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Original Article

Unworking Milton: Steps to a georgics of the mind

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Abstract Traditionally read as a poem about laboring subjects who gain power through abstract and abstracting forms of bodily discipline, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) more compellingly foregrounds the erotics of the Garden as a space where humans and nonhumans intra-act materially and sexually. Following Christopher Hill, who long ago pointed to not one but two revolutions in the history of seventeenth-century English radicalism – the first, ‘the one which succeeded[,]... the protestant ethic’; and the second, ‘the revolution which never happened,’ which sought ‘communal property, a far wider democracy[,] and rejected the protestant ethic’ – I show how Milton's *Paradise Lost* gives substance to ‘the revolution which never happened’ by imagining a commons, indeed a communism, in which human beings are not at the center of things, but rather constitute one part of the greater ecology of mind within Milton's poem. In the space created by this ecological reimagining, plants assume a new agency. I call this reimagining ‘ecology to come.’

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Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set
From centre to circumference, whereon
In contemplation of created things
By steps we may ascend to God.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

This way of thinking I call the ‘ecology of mind,’ or the ecology of ideas. It is a science which does not yet exist as an organized body of theory or knowledge.

Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*



In his *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597), the English herbalist John Gerard hastens to explain why plants ought to be considered preeminent ‘Among the manifold creatures of God’ (Gerard, 1597, 1). He reasons that of all God’s creatures ‘that have all in all ages diversely entertained many excellent wits, and drawn them to the contemplation of the diuine wisdome’,

none haue prouoked mens studies more, or satisfied their desires so much, as plants have done, and that vpon iust and woorthie causes: For if delight may prouoke mens labour, what greater delight is there than to behold the earth apparelled with plants, as with a robe of imbroidered worke, set with orient pearles, and garnished with great diuersitie of rare and costly iewels? (Gerard, 1597, 1)

Gerard’s assessment of the Earth’s floral estate is striking not only for the immediate reason that he privileges plants ‘among the manifold creatures of God,’ including humans, but also because, in addition to naming the ‘use’ and ‘necessitie’ of plants, which since ‘the first ages of the world ... have continued ever since of necessarie use both for meates to maintaine life, and for medicine to recover health,’ Gerard also specifies the ‘principall’ measure of plants as their ability to affect ‘delight,’ both in ‘the outward senses’ and ‘in the minde’ (Gerard, 1597, 1). Indeed, Gerard goes so far as to say that the affect of ‘delight’ elicited by plants is not only congenial to the mind, but may be a necessary provocation to ‘wisdome,’ ‘contemplation’ and the ‘satisfaction’ of our ‘desires.’ Gerard’s ascription of a propaedeutic efficacy to plants hinges, seemingly without contradiction, on the latter’s ability to cultivate the higher faculties of the mind through an involutory address to the senses. Plants, according to Gerard, ‘pro-voke,’ meaning that they call forth, challenge, arouse, stir up, excite and appeal (the Latin etymology of *vocare* means literally ‘to call’). This address turns the mind inside out, making it flush with the body’s sensitive exterior. How do plants perform this involutory vocation? By appearing before the eye, ‘apparelled ... as with a robe of imbroidered worke,’ rhetorically emblazoned in accordance with the Petrarchan genre’s signature combination of visual fragmentation and lush adornment, plants act in Gerard’s description as lures to thought, or to what Timothy Morton calls, ‘the ecological thought.’ As Morton writes:

The ecological thought is thought about ecology, but it’s also a thinking that is ecological The ecological thought doesn’t just occur ‘in the mind.’ It’s a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral. Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy.

(Morton, 2010, 7)¹

I begin with Gerard’s *Herball* not because it takes an interest in looking at plants (though that is part of it), but because it forces us to consider how plants invite us to look differently, to see more, that is, and in turn to feel more than we

1 Although Morton claims ‘the ecological thought’ is only thinkable in

modernity, he makes an exception in the case of Milton, writing: 'Milton achieves the ecological thought in form as well as in content' (Morton, 2010, 23).

