretched across a chapter break highlights a contingent disjunction, rather than a causal link, between the pleasure of the story and the effective profit of Palladius’s action.⁴⁵ Writing of Jane Austen’s *Emma* in particular, but in terms that apply to the materiality of any text divided into sections, chapters, or cantos more generally, D. A. Miller asserts that “the hurdle of a chapter break, . . . like a fade-to-black in film, executes as strong an internal disconnect as the Novel has at its disposal.”⁴⁶ Sidney’s meta-romance hesitates in this black hole, the

⁴⁵ This isn’t to suggest that immediate continuity is the only way of establishing causality. Rather, my point is that this kind of discontinuity is a prime way of establishing contingency.

⁴⁶ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 64.

spacetime discontinuum between the telling of the tale and the response to the tale—between the tale's end and the actualization of its ends. Granted, the Horatian effect logically as well as narratologically succeeds across and despite the disruptiveness of this ironic split, but the split itself reveals the contingency of that success. The void or gap at the heart of the *Arcadia*'s meta-romance reveals the fragility of the Horatian dictum's means/ends economy, the belief that a pleasurable tale leads to virtuous action. The pause in the text belies the cause of the text. In the process, it rends asunder what the Horatian dictum tries so hard to render: an easy passage from poetics to ethics.

The Legend of Courtesy, as we have already begun to see, is even bolder than the *Arcadia* is about opening up and locating itself within the gap between poetics and ethics. Suggesting that the link between aesthetics and ascetics is contingent and accidental at best, as is the case in the Matilda/Calepine subplot, the legend provides a perverse or oblique glance at the ethical system undergirding Renaissance humanist poetics. Such a reading, however, must inevitably confront the question of Spenser's intention. The poet, that is to say, is quite explicit about the ethical aims and dimensions of his text; critics have frequently used those statements of intention as a way of controlling the kinds of readings one may offer of *The Faerie Queene*. At this point, then, I'd like to switch gears in order to show how the very forms of romance—its tendency toward dilation and errancy—confound Spenser's intentions.

Intermeddled Accidents

Critics have long recognized that the Legend of Courtesy poses a plethora of problems with regard to what Grogan calls Spenser's "didactic poetics," but it is striking that

virtually all these critics, working from such different perspectives, feel obligated to explain away those problems by appealing to some notion of intention. Responding, for example, to J. C. Maxwell's critique of Calidore's truancy, Harry Berger, Jr., in a foundational essay, observes the inconclusive and unresolved nature of most of the legend's episodes. But he goes on to stress that Spenser, in writing a legend with so many loose threads, "intended a poetic effect."⁴⁷ "Thus," writes Berger, "the apparent inattention Maxwell notes seems deliberate."⁴⁸ More recently, Douglas A. Northrop has noted that "the Legend of Courtesy is notable for its discontinuity."⁴⁹ But he, too, stresses that such discontinuities "create the very tone and character of the book; they are clearly intentional."⁵⁰ In the last several decades, critics have anchored the wanderings and uncertainties of the Legend of Courtesy, if not to a generalized notion of intention, then at least to some kind of historical, moral, or philosophical ground: Fortune, pastoral, courtesy, Queen Elizabeth, Sir Walter Raleigh, Ireland, Calvinist theology, and, above all, the vision of the Graces in canto x, are all topics favored by critics who seek to reorient Spenser's poetics to a definable origin and telos.

The problem here, it seems to me, is that Spenser is one of the few early modern poets whose intentions are so explicit. The poet makes a cameo appearance in Lodowick Bryskett's *A Discourse on Civill Life*, published in 1606 though written much earlier, outlining for his auditors a map of *The Faerie Queene*'s master plan: the poem will "represent all the moral vertues, assigning to euery vertue, a Knight to be patron and

⁴⁷ Harry Berger, Jr., *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 219. See also J. C. Maxwell, "The Truancy of Calidore," *ELH* 19.2 (1952): 143–49

⁴⁸ Berger, 222.

⁴⁹ Douglas A. Northrop, "The Uncertainty of Courtesy in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*," *Spenser Studies* 14 (2000): 216.

⁵⁰ Northrop, 219.

defender of the same: in whose actions and feates of armes and chivalry, the operations of that vertue, whereof he is the protector, are to be expressed, and the vices & unruly appetites that oppose themselves against the same, to be beaten downe and ouercome.”⁵¹ And then, of course, there’s the Letter to Raleigh, in which Spenser is even more explicit (and elaborate) about his intentions, about the “generall end” of the poem and about the means he uses to get there.

There are many problems, however, with using these statements of intention as keys to understanding the poem as a whole. For one thing, the Letter to Raleigh was not reprinted with the 1596 edition of the poem. No reader of *The Faerie Queene* can fail to notice how the tone of the second set of three books seems to constitute a marked departure from the purposefulness of the first three books.⁵² The standard hypothesis is that Spenser became disillusioned with his project after presenting the poem at court following the publication of the first edition. Consider the first stanza of the Legend of Friendship:

The rugged forehead that with graue foresight
Welds kingdomes causes, and affairs of state,
My looser rimes (I wote) doth sharply wite,
For praising loue, as I haue done of late,
And magnifying louers deare debate;
By which fraile youth is oft to follie led,
Through false allurement of that pleasing baite,
That better were in vertues disciplined,
Then with vaine poems weeds to haue their fancies fed.

(4.Proem.1)

⁵¹ Lodowick Bryskett, *A discourse of ciuill life containing the ethike part of morall philosophie* (London, 1606), sig. E1v–E2r.

⁵² This shift in tone is particularly acute in the case of the Legend of Courtesy. Richard Neuse acknowledges that “the dominant sense of Book VI is one of disillusionment, of the disparity between the poet’s ideals and the reality he envisions” (“Book VI as Conclusion to *The Faerie Queene*,” *ELH* 35.3 [1968]: 331). Similarly, George E. Rowe writes: “That the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene* ends in bitterness and cynicism few readers would, I think, deny” (“Privacy, Vision, and Gender in Spenser’s Legend of Courtesy,” *MLQ* 50.4 [1989]: 309).

The “rugged forehead” is often identified, in annotated editions of the poem, as a sly allusion to Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley. When Spenser presented *The Faerie Queene* at court, did Burghley dismiss it as a “vaine” toy? Did Spenser take such criticism to heart, giving up, over the course of the 1596 edition, on his moral purpose? If so, is his giving up truly a sign of disenchantment and failure? Or is it, perhaps, a bolder response to Burghley’s charges: “Yes, you’re right—it’s a vain poem, but that shouldn’t matter”? These questions are not answerable without recourse to speculation about Spenser’s intentions. Whatever the real case may be, the Letter to Raleigh was not reprinted when Spenser revised *The Faerie Queene* for the 1596 edition. This simple fact is sufficient to suggest that the letter’s assertion of intention is itself no longer sufficient to account for the project and design of *The Faerie Queene*’s second installment.

Even if it had been included, the letter’s internal ambiguities and ambivalences make it difficult for us to adopt its content as a programmatic statement of intention. To put the point bluntly: Spenser’s intent may be explicit, but it is far from clear. In his chapter on *The Faerie Queene* in *The Seeds of Things*, Goldberg calls attention to the letter’s rhetorical indeterminacies: the stuttering repetition of “gentle” in the phrase “to fashion a *gentleman* or noble person in vertuous and *gentle* discipline”; the ambiguity of the word “end” (to say nothing of the word “generall”) in the phrase “the generall end . . . of all the booke”; and the possibility, as Goldberg puts it, that “the person being fashioned in this text may be the person being fashioned in this text, not its reader but the characters being read.”⁵³ To this list of obscurities one can also add a pair of comments that run counter to, even as they run alongside, the whole notion of intention. At the

⁵³ Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things*, 65.

outset of the letter, Spenser promises to “discouer vnto” Raleigh the poem’s “general intention and meaning, which in the whole course thereof I haue fashioned, without expressing of any particular purposes or by-accidents therein occassioned” (714). Spenser returns to the notion of “accidents” at the end of the letter when, after outlining the main plots of each of the first three legends, he writes that “by occasion thereof, many other aduentures are intermedled, but rather as Accidents, then intendments” (718).

The *OED* defines the word *accident* as “[a]nything that happens without foresight or expectation; an unusual event, which proceeds from some unknown cause, or is an unusual effect of a known cause; a casualty, a contingency” (*accident*, n. I.1.b). Casual rather than causal, untimely rather than opportune, an accident fractures the “foresight,” the agency, by which self-government and state government operate effectively. It makes sense, then, that Burghley, that “rugged forehead that with graue *foresight* / Welds kingdomes *causes*, and affairs of state,” would be so annoyed by the 1590 *Faerie Queene*. And how much more irritated would he have been by the second installment. In the 1590 edition, the accidents are kept to a minimum, redirected to the poem’s purposeful telos. In the 1596 edition—and in particular in the Legend of Courtesy—the “intermedled accidents” usurp the poem’s “intendments.”

“Intermedled accidents” is a phrase that nicely designates the source of romance’s pleasure. As Goldberg explains in *Endlesse Worke*, the “incitement to pleasure” that the Letter to Raleigh “alludes to—the variety of stories, their endless interconnected play, the deferral of an explanation of a beginning—putting off the problem of connecting narrative and meaning, or of finding what is central and peripheral, the structural design that defers the beginning until the end . . . these pleasures

assure a principle of frustration.”⁵⁴ Notice how Goldberg’s grammar performs the same “principle of frustration” that it identifies in *The Faerie Queene*. Goldberg’s sentence enacts at a grammatical level what the Legend of Courtesy enacts at a narrative level; like the subordinate clauses of Goldberg’s sentence, the legend’s virtually parenthetical subplots (of which the episode of Matilda and Sir Bruin is a prime example) take over the substance of the plot. The parabases of romance are the very bases of romance—the roots of its delights as well as its dangers.

The degree to which these parabases pose a problem for Renaissance poetics can be measured by considering how Sir John Harington, in the defense of poetry printed with his 1591 translation of *Orlando Furioso*, defends Ariosto against the charge that such disruptions make the poem defective. Just when the main terms of his defense have run their course, Harington addresses two more final “reproofs” against Ariosto:

There follows only two reproofs, which I rather interpret two peculiar praises of this writer, above all that wrote before him in this kind. One, that he breaks off narrations very abruptly, so as indeed a loose unattentive reader will hardly carry away any part of the story. But this doubtless is a point of great art, to draw a man with a continual thirst to read out the whole work, and toward the end of the book to close up the diverse matters briefly and cleanly. If Sir Philip Sidney had counted this a fault, he would not have done so himself in his *Arcadia*. Another fault is that he speaketh so much in his own person by digression, which they say also is against the rules of poetry, because neither Homer nor Virgil did it. Methinks it is a sufficient defence to say, Ariosto doth it. Sure I am, it is both delightful and very profitable, and an excellent breathing-place for the reader. And even as if a man walked in a fair long alley, to have a seat or resting place here and there is easy and commodious, but if at the same seat were planted some excellent tree, that not only with the shade should keep us from the heat but with some pleasant and right wholesome fruit should allay our thirst and comfort our stomach, we would think it for the time a little paradise. So are Ariosto’s morals and pretty digressions

⁵⁴ Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke*, 28–29.

sprinkled through his long work, to the no less pleasure than profit of the reader.⁵⁵

The moves of the defense are nothing short of clever; Harington treats Ariosto's supposed narrative vices as narrative virtues. He simply turns the charge into a defense against the charge: the fact that *Ariosto* digresses seems to be "sufficient" justification for the fact that Ariosto *digresses*. And in addition to shifting the blame from the poet to the "loose unattentive reader," Harington also removes the taint of Italianate associations from Ariosto's parabases by locating the same kind of disruptive structures in Sidney's *Arcadia*.

As agile as Harington's logic is, his rhetoric betrays some unquestioned presuppositions. In the case of the first charge—the accusation of interruption—Harington implies that the dilated errancy of romance is fine as long as the poet "close[s] up the diverse matters briefly and cleanly." In the case of the second charge—the accusation of intrusion—Harington's elaboration of a pastoral conceit suggests that the *otium* of authorial pauses is a remedy; the pleasure provided by Ariosto's parabases is an alleviating kind of pleasure, thus rendering the way to profit easier to follow. Spenser's Legend of Courtesy gives the lie to both of these assumptions. In the first case, the ending of the legend is so drawn out and messy as to undermine any end(s)-oriented justification for errancy. In the second case, the legend characterizes as dangerous the kind of pastoral retreat on which Harington relies for his defense. The Legend of Courtesy suggests that if rest is a remedy, it is a remedy for a problem of which it is itself a cause. According to the legend's ambivalent poetics, the "shade" that keeps us from tedious heat can only

⁵⁵ Sir John Harington, "An Apology for Ariosto: Poetry, Epic, Morality (1591)," in *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1999), 320.

ever be shady.⁵⁶ It is not that the Legend of Courtesy's "subject," to quote Patricia Parker, "seems to be *becoming* the ambivalences of romance itself";⁵⁷ it is rather that the intermeddled accidents of the legend's plot retrospectively establish the whole poem's subject as *always already having been* the ambivalences of romance. In the Legend of Courtesy, Spenser pushes to the extreme an interruptive impulse or drive—the very pleasure of romance—that the previous books try so hard to subdue.

To claim, however, that Spenser himself "pushes" this impulse is to ascribe to him a degree of agency that the Letter to Raleigh, like the Legend of Courtesy, seems to want to deny: "by occasion thereof, many other aduentures *are intermedled*." The negation of authorial authority and intention has profound implications for the ending of the Legend of Courtesy. One might expect that the poem has reached its natural end when Calidore returns to his initial quest and successfully captures the Blatant Beast. But Spenser confounds this expectation for ending by noting, in a markedly disillusioned moment, that the Blatant Beast escapes Calidore's control. Still more, no subsequent knights are able to recapture the Beast, who now "raungeth through the world againe," hurling slanders at everyone regardless of "degree or state" (6.12.39–40). At this point *The Faerie Queene*, like a Moebius strip, becomes recursive, metatextually constituting itself as an object of the Beast's slanders:

Ne spareth he most learned wits to rate,
Ne spareth he the gentle Poems rime,

⁵⁶ When, for example, Timias, in flashback, after being bitten by the Blatant Beast, pursues the monster into a "woody glade," he is ambushed by Despetto, Decetto, and Defetto: "at length unto a woody glade / He came, whose covert stopt his further sight, / There his three foes shrowded in guilefull shade, / Out of their ambush broke, and gan him to inuade" (VI.v.17.6–9). Indeed, the entire legend can be read as an attempt to dramatize the "guile" lurking behind apparently safe "shades." On the legend's tendency to disrupt secret spaces, see Richard Rambuss, *Spenser's Secret Career* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1993), 114–124.

⁵⁷ Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), 105; my italics.

But rends without regard of person or of time.

Ne may this homely verse, of many meanest,
Hope to escape his venemous despite,
More then my former writs, all were they clearest,
From blamefull blot, and free from all that wite,
With which some wicked tongues did it backebite,
And bring into a mighty Peres displeasure,
That neuer so deserued to endite.
Therefore do you my rimes keep better measure,
And seeke to please, that now is counted wisemens threasure.

(6.12.40–41)

Thus the poem ends, like Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, with an invocation of pleasure as the only end that a poem is capable not just of successfully reaching, but of aiming toward at all. In an essay on Book VI as a conclusion to *The Faerie Queene*, Maria R. Rohr Philmus argues that the closing lines of the legend "constitute an express rejection of the *utile* part of the aesthetic equation."⁵⁸ However, such a rejection should not be read as, in Philmus's words, "a momentous *decision* on Spenser's part."⁵⁹ Closer to the mark is the following statement by Jeff Dolven: "What has happened to the poem at the end of Book VI is that it has capitulated to the enemies of romance by conforming to their critique, finally allowing itself to become the sort of idle, profitless toy that the schoolmasters deplored."⁶⁰ Given the pattern of passivity that pervades the legend, it is therefore more accurate to say that the abandonment of a Horatian poetics is something that happens *to* Spenser and his poem, that the capitulation to the pleasure of the text is one of the many accidents by which the text loses control over itself and over its aim to teach the ways of askesis.

⁵⁸ Maria R. Rohr Philmus, "The *Faerie Queene* and Renaissance Poetics: Another Look at Book VI as 'Conclusion' to the Poem," *English Studies* 76.6 (1995): 512.

⁵⁹ Philmus, 515; my italics.

⁶⁰ Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007), 233.

The Poetry of Misconduct

As a way of wrapping up my discussion of the Legend of Courtesy, I would like to end not with the discussion of the ending that I just ended, but rather with a return to Calidore, who has been as absent from this chapter as he is from the Legend of Courtesy itself. Any discussion of Calidore must address his absence from the poem as well as his retreat from service into the realm of pastoral and his pursuit of Pastorella. That truancy can easily be explained by calling attention to the primary ideological conflict that runs throughout the legend: a tension between a view of the court as source of chivalry, courtesy, and virtue, and a view of the court as source of flattery, inconstancy, and what Calidore calls “gay shows” and “vaine shadowes” (6.9.27). This tension is established at the beginning of the poem through a play on the etymology of the word “courtesy.” The proem ends with an invocation to Queen Elizabeth and a reference to the “Faire Lords and Ladies” who both “dwell” in and “adorne” Elizabeth’s “Court, where courtesies excell” (6.Proem.7), but this statement, which brings out the courtesy in the court by bringing out the “court” in *courtesy*, is both repeated and qualified by the following line, at the very beginning of the first canto: “Of Court it seemes, men Courtesie doe call, / For that it there most vseth to abound” (6.1.1). The use of the word “seemes” introduces a tone of hesitancy with respect to the court. And this hesitancy ripples across the legend, so that Calidore’s retreat from court to pastoral may be at least partially explained or excused.

What interests me about Calidore’s truancy, however, isn’t the question of whether or not it constitutes a moral lapse, an exemplum of misconduct that flies in the

face of any ascetic virtue the poem wishes to impart, but rather the way in which his misconduct is tied up with the poetics of the poem itself. Indeed, it is difficult to attach the fault of errancy solely to the knight represented *in* the poem; the narration *of* the poem seems to be implicated as well. The first stanza of the legend admits the overwhelming attractions of the pleasure in error:

The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde,
In this delightfull land of Faery,
Are so exceeding spacious and wyde,
And sprinckled with such sweet variety,
Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye,
That I nigh rausht with rare thoughts delight,
My tedious trauell doe forget thereby;
And when I gin to feelee decay of might,
It strength to me supplies, and chears my dulled spright.

(6.Proem.1)

Only at the end of the stanza, in the last two lines, does Spenser unequivocally characterize the pleasure in error as the source of much-needed relief. It is thus a means to an end, a way of making Spenser's "tedious trauell" more bearable (the pun on travel/travail is as unmistakable as it is frequent in Spenser—indeed, unmistakable *because* so frequent). But before the last two lines, that pleasure is cast in less comforting terms: the path of romance is "*exceeding* spacious and wyde," and its "sweet variety" leaves the narrator "rausht." Moreover, the ambiguity of the phrase "My tedious trauell doe forget thereby" leaves it unclear whether the pleasure of the text leads Spenser to forget merely the *tediousness* of his "trauell" or leads him, like Calidore, to forget his "trauell" altogether.⁶¹

⁶¹ Here I disagree with Patricia Parker's reading that this stanza "seems to gather up and remove the sting from images and phrases which earlier in the poem suggested more dangerous kinds of delay"—or rather, I place more emphasis on the word "seems" than Parker herself does. See Parker, 102.

At the beginning of the legend's final canto, using one of the most common emblems of, in, and for romance, Spenser retrospectively justifies both Calidore's delay and his own:

Like as a ship, that through the Ocean wyde
Directs her course vnto one certaine cost,
Is met of many a counter winde and tyde,
With which her winged speed is let and crost,
And she her selfe in stormie surges tost;
Yet making many a borde, and many a bay,
Still winneth way, ne hath her compasse lost:
Right so it fares with me in this long way,
Whose course is often stayd, yet neuer is astray.

For all that hetherto hath long delayd
This gentle knight, from sewing his first quest,
Though out of course, yet hath not bene mis-sayd,
To shew the courtesie by him profest,
Euen vnto the lowest and the least.
But now I come into my course againe,
To his atchieuement of the *Blatant beast*;
Who all this while at will did range and raine,
Whilst none was him to stop, nor none him to restraine.

(6.8.1–2)

The defense may belatedly and retrospectively excuse both poet and character, but the very need for a defense doesn't eliminate the suspicion that some kind of moral fault has been committed. Through the very act of justifying the actions of *both* the knight *and* the poet, the poem calls into question both their actions—and for the same reasons.

Regardless of whether Calidore and/or Spenser are to be condemned and/or excused for traveling “out of course,” these two stanzas establish the inextricability of their “stayd” courses.

What is at stake in thus aligning Spenser's poetics with Calidore's errancy? A great deal seems to be at issue, for critics have frequently recoiled from such an alignment. In his 1936 study *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis warned his readers that

the “greatest mistake that can be made about [the Legend of Courtesy] is to suppose that Calidore’s long delay among the shepherds is a pastoral truancy of Spenser’s from his moral intention.”⁶² Hyperbolic though it may seem, Lewis’s attempt to create a distance between Calidore and Spenser finds some support in the legend itself. At the beginning of canto x, for instance, the narration itself creates that distance by censuring Calidore:

Who now does follow the foule *Blatant Beast*,
 Whilest *Calidore* does follow that faire Mayd [i.e., Pastorella],
 Vnmindfull of his vow and high behest,
 Which by the Faery Queene was on him layd,
 That he should neuer leave, nor be delayd
 From chacing him, till he had it attchieued?

(6.10.1)

But if Calidore is truly being censured here, then so should the poem. Read metatextually, the stanza admits that neither Calidore nor the poem “follow[s] the foule *Blatant Beast*.” Rather than making a beeline toward the telos of the main quest, both the knight and the poem display the interruptive tendency to pursue the intermeddled accidents that mark the journey’s errant path. As William Nestruck writes: “Again and again, Spenser or one of his characters undrapes an intimate scene of restful delight. Such scenes exemplify the sweet variety that Spenser *and Calidore* find along their tedious way. Calidore does the same things that Spenser claims he himself is doing in this book.”⁶³ The Legend of Courtesy thereby exemplifies Yeats’s claim that Spenser was more interested in the journey than its end, and the tale less than the telling; Calidore functions as the figure *within* the poem who emblemizes this preference.

⁶² C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1936; rpt. Galaxy, 1958), 350.

⁶³ William V. Nestruck, “The Virtuous and Gentle Discipline of Gentlemen and Poets,” *ELH* 29.4 (1962): 363; Nestruck’s italics.

Given this structural redoubling whereby Calidore's truancy figures the poem's own errancy, it is difficult to read the Legend of Courtesy as a conduct book. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse have argued that "the literature of conduct and the conduct of the writing known as literature share a same history."⁶⁴ While literature and conduct literature may share a same history—a history that stretches back to antiquity and forward to modernity, with important stops in Renaissance England along the way—the Legend of Courtesy ironically exposes the ways in which they may not share the same function, despite what Spenser claims in the Letter to Raleigh.⁶⁵ If *The Faerie Queene* as a whole sets out to work as a narrative of askesis, relying on the askesis that *is* narrative to straighten out the eruptions and interruptions of aimless pleasure that constitute romance's hallmark, then the misconduct exemplified in and by Spenser's Legend of Courtesy provides a glimpse of how one might begin the impossible task of shuffling off this moral coil. Then again, as we've seen, the passivity inscribed in the legend denies any such agency, suggesting the ways in which romance shuffles this moral coil off *us*.

⁶⁴ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, "The Literature of Conduct, the Conduct of Literature, and the Politics of Desire: An Introduction," in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 1.

⁶⁵ Cf. Daniel Juan Gil's comment that "if *The Faerie Queene* is a conduct manual, then it is a very strange one for, as a genre, conduct manuals are marked by an overwhelming degree of explicitness. . . . Any reader of *The Faerie Queene*, by contrast, knows that if rules of conduct are being offered at all, they are almost impossible to understand" (*Before Intimacy: Asocial Sexuality in Early Modern England* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006], 49).

CHAPTER FOUR

Against Sublimation: The Miltonic Ore and Poetry's Refuse

But if something were to remain of the prolegomenon once inscribed and interwoven, something that would not allow itself to be sublated [*relevé*] in the course of the philosophical presentation, would that something necessarily take the form of that which *falls away* [*la tombée*]? And what about such a fall? Couldn't it be read otherwise than as the excrement of philosophical essentiality—not in order to sublimate it back into the latter, of course, but in order to learn to take it differently into account?

JACQUES DERRIDA

In his 1762 *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, Bishop Richard Hurd counted John Milton as an English inheritor of the “Gothic Romance”:

The greatest geniuses of our own and foreign countries, such as Ariosto and Tasso in Italy, and Spenser and Milton in England, were seduced by these barbarities of their forefathers; were even charmed by the Gothic Romances. Was this caprice and absurdity in them? Or, may there not be something in the Gothic Romance peculiarly suited to the views of a genius, and to the ends of poetry? And may not the philosophic moderns have gone too far, in their perpetual ridicule and contempt of it?¹

Hurd's placement of Milton within a genealogy of romance poets seems to contradict

Milton's own statements against romance, in *Paradise Lost*, in favor of “that which justly gives heroic name / To person or to poem.”² But the problem is, in fact, even more

¹ Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, ed. Hoyt Trowbridge (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1963), 4.

² *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 9.40–41. All quotations from Milton's work, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from this edition and cited in the text. Citations to *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* will refer to book and line numbers; citations to Milton's other poetry, such as *Comus*, will refer to line numbers; and citations to Milton's prose works will refer to page numbers.

intricate than this simple contradiction suggests. Notice how romance exerts a textual effect in Hurd's discussion: he uses a vocabulary found *in* romance ("seduced," "charmed") to depict the influence *of* romance on poets such as Milton and his predecessors in the heroic tradition. Milton is seduced by romance just as the knights within romance narratives are seduced by enchanters ranging from Homer's Circe to Milton's Satan.³ By the logic of this analogy, Milton was led astray much as Eve was led astray, enchanted into using a form that his political, theological, and philosophical convictions—indeed, the very culture of his times—should have led him to forsake.

In *Eikonoklastes*, for instance, Milton takes aim at the "vain amatorious poem of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*" and more generally at the "polluted orts and refuse of *Arcadias* and romances."⁴ Romance comes under attack here because of its association with the debased monarch: the context of the strike is Milton's condemnation of Charles I, who appropriated the "ethnic" (i.e., pagan) prayer of Pamela from Book 3 of Sidney's romance.⁵ Milton thus characterizes the *Arcadia* as "a book in that kind full of worth and wit, but among religious thoughts and duties not worthy to be named, nor to be read at any time without good caution, much less in time of trouble and affliction to be a

³ See Victoria Kahn's discussion, in *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004), of Thomas Hobbes' attack on romance. For Hobbes, Kahn writes, "romance does not simply narrate the story of emulous desire but also excites the desire for imitation in the reader" (142).

⁴ John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1957; rpt. 2003), 793–94. The word "orts" denotes scraps of food. Cf. Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*: "Where should he have this gold? It is some poor fragment, some slender ort of his remainder. The mere want of gold and the falling-from of his friends drove him into this melancholy" (*The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997], 4.3.392–95). Many of the details condensed in this quotation (refuse, gold, even the phoneme "or") will be central to my discussion of Milton in this chapter.

⁵ On romance's royalist associations in the seventeenth century, see Kahn, 139–40.

Christian's prayer-book."⁶ Just a few years earlier, though, Milton praised romance in his *Apology for Smectymnus*, recounting how his "younger feet wandered . . . among those lofty fables and romances, which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knighthood founded by our victorious kings, and from hence had in renown over all Christendom" (851).⁷ Although such romances, he writes, may "to many others have been the fuel of wantonness and loose living," they provided for him instruction in the ways of chastity, that virtue so important to Milton throughout his career, that virtue which, as he characterizes it, "abhors the society of bordellos" (851). By the time of *Paradise Lost*, however, the "lofty fables and romances" become the "long and tedious havoc" of "fabled knights / In battles feigned" (9.30–31). Is Milton's relationship with romance so simply teleological, so easily cast in the form of a modern bildungsroman narrative that displays a development from youthful indulgence to mature rejection? Or could it be that Milton, in the words of Steven Knapp, "is of Arthur's party without quite knowing it"?⁸

The problem of Milton's relationship to romance constitutes an intriguing piece of a larger conflict that has rifted the reception of the poet's work for the past several hundred years. Knapp's statement, of course, tropes on William Blake's well-known claim in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Milton "was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it."⁹ One of the many questions raised by this infamous assertion is how we should read Blake's "and," whether as additive (Milton was a true

⁶ Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, 793.

⁷ The use of the words "lofty" and "solemn" to describe romance suggests that, early in his career, Milton viewed romance as reconcilable with sublimity.

⁸ Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 54.

⁹ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., 2 vols., gen. ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 2000), 2:75.

poet and *additionally* of the Devil's party) or as causative (Milton was a true poet and *therefore* of the Devil's party). In any case, Blake's radical appraisal clues us in to the perpetual tension between Milton's poetic and didactic aims.¹⁰ This is a tension that continues to structure the debates within Milton studies. "The argument over *Paradise Lost*," wrote Patricia Parker in 1979, "has most frequently been a conflict of historical views, between adherents of Blake's 'Of the Devil's Party without knowing it' and the attempt to reconstruct a more theological—or seventeenth-century—reading, behind, or beyond, the Romantic distortions."¹¹ The historicist climate of the three decades since Parker made this observation might lead us to believe that the second position—the "more theological" or seventeenth-century position—has held sway.¹² In the interest of rescuing Milton's poetry from the charge of apolitical escapism (the failed revolutionary retreats into vain poetry), critics tend to align his poetic revolution with the politico-theological revolution of which he was a part. Such assumptions, for example, underwrite David Scott Kastan's recent claim that *Paradise Lost* is the "answer" to the question, "What is a Protestant and a republican epic?"¹³

But what if *Paradise Lost* were the question instead of the answer? To pose this question—that is, to pose the poem *as* a question—is to begin to sketch an oblique and

¹⁰ That tension was identified as early as the eighteenth century by Samuel Johnson, who wrote of *Paradise Lost*: "Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions" (*Lives of the English Poets*, 2 vols. [London: Oxford UP, 1906], 1:127).

¹¹ Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), 11.

¹² Sharon Achinstein's blanket statement that "Milton's poem is consistent with the ethical concerns voiced in his prose" sums up this position (*Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994], 199). For a summary of the tenets of recent Milton studies, see Peter C. Herman, *Destabilizing Milton: "Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–24. I will have more to say about Herman's study momentarily.

¹³ David Scott Kastan, "Introduction," in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. David Scott Kastan (New York: Hackett, 2005), xvi.

counterintuitive portrait of Milton; it is to begin to reveal, in the words of Stephen Guy-Bray, “not the utterly self-assured poet who is still the prevalent image of Milton, but rather a more tentative poet, trying to work out the relation between his poetics and his religious duty.”¹⁴ Such a “tentative” poet is the (per)version of Milton that I will unfold in this chapter. Where most Miltonists work under the assumption, not to say belief, that Milton’s poetics is coextensive with his theological and political commitments, my goal here is to hold open the gap between his poetics and those commitments for as long as possible in order to unpack elements of his poetry that get lost or rejected in the standard attempt to read Milton’s texts as aimed toward redemption. In doing so, I would seem to join the rising chorus of recent Milton scholars who have sought to denaturalize—or to show how *Paradise Lost* itself denaturalizes—the conventional reading of Milton as a totalizing poet.¹⁵ This attempt to track an uncertain version of the poet is most strongly made in Peter C. Herman’s *Destabilizing Milton*. Because Herman’s study exemplifies the assumptions and claims of recent criticism, I would like briefly to examine his argumentative maneuvers in order to register my distance from his book and to position my own argument in the more general currents of Milton studies.

One of the most marked characteristics of the recent wave of criticism exemplified by Herman is its rehabilitation of William Empson’s controversial study *Milton’s God*. Empson’s claim that *Paradise Lost* “is not good in spite of but especially because of its moral confusions” is itself a rehabilitation of what he pointedly calls “the

¹⁴ Stephen Guy-Bray, *Against Reproduction: Where Renaissance Poems Come From* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009), 154.