2 For an account that traces the authorship and print production of Gerard's *Herball* within the context of a 'European Republic of Letters,' see Harkness (2007).

are used to.² Today, we are accustomed to thinking of terms such as 'wisdom' and 'contemplation' (to use Gerard's terms) with respect to the higher faculties of cognition (that is, 'the mind'). Yet rarely do we associate these terms with affective response, much less with other creatures: animal, vegetable or mineral. What once appeared obvious to Gerard and to the naturalists of his time as a practice that veered unimpeachably upon the strange and unpredictable nature of their life's work, namely, the cultivation of mind through the nurturing of plants, today seems odd. Yet more and more in the twenty-first century we humans increasingly find ourselves in daily encounter with nonhuman species who are challenging our claims to sovereignty over the Earth's physical and mental resources (Smith, 2009). More and more we find ourselves confronted with different scales of life and different modes of living, of which we are deeply, inextricably, intertwined. Today, in an era of biopolitics, in which the question of how and where to value life is precisely what is at stake in debates over 'bare life' and the growing threats of extinction, biologists and philosophers of life are asking again and again 'What is life?,' or, as Helmreich has recently posed the question, 'What was life?' (Helmreich, 2011, 676). From proliferating reproductive technologies to genomic experimentation, digital simulation and informatic representation, 'life' is everywhere in question, but nowhere the same (Thacker, 2010). At the level of the global ecosystem, we are learning that the history of human affairs is deeply entangled with natural history; the history of 'life' – hitherto understood as the history of human life – is coming undone in the face of new and previously unimaginable historical agents: global pandemics, natural disasters, mass extinction of species (Chakrabarty, 2009). Although the contemporary crisis of the Earth's global ecosystem makes this entanglement all the more precarious, it does not therefore make it vivid. The difficulty of perceiving entanglement is that it implies scaling down human perception; no longer the measure of all things, humans are obliged to perceive life at all levels, from the molecular to the global. Difficult though this may be, Doyle points out that this kind of scalar perception is precisely what is needed:

Across the life and climate sciences, the news is this: You are deeply implicated in the global ecosystem in ways scientific and technical practices are only beginning to comprehend and model. If the breakthroughs in medical and global imaging systems have provided us with revelations, they reveal that our separateness from ecosystems is itself an illusion, and that we are membranes inseparable from a global ecology.

(Doyle, 2010, 7)

How can we begin to adjust our scales of perception to apprehend our entanglement with the Earth's ecosystems? And what new models for thinking and perceiving entanglement might we derive from Gerard's description of plants?



In what follows, I argue that plants provide an uncanny way of re-calibrating our mental architecture. As imaging systems in their own right, plants serve as unique, evolutionarily adapted technologies for training human perception to visualize life's many entanglements. Like the posthuman figures that Donna Haraway has theorized, from the fleshly silicon of the 'cyborg' to the human–animal symbiosis of 'companion species' (Haraway, 2008, 4–19). I argue that plants, too, act as cybernetic pedagogues with the capacity to seduce the mind's eye toward more worldly modes of perception. Although the concept of 'seduction' has held a prestigious place in the history of psychoanalysis, it was Charles Darwin, not Freud, who first articulated the role of seduction in the dynamic processes of nature. Whereas natural selection provides a utilitarian understanding of evolution, one in which nature, bent on survival, fundamentally aims to match the organism to its environment, it was Darwin's theory of sexual selection that introduced a disturbance in the natural selective order. As Grosz explains:

In affirming the radical distinction between natural and sexual selection – that is, between skills and qualities that enable survival, and those that enable courtship and pleasure, which sometimes overlap but commonly do not – Darwin introduced an excessiveness into the development and transformation of species. Species are no longer natural collections or kinds developed to survive and compete, they are also the a posteriori and ultimately incalculable consequences of sexual taste, appeal, or attraction.

(Grosz, 2008, 33)

What is more, because sexual selection does not serve the reproductive ends of survival, it uses forms of seduction to elicit novel forms of attention. Elaine Scarry has written beautifully about the evocative powers of plants in training the mind's eye toward diverse forms of perception. Although as humans we often see ourselves as sole arbitrators over the worlds of meaning and perception, Scarry argues that human perceptual capacities have been fundamentally shaped by our evolutionary entanglement with plants. In the case of flowers, this evolutionary shaping most resembles a game of courtship.

Flowers can be taken as the representative of the imagination because of the ease of imagining them. That ease is in turn attributable to *their* size and the size of our heads, *their* shape and the shape of our eyes, *their* intense localization and the radius of our compositional powers, *their* rarity that lets them rise and enter our brains and our willingness to receive them as the template for the production of other, more resistant compositions. It is clear: we were made for one another. No wonder the kind of cross-species desire that Ovid recommends turns out to be key to imaginative life, to the bringing forth of what is fresh.