¹⁵ See, for e.g., John Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996); Victoria Silver, *Imperfect Sense: The Predicament of Milton’s Irony* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001); and Andrew Mattison, *Milton’s Uncertain Eden: Understanding Place in “Paradise Lost”* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

manly and appreciative attitude of Blake and Shelley,” a rehabilitation, that is, of the Romantic reading of Milton that, at the time Empson was writing, “ha[d] been held in contempt since the last bold literary revolution, spearheaded by Mr T. S. Eliot.”¹⁶ The rebellious or at least uncertain Milton notoriously constructed first by the Romantics and then in the twentieth century by Empson would therefore stand against what Herman identifies as the three-pronged dominant paradigm of conventional Milton criticism: that “Milton is a poet of absolute, unqualified certainty”; that “*Paradise Lost* coheres”; and that the “critic’s task is to make the poem cohere.”¹⁷

While Empson represents a strong challenge to this paradigm, the paradigm itself, according to Herman, is embodied in and by the work of Stanley Fish—not only in Fish’s classic study *Surprised by Sin*, but also in his more recent, boldly titled *How Milton Works*.¹⁸ In the latter, as in the former, Fish presents a Milton “without either contradiction or tension,” a Milton fixed on a single theological purpose: to achieve a union with deity.¹⁹ Fish directs his argument against precisely the alternative line of criticism that begins with Blake and extends to Empson and more recent critics. Hence he asserts that “conflict, ambivalence, and open-endedness—the watchwords of a criticism that would make Milton into the Romantic liberal some of his readers want him to be—are not constitutive features of the poetry but products of a systematic misreading of it, a misreading performed *in* the poetry by Comus and Satan, a misreading *of* the poetry as old as Blake and Shelley”—and as new, he goes on to show, as a whole slew of

¹⁶ William Empson, *Milton’s God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 13.

¹⁷ Herman, 7.

¹⁸ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in “Paradise Lost”* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1967), and *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2001).

¹⁹ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 5.

contemporary Miltonists who “reinstate and reinvok[e] the dualism Milton so often rejects.”²⁰ Fish, for Herman, thereby produces and reproduces the principal and prevailing claims of Milton scholarship, declaring that Milton’s poetry is coherent, certain, unified, total, and ultimately meaningful. Following Empson, by contrast, Herman attempts to destabilize such coherency, revealing how *Paradise Lost* is structured by incertitude.

However, in claiming that Fish sticks with his story, rarely deviating from his totalizing interpretation of Milton, Herman sets up a totalizing interpretation of Fish.²¹ In other words, Herman does to Fish what he accuses Fish of doing to Milton. Indeed Fish, I would like to suggest, doesn’t so *simply* do to Milton what Herman says he does. Throughout *How Milton Works*, Fish in fact acknowledges the precariousness of Milton’s single-minded project, a precariousness that takes the form of a conflict between means and ends.²² In a footnote to his discussion, Herman grants that “Fish gives a much more nuanced view” of Milton, later in *How Milton Works*, by pointing out patterns of

²⁰ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 14; Fish’s italics.

²¹ One might also argue that Herman’s own interpretation of Milton is itself totalizing. Although Herman is intent on analyzing what he calls “a poetics of incertitude,” he ultimately tethers, and so certifies, that incertitude to a political and historical cause: “[I]t is out of the turmoil of not knowing what to affirm in the wake of the Revolution’s failure that Milton creates some of his finest poetry” (21). He argues later, for example, that “the Miltonic ‘Or’ in *Paradise Lost* reflects Milton’s uncertainties after the Revolution collapses” (58). The metaphor of reflection, typical of historicist criticism, implies a stable mirroring between text and context. Precisely because it mirrors Milton’s political and historical incertitude, textual incertitude is thus sublimated as certain—and indeed redeemed in terms of aesthetic value, as Milton is thereby able to create “his finest poetry.” For an incisive critique of Herman’s study, see Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007), xiii, where Fallon claims that “Herman’s opposition to reading Milton as monolithic does not go far enough, for in the place of the real disjunctions in Milton’s texts Herman provides a catalogue of the pervasive binaries and alternatives composing what has been called Milton’s poetics of choice.”

²² As Fish writes immediately after attacking the Romantic strain of Milton criticism: “Then why, one might ask, is the poetry so full of what it finally asks us to affirm against? The answer is that the lesson [Milton] would teach us—that we must forsake the letter for the spirit—can be taught only in the discursive forms the letter provides. Those forms are at once the vehicles of our instruction and the habitation of temptation—that is, of the temptation to take them seriously for themselves rather than as instruments of a supreme pedagogical intention, Milton’s intention and . . . the intention of his God” (*How Milton Works*, 14–15).

indeterminacy. “Yet,” Herman writes, “Fish contains these subversions, as it were, by concluding *How Milton Works* saying that ‘everything that many readers find interesting in Milton’s work—crises, conflicts, competing values, once-and-for-all dramatic moments—proceeds from error and is finally unreal.’”²³

But *How Milton Works* doesn’t actually conclude with this claim. Fish goes on to point out that, because it is the ground of history, error is the condition through which, in a postlapsarian universe, we must experience the world; “its attractions,” he writes, “are therefore as ‘natural’ as they are fatal to entry into true life.”²⁴ The necessary task of standing outside error and history, he acknowledges,

is not a requirement that anyone can fulfill; but what one can do . . . is continue to be carried within the vehicles of time, plot, history, politics, projects, objects, discourses, but in a way that uses them—figuralizes them—rather than enjoys them for their own sake.

This is what Milton does both *in* his poetry and prose and *with* his poetry and prose, which are themselves, after all, material forms of the kind that embody the ever-present danger of mistaking the historically real for the really real. The danger, Milton believes, must be engaged and even courted if it is to be (even temporarily) overcome; the forms that invite us to identify with their limitedness must be re-seen as signs of what they cannot contain. Nothing is to be rejected as a means; everything (except for the really real) is to be rejected as an end.²⁵

What Fish presumably intends to say when he writes “This is what Milton does” is that Milton uses errant postlapsarian forms not for their own sake but as a means to more sublime ends. Yet it is curious that the immediate referent for Fish’s “This” is “enjoys them for their own sake.” Given his project, Fish likely doesn’t mean to suggest that Milton’s poetry and prose indulge in the pleasure in error for its own sake. Nevertheless, the incertitude of Fish’s own language—an incertitude that Herman’s totalizing reading

²³ Herman, 179n26; citing Fish, *How Milton Works*, 572.

²⁴ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 572.

²⁵ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 572.

of Fish overlooks—performs the dangerous possibility of error that, he argues, Milton tries so hard to guard against. Fish actually concludes his study with a bleak assertion of that danger's power: "[E]verything in the poetry provides the material and the occasion for going down another, disastrous, path. . . . The discipline is so severe that any one of us, including Milton and even the Son of God, is only half a beat away from relaxing it and so losing Paradise again."²⁶ Fish himself relaxes the discipline when, in half a beat, his ambiguous demonstrative pronoun allows for the Romantic counter-interpretation that his book attacks.

I've critiqued Herman's critique of Fish in order to show how, all appearances to the contrary, my own understanding of Milton's poetics of incertitude draws its inspiration more from Fish's reading than from Herman's. I agree with Fish that Milton is a poet with totalizing intentions, but I wish to pry open, as wide as possible, the gap between means and ends to which Fish, perhaps despite himself, points us. In this chapter, I argue not that Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it (the Romantic interpretation is no less a totalizing reading than a Christian interpretation), but that his work is both formed and deformed around the possibility that he *may* be of the Devil's party. The risk of falling, and thus failing, is inextricable from Milton's sublime intentions, not in spite of the fact but precisely *because* his intentions are so lofty. Necessarily, then, this chapter is organized according to a falling, as opposed to rising, pattern: I begin with the sublimity of Milton's lofty goals and I end in the bowels of Chaos and Hell, where, I suggest, we can find the grisliest analogies for the errancy and futility of poetic creation.

²⁶ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 573.

If this descent narrative is meant to run counter to the logic of progress, development, and ascent, it nonetheless constitutes the linear structure of this chapter as it *develops* in time. It should be noted, then, that there is another, more errant pattern by which my argument less obviously *wanders*.²⁷ Within and across the sections that follow, I trace the metonymic—that is, associative—connections among a constellation of terms, including, among others, *sublimity*, *sublimation*, *sublation*, and what I will term *relèveation*, a neologism by which I mean to evoke at once elevation, revelation, relevance, relation, relief, and *relève*, this last word being Derrida’s French translation of Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, or subl(im)ation.²⁸ I track the interplay of these terms as they crisscross the discursive domains of alchemy, (e)sc(h)atology, Hegelian philosophy, Christian theology, poststructuralism, and Milton’s own body of work. While each of these words is significant in itself and carries loaded meaning in distinction with the others and in particular contexts, they nevertheless swarm together here because they all evoke the desire for a dialectical deliverance from poetry’s (to say nothing of humanity’s) indulgence in the pleasures of vanity, error, and negativity. Throughout I argue against this desire, against the temptation, that is, to resolve the tensions in Milton’s poetry dialectically. I do so, to borrow from the epigraph to this chapter, by attending to what

²⁷ The following words of Barthes may help give a sense of the intended duplicity of this chapter’s organization: “This work, in its discontinuity, proceeds by means of two movements: the *straight line* (advance, increase, insistence of an idea, a position, a preference, an image) and the *zigzag* (reversal, contradiction, reactive energy, denial, contrariety, the movement of a *Z*, the letter of deviance” (*Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977], 90–91; Barthes’ italics).

²⁸ In explaining *la relève*, Derrida situates Hegel’s metaphysical system in relation to eschatological and theological concerns that are relevant for any understanding of Milton’s ends: “*Aufheben* is *relever*, in the sense in which *relever* can combine to relieve, to displace, to elevate, to replace and to promote, in one and the same movement. . . . This equivocal relationship of *relief* doubtless marks the end of man, man past, but by the same token it also marks the achievement of man, the appropriation of his essence. . . . The *relève* or *relevance* of man is his *telos* or *eskhaton*. . . . Such a discourse, in Hegel as in the entirety of metaphysics, indissociably coordinates teleology with an eschatology, a theology, and an ontology” (*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982], 121; Derrida’s italics).

inevitably remains or falls away after the purifying processes denoted by these terms work their effects—not in order to sublate such remainders, but in order to *take them differently into account*.

Vantage Points

Throughout this project I've elaborated a two-pronged argument, at once critical and metacritical. My critical claim is that romance provides a particularly acute vantage point from which we can see a tension between the pleasurable means and useful ends of poetry. My metacritical claim is that this vantage point constitutes the vanishing point of contemporary criticism, which operates, like early modern England, according to an ends-oriented conception of poetic production. And yet, because, as we've seen, Renaissance writers viewed romance as constitutively irreconcilable with the sublimity implied by the phrase, perhaps it is the very notion of a "vantage point" that demands to be called into question.

The problematic stakes involved in this trope can be preliminarily glimpsed by turning to Jacques Derrida's essay "The Principle of Reason," which was initially delivered as a lecture at Cornell University.²⁹ The scene of the lecture—what he calls "the institutional scenography" of Cornell—provides Derrida with a "cause for worry" insofar as he "find[s] [him]self involved already, quite imprudently, that is, blindly and without foresight, in an act of dramaturgy, writing out the play of that *view* in which Cornell, from its beginnings, has felt so much to be at stake" (133; Derrida's italics). Cornell's campus, of course, is located on top of a high hill overlooking the city of

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug, et. al. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 129–55. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

Ithaca, New York. Derrida cites an account of the university's founding that points out that the plan of the university's founder, Ezra Cornell, to construct the university on this high ground "seems to have been shaped by the thematics of the Romantic sublime" (qtd. in Derrida 133). The sublimity of the university's site, however, is haunted by a death drive that gets manifested in the suicides for which the university is infamous—suicides accomplished by students who jump off the campus's bridges into the gorges that cut through the sublime heights of the hill on which the university is constructed: "Beneath the bridges linking the university to its surroundings, connecting its inside to its outside, lies the abyss" (134).³⁰ Thus the topic of Derrida's essay is caught in an uncanny play with the topos of its occasion—in his words, "the topolitics of the Cornellian point of view" (130).³¹ Although Derrida's essay is, therefore, very much a cry of its modern, or post-Romantic, occasion, the motif with which it deals is part of a vast transhistorical construct in which Milton, as I will show in this section, is implicated as well.³²

The notion of a "vantage point" is problematic, then, because it evokes a sublime space of clear vision and transparent truth, a site of instructive or prophetic sight. It is from such a vantage point, Mount Sinai, that Moses receives the Ten Commandments, for example. Consider, too, Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Or consider his miraculous transfiguration, coupled with the appearance of the Hebrew prophets Moses and Elijah,

³⁰ One cannot help but think here of the "bridge" that Sin and Death construct, in *Paradise Lost* (10.301), through the abyss of Chaos in order to connect Hell to Earth.

³¹ Such "topolitics" also informs the occasion of my own study, for, like Cornell, Brown University, where this project is being written, is located on top of a high hill. The fact that Brown's campus overlooks the allegorically named city of Providence adds to the reflexivity in which I, too, like Derrida, am caught.

³² In making this claim I should point out that, although Milton's work predates philosophical discussions of aesthetic sublimity made by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the 1554 publication of Longinus's *Peri hypsous* ("On the Sublime"), as well as Milton's own use of the word throughout his corpus, suggests that, to speak of Milton's poetry in relation to sublimity isn't an anachronism. On this point see David L. Sedley, *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005).

on a “high mountain apart” (Matthew 17.1; Mark 9.2).³³ The title of Milton’s anti-censorship tract, *Areopagitica*, derives from the Areopagus (“Mars Hill”), the hill in Athens famous both as the site where Isocrates’ seventh oration was delivered and as the site from which Saint Paul evangelized the Athenians: “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, *Ye men of Athens*, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious” (Acts 17.22). A cursory glance at the romance tradition reveals that these literal moral high grounds usually come, if not at the end of the narrative, at least at a stage preparatory to the end. One thinks, for example, of the “highest Mount” to which Contemplation leads the Redcrosse Knight in canto 10 of Spenser’s *Legend of Holiness*, a topos that seems to suggest that the narrative trajectory of romance is founded on the desire to transcend its own errors.³⁴ Another example from *The Faerie Queene* is Calidore’s vision of the Graces on Mount Acidale in the *Legend of Courtesy*, although in this particular instance Spenser is interested in the disruption of the kind of revelatory vision that such a vantage point affords, so that, by the end of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser seems to confirm about romance what Milton later suspects: that it is irreconcilable with the sublime visions gained on moral high grounds.

In the rhetoric, logic, and history of Western metaphysics, the vantage point can be characterized not just as a site of revelation in itself, but as a space quite pointedly

³³ All quotations are from *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP); citations will appear in the text and refer to book as well as chapter and verse numbers; all italics are in the original. Strangely enough, just before his discussion of Cornell’s site and founding, Derrida compares himself to Elijah: “Was this inaugural lecture a well-chosen moment to ask whether the university has a reason for being? Wasn’t I about to act with all the unseemliness of a stranger who in return for noble hospitality plays prophet of doom with his hosts, or at best eschatological harbinger, like Elijah denouncing the power of kings or announcing the end of the kingdom?” (133).

³⁴ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2d ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2007), 1.10.53. Subsequent citations will appear in the text and will refer to book, canto, and stanza numbers.

above and beyond the labyrinth of error as well. In his essay “Of Truth,” Francis Bacon makes this distinction clear by quoting the opening lines of Book 2 of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* (the italics signify Lucretius’s words):

The poet that beautified the sect [i.e., the Epicureans], that was otherwise inferior to the rest, saith yet excellently well: *It is a pleasure to stand upon the shore and to see ships tossed upon the sea; a pleasure to stand in the window of a castle and to see a battle and the adventures thereof below; but no pleasure is comparable to the standing upon the vantage-ground of truth* (a hill not to be commanded, where the air is always clear and serene), *and to see the errors and wanderings and mists and tempests in the vale below*; so always that this prospect be with pity, and not with swelling or pride.³⁵

As throughout his work, Bacon here contrasts the high “vantage-ground of truth” with the vagaries of romance: “errors and wanderings and mists and tempests in the vale below,” the word “vale” surely working as a pun on “veil.”³⁶ In a quasi-Miltonic gesture, Bacon goes on to Christianize this Lucretian vantage-ground: “Certainly it is heaven upon earth to have a man’s mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth.”³⁷ In using this trope, Bacon is hardly alone among his contemporaries. According to John M. Steadman, seventeenth-century epistemology routinely drew distinctions between the hill and the labyrinth, preferring the swift ascent of the former as the most direct path to truth.³⁸

³⁵ Francis Bacon, *Essays and “New Atlantis”* (Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1949), 4–5; italics in original.