(Scarry, 2001, 65)

3 Foucault (2005, 16) enjoins labor (*askesis*) and eros as ‘the two major forms in Western spirituality for conceptualizing the modalities by which the subject must be transformed in order finally to become capable of truth.’ For a related account of spiritual *askesis* that centers on early modern lyric, see Martz (1954).

In this essay, I pursue the kind of cross-species desire that Darwin and Scarry sketch out here. I do so by focusing on two motifs central to both the writings of John Milton and the history of sexuality. Those motifs are, following Foucault, labor and eros.³

Consider the laboring that takes place, *contra* Christian orthodoxy, in the Garden of *Paradise Lost* ([1667] 2008), among the tendrils and branches and the seductively overgrown *flora*, which, despite the absence of physical need or the ever renewed efforts of the first man and woman to curb their excessive growth, continue to exude themselves, in Milton’s words, by ‘Tending to wild’ (9.212). In an evocative passage taken from Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, we witness a scene of erotic labor that turns on this very language of plants tending to wild. In it, ‘rural work’ registers as a deeply seductive ecology:

On to their morning’s rural work they [Adam and Eve] haste
 Among sweet dewes and flowers; where any row
 Of fruit trees over-woody reached too far
 Their pampered boughs, and needed hands to check
 Fruitless embraces.

(5.211–215)

Here, the poetics of laboring inaugurated by Virgil’s *Georgics* cross-cuts with Milton’s epic, producing a scene of ‘rural work’ in which ‘trees over-woody’ outstrip the efforts of the first workers ‘to check’ their wild growth. In this Sisyphean venture, ‘work’ tends to unwork as plants overreach man’s labors. What interests me, however, is not the futility of Adam and Eve’s work but rather the cross-species desire that such work enables. Continuing from the last line:

they led the vine
 To wed her elm; she spoused about him twines
 Her marriageable arms, and with her brings
 Her dower the adopted clusters, to adorn
 his barren leaves.

(5.215–219)

The entanglement of ‘vine’ and ‘elm’ doubles as human and nonhuman desires intertwine around the confusion of pronouns (‘they,’ ‘her,’ ‘she’). Is the vine a ‘she’? Is the ‘she’ that ‘twines’ Eve? Milton’s poem is replete with such moments in which ‘rural work’ combines with ecological forces to unwork the Garden’s ‘human’ center.⁴ In the following passage, Adam’s call to ‘labour’ is again undone by this wild ecology:

And at our pleasant labour, to reform
 Yon flowery arbours, yonder alleys green,
 Our walk at noon, with branches overgrown,

4 For an account of ‘the indistinct human’ as an *internal* condition of Renaissance humanism, see Feerick and Nardizzi (2012, 1–12).

That mock our scant manuring, and require
More hands than ours to lop their wanton growth.

(4.627–629)

In good Puritan fashion, Milton's Adam equates 'pleasant labour' with the desire to 'reform' the Garden. But no sooner does he express this desire when his labors are undercut (the reflexive obverse of 'to lop'). The hard dual syllabic, 'More hands,' unworks Adam's reformist ambitions in the face of 'overgrown' plants and 'wanton growth.' A haunting refrain that repeats throughout Milton's poem (for instance, it appears in my first quotation, 'needed hands'), 'More hands' signals an interruptive force internal to the Garden. It is not that 'pleasant labor' results in nothing; rather, it is that Adam and Eve's labors reveal an excess that is both inhuman and unworkable.

By focusing on this 'wanton' *flora* and on the cross-species desires engendered by the Garden, my goal is to show that instead of simply producing laboring subjects as the embodiments of a Puritan mentality⁵ or an emergent public sphere,⁶ Milton's vision of the Garden testifies to a form of life that is not dependent on the separation of subjects from objects (Burckhardt, 1958; Grazia *et al*, 1996) or on the decahexis of work from desire (Picciotto, 2005). Rather, subjects and objects, humans, animals and plants, unwork their fixed identities through their erotic entanglements. In this way, 'rural work' enjoins my title: 'Unworking Milton.'⁷ In the space created by this ecological reimagining, plants assume a new agency, something akin to what Bennett terms a 'vital materiality': the recognition that 'vitality is shared by all things,' and not limited to humans alone (Bennett, 2010, 89).⁸