³⁶ As Patricia Parker writes: “[T]he ‘vale’ of exile and the ‘veil’ of language were assimilated long before even Blake’s combination of the mysterious and the lachrymose in the romance figure of Vala, and the figure of the veil and unveiling is one of the oldest of narrative—and semiotic—images, from the Book of Revelation to the series of romance enchantresses whose uncovering is related both to the discovery of meaning and to a sense of narrative ending” (221). Indeed, the title of one of the sections in Parker’s chapter on Spenser is “The Vale of Vision.”

³⁷ Bacon, 5.

³⁸ John M. Steadman, *The Hill and the Labyrinth: Discourse and Certitude in Milton and His Near-Contemporaries* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984).

If the attainment of such a vantage point constitutes the aim of Milton's aspirations, as well as the aspirations of his culture, then it's hardly surprising that the epic sweep of *Paradise Lost* culminates on moral high grounds. I refer, of course, to the hill in Eden to the top of which Michael leads Adam so that the archangel, following God's instructions, may educate the progenitor of all humankind following the Fall. Before turning to that *particular* vantage point, however, I'd like to unpack further the theoretical and philosophical implications of the trope of the vantage point *in general*.

Some sense of the staying power and further significance of this trope can be gleaned from a comment that Stanley Fish makes in *How Milton Works*: that the tension "between the desire to lose oneself in a union with deity, and the desire either to defer the moment of union or to master it by intellectualizing it" is "a master theme" of Milton's *Lycidas* and thus "provides a vantage point from which we can make a kind of narrative sense of the poem's many and surprising twists and turns."³⁹ Fish's use of the phrase "narrative sense" is as telling as his use of the phrase "vantage point"; the latter functions, for him, much in the same way that the former, as I showed in the previous chapter, does for Paul de Man—as a force of dialectical recuperation. And if we take "twists and turns" to denote the forces encapsulated in the word *trope*, then Fish's claim also exemplifies de Man's observation that narrative produces "the anamorphosis of the tropes, the transformations of the tropes, into the system of tropes, to which the corresponding experience is that of the self standing above its own experiences."⁴⁰ Whereas de Man, however, directs his critique *against* such a vantage point, Fish aims for nothing less: a

³⁹ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 256.

⁴⁰ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 177.

site as well as sight of sense making, a locus of truth that sublimates the errant “twists and turns” of Milton’s notoriously difficult *Lycidas*.

The word *sublimates* is apposite here for a number of reasons: it intersects not only with the high grounds characteristic of aesthetic, theological, and philosophical sublimity, but also with the purifying processes that characterize both alchemy and dialectics. Hence Lee Edelman reminds us that “the logic of sublimation—often associated, as Lacan points out, with forms of ‘moral and spiritual elevation, that of the scale of values’—designates also a process for translating the impurities of ore into gold.”⁴¹ Interestingly enough, an early twentieth-century edition of *Lycidas* represents Milton’s revisions of the poem—his sublimation or purifying of the twists and turns of its manuscript form—in precisely these terms. Surveying the corrections that Milton made to the poem as it appears in the Trinity Manuscript, the editor, H. B. Cotterill, writes: “By some wondrous alchemy [Milton] transforms (sometimes by a single word) what seems of little value into pure gold”; Cotterill then goes on to cite comments made by Charles Lamb about encountering the poem in manuscript form: “I had thought of the *Lycidas*,” writes Lamb, “as of a full-grown beauty—as springing up with all parts absolute—till in an evil hour I was shown the original copy of it in the Library of Trinity . . . How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined! corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if inspiration were made up of parts, and these fluctuating, successive, indifferent!”⁴² Upon close inspection, the signifier

⁴¹ Lee Edelman, “Aesthetic Value and Literary Language: Elizabeth Bishop and Paul de Man,” in *Never Again Would Birds’ Songs Be the Same: Essays on Early Modern and Modern Poetry in Honor of John Hollander*, ed. Jennifer Lewin (New Haven, CT: Beinecke Library, 2002), 231. On associations between sublimation and alchemy, see also Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare’s Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2002), esp. Chapter 1.

⁴² See John Milton, *Lycidas*, ed. H. B. Cotterill (London: Blackie & Son, 1902), 56–57

“ore” reveals itself all over Milton’s oeuvre, from the famous opening lines of *Lycidas* (“Yet once *more*”) to the most marked characteristic of Milton’s style: the famous Miltonic “Or,” the disjunctive conjunction that keeps the desire for dialectical resolution in the relentless grips of error and *aporia*.⁴³ The desire for such relief from the “twists and turns” of the Miltonic or(e), the desire, that is, for the quasi-alchemical sublimation or translation of or(e) into go(l)d, is encapsulated in Fish’s use of the phrase “vantage point,” as, indeed, it is in all of the examples I’ve cited.

The serene vantage point, then, is the desired locus of what one might call “*relèvement*,” where *relève*, as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, is Derrida’s translation of Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, the synthetic moment of the dialectic which at once raises, annuls, and recuperates negativity in the progressive movement toward the revelation of Spirit. Because the sublime aspirations of Hegelian idealism, on the one hand, and Christian prophecy and eschatology, on the other, intersect in the form of such *relèvement*, it should come as no surprise that systematic readings of Milton tend to proceed according to a dialectical pattern. Such is the organizational structure, for instance, of Fish’s *How Milton Works*: a movement from a paradigm to a counter-paradigm to a paradigm reaffirmed (never, one might notice, a paradigm lost, at least not explicitly). Michael Lieb’s earlier study *The Dialectics of Creation* is arranged, not

⁴³ In “Aesthetic Value and Literary Language,” Edelman juxtaposes two texts published in 1978: Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “Santarém” (which draws, for its context, on the discovery of gold in South America) and Paul de Man’s essay “The Epistemology of Metaphor” (which analyzes John Locke’s discussion of gold in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*). This conjoining allows Edelman to speculate, so to speak, on questions of aesthetic value; his analysis centers, not incidentally for our discussion of Milton, on Bishop’s use of the conjunction *or*, “a word,” Edelman points out, that is “always ready, in romance languages, to turn into gold itself . . . Like a version of Rumpelstiltskin, the economy of aesthetic value turns even the refusal or undoing of the aesthetic into more aesthetic gold . . . ‘Santarém’ thus enacts an allegory of literature as the gold standard of aesthetic value by tracing that value to the conjunction of linguistic possibilities *in a conjunction*” (225; Edelman’s italics).

unexpectedly, along similar lines.⁴⁴ Indeed, Lieb's argument is that dialectics structures Milton's work throughout his career. With regard to Milton's prose, specifically *Areopagitica*, Lieb writes: "Dialectically, one might express Milton's attitude in this manner: one side of the argument confronts the opposing side, and these oppositions, in turn, manifest themselves in a higher union."⁴⁵ With regard to Milton's poetry, specifically *Paradise Lost*, Lieb writes: "Milton's 'great Idea' is not fulfilled through a straightforward presentation of answerable propositions and verifiable conclusions. On the contrary, the argument finds expression through a complex mode of indirection and nuance, in which each statement . . . has relevance for the whole."⁴⁶ The purpose of the Miltonic dialectics delineated by Lieb is by such "indirection[s]" to find directions out. This, as Fish also argues, is how Milton works.

But might not the specter of Milton's or(e) haunt even these axiomatic assertions about how Milton works? Milton's poetry may aim to ascend to a vantage point, and thereby attain and spread the good gift of *relèveation*, but are there no loose threads or remainders in his work that persist even as they are recuperated into a dialectical system by the force of *relèveation*? It is my contention that, yes, such remainders persist, which isn't to say that they necessarily or completely *resist* Milton's desire for what Lieb calls "a higher union" (although I'd add that they don't automatically reinforce this desire, either). Nor do I mean to argue that Milton's visions of grandeur are delusions of grandeur; they may, in fact, have been very real for him. But I do mean to ask whether

⁴⁴ Michael Lieb, *The Dialectics of Creation: Patterns of Birth and Regeneration in "Paradise Lost"* ([Amherst:] U of Massachusetts P, 1970). (Part I is called "The Process of Creation," Part II is called "The Process of Uncreation," and Part III is called "The Process of Re-Creation.")

⁴⁵ Lieb, 5.

⁴⁶ Lieb, 6

Milton may be more skeptical, especially toward sublimity and sublimation, than we customarily give him credit for.

In doing so, I would draw support from David L. Sedley's recent study *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton*. Situating these two writers, who are rarely conjoined, at a moment when the rises of philosophical skepticism and the aesthetics of the sublime were coincident, Sedley asserts that "Milton forged sublimity . . . through his encounter with skepticism."⁴⁷ This argument, made in the introduction, may seem to recapitulate in different terms the all-too-conventional reading that Milton invokes the negativity and errancy of doubt as a mere means to grander ends. Yet Sedley's reading of *Paradise Lost* later in his study illustrates a more perverse argument. Demonstrating how Satan's fall ultimately supplies the full measure of true sublimity, Sedley nevertheless makes the claim that sublimity cannot completely escape or control the skepticism out of which it is created: "Because sublimity, as Satan accidentally demonstrates, does not confine doubt but turns it loose, the indeterminacy that characterizes skepticism also characterizes the parameters of the aesthetic category [i.e., the sublime] skepticism helps to create."⁴⁸ Sublimity, then, cannot completely exclude and thereby control skepticism because skepticism is sublimity's own self-determining but also self-undermining limit.

Although Sedley doesn't cite Hegel here or elsewhere in his study, his reading of Satan nevertheless accords with the philosopher's discussion of skepticism in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Hegel, the skeptical consciousness is divided against itself: on the one hand, Hegel writes, "it is itself determinateness as contrasted with the non-identical," but on the other hand, he goes on to add, "it is just in this process

⁴⁷ Sedley, 15.

⁴⁸ Sedley, 124.

that this consciousness, instead of being self-identical, is in fact nothing but a purely casual, confused medley, this dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder.”⁴⁹ Thus the dialectics of skepticism is, for Hegel, a negative dialectics—an “*absolute dialectical unrest*” (124; Hegel’s italics).⁵⁰ The skeptical consciousness “passes back and forth from the one extreme of self-identical self-consciousness to the other extreme of the contingent consciousness that is both bewildered and bewildering” (125). The key point is that this oscillation between essential self-identity and contingent non-identity doesn’t culminate in a synthesis, a resolution that would manage, by manhandling negativity, to elevate consciousness into a state of positive *relèvement*, a vantage point from which one could sublimate the “bewildered and bewildering” contingency and particularity of existence. In skepticism, consciousness “does not itself bring these two thoughts of itself together. At one time it recognizes that its freedom lies in rising above all the confusion and contingency of existence, and at another time equally admits to a relapse into occupying itself with what is unessential” (125). In skepticism, the essence of consciousness cannot escape its determination in and by the “unessential” contingency against which it identifies itself and above which it strives to rise.

The result of such division, as Jean Hyppolite explicates, is that skepticism, in the world according to Hegel, “leads human consciousness to the double feeling of its

⁴⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1977), 124–25. Subsequent citations are to this edition and will appear in the text.

⁵⁰ In using the phrase “negative dialectics,” I’m of course drawing on Theodor Adorno’s book of the same name. At the outset of his opus, Adorno points out that his title “is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation . . . This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. The unfoldment of the paradoxical title is one of its aims” (*Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Continuum, 1973; rpt. 2007], xix). Later in the book, Adorno offers an extended reading of Hegel; see 300–360.

nothingness and its grandeur.”⁵¹ Evoking Qoheleth, the preacher in Ecclesiastes who “saith” that “all is vanity” (1.2), Hyppolite claims that the contradiction that divides the skeptical consciousness from within can also be found in

the man who proclaims that all is vanity and that life is but the shadow of a day. In this very thought he rises above all vanity and poses authentic self-certainty in its sublime grandeur, but at the same time he himself appears as a contingency. By lowering himself he rises, but as soon as he rises and claims to reach that immutable certainty he descends anew. His immutable certainty is in contact with ephemeral life, and the eternity of his thought is a temporal thought of the eternal.⁵²

The phrase “temporal thought of the eternal” evokes the central paradox of Milton’s writing: namely, his desire to convey prelapsarian truth through postlapsarian media. More specifically, Hyppolite’s reflections on “vanity” recall Milton’s statement of his poetic intentions and vocation in *The Reason of Church Government*: taking Ariosto as his model, Milton strives “to fix all the industry and art [he] could unite to the adorning of [his] native tongue; not to make verbal curiosities the end, that were a toilsome vanity, but to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things” (840). Here Milton explicitly states his self-certainty—his desire to “rise above all vanity,” to use Hyppolite’s words. But while Milton may be bent on being an “interpreter and relater,” the straight vertical trajectory of ascent is bent by the ever-present threat of descent. The higher his aspirations, in other words, the more likely he is to fall.

I’ll have more to say in the next section of this chapter about the forces of ascent and descent that, pulling in opposite directions, create strains in the poetic project of

⁵¹ Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit,”* trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1974), 186–87. Hyppolite, it is worth pointing out here, was Derrida’s thesis advisor; Derrida pays tribute to his teacher in the essay “Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis,” which immediately precedes “The Principle of Reason” in *Eyes of the University*; see 117.

⁵² Hyppolite, 188–89.

Paradise Lost. For now, however, I'd like finally to turn, with these various implications in mind, to the hill on top of which Michael instructs Adam at the end of *Paradise Lost*. "Ascend this Hill," Michael commands Adam (11.366–67); "it was a hill," Milton writes, "Of Paradise the highest, from whose top / The hemisphere of the earth in clearest ken / Stretched out to the amplest reach of prospect lay" (11.377–80). Michael's first action as divine instructor is to administer a remedy in order to remove the "film" that clouds Adam's vision after the fall, a film "[w]hich that false fruit that promised clearer sight / Had bred" (11.413–414). Once he removes this film of error, Michael not only reveals to Adam a series of visions of the future course of human history, but also trains Adam in the proper ways of reading and interpreting these visions. The lesson ends in Book 12 when Adam rehearses the morals that he has learned (12.553–73) and is able to leave Paradise, hand-in-hand with Eve, with a more contented mind.

In order to provide a framework for understanding the implications of Michael's instruction, I would like to turn briefly to Milton's *Of Education*. Solicited by the reformer Samuel Hartlib to provide his thoughts on education, Milton begins his reply with a long diatribe against the Renaissance humanism in which he was trained and against which Hartlib aimed his reforms. The problems with humanistic education are captured in the vivid language Milton uses: it fills students' heads with "ragged notions and babblements," produces "souls so unprincipled in virtue and true generous breeding that flattery and court shifts and tyrannous aphorisms appear to them the highest points of wisdom," and leads those "of a more delicious and airy spirit" to "retire themselves, knowing no better, to the enjoyments of ease and luxury, living out their days in feast and

jollity” (972–73). At this point Milton introduces an abrupt shift in the tract’s content; he does so by way of a familiar trope:

I shall detain you no longer in the demonstration of what we should not do, but straight conduct ye to a hillside, where I will point ye out the right path of a virtuous and noble education—laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospect and melodious sounds that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming.

(973)

Thus, Milton rhetorically presents himself in *Of Education* as undertaking the same kinds of actions that Michael does in *Paradise Lost* to educate Adam.⁵³ This dialectical process—of demonstrating “what we should not do” as a means for pointing out “the right path”—is precisely the pedagogical process by which Michael performs his task.

Specifically, Michael uses a series of Biblical tableaux as a way of training Adam to reject the Renaissance humanist forms that Milton disparages in the first part of *Of Education*. After Michael reveals the murder of Abel and then the rise of disease and death, for example, he displays a third vision: “A bevy of fair women, richly gay / In gems and wanton dress” (11.582–83). At first Adam is taken in by the ornamental signifying surface of these women, saying to Michael, “Much better seems this vision” (11.599), but Michael quickly corrects him in a lengthy sermon (11.603–627). In many ways, Michael’s sermon can be read as a polemical jab against the extravagance of Renaissance *inventio* and *elocutio* (“studious they appear / Of arts that polish life, inventors rare . . .” [11.609–610]).⁵⁴ Moreover, the subsequent two visions deflate the

⁵³ On general parallels between Milton’s tract and Michael’s education of Adam, see Ann Baynes Coiro, “‘To Repair the Ruins of Our First Parents’: *Of Education* and Fallen Adam,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 28.1 (1988): 133–47.

⁵⁴ Here Michael echoes the antipoetic sentiments of Renaissance killjoys summarized by George Puttenham: “[W]hatsoever device be of rare invention they term it ‘fantastical,’ construing it to the worst side” (*The Arte of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007], 109).

inflated heroism typical of classical and Renaissance epic and romance as well as the kind of luxurious decadence (“pleasure, ease, and sloth, / Surfeit, and lust” [11.794–95]) that, Milton argues in *Of Education*, is the inevitable product of an education in humanism.

With Michael’s instruction, we thus seem to be fully in the realm of judicious Enlightenment reading. We also seem to be moving toward the novel, with its emphasis on the domestic and its attempt to represent plainly the plain virtues of middle class men and women without the distortions of romance, error, pleasure, and rhetoric—all the by-products, if not hallmarks, of Renaissance humanism. As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse write about this “scene of instruction”: “The poetry of the fallen world is didactic poetry. . . . It identifies human deficiencies and establishes a standard for perfection. By bearing witness to human history, Adam acquires the knowledge of human progress required to produce such interpretations.”⁵⁵ This claim recapitulates the standard reading of Michael’s instruction reproduced by critics since Fish’s *Surprised by Sin* called attention to the pedagogical techniques in and of *Paradise Lost*. Surveying the poem’s tendency to mislead the reader linguistically and then to correct the interpretive errors it raises, Patricia Parker sums up Fish’s position in telling terms: “Stanley Fish has *raised* this process of misprision and correction to *a dialectics of enlightenment*, a movement in which *the function of error is to educate*, or bring through.”⁵⁶ Even where critics attempt to depart from Fish’s Milton’s “dialectics of enlightenment,” they still

⁵⁵ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992), 111.

⁵⁶ Parker, 138; my italics.

proceed from the assumption that Michael's pedagogy is successful, desirable, and ultimately redemptive.⁵⁷

In its treatment of Books 11 and 12, Milton criticism thus perpetuates rather than critiques the fantasy that those books generate: a Hegelian fantasy that "gives us history," to borrow the words of Edelman, "as the continuous staging of our dream of eventual self-realization." This fantasy—which Edelman identifies with politics as such, but which we might spin in the direction of theology as well—works its effects "without letting us acknowledge that the future, to which it persistently appeals, marks the impossible place of an Imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic to the operation of the signifying chain and projected ahead as the site at which being and meaning are joined as One."⁵⁸ Michael's instruction installs this fantasy, this desire for a future return to an Imaginary past purged of error. Naturally, then, his instruction climaxes with the messianic hope that Christ will "bring back / Through the world's wilderness long wandered man / Safe to eternal Paradise of rest" (12.312–314). And just as this fantasy assuages Adam's perturbed postlapsarian conscience, so too does it assuage the conscience of critics who seek to justify the ways of Milton to man, those who wish to redeem *Paradise Lost* itself from any potential charge of incoherence, meaninglessness, or error. These critics

⁵⁷ In *The End of Learning: Milton and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006), for example, Thomas Festa sides with John Rumrich against Fish's didactic reading of the poem, but his rhetoric nonetheless reinscribes the value system undergirding the conventional reading of Milton. "What we gain by seeing Milton in [Rumrich's] way," he writes in his introduction, "is a new set of problems, a new *vantage* from which to challenge our own epistemological and ideological positions" (20; my italics). Festa's reading of Books 11 and 12 culminates in the understanding that "Adam finally attains a serviceable understanding of Michael's teachings" (154). In addition to Festa, other critics who reproduce the assumptions of Fish's reading of Books 11 and 12 include Marshall Grossman, *Authors to Themselves: Milton and the Revelation of History* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987), who argues that "Milton represents the process whereby historical experience is integrated with a scripturally derived sense of providence" (183); and Catherine Gimelli Martin, *The Ruins of Allegory: "Paradise Lost" and the Metamorphosis of Epic Convention* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998), who sees Adam gaining "the rewards of self-deliverance through trial" (296).

⁵⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 10.

continue to read Books 11 and 12 as the vantage point where such redemption is enacted to full effect.

But that hasn't always been the case. In his essay "Transmuting the Lump," Fish himself narrates the critical history by which the final two books of *Paradise Lost* were rescued from charges of incoherence, meaninglessness, and error.⁵⁹ Fish traces such charges about Michael's instruction back to Joseph Addison's 1712 comment that "if Milton's poem flags anywhere, it is in this Narration, where in some Places the Author has been so attentive to his Divinity, that he has Neglected his Poetry."⁶⁰ In the modern period that forms the focus of Fish's narrative, the flashpoint for such charges is C. S. Lewis's claim that Books 11 and 12 present "an untransmuted lump of futurity," which, "coming in a position so momentous for the structural effect of the whole work, is inartistic."⁶¹ Fish's essay details the trajectory by which Lewis's appraisal was dislodged over the course of several decades. With the rise of myth criticism, new criticism, and typological interpretation, conditions come into play which allow critics to transmute the lump, such that, by 1972, Raymond Waddington's article on the controversy could begin: "Few of us today could risk echoing C. S. Lewis's condemnation of the concluding books of *Paradise Lost* as an 'untransmuted lump of futurity.'"⁶²

And what about today? Would it be a professional, intellectual, and critical "risk" to reconsider—if not wholly endorse—Lewis's claim now? The word "untransmuted" is particularly resonant here: like *sublimate*, *transmute* is an alchemical term that designates

⁵⁹ Stanley Fish, "Transmuting the Lump: *Paradise Lost*, 1942–1979," in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1989), 247–93.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Fish, "Transmuting the Lump," 252.

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (London: Oxford UP, 1942; rpt. 1961), 129.

⁶² Quoted in Fish, "Transmuting the Lump," 247.

the transformation of one substance into another, especially, according to the *OED*, “a baser metal into gold or silver” (1b). In using the phrase “untransmuted lump of futurity,” Lewis implies that the final two books of *Paradise Lost*—the sublime vantage point toward which the poem’s teleological narrative force drives—present a messily unsublimated series of visions. Where Addison claims that the success of the poem’s didactic function subsumes the pleasure of its poetry in the final two books, Lewis suggests that the didactic function fails because it falls flat, because it cannot cohere or coalesce into the refined form of *relèveation*. Michael may lead Adam to a moral high ground, instruct him in the ways of right reading and right reason, and leave him with the sublime hope of “possess[ing] / A paradise within” (12.586–87). And yet, as Parker has written, such “a resolutely teleological reading of Milton’s poem may be faithful, finally, to only one of its tendencies, and the experience of the poetry itself leads us back to . . . the question of how single-minded, or unidirectional, this process is.”⁶³

Along these lines, it is worth noting how the vantage point of Michael’s education of Adam in *Paradise Lost* resembles the vantage point of Satan’s seduction of Christ in *Paradise Regained*.⁶⁴ This is a comparison that *Paradise Lost* proleptically invites us to make when it describes the hill in Eden:

it was a hill
Of Paradise the highest, from whose top
The hemisphere of the earth in clearest ken
Stretched out to the amplest reach of prospect lay.
Not higher that hill nor wider looking round,
Whereon for different cause the Tempter set
Our second Adam in the wilderness,
To show him all Earth’s kingdom’s and their glory.
(11.377–84; my italics)

⁶³ Parker, 138.

⁶⁴ *Education* and *seduction*, it is worth pointing out, share the same root: *educere*, to lead forth.

As is so often the case with Milton's syntax, the "that" in line 381 is ambiguous: it pivots between referring to the hill that precedes it—the hill on which Michael educates Adam—and referring to the hill that follows it—the hill on which Satan seduces Christ. It thus confuses the distinction between the two hills that these lines attempt to make.

Moreover, the hill of instruction on which Milton's vision culminates also recalls the picture that Milton paints of the philosophizing devils in Hell in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*:

Others sat apart on a hill retired,
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
Of providence, foreknowledge, will, and fate,
Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wand'ring mazes lost.

(2.557–61)

Until the final line, this passage could just as easily describe Michael and Adam's activities in the final two books of the poem. The rhetorical proximity of these hills to the vantage point from which Michael instructs Adam suggests that no vantage point—except, perhaps, for God's "prospect high" (3.77)—is finally exempt from the possibility of error.

Beyond Good and Evil

Given how inescapable error is, one shouldn't underestimate the force of defensive efforts that are aimed to counteract the terror such error produces—efforts that attempt to sublimate error's temptation, to spin its negativity into something positive, to transmute or translate its dark, leaden ore into bright, shining gold. Such defensiveness, as the previous chapters demonstrated, constitutes the hallmark of late-sixteenth-century poetic

theory. But because Elizabethan writers so insistently revel in the materials of error, thus overwhelming and undermining their desire to profit from its negativity, the defense mechanisms of Renaissance humanism were inevitably bound to fail.

The opposite would seem to be the case with Milton. If the early modern era, as I established in the introduction, conceived of poetry as a *pharmakon*, both poison and remedy at once, then one might say that whereas Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser are enchanted, despite themselves, by its poisonous Circean qualities, Milton, by contrast, seems (but only seems) unequivocally to celebrate its remedial benefits. This difference would help explain the curative and purgative drugs that appear, like *deii ex machina*, at the climaxes of Milton's most famous poetic explorations of the tensions between pleasure and virtue.⁶⁵ It would also help explain the violent act of purgation by which Milton, as we've seen, tries to abject the rhetoric and poetics of the Tudor-Stuart era: what in *Paradise Lost* he associates with the enchanting necromancy of Satan's rhetorical prowess and identifies with the epic and romance predecessors he tries to trump; what in *Of Education* he disparages as the idleness and luxurious pleasures that result from an education in the humanist tradition; and what in *Eikonoklastes* he calls the "polluted orts and refuse of *Arcadias* and romances."

We've already seen how Milton's politics and theology raise the stakes of this historical difference, but it is worth noting too that, in attempting to purge his writing of forms of error celebrated by the Renaissance, Milton works in concert with revolutions in the philosophical arena as well. Renaissance courtiers, poets, and educators maximized

⁶⁵ I'm thinking not only of the euphrasy and rue with which Michael cures the problems with Adam's vision, but also *A Maske's* Haemony, the root "more med'cinal . . . than that Moly / That Hermes once to wise Ulysses gave" and the "sov'reign use" of which works "'Gainst all enchantments" (636–40). "Moly," of course, as Ascham reminds us in *The Scholemaster* (see Chapter 2), is the herb that Hermes gives to Ulysses specifically to counteract the poisonous enchantments of Circe.

the gap between signifier and signified—a disjunction that, from a Judeo-Christian vantage point, is a direct consequence of the Fall—by celebrating and indulging in, even as they were suspicious of, the pleasurable errors of rhetoric, figure, and allegory. By the time the Enlightenment revised Renaissance epistemology by valuing the ideology of realism, attempts to eliminate this linguistic mediation became more and more earnest. Written in a century that saw the publication of Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637), Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), and Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), *Paradise Lost* would appear to undertake the same project and, as Michael does to Adam, to usher its readers into a sublimated modernity.

Indeed, it is on this point that Milton joins company with philosophers whose epistemological systems he normally rejects. While scholars, for example, regularly pit Miltonic monism against Cartesian dualism,⁶⁶ even a cursory glance at Descartes' *Discourse on Method* reveals affinities between his and Milton's goals of attaining the truth of spiritual redemption. Like Milton's, Descartes' method at least nominally depends on a rejection of poetry's "very ravishing delights and sensibilities" and, even more particularly, of the discursive materials of romance: what he calls "the extravagancies of the knightly heroes of romantic novels."⁶⁷ Once such "doubts and errors" are cleared away, the path to virtue—indeed, the path to heaven itself—is easily traversable. But it is precisely here that Descartes stumbles upon an obstacle:

⁶⁶ See, for e.g., Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), esp. 203–206, where he convincingly links Descartes' philosophy to Milton's devils.

⁶⁷ René Descartes, "*Discourse on Method*" and *Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (New York: Penguin, 1999; rpt. 2003), 8–9. Derrida offers a reading of Descartes' relationship to romance in "If There Is Cause to Translate II: Descartes' Romances, or The Economy of Words," in *Eyes of the University*, 20–42.

I respected our theology and hoped, as much as anyone else, to get to heaven. But once I learned, as something which is very certain, that the path to heaven is just as open to the most ignorant as to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which lead there are beyond our understanding, I did not dare subject them to the feebleness of my reasoning, and thought that one needed to have some extraordinary assistance from heaven and to be more than human in order to study them successfully.⁶⁸

This is also the problem that confronts Milton's writing in *Paradise Lost*. But because Milton composes an *epic*, there seems to be a ready-made solution to the problem: for "extraordinary assistance from heaven," Milton invokes the "aid" (1.13) of his heavenly Muse. By translating Milton from Earth to Heaven so that he may translate Heaven to his readers on Earth, Milton's Muse both guides and authorizes his "advent'rous song, / That with no middle flight intends to soar / Above th' Aonian mount" (1.13–15).

A number of recent critics have offered counterintuitive readings of the proems to Books 1, 3, 7, and 9, the passages in *Paradise Lost* where Milton invokes his Muse. While these critics display different focuses, they nevertheless all call our attention to a tension within the poem: namely, that Milton both must and must not present himself as a divinely inspired prophet.⁶⁹ Recalling Descartes, Milton must declare himself "more than human" in order to access divine *relèveation*. But to do just that is to aspire beyond what is reasonably expected of the all-too-human Milton, to reproduce, in fact, what *Paradise Lost*, immediately after its opening invocation, identifies and vilifies as Satan's

⁶⁸ Descartes, 9.

⁶⁹ For Stephen Guy-Bray, for example, this tension manifests itself as Milton's "discomfort with his own poetic audacity" (162); Stephen Fallon similarly identifies it as "the question of overreaching" (*Milton's Peculiar Grace*, 207); In *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Oxford UP, 2009), Gordon Teskey reads it as a "delirium" that "arises from an inner conflict between the authority of God the Creator . . . and the poet's need to be a creator . . . in his own right" (5); and Noam Reisner recasts the terms of Teskey's claim as an opposition between "the Hermetic poet, self-propelling himself towards God in ever-more ambitious poetic flights, and the passive prophet, lying in his bed as the 'heavenly Muse' dictates accommodated divine truths to him in verse" (*Milton and the Ineffable* [Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2009], 177).

“ambitious aim” (1.41). How can we (or, for that matter, how can Milton) tell the difference between Milton’s ambition and Satan’s? They may have different aims—Satan wants to *equal* “the Most High” (1.40), whereas Milton more modestly wants to “*justify* the ways of God” (1.26)—but the proximity of their ambition calls into question just how pure is Milton’s intent to “justify” God. Given the ambivalence that Milton repeatedly displays toward his divine aid, the presence of the Muse aggravates rather than allays the poetic fears surrounding such questions. In what follows, I want to focus on specific instances in the poem where this tension erupts. In doing so, though, I’d like to build on recent critics’ treatment of this tension by viewing it not, with Fallon, as a “dialectic of assertion and anxiety,” a “paradox [that] is resolvable . . . by our recognition of what Milton struggles to obscure,”⁷⁰ but rather as that which exceeds dialectical recuperation, a limit point that Milton struggles to obscure because it obscures *him* and leaves him wandering in the dross of his poem’s orts and refuse.

Let me begin, then, with the proem to Book 3, Milton’s invocation to “holy light” (3.1), which is rhetorically structured according to a dialectical organization. It begins with a *thesis*: having just descended from Earth to Hell so that he can follow Satan’s journey from Hell to Earth, Milton asserts his assurance that he now returns to the light that was absent during the “obscure sojourn” (3.15) of Books 1 and 2: “thee I revisit safe, / And feel thy sov’ reign vital lamp” (3.21–22). Immediately, Milton presents his blindness as the *antithesis*:

but thou
 Revist’st not these eyes, that roll in vain
 To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
 So thick a drop serene hath quenched his orbs,

⁷⁰ Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace*, 221, 232.

Or dim suffusion veiled.