While Miltonists have long pointed to the fact that Milton revises the Genesis story by figuring Adam and Eve as laborers whose divine charge is to put off carnal temptation through physical exertion and cultivation of the Garden, a task traditionally reserved for fallen man, too often readers of Milton desist at the point of determining the full significance of this revision. Consequently, what is unconventional in Milton has now become rote among Milton critics: the fact that Adam and Eve must cultivate the Garden is read as a commonplace of Milton's Puritanism. My reading of *Paradise Lost* resists this assumption. Indeed, it shows that we err in reducing Milton's poetic (re)vision to either a theological exercise (Fish, 1998, 2001), on the one hand, or a protestant work ethic (Lewalski, 1979), on the other. We err insofar as we miss seeing the queer potentiality, or the sheer erotic excess, of Milton's vision of the Garden, which is not merely about work, after all, but about unworking our assumptions about collectivity, agency, sexuality and the commons.⁹ I call this form of unworking and the assemblage of human and nonhuman forces that it enlists an ecology. Though it can also be read, after Foucault, as a form of *askesis*.

Writing in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault reflects on a matter of intrinsic importance to Milton's ecopoetics. Following Kant, he describes what he

5 For a compelling argument against reading Milton as a 'Puritan poet,' see Martin (2010).

6 As Kuzner argues (Kuzner, 2009, 106), critics who read Milton in light of Habermasian public sphere theory (see, for example, Norbrook, 1999) tend to neglect that Milton intertwines 'ostensibly public and ostensibly private spaces and behaviors ... whose separation permits Habermasian forms of modern, public selfhood to emerge.'

7 By 'Unworking Milton' I refer to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of 'the community of unworking.' See Nancy (1991).

8 Drawing on a tradition of pre- and early modern vitalist thinkers including Epicurus, Lucretius, Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, Bennett (2010, 62) posits a 'vital materialism' that is neither naive

(governed by a spiritual force) nor mechanistic. Although not a focus of her study, this conception of vitalist agency bears a striking resemblance to the seventeenth-century 'vitalist moment' detailed by Rogers (1996, 8–9), in which 'the figure of autonomous material agency' provided a range of political radicals, including John Milton, with theoretical alternatives to both Calvinist and mechanist forms of determinism.

9 This ecological approach departs from the place-based and phenomenological ecocriticism of critics such as Hiltner (2003) and instead aims at the uncanny or out-of-place (*unheimlich*) nature of Milton's *oikos*. For a trenchant critique of place-based ecology, see Heise (2008).

10 For an account of the explosive atemporal power of the 'now' in medieval and postmodern timeframes, see Dinshaw (2012).

calls 'the discreet entrance into the history of thought of a question that modern philosophy has not been capable of answering,' namely, *Was ist Aufklärung?* (What is Enlightenment?), and asks: 'What, then, is this event that is called the *Aufklärung* and that has determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today?' (Foucault, 1997b, 303). The emphasis on 'today' is not inconsequential. For as Foucault goes on, he notes that Kant does not define Enlightenment as an accomplished fact or as 'a historical process.' Instead, Kant refracts the history of modernity from the perspective 'of contemporary reality alone,' asking, in Foucault's words, 'What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?' (Foucault, 1997b, 305). What is Enlightenment *now*, in other words? As a precursor to what Foucault will later term 'care of the self,' that ongoing process of desubjectivization and experimentation that inhabits modes of quotidian existence, self-practice, corporeal comportment, living and dying, Kant's 'attitude' to modernity ushers in a different way of relating to history as the history of the present. This way of relating that involves forms of *askesis*, that is, practices of the self in the transformation of thought, will be the framework with which I proceed in this essay as we encounter attitudes and practices akin to those that Foucault labels under 'Enlightenment.' From poetic labor to eating to practices of sexual assemblage, Milton's georgics, like Foucault's *Aufklärung*, gravitates toward the time of the now, but a now that explodes time from any strict teleological or instrumental development.¹⁰ Milton's 'georgics of the mind' (a phrase I borrow from Bacon [see Bacon, [1605] 2002, 245]) torques time toward an ecology *to come*.¹¹ Tracing that untimely ecology will be the work of this essay.¹²

How Soon Hath Time?

Allow me to begin with a short poem, Milton's 'Sonnet 7.' Although critics often read 'Sonnet 7' as a statement about poetic immaturity,¹³ the poem works rather to undo developmental chronologies by figuring poetic life, and indeed life in general, as a labor of temporal multiplicity. Here is Milton:

How soon hath time the subtle thief of youth,
 Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year!
 My hasting days fly on with full career,
 But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
 Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
 That I to manhood am arrived so near,
 And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
 That some more timely-happy spirits endueth.
 Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
 It shall be still in strictest measure even,
 To that same lot, however mean or high,

Toward which time leads me, and the will of heaven;
 All is, if I have grace to use it so,
 As ever in my great task-master's eye.

(Milton, [1645] 2008, 34–35)

'Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow': Milton's poem, published among his 1645 poems, is an experiment in the anachronic time of becoming (Nagel and Wood, 2010). It is nothing if not untimely. From the opening quatrain, indeed, the opening line, time is set off center. 'How soon,' says the speaker, already intoning the lesson (his and ours) that time in Milton's poetic universe is neither a series of discrete nows nor a linear succession. Time is process; it is composing and decomposing. 'How soon hath time' – time has already happened. In Milton's cosmos, time lags precisely as it moves forward. Already 'Stol'n,' 'youth' reappears after 'hasting days' only to appear too early, too late: 'my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.' In the following quatrain, while there is an appearance of growth, what 'shew'th' is not 'the truth' of 'manhood' or 'inward ripeness,' but their fleeting 'semblance.' A semblance does not register depth, only surface. The speaker's 'semblance' refracts time as it 'deceives the truth.' Behind it are only more semblances.

I want to pause here to reflect on the nature of these semblances. We should recall that semblances are more than just surfaces; semblances are gatherings: they simulate (*sembler*) as they as-semble.

Writing on the notion of assemblage in early modern historiography, Jonathan Gil Harris suggests that material objects oblige us to think history in terms of the anachronic, that is, in terms of the differential timelines that fold and unfold in the object, any object whatsoever (Harris, 2009). For Harris, time is always the inhuman time of the baroque fold; it has infinite points of contact, and infinite gradations of speed and slowness. Time is, he suggests, inhuman precisely because it inheres in objects and at scales unimaginable to human comprehension. Quoting Bruno Latour, Harris observes that 'I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer. The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands Some of my genes are 500 million years old, others 3 million, others 100,000 years old, and my habits range in age from a few days to several thousand years' (Harris, 2009, 3).

Not unlike Latour's hammer, Milton's poem partakes of this inhuman time by imagining itself at multiple speeds and multiple scales of becoming: from youth to maturity; ripeness to decay; and last, eternity. Milton's poem is a happening. In point of fact, it is about being in the midst of a happening. But this happening is and is not the speaker's. Although the speaker's temporal attitude is fastened to an image of nature, here figured as 'my late spring,' this nature is, as we soon learn, not one: nature is not natural. As vehicle, 'spring' connotes the cyclical time of growth and fertility; as tenor, poetic maturity. But the speaker's image of 'late spring' tends finally to infertility (no bud or blossom shew'th), despite his future

11 On the Derridian inflection of 'ecology to come,' see Morton (2007, 6).

12 Given my emphasis on life practices of the self, this essay could very well have been titled 'Steps to a Pastoral of the Mind.' I persist in the generic attribute of georgic so as to avoid the too easy relegation of all that is pleasurable to the side of pastoral, while leaving untainted all that concerns physical moderation to the side of labor.

13 In their 'Introduction' to Milton's *Major Works* ([1645] [1667] 2008, xv), Goldberg and Orgel write that in the revolutionary times of the 1630s and 1640s, 'to take charge of circumstances that were not always in his control, Milton described himself as both feeling and appearing younger than he really was.'

hope 'That some more timely-happy spirits' may 'endueth.' In this way, the promise of a certain futurity that would develop from and be continuous with the past is left suspended: neither finished nor unfinished, the poem radiates from the middle – like a plant – producing differences, surprises and uncanny emergences through its temporal unfolding.