(3.22–26)

The inspiration of the poem thus finds its limit in the obscurity through which Milton fails to see the world around him. He gives a catalogue of the pastoral imagery that now escapes him, lamenting that “cloud instead, and ever-during dark / Surrounds me” and that “Nature’s works” are to him “expunged and razed” (3.40–49), recalling in this the fallen devils “blotted out and razed / . . . from the Books of Life” (1.362–63). With the inevitable dialectical *synthesis*, however, such darkness works to Milton’s advantage:

So much the rather thou celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

(3.51–55)

Because Milton’s goal, especially in this book, as he turns to Heaven, is to “see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight,” he requires not the “mortal sight” that has now escaped him but rather an “inward” vision. Thus the limitation his inspiration encountered is sublimated in a dialectic of blindness and insight: external blindness is recuperated as in-sight as light “purge[s] and disperse[s]” the “dim suffusion” that “veil[s]” Milton’s eyes, much in the same way that Michael clears Adam’s foggy vision with euphrasy and rue.

Approached from a less resolute perspective, though, this invocation betrays the dialectical *relèvement* it sets up. In the midst of the proem, Milton compares himself to a series of blind ancient prophets, “equaled with me in fate / So were I equaled with them in renown”: Thamyras, Maeonides (Homer), Tiresias, and Phineas. “With the exception of the blind poet Homer (Maeonides),” Reisner writes, “the prophetic types of blind

Thamyris, Tiresias, and Phineas are ambivalent, in that they all represent pagan prophets whose blindness was a form of punishment for presuming to peer into divine mysteries.”⁷¹ As a way of dialectically resolving this ambivalence, Reisner goes on to cite Milton’s *Second Defence*, where Milton portrays the blindness of Tiresias and Phineas as, in Reisner’s words, “a gift, not a curse.”⁷² Whatever Milton may *say* in the *Second Defence*, what the invocation to Book 3 *does* is leave us nonetheless with the impression of what Fallon calls “an unspoken fear, that [Milton’s] similarity to [these blind prophets] may lie in blindness as divine punishment.”⁷³

This “unspoken fear” may help explain the disconcerting presence of the verb *may* at the climax of the invocation: “all mist from thence / Purge and disperse, that I *may* see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight.” How are we to read this “may”? It seems to express permission, but there’s also the lexical possibility that it expresses mere possibility. If it expresses permission, it may ironize the *presumption* of permission, especially when read alongside Milton’s ambivalence toward his prophetic predecessors who were punished by the gods for presuming such permission. If it expresses mere possibility, it would raise the concomitant possibility of *not* seeing and *not* telling of things invisible to mortal sight. In either case, the verb renders uncertain or ironic the seeming confidence of Milton’s prophetic desires. It thus retrospectively sheds new light—or, more precisely, new darkness—on Milton’s statement in the proem to Book 1 of the poem’s aim, goal, and end: “That to the highth of this great argument / I *may* assert eternal providence, / And justify the ways of God to men” (1.24–26; my italics). The

⁷¹ Reisner, 184–85.

⁷² Reisner, 185.

⁷³ Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace*, 221.

instability of this “may,” which erupts, no less, at the rhetorical “highth” of Milton’s “great argument,” reintroduces a fundamental ironic uncertainty in the making of the poem.

The bleakness of such uncertainty, as well as its dire implications for Milton’s own poetics, is expressed most dramatically and poignantly in the proem to Book 7, which reinforces how Milton’s sublime ends are subject to potential errancy:

Up led by thee
Into the Heaven of Heavens I have presumed,
An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal air,
Thy temp’ring; with like safety guided down
Return me to my native element:
Lest from this flying steed unreined, (as once
Bellerophon, though from a lower clime)
Dismounted on the Aleian field I fall
Erroneous there to wander and forlorn.

(7.12–20)

It would not be too tongue-in-cheek to suggest that what Milton represents here is the dangers of getting high, the risk that he himself “might err in things too high, / And no advantage gain,” as Raphael warns Adam (8.121–22).⁷⁴ Even though Milton seems to presume that he will *not* fall, “guided” as he is by his heavenly Muse, the specter of “erroneous . . . wander[ing]” nevertheless shadows his attempt to create a heavenly epic. In a postlapsarian world, *Paradise Lost* can only be perched precariously between Earth and Heaven.

Editors and critics have routinely explicated how this invocation’s explicit allusion to Bellerophon—the classical mythological figure who attempted to ride Pegasus

⁷⁴ This seems to have been a concern for Milton even from a young age. In “At a Vacation Exercise,” he evokes his desire to be raised to sublime heights, “Such where the deep transported mind may soar / Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav’n’s door / Look in, and see each blissful deity” (ll.33–35), but he then chastises his Muse for such presumption: “But fie my wand’ring Muse, how thou dost stray!” (l.53). As this poem makes clear, a union with deity may be an escape from error, but the vertical path required to achieve such a union may itself be a form of error, of “wand’ring” beyond bounds.

to Heaven and ended up falling and wandering the Aleian field—functions as “a self-cautionary tale for the audacious poet.”⁷⁵ But this passage also exhibits more implicit intertextual echoes that hearken back to the more recent past, specifically to the Elizabethan romance predecessors that Milton aims to forgo, trump, and discard in *Paradise Lost*. Both echoes are condensed in the word “unreined.” In the first place, the word evokes a striking claim that Sidney, the author of those “polluted orts and refuse of *Arcadias* and romances,” makes in the *Defence*. The claim occurs at the precise moment that Sidney integrates the Horatian dictum into his tract. Characterizing what he calls “right poets,” Sidney writes: “For these . . . be they which most properly do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.”⁷⁶ The words “range” and “reined” designate opposing forces: the former pulls in the direction of aspiration, not to mention errancy, whereas the latter pulls in the direction of containment, rectification, and “discretion.” But the line between them is difficult to draw, a difficulty redoubled by the alliteration and assonance that draws the two words together. Sidney thus wields the same double-edged sword that Milton tries to balance: even as Sidney attempts to avoid the charge, his phrasing raises the possibility of a ranging that becomes unreined, an impious, imprudent, and improvident presumption (“Into the Heav’n of Heav’ns I have *presumed*,” as Milton puts it in the invocation to Book 7).

⁷⁵ Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace*, 223. See also Fish, *How Milton Works*, 289–90; and Guy-Bray, 162.

⁷⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry; or, The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, rev. R. W. Maslen (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 2002), 87.

Milton's use of the trope of an "unreined" steed, especially when considered alongside the word "temp'ring" and the request to be "guided down," can also be read as a muted echo of Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, the Legend of Temperance.⁷⁷ This echo would cast the narrator of *Paradise Lost* as the pedestrian knight Guyon: in the same way Guyon descends to the Cave of Mammon, so too is *Paradise Lost* at risk of falling were it not for the heavenly Muse, who functions much in the same way that Guyon's guide, the Palmer, does. In Spenser's poem, however, Guyon *does* lose his guide when he goes down to the Cave of Mammon, where he almost dies. This is a fact that Milton curiously and infamously forgets when, in *Areopagitica*, he makes not only an explicit reference to the Legend of Temperance, but also a commendation, not condemnation, of Spenser:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue [i.e., chastity] therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness; which was the reason why our sage and serious poet, Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinus, describing true temperance under the person of Guyon, brings him in *with his palmer* through the cave of Mammon and the bower of earthly bliss that he might see and know and yet abstain. . . . [T]herefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human nature, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth . . .

(939; my italics)

While the Palmer does travel with Guyon into the Bower of Bliss at the end of the Legend of Temperance, he does not in fact accompany the knight into Mammon's cave. Milton's mistake has generated much commentary. Critics agree that the error (and let's not forget that this passage is precisely *about* "the scanning of error") is no mere accident or oversight and that it must therefore serve some purpose, conscious or unconscious,

⁷⁷ I am grateful to Jean Feerick for calling this language to my attention.

rhetorical or otherwise.⁷⁸ One of the more recent entries into this conversation, by George F. Butler, rationalizes the error as follows: “Spenser’s Guyon possibly displays greater strength and courage by confronting Mammon’s temptations without the Palmer’s help, and he comes across as a conventionally self-reliant hero. But for Milton, the presence of the Palmer affirms the propriety of Guyon’s actions, since the Palmer is a moral guide.”⁷⁹ Butler’s “possibly” understates the case: Guyon *does* display “greater strength and courage by confronting Mammon’s temptations without the Palmer’s help”; why else would Spenser stress the fact that Guyon has “lost his trustie guyde” before entering Mammon’s cave (2.7.2.1)? By reestablishing the Palmer at Guyon’s side, *Areopagitica* implies, perhaps inadvertently, that temperance alone is not enough to resist the temptations of evil.

Why might this be the case? To answer this question, it may be helpful to consider part of the passage in *Areopagitica* that precedes Milton’s allusion to *The Faerie Queene*, for the terms in which it is couched bear affinity with *Paradise Lost*. “It was from out of the rind of one apple tasted,” Milton writes, “that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps that is the doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil” (728). If “that is to say” is a phrase that typically indicates paraphrase, what are we to make of the fact that Milton paraphrases “knowing good *and* evil” as “knowing good *by* evil”? Despite the fact that the rhetorical logic of paraphrase attempts to equate them

⁷⁸ See Ernest Sirluck, “Milton Revises *The Faerie Queene*,” *Modern Philology* 48 (1950): 90–96; Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 127–28; John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), 131–35; and Maureen Quilligan, *Milton’s Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983), 50–53.

⁷⁹ George F. Butler, “Milton’s ‘sage and serious Poet *Spencer*’: Error and Imitation in *The Faerie Queene* and *Areopagitica*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 49.2 (2007): 104.

here, these two phrases are not the same. First the text boldly announces that knowing good *and* knowing evil constitute Adam's—and by extension, all humanity's, including Milton's—doom. Then it leaps to the less troublesome assertion that this double knowledge means “knowing good *by* evil,” which implies that evil is merely a dialectical means to the virtuous end of knowing good.⁸⁰ This paraphrase, however, does not erase the initial and inescapable statement that knowing good by (means of) evil *requires* the knowledge of evil as much as—indeed, *so that*—the knowledge of evil produces the knowledge of good. That is to say, the bold initial assertion that Milton makes is that the knowledge of good and the knowledge of evil are required *together*: in his vivid breeding metaphor, Milton describes good and evil as “two twins cleaving together.” Milton's paraphrase attempts to sublimate the boldness of this notion by reinscribing the relationship between good and evil in a dialectical means/ends economy, but the strain of that attempt is inscribed in the text as a rhetorical stutter.

Such concerns are inscribed in *Paradise Lost* as well. At the end of the poem, Adam rejoices in Michael's vision of redemption by marveling at how “all this good of evil shall produce / And evil turn to good” (11.470–71). His statement displays faith in the same economy of recuperation that Freud, according to Derrida, observed where the Devil is concerned:

We do not like to be reminded, Freud notes, of the undeniable existence of an evil which seems to contradict the sovereign goodness of God. But if this Devil . . . seems, then, in the eyes of Christians, . . . irreconcilable with God, we see now that it can also exculpate God . . . In other words, the radical destruction can again be *reinvested* in another logic, in the inexhaustible *economistic* resource of an archive which capitalizes everything, even that which ruins it or radically contests its power: radical

⁸⁰ Here we should recall Adorno's statement that dialectics has traditionally “meant to achieve something positive by means of negation” (*Negative Dialectics*, xix; cited in n50 above).

evil can be of service, infinite destruction can be reinvested in a theodicy,
the devil can also serve to *justify* . . .⁸¹

One could argue that Milton is of the Devil's party, then, only on the condition that the Devil's evil can be reinvested in order to serve the poet's ultimate aim to justify the ways of God to men, to produce a theodicy. Lurking about this logic, though, like Satan insinuating himself in Paradise, is the perversion of good ends that Satan articulates to Beelzebub in Hell:

If then [God's] providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil

(1.162–65)

If Milton feels compelled to place the Palmer at Guyon's side at all times, even in Mammon's Hell-like cave (not for nothing does Milton place Mammon in *Paradise Lost's* Hell), then perhaps that's because of the Satanic potential for "pervert[ing]" the dialectic of good and evil, for "disturb[ing] / [God's] inmost counsels from their destined aim" (11.167–68). While Guyon alone *may* be able to ascertain good by means of evil, the very presence of the Palmer in Milton's strange revision suggests that he *may not* be able to. Milton invokes the Palmer for Guyon for the same intentions that he invokes the Muse for himself: namely, as a means of sublimating evil into good and thus elevating himself out of the (potential for) error that Satan both represents and performs. As we've seen, though, Milton himself is not exempt from error's temptation, a temptation that casts a shadow on even the loftier aspects of his own "destined aim."

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 12–13; Derrida's italics.

In the End: The Un-Sublime

Early in the *Confessions*, Augustine laments the fact that “as a boy” he “gave pride of place” in his “affection” to “empty fables” like the *Aeneid* “rather than to more useful studies.”⁸² When the *Confessions* was translated into and printed in English in 1620, the Latin words translated here as “empty” and “useful” were translated into the familiar early modern metapoetic terms “vaine” and “profitable.”⁸³ It is worth pointing out, though, that the original Latin words translated are *inania* and *utilioribus*. And *inania* is the same word that Virgil uses—in the *Aeneid*, no less—to characterize the domicile of Dis; it’s also the same word used, in the Vulgate translation of Genesis, to describe chaos.⁸⁴ Augustine thus deploys a word *from* the *Aeneid* in order to disparage the *Aeneid*, but he specifically uses a word with loaded cosmological and theological connotations. Why would the futility of literature be associated with chaos? And how can Milton’s depiction of chaos in *Paradise Lost* help us understand the stakes of this association?

Asking such questions immediately thrusts us into chaotic territory in more than one way. Milton’s chaos is like no other even as it resembles all others, drawing on Hesiod, Ovid, Lucretius, and Genesis even as it departs from them. As a result, in the last couple of decades an often-intense debate over the limits and ultimate significance of Milton’s chaos has emerged.⁸⁵ The debate centers on an apparent contradiction: Milton’s

⁸² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1991), I.xiii.22.

⁸³ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of the Incomparable Doctor S. Avgvstine, Translated into English* (London, 1620), sig. C2v.

⁸⁴ John E. Hankins, “Chaos,” in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. A. C. Hamilton (Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1990), 139.

⁸⁵ Major contributions to the debate include the following studies: A. B. Chambers, “Chaos in *Paradise Lost*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963): 55–84; Regina Schwarz, *Remembering and Repeating: Biblical Creation in “Paradise Lost”* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1988), 8–39; John Rumrich, “Milton’s God and the Matter of Chaos,” *PMLA* 110.5 (1995): 1035–46; Rumrich, *Milton Unbound*, 118–46; Rumrich, “Of Chaos and Nightingales,” in *Living Texts: Interpreting Milton*, ed. Kristin A. Pruitt and

monism, especially when coupled with the explicit claims made about chaos and creation in *Of Christian Doctrine*, seems to clash with the poem's representation of a more negative and unruly chaos. In *Of Christian Doctrine*, Milton argues for creation *de deo* instead of creation *ex nihilo*, claiming that the "original matter" used in creation is coextensive with deity and moreover that "this original matter was not an evil thing, nor to be thought of as worthless: it was good, and it contained the seeds of all subsequent good" (1201). At times, *Paradise Lost* seems to support this view, never more so than when God asserts his infinitude:

Boundless the deep, because I am who fill
 Infinitude, nor vacuous the space.
 Though I uncircumscribed myself retire,
 And put not forth my goodness

(7.186–71)

The logic here is that God's spirit fills the "boundless . . . deep," but can "retire" his deity from certain regions of the universe. This logic confirms the statement that Raphael makes to Adam regarding original matter and God's singularity:

O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom
 All things proceed, and up to him return,
 If not depraved from good, created all
 Such to perfection, one first matter all . . .

(5.469–72)

However clearly this claim seems to support Milton's arguments in *Of Christian Doctrine* regarding creation *de deo*, the conditional phrase ("If not depraved from good") raises a

Charles W. Durham (Selinsgrove, PA: Susequehanna UP, 2000), 218–29; John Leonard, "Milton, Lucretius, and 'the Void Profound,'" in *Living Texts*, 198–217; John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996), 103–43; Teskey, 65–85; Paul Cefalu, *English Renaissance Literature and Contemporary Theory: Sublime Objects of Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 101–140; and Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 204–209.

thorny complication: how can any matter be *possibly* “depraved from good” when all matter is *essentially* a part of God’s body?

The debate over chaos turns on this very question, resulting in what Regina Schwartz has called “a critical conspiracy to detoxify chaos.”⁸⁶ The twists and turns of the debate are far too complicated to trace here. As a matter of fact, my initial claim is that such twists and turns are beside the point: despite the contentious differences that animate the conversation, all critics (including Schwartz) inevitably participate in a concerted effort to detoxify chaos, to sublimate its negativity by resolving any contradiction such negativity may instigate in relation to Milton’s monism and God’s infinitude.

Of all the critics who have entered the debate, none has tried so hard to counteract these processes of detoxification or purification as John Rogers. In this effort, he helpfully calls our attention to a strikingly unsublatable moment in the poem’s depiction of Creation:

Thus God the heav’n created, thus the earth,
Matter unformed and void: darkness profound
Covered th’ abyss: but on the wat’ry calm
His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspread,
And vital virtue infused, and vital warmth
Throughout the fluid mass, but downward purged
The black tartareous cold infernal dregs
Adverse to life . . .

(7.232–39)

“In one remarkable line,” Rogers writes, “Milton appears to indicate that there remained a portion of the deep for which the process of spiritualization did not take: ‘The black tartareous cold Infernal dregs’ refuse assimilation into the vitalist world of Milton’s

⁸⁶ Schwartz, 31.

poem.”⁸⁷ Rogers’ use of the verb “refuse” is doubly resonant here, for Milton seems precisely to depict the polluted orts and *refuse*, or waste, produced as a by-product of creation. As Rogers explains: “The terms Milton employs for that which is excreted in the purgative step of this process—tartar and dregs—are the standard names in the period’s natural philosophy for the inassimilable elements purged from the system in the process of digestion.”⁸⁸ Rogers goes on to explain away these “inassimilable elements” by way of reference to Milton’s political concerns, but until that point his analysis implores us to refuse to reuse or recycle dialectically what (the poem’s account of) Creation scatologically expels as refuse.

Critics, to be sure, have frequently pointed out the persistent scatological and digestive tropes that permeate the poem’s depictions of the universe’s mechanics, and the “black tartareous cold infernal dregs” produced at creation are certainly part of that alimental constitution.⁸⁹ Evocative of fecal matter, these dregs bring new meaning to the phrase “end times”: they bring out the scatology in Milton’s eschatology, perversely revealing how the universe’s salvational end or goal may be tainted by the shit that spits out its rear end or hole.⁹⁰ Here we might think of Lacan, whose tour through Lutheran theology in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* leads him to write of “the essentially digestive

⁸⁷ Rogers, 134.

⁸⁸ Rogers, 133.

⁸⁹ See, for e.g., Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1999), 131–68; Denise Gigante, “Milton’s Aesthetics of Eating,” *diacritics* 30.2 (2000): 88–112; and Kent R. Lehnhof, “Scatology and the Sacred in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” *ELR* 37 (2007): 429–49.

⁹⁰ Dominique Laporte, in his *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2000; rpt. 2003), situates such dynamics in relation to the purification of language and the urban management of waste begun in the Renaissance: “Where shit was, so gold shall be. And with its entrance, gold proclaims its implicit and ambivalent relation to excrement. Beautified, ordered, aggrandized, and sublimated, the town opposes itself to the mud of the countryside. But in so doing, it also exposes itself . . . as a place of corruption. . . . If the shit that glows in the fields becomes the lasting gold of city streets, the stench of shit lingers where gold sleeps” (39; Laporte’s italics).

and excremental schema forged by a thought that draws ultimate consequences from the form of exile in which man finds himself relative to any good in the world whatsoever.”⁹¹ According to Lacan, this schema forms the basis of Luther’s conception of postlapsarian man: Luther, he writes, “renewed the very basis of Christian teaching when he sought to express our dereliction, our fall in a world where we let ourselves go. . . . Luther says literally, ‘You are that waste matter which falls into the world from the devil’s anus.’”⁹² The dregs of *Paradise Lost* partake of a similar schema, but whereas Lacan and Luther, in quite different ways, view it as a by-product of the Fall (the Fall into sin for Luther, the Fall into the Symbolic for Lacan), Milton’s poem figures that schema as a by-product of Creation itself.

The dregs of Creation are also linked in subtle ways with other evil and pointedly un-sublime figurations of matter in the poem. I am thinking particularly of the “asphaltic slime” (10.298) that, in Teskey’s words, “bubbles up in the lowest, nastiest part of chaos.”⁹³ In an illuminating discussion, Teskey makes a number of points about this tar(tar): it was said to be the binding agent for the bricks of the Tower of Babel and the walls of Babylon, and it was said to boil up from Hell at three infamous sites of evil along the Fertile Crescent: Babylon, Egypt, and the plain of Sodom. Teskey even raises the interesting, albeit ultimately unprovable, hypothesis that this asphaltic slime or tar is the referent for the black tartareous dregs of the Creation narrative. He sums up the negative implications of this substance as follows: “Although all matter in Milton’s cosmos is supposed to have its origin ultimately in God and to return to God at the end of

⁹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Potter (New York: Norton, 1992), 93.

⁹² Lacan, 92–93.

⁹³ Teskey, 39.

time, recuperated entirely, this one substance appears to stand outside the system, as a heterological, virulent remainder of the kind Georges Bataille theorized, something incapable of assimilation to the world.”⁹⁴

Teskey’s reference to Bataille is merely made *en passant*, but I wish to pick up the thread that he drops. One reason why is that Bataille is one of the most perverse readers of Hegel and one of the more forceful critics of dialectical thinking and can therefore provide a model for how to consider Milton from an oblique, non-dialectical position.⁹⁵ Bataille’s enterprise draws a distinction between two elements of society: the *homogenous* and the *heterogeneous*. The homogeneous, for Bataille, “signifies the commensurability of elements . . . [and] the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations”; its basis is production and utility, and thus in order to maintain itself it must exclude every “useless element.”⁹⁶ The heterogeneous, on the other hand, signifies “elements that are impossible to assimilate” (140), like the tar that Teskey makes much of, insofar as they are the result of “*unproductive* expenditure” (142) and must therefore be wasted. Whereas the homogeneous, then, signifies the coherence and stability of any social system, the heterogeneous is that which both undermines and also supports homogeneity—indeed, supports it by being sacrificed *because* it undermines it.

What is striking about this theoretical schema, especially in relation to *Paradise Lost*, is that Bataille locates *both* the sacred *and* the profane within the realm of the

⁹⁴ Teskey, 39–40.

⁹⁵ See Georges Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 9–28. For a lucid reading of Bataille’s reading of Hegel, see Jacques Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978), 251–77.

⁹⁶ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985), 137–38. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

heterogeneous.⁹⁷ He argues that “one must take into account the fact that religions bring about a separation within the sacred domain, dividing it into a superior world (celestial and divine) and an inferior world (demoniacal, a world of decomposition)” (96).

Although he immediately suggests that “such a division necessarily leads to a progressive homogeneity of the entire superior domain” (96)—that such a division, in other words, can be dialectically reinscribed within a homogeneous system—he nevertheless claims that homogeneity “automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element” (97). Redirecting this claim toward *Paradise Lost*, one might say that Milton’s monistic intentions have an unintended and potentially uncontrollable dualistic effect: in order to subsume the heterogeneous under the logic of the homogeneous, he must liberate and inscribe within his poem the very heterogeneity to be subsumed.

In early modern theology, philosophy, and mathematics, the potential heresy of this sort of heterogeneity was condensed in the problematic ontological and epistemological status of *zero*. As J. Hillis Miller explains: “What struck conservative Renaissance thinkers as blasphemous about the use of zero in computation was that it reintroduced a void that God with his creative fiat had replaced once and for all with a full creation, a plentiude. Only the devil is void, empty, a nothing dwelling in Hell. Hell is a nothing place, a place of infinite, non-determinate, unoblatable negation.”⁹⁸

Although Milton nowhere writes directly about zero, his argument for creation *de deo*

⁹⁷ The heterogeneous, he writes in *Visions of Excess*, includes not only “the properly sacred things that constitute the common realm of religion or magic,” but also “the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash, vermin, etc.)” (142). This conjunction perversely reveals what he calls the “identical nature . . . of God and excrement” (102n1).

⁹⁸ J. Hillis Miller, “Zero,” in *Glossalalia: An Alphabet of Critical Keywords*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (New York: Routledge, 2003), 374.

rather than creation *ex nihilo* suggests that the “blasphemous” significance of zero—the zero as void, as nothing, as negation—was forefront in his mind, even if only as an object of abjection.

It was also forefront in the work of one of Milton’s contemporaries: Blaise Pascal. In his essay “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion,” Paul de Man demonstrates how the homogeneous coherence of Pascal’s systematic geometry is “entirely dependent on the introduction of an element—the zero and its equivalences in time and motion—that is itself entirely heterogeneous with regard to the system and is nowhere part of it. The continuous universe . . . is interrupted, disrupted *at all points* by a principle of radical heterogeneity without which it cannot come into being.”⁹⁹ As his use of the language of “heterogeneity” implies, De Man’s reading of Pascal helps us refocus onto seventeenth-century epistemology the general psychosocial dynamics limned by Bataille. Following the errant path of de Man’s heady, complicated argument is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I wish nevertheless to outline a few ways in which de Man’s essay intersects with my concerns here. For one thing, de Man’s starting point is a gap in Pascal’s *Réflexions* where the argument cannot come to terms with “the language of pleasure and seduction”—the result, de Man writes, of “the fallen condition of man” (54). And when in the second half of his essay he turns to Pascal’s *Pensées*, he examines texts that address a number of key thematic concerns shared by *Paradise Lost* as I’ve analyzed it

⁹⁹ Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 59; de Man’s italics. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.

here: the relationship between skepticism and dogmatic faith as well as the relationship between grandeur and misery.¹⁰⁰

The real force of de Man's reading, however, derives from its attempt to consider whether any elements of Pascal's text disrupt the all-powerful force of the Pascalian dialectic in the same way that the heterogeneous zero disrupts the principles of totality, infinity, and homogeneity. Critiquing the Pascalian dialectic, it turns out, is as formidable a task as critiquing the Miltonic dialectic. As de Man confesses: "Negation, in a mind as resilient as Pascal's, is always susceptible of being reinscribed in a system of intelligibility" (61). Nevertheless, de Man persists in his search for non-recoverable, inassimilable negativity. Most relevantly for our purposes here, his search leads him to compare the disruptions of Pascal's system to the language of irony in ways that recall his lecture "The Concept of Irony" (also published in *Aesthetic Ideology*). According to de Man's analogy, the zero is to the one as irony is to the progressive, sequential force of narrative or allegory or dialectics. In making this analogy, de Man displays a high degree of caution:

To say then, as we are actually saying, that allegory (as sequential narration) is the trope of irony (as the one is the trope of zero) is to say something that is true enough but not intelligible, which also implies that it cannot be put to work as a device of textual analysis. To discover, in the *Pensées*, the *instances de rupture*, the equivalence of the zero in Pascal's theory of number, we can only reiterate compulsively the dialectical pattern of Pascal's own model.

(61)

I would argue, however, that this caveat regarding irony is itself ironic, for de Man reiterates the Pascalian dialectic only until the very end of his essay on Pascal when he

¹⁰⁰ De Man quotes the following words of Pascal, words which evoke the complicated dynamics of Milton's invocations: "[T]he higher the station from which one falls the more miserable one will be, and vice versa" (qtd. in de Man 65).

uncovers an ironic disjunction, equivalent to the mathematical zero, that breaks the dialectic. Irony, we will recall, is disruptive for de Man insofar as its permanent negativity “undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model, both of which are . . . the basis of any narration” (181).

Throughout this project, I’ve returned again and again to de Man’s theory of irony in order to open a window onto the pleasure of poetry’s potential futility. I once again take it up here in order to reopen the more specific question with which this section began: what is the relationship between poetry and chaos? De Man’s reading of Schlegel in “The Concept of Irony” ends, incidentally enough, on this very question. “This is the original of all poetry,” writes Schlegel, “to suspend the notions and the laws of rational thought and to replace us within a beautiful confusion in the original chaos of human nature” (qtd. in de Man 181). However, as his recourse to the phrase “beautiful confusion” makes clear, Schlegel—like Pascal, Milton, and even, at points, Bataille—must think this chaos dialectically: “Is not this entire infinite world built out of nonunderstanding, out of chaos, by means of understanding?” (qtd. in de Man 183). “That sounds very nice,” de Man acerbically replies, “but you should remember that the chaos is error, madness, and stupidity, in all its forms . . . Any attempt to construct—that is, to narrate—on no matter how advanced a level, is suspended, interrupted, disrupted, by a passage like this” (184).

Milton studies is one contemporary arena where the desire to smooth out such chaotic suspensions, interruptions, and disruptions is felt most strongly. Such desire makes eminent sense. In light of the benefits gained from viewing (Milton’s) poetry as an agent of *relèvement*, the costs of bringing out the chaos of irony and the irony of chaos

are bound to be too high. As de Man writes, “irony is instantaneous like an ‘explosion’ and the fall is sudden.”¹⁰¹ But what if the costs of maintaining the fantasy of *relèveation*—the fantasy of what Edelman, in a different context, calls reproductive futurism—are even higher? More specifically, what if this fantasy depends on a constitutive misreading of poetry? In Edelman’s schema, the by-product of such a fantasy is the *sinthomosexual*, the figure who, unlike Milton’s Raphael or Michael, “won’t offer a blessed thing by way of salvation, won’t promise any transcendence or grant us a vision of something to come.”¹⁰² In *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives us a compelling portrait of the *sinthomosexual* par excellence: Satan. What if poetry, though, far from merely representing paradigmatic *sinthomosexuals* like Satan, is itself *sinthomosexual* in (dis)orientation? What if poetry, in other words, functions as an obstacle to the progressive work of redemption and salvation? According to Edelman, the Symbolic order “continues to fill its constitutive gap with futurism, . . . but the *sinthomosexual* erupts from within as the obstacle to such a fantasy of eventual totalization, and, therefore, as an obstacle to fantasy as such.”¹⁰³ And just as the *sinthomosexual* “erupts from within” this fantasy, so too does irony “erupt now and then” (to borrow Stephen

¹⁰¹ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 222.

¹⁰² Edelman, *No Future*, 101. This is the perfect place to recall that one of Edelman’s chief examples of *sinthomosexuality*, the devilish villain Leonard (Martin Landau) in Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, is nearly responsible for causing a character allegorically named Eve (played by the even-more-allegorically named Eva Marie-Saint) to fall from the sublime heights of Mount Rushmore (*Rushmore*), the vantage point on which the film climaxes, into the abyss below until Leonard is shot, defeated, and falls off the mount, purged from the narrative like Satan being expelled out of Heaven after his rebellion, and Eve is subsequently rescued, virtually miraculously, by the film’s main character: her lover and, by the end of the film, husband, who is appropriately named, given the fact that he occupies the moral high ground by film’s end, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant). The compassion that Thornhill, like Adam, comes both to learn and to embody is read by Edelman in terms of de Man’s theory of irony: “In that case this version of compassionate love, intended to buck up the order of desire whose form is reproductive futurism, would allegorize, to the profit of dialectic, the expense of the unrecuperable irony that compassion necessarily abjects in whomever it reads as *sinthomosexual*” (92).

¹⁰³ Edelman, *No Future*, 101.

Fallon's words) through the "surface" of Milton's poetry in the form of "unintended and displaced self-representations, allowing us to view a Milton normally hidden from us and . . . from Milton himself."¹⁰⁴

Incidentally, such "eruption" is literalized in *Paradise Lost* itself, where the heterogeneous landscape of Hell boils and bubbles with volcanoes:

There stood a hill not far whose grisly top
Belched fire and rolling smoke; the rest entire
Shone with a glossy scurf, undoubted sign
That in his womb was hid metallic ore,
The work of sulphur.