'Sonnet 7' calls to mind the sense of activity and immediacy that Whitehead (1938) and, more recently, Massumi (2011) have termed 'process philosophy.' Following Whitehead, Massumi re-conceives of 'life' as a generalized process of becoming or 'emergence.' 'The world is not a grab-bag of things,' Massumi writes, 'It's always in germ. To perceive the world in an object frame is to neglect the wider range of its germinal reality' (Massumi, 2011, 6). In an uncanny way, process and emergence come to represent core concepts in both the vitalist philosophies of Whitehead and Massumi and, in a less explicit sense, Milton's poetry. Teskey avers to the 'patterns of emergence' that 'tend to appear at crucial moments in Milton's poetry,' writing: 'It is the persisting and undeniable sense we have that the poem is an emergent structure, something that feels, even as we read it, still in the process of being created, of excitedly breaking forth from the poet's imagination and passing, even now, through the poet's lips to our ears' (Teskey, 2006, 17–19). From this sense of untimely passing, it is hard not to detect the emergence of another, transhistorical folding – Milton's 'less or more' – in folded touch with this statement by Whitehead:

[T]he notion of existence involves the notion of an environment of existences and of types of existences. Any one instance of existence involves the notion of other existences, connected with it and yet beyond it. This notion of the environment introduces the notion of 'more and less,' and of multiplicity.

(Whitehead, 1938, 6–7)

For Whitehead, the notion of 'more and less' emerges from the 'recognition of the goings-on of nature in which we, and all things of all types, are immersed. It has its origin in the thought of ourselves as process immersed in process beyond ourselves' (Whitehead, 1938, 8). Contrary to the positivist belief in pure objectivity, Whitehead claims that 'connectedness is of the essence of all things of all types,' and that to abstract from connectedness – that is, to see only positivities – 'involves the omission of an essential factor in the fact considered' (Whitehead, 1938, 9). In short, 'No fact is merely itself.' To look from the vantage of 'process' is to perceive infinite gradations of 'connectedness' in and between the bare 'facts' of life. It is to see life in terms of 'more and less,' composition and de-composition, rather than in terms of either/or, presence or absence. Whitehead suggests that so entangled are the perceiver and the perceivable world 'that in every consideration of a single fact there is the suppressed presupposition of the environmental This environment, thus coordinated, is the whole universe in its perspective to the fact' (Whitehead, 1938, 9). Echoing what anthropologist



and early cyberneticist Gregory Bateson once called ‘steps to an ecology of mind,’ Whitehead maintains that a truly ecological perspective is one that is always willingly outstripped by the scale and complexity of ecological entanglement. ‘Any one instance of existence involves the notion of other existences, connected with it and yet beyond it (Whitehead, 1938, 7)’. This ‘beyond’ implies a limit to what we can know about the environment, and implicatively, about ourselves. Hence the need to approach the environment by ‘steps.’

And Milton? The notion of ‘less or more, or soon or slow’ in Milton’s poem invites us to think along the lines of what Gilles Deleuze describes as a life of *immanence*. The term immanence refers to things which are massively intra-connected (Barad, 2007, 376–384), neither subject nor object, but web. For Deleuze, ‘immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject’ (Deleuze, 2001, 26). Immanence, says Deleuze, is ‘a life.’ In Milton’s poem, ‘a life’ translates ‘in strictest measure even’ to the final couplet’s opening two syllables: ‘All is.’ While the previous line, ‘Toward which time leaves me,’ gives the poem a teleological (not to mention theological) bent, one which arcs toward ‘heaven’ and the all-seeing ‘eye’ of God, I am more concerned here with the perspective that the ‘All is’ engenders for approaching the notion of ‘life.’ In the immanent field that is ‘Sonnet 7,’ one of the figures that emerges is the figure of plant life, a figure that pushes the poem heliotropically, as it were, from ‘late spring’ to ‘inward ripeness’ to the poem’s sublime conclusion.

Although nothing is more common among Renaissance figures than that of a plant or flower, ubiquitous for their poetic tropes – laurel and poesy – this particular figure stands out as one that will re-emerge much later in Milton’s poetic process as ‘care of the self’ and care of the land intersect in scenes of eating. It is to that untimely figure that I turn to next.

Eating Well

In Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton invites the reader to perceive the created universe as an alimentary one.¹⁴ Pausing over a discussion between the first man, Adam, and his guest, the angel Raphael, a discussion that circles around (of all things) the subject of ‘food,’ Milton dilates his poem to make ‘nourishment’ the governing principle of ‘whatever was created’ (5.414, 421). From embodied man to ‘purest spirits,’

... both contain,
 Within them every lower faculty
 Of sense, whereby they hear, see, smell, touch, taste,
 Tasting concoct, digest, assimilate,
 And corporeal to incorporeal turn.