(1.670–74)

"The terrestrial globe," Bataille writes, "is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus" (8). As we've seen, Divine Creation-as-digestion-as-sublimation depends on translating or "turn[ing] / Metals of drossiest ore to perfect gold" (5.442), a process that produces black, tartareous waste, polluted orts and refuse. Criticism will continue, no doubt, to try to dispose of or cover over or recycle the negativity such waste figures in order to build literary monuments on moral high grounds. Yet from a more skeptical perspective, the un-sublimity of Chaos and Hell suggests that such vantage points may not be stable hills so much as unstable, unsublatable volcanoes from within which irony spurts forth its dross, a "metallic ore" that forms the very stuff of the Miltonic "or(e)." The real task, however, is to theorize a critical space wherein that or(e) is viewed not simply as an abjected remainder but as a source of pleasure and as the undesired end, in every sense of the word "end," of the salvational, redemptive, and generative desires we foist onto poetry. "After the volcano, the 'abyss,'" writes Derrida in an essay that touches on all of these concerns. "The blind men that we are, *almost all of us*, live in this

¹⁰⁴ Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, 13.

language, above an abyss. . . . But the seers, the lucid ones, fall into it—this is what we must understand.”¹⁰⁵

Coda: Eve’s Vain Desire

After being created out of Adam’s rib, Eve lays herself down on a “green bank,” and in a “clear / Smooth lake, that . . . seemed another sky” (4.458–59), she gazes at her reflection in the pool, in a pointed re-inflection of the Narcissus myth. Retrospectively speculating and reflecting on the significance of this mirror stage, Eve relates what could have happened but didn’t: “there I had fixed / Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire, / Had not a voice thus warned me” (4.465–67). That voice, the voice of God, leads Eve away from the lake—away from Narcissus’s fate, in fact—toward Adam and toward her reproductively redemptive future as “Mother of human race” (4.475). Explicating this scene, Edelman writes: “Where Narcissus, in the Ovidian narrative from which Milton draws in this . . . scene, pays for his specular fixation by ‘dying at life’s prime,’ Eve escapes such a fate through the external mediation of the divine voice, a third term whose linguistic intervention both lays down and *is* the Law.”¹⁰⁶ And because that voice “both lays down and *is* the Law,” the path toward which it directs Eve is inevitable. As Eve says: “What could I do, / But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” (4.475–76).

Insofar as the force of that Law exerts itself on us, too, we have no choice but to read Eve’s question as a rhetorical question, as a statement that there’s no other course than the course to “follow straight.” Nevertheless, the chaotic irony of poetic language

¹⁰⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 196, 197–98; Derrida’s italics.

¹⁰⁶ Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 102; Edelman’s italics.

means that Eve's question can also be taken literally, not just rhetorically, in which case she would actually be asking what other courses or non-courses are available beyond the teleological narrative that Milton, inspired by God, lays out for her. Read in such a way, her question raises the possibility that she *could* have stayed or strayed by the lake and thus "pined with vain desire." If she had gone the way of Narcissus, the logic of Western hedonophobia would require us to read her fate, like the Fall itself, as "tragic" (9.6). Her inevitable death would be seen, then, as too high a price to pay for a moment's pleasure. But the irony that erupts at this moment also opens up a space of pleasure into which literary theory, I argue, can and should insinuate itself. What can we do but follow straight? Pleasure, it seems, must always ultimately lose out in any dialectical contest with virtue. Not in spite but as a result of his very best intentions, Milton repeatedly comes to imagine, however fleetingly, what would happen if pleasure were to win such a contest. Like his sixteenth-century predecessors and contemporary counterparts, he recoils in horror from that possibility. How, then, can we learn to read and write from a position where the possibility of a pleasure unreconciled to virtue becomes a source of pleasure rather than horror?

AFTERWORD

Romance, Reading, and Literary Theory

At this point we may ask: what is the purpose of all this? Has this analysis taught us anything about the stories in question? But that would be a bad question.

TZVETAN TODOROV

When I first began formulating this project, the title that it should bear was fairly obvious to me: “Reading for Pleasure.” The more concretely my argument came together, however, the more I realized just how inappropriate that title was. Because of the semantic slipperiness of the word *for*, the phrase “reading for pleasure” can be taken in at least two senses. On the one hand, it could mean reading *in pursuit of* pleasure—much as one would say, “I’m searching for the treasure.” On the other hand, it could mean reading *in support of* pleasure—much as one would say, “I’m rooting for the UCLA Bruins.” In the first case, pleasure would be the object of a quest; in the second case, it would be the object of a defense. But it is precisely the notions of the “quest” and the “defense” that this project has attempted to call into question.

I thus rejected my projected title in favor of the phrase “The Pleasure in Error.” The word *error*, after all, captures what is most specific about the kinds of pleasures in which this project is invested. But my problem with the canceled title had mostly to do with the word *for*, and there’s at least one reason why I think the canceled title may still

have an advantage over the actual title: it contains the word *reading*. The more I worked on this project, the more I realized it was first and foremost a project about reading.

My aim throughout this study has indeed been to elaborate not only a reading of romance but also a romance of reading—a reading of reading *as* romance, or of romance as a paradigm for reading. What I hope to convey by this formulation is that the pleasures of reading are not, and shouldn't be, as linearly determined as our most authoritative conceptions of language and literature would have us believe. So powerful is the desire for immediate understanding, for the quick and successful obtaining of meaning, knowledge, and useful results, that any attempt to stall, slow down, interrupt, or obstruct the reading process is doomed to be invalidated as error, as romance. Hence the persistent disreputability of deconstructive theory. If the goal of communication is to “get one's point across” in an effective, productive manner, this goal necessarily presupposes a constitutive gap or void across which one's point must travel. Where most metaphysical systems—religious, philosophical, political—operate under the illusion that that gap can be healed, sealed, or simply ignored, deconstruction exposes it, exposing itself, in the process, to charges of senseless nihilism or excessive vanity.

For that very reason, deconstruction, like early modern romance, demands ongoing attention as a site from which we can rethink the constraining illusions that structure the very forms that reading, and writing, may take. The need for that rethinking, spurred by the twinning of deconstruction and romance, has been the animating force for this dissertation. I will have more to say, momentarily, about what I hope are the potential implications of this project, but I wish now to document a number of tangential, incidental, occasional “events” (if they may be so called) that have circulated in and

around the cultural, intellectual, and political contexts in which this project was composed.

For most of my time in graduate school, one of the most widely celebrated and often intensely debated television programs was the groundbreaking ABC series *Lost* (2004–2010). In the first episode of the series (the most expensive pilot ever made for television), a plane flying from Sydney to Los Angeles crashes on a tropical island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. While awaiting rescue, the survivors soon discover that they aren't alone and that the island contains mysteries that strain credulity. In a flurry of heady activity last seen, perhaps, only during the heyday of the *Star Trek* franchise or the 1990s series *The X-Files*, fans and critics took to the Internet to document, process, theorize, and question the show's ever-expanding mythology, intertextual allusions, and unresolved plot points. The show as a whole straddled the divide—not so successfully, some would argue—between psychological realism and science fiction or fantasy, but I was initially attracted to its aesthetic and intellectual texture because it seemed to take a page out of the Renaissance romances in which I was so deeply immersed, not only in its thematic content (shipwrecks; monsters; supernatural occurrences; eschatological concerns) but also in its narrative structure (a seemingly endless proliferation of digressive side plots; a resistance to the forward momentum of the quest narrative; an overall refusal to tie things up).¹

Thus, I couldn't help but be invested in what one *New York Times* television critic aptly called “the show's labyrinthine plotline, stuffed as it is with interconnected back

¹ For a reading of *Lost* as a recasting of one particular Renaissance text, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, see Kathryn Bond Stockton, “*Lost*, or ‘Exit, Pursued by a Bear’: Causing Queer Children on Shakespeare's TV,” in *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011), 421–28.

stories and sci-fi mind games.”² Even more than the show’s form, however, its reception proved most compelling. Over the course of *Lost*’s six seasons, the audience grew frustrated with the lack of resolution, with the fact that the producers and writers of the show seemed to introduce, in each new episode, more questions than answers. Thus, when the series drew to a close in the spring of 2010, it was “inevitable,” as another *New York Times* reviewer put it, that viewers would be disappointed: “After years of insane complication of plot and character, no ending could have ‘explained’ the show in a wholly satisfying way, and it might have been better not to.”³

From a theoretical standpoint, especially in light of my readings of romance in this study, what struck me and still strikes me about the ending of *Lost* is the almost universal desire for the satisfaction of an ending, a need for the recuperative and redemptive assurance that, in the words of the series’ protagonist, Jack Shephard (Matthew Fox), “All of this matters.” In the finale’s reception—indeed, in the reception of the show altogether—all that seemed to matter was this insistence on mattering. Viewers (even, or especially, rabid fans of the show) seemed unwilling or unable to take pleasure in the “labyrinthine” errancy of the journey itself, preferring instead the gratification that should come from and at the journey’s end. Like medieval and Renaissance romances, and like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, *Lost* proved intractable when it came to such gratification because it lingered too long, or wandered too widely, in what Roland Barthes calls the “dilatory area” between a narrative’s beginning and its end or what D. A. Miller has termed the “narratable,” those

² Bill Carter, “Tropical Teaser: ‘Lost’ Decoded,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/30/arts/television/30lost.html>>

³ Mike Hale, “No Longer ‘Lost,’ but Fans Are Still Searching,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/arts/television/25lost.html>>

elements of disequilibrium from which narrative proceeds but which must be contained by the stable quiescence at the end of narrative.⁴ As Miller explains: “Once the ending is enshrined as an all-embracing cause in which the elements of a narrative find their ultimate justification, it is difficult for analysis to assert anything short of total coherence.”⁵

Miller’s work, as it so happens, makes a cameo appearance in the second anecdote I wish to recount. In the fall of 2008, when I was putting together the prospectus for this dissertation, I audited a graduate seminar on “History and Form” for which we read Miller’s 2003 study *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*.⁶ At a departmental event a week later, one of my fellow graduate students, a self-proclaimed Marxist who had been as vocal, in class, about her distaste for Miller’s study as I had been about the pleasure I derived from it, confronted me and asked, in an exasperated tone: “You actually *liked* that book?” After reconfirming how much I liked it, and explaining why, she dismissed it by saying: “Well, what I like about this profession is the *communal* aspect of what we do.” Her comment encapsulated the point that she had suggested in class: that the hyperbolic closeness of Miller’s readings, his use of the first person, and his florid style amounted to nothing more than a narcissistically antisocial display intended more for showing off than for making any useful (i.e., political, ethical) contribution to the field.

At the time, my impulse was to defend Miller against these charges, to insist that his work wasn’t *not* communal, that he too, like her, was committed to a social project

⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 75; D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), ix.

⁵ Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents*, xiii.

⁶ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003).

and not to mere self-indulgence. It was only later, months into working on this project, that I realized that such a response—a response I had made almost as if by reflex—merely confirmed the assumptions—not to say presumptions—behind her criticism. In justifying Miller’s work, I had downplayed the pleasure I took in his writing and his readings, a pleasure focalized on the very elements of his book that she had disregarded.⁷

A pluralist approach to this encounter might lead me to the conclusion that the basis of pleasure simply varies from person to person and that the pleasure I take in the futility of Miller’s writing is no more or no less valid than the pleasure my fellow graduate student takes in the utility of Marx’s writing. Such an approach, however, begs the question of why the particular kinds of pleasures one may take in error and futility are a) consistently devalued in the culture at large and, in a concomitant fashion, b) insistently abjected onto the figure of the queer. Here I am reminded of some comments that Joseph Litvak makes regarding the similarly devalued quality of sophistication. Etymologically tied to sophistry, sophistication, Litvak writes, “by no means lacks detractors, who are quick to point out its various offenses. But, since one of those ‘offenses’ is its association with intellectuality and homosexuality, both of which are resented as by definition excessive, as self-indulgent and unproductive, it has seemed to me worthwhile to affirm it precisely on the bases of this association.”⁸

⁷ Readers of this dissertation who are familiar with Miller’s work will no doubt recognize the influence on my own readings of not only his work on Austen but also his recent analyses of modernity’s most unapologetically futilitarian stylists: Roland Barthes, Federico Fellini, and Alfred Hitchcock. See, respectively, D. A. Miller, “Foutre! Bougre! Ecriture!,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (2001): 503–511; *8 1/2*, BFI Film Classics Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and “Hitchcock’s Hidden Pictures,” *Critical Inquiry* 37.1 (2010): 106–130.

⁸ Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 18.

Inchoate forms of these thoughts had begun circulating in my mind, in fact, a few weeks prior to the encounter over Miller's book, with particular intensity on the night that Barack Obama was elected as President of the United States. I felt overwhelming amounts of ambivalence that evening because, while I surely participated in the celebrations surrounding such a monumental, and monumentally necessary, election, I simultaneously watched as my home state of California passed Proposition 8, which denied gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. And while, as a gay man myself, I certainly believe that we gays and lesbians should have the *right* to marry, I've also always wondered about the costs of the *act* of marrying, not the least of which is that it lends undeserved credence to the smug self-satisfaction that our heteronormative culture derives from the seemingly unshakeable conviction, a conviction shared by many gay people, that all gay people want is to be more like straight people.⁹ Lest this excursus into the politics of gay marriage seem as though I'm wandering *too* far afield from the more immediate concerns of this project, I'd add that, during this same period, in the seminar on History and Form in which I first read Miller's book on Austen, I was struck by how many of our readings and discussions obsessively returned to the rhetoric of marriage in order to argue for the "union" of form and history or for the social "engagement" of literary and literary-critical work.

I hope these anecdotes give some sense of the overdetermined threads by which this project is stitched into concerns that extend far beyond a reading of Renaissance culture (and I use the passive voice construction, "is stitched," deliberately here, for at

⁹ For critiques of homonormativity, and gay marriage in particular, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000); Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002); and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004)

times it has seemed as though these connections were forged independently of my active intentions, desires, and efforts). If this project, moreover, is destined to have any effects beyond its readings of particular texts, I hope that it will lead readers to reevaluate the very pleasures of reading itself, to take the time to linger, to wander, and to indulge, even at the cost of being accused with the indefensible charge of vanity. I hope, too, that this reevaluation will manifest itself in the form, or, even better, the *performativity*, of critical writing. Like Eve Sedgwick, “I’m the more eager to think about performativity, too, because it may offer some ways of describing what *critical* writing can effect (promising? smuggling?); anything that offers to make this genre more acute and experimental, less numb to itself, is a welcome prospect.”¹⁰ From the moment we enter this profession, we are interpellated into a critical ideology that values linearity over errancy, progression over digression, the staidness of propositional logic over the vicissitudes of play. Without completely abandoning the value of these primary values—a total rejection that is, as I granted in my introduction, virtually impossible—it may be helpful to reconsider or transvalue what gets lost or rejected in the totalizing force with which this ideology is asserted.

What gets lost, I’d like to suggest, is a more pleasurable complicity of literary criticism with the literature it ostensibly supplements. I therefore join Jane Gallop in calling for more literary theory, “if by that phrase,” Gallop hastens to add, “we understood not a theory of literature, but a theory that was itself truly literary.”¹¹ For

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 11; Sedgwick’s italics.

¹¹ Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), 2. In a review essay of studies that could all be loosely grouped under the banner of a “new aestheticism,” Jeff Dolven makes a similar point when he writes: “[T]he lure of a new aestheticism, whatever that would or will be—indeed, the lure of any new orthodoxy—seems relatively faint. Perhaps it is coming anyhow, but in the meantime we may be better

Gallop, a more literary theory chiefly involves the strategic use of anecdote, the interpolation of stories—often playful, humorous, or gossipy, always exorbitant in the most literal sense of that word—into the august annals of conceptual writing. My own recounting of anecdotes in this afterword is meant as an effort in that direction. Given my own literary tastes and propensities, however, a more literary theory means, for me, producing critical articles and books that *read as romances*: texts where the reader doesn't necessarily know in advance where the argument is going; texts in which pleasures are unleashed in the surprising twists and turns of errant, dilatory critical plots; texts which adopt, as their formal principle, the following words of Reuben Brower: "Not knowing where one is coming out is an essential part of the experience of thinking."¹² I believe that our reading, our research, and our thinking frequently unfold in so errant a fashion (who hasn't been led down unanticipated side paths?), but because of our discipline's demand for discipline, for theses, organization, and linear arguments, our writing is rarely able to mimic the labyrinthine tracks and traces wherein lies more disreputable, but far more pleasurable, pleasures. This dissertation, then, has represented one reader's attempt not only to theorize but also to perform the pleasure in error.

able to attend to the aesthetics of the books we write ourselves" ("Shakespeare and the New Aestheticism," *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 5.1 [2003]: 109).

¹² Reuben A. Brower, "Reading in Slow Motion," in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: Dutton, 1962), 8.

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