(5.409–413)

14 For an extended treatment of Milton’s alimentary poetics, see Schoenfeldt (2000).

Goldberg, writing on the philosophical materialism of Lucretius, points out that in Milton's monist universe 'digestion is the route to oneness' (Goldberg, 2009, 193). In this sense eating is parallel to sex (the other subject of Adam and Raphael's discussion), which, according to Raphael, 'Leads up to heaven, is both the way and guide' (8.613). Alighting on the notion of the 'incorporeal' as it appears in both Milton and Foucault, Goldberg suggests that it is the very 'perversion' of substance, substance turning into 'simulacra' without depth or direction, that constitutes the (de)foundational nature of Milton's (and Foucault's) monist universe. 'It is the nature of things that they are not solid bodies but rather bodies in motion; between things, connecting and separating them, are the simulacra they cast off' (Goldberg, 2009, 33). What remains to be said, however, is that as Milton's poem continues, the way things are connected and 'cast off' is entirely 'alimantal.' From the smallest scale of Milton's universe to the largest, eating is not simply what one does; it is of the very nature of things:

For know, whatever was created, needs
To be sustained and fed; of elements
The grosser feeds the purer, earth the sea,
Earth and the sea feed air, the air those fires
Ethereal, and as lowest first the moon;

.....

Nor doth the moon no nourishment exhale
From her moist continent to higher orbs.
The sun that light imparts to all, receives
from all his alimantal recompense
In humid exhalations, and at even
Supps with the ocean.

(5.414–426)

In these lines, Milton's early invocation of 'less or more' finds its echo in the vast concatenation of a universe strung together by little more than the material necessity of eating and (this is implied) shitting. Such is the 'nourishment' by which, as Raphael will later say, 'All things proceed .../... one first matter all,/ Indued with various forms, various degrees/Of substance, and in things that live, of life' (5.470–474). What's striking, however, is less the alimentary nature of Milton's cosmology and more the form it resembles. Recall that in one of the earliest attempts to think the ontology of 'life,' Aristotle's *De anima*, Aristotle partitions 'life itself' into three separate forms (plants, animals, humans) according to the type of 'life' that is manifested in them (Aristotle, 1984). Humans alone are accorded the power of thinking, animals the power of movement and sensation, whereas plants are deemed 'living' only in the sense that they decay and grow. Aristotle identifies this form of life common to plants 'nutritive life': 'it is the only psychic potentiality they possess' (quoted in Agamben, 2004, 14). Commenting on this division in the ontology of life, Agamben has noted that 'the



isolation of nutritive life (which the ancient commentators will already call vegetative) constitutes in every sense a fundamental event for Western science,' for 'it was primarily by means of a progressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative life (now coinciding with the biological heritage of the nation) that the State would carry out its new vocation' (Agamben, 2004, 14, 15).

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible.

(Agamben, 2004, 15)

Milton's poem enacts this 'mobile border' at all scales of existence, only to confound it. Cutting across Aristotle's tripartite ontology, 'life' proper becomes synonymous with vegetative life; humans and animals co-mingle; and at the center of this entangled universe, Milton foregrounds the vital movements of nourishment and decay. In Milton's vitalist universe, flesh and spirit share the same root:

... So from the root
 Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves
 More airy, last the bright consummate flower
 Spirits odorous breathes: flowers and their fruit
 Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed
 To vital spirits aspire, to animal,
 To intellectual, give both life and sense,
 Fancy and understanding, whence the soul
 Reason receives,.....

 Differing but in degree, of kind the same.

(5.479–490)

From the view offered by these few words, 'Differing but in degree,' we begin to perceive how Milton's theory of life works – or rather unworks. Stanley Fish has argued that to understand how Milton works, one should look to Freud. Beginning with the Freudian death drive, that inexhaustible machine of repetition, Fish maps the story of the fall onto the story of life's emergence. Drawing on Freud's theory that all living matter emerges from and desires return to rest and stasis, Fish recasts the Freudian death drive in a distinctly Christian light:

[W]e must leave the analogy with Freud behind, because for Milton the issues at stake are theological ones and the circuitous paths are the vehicles either of redemption or damnation. Where a path leads to depends on whether those who are on it believe that they are striking out in new and adventurous directions ... or whether ... they are trying to get back home

.... Those who seek to find rest in service to the deity act independently in the hope that they may one day cease to do so because their labors and their voices will have been reabsorbed into the rhythms and harmony of eternity.
(Fish, 2001, 3)

Here, the terms labor, motion, sound and rhythm are repurposed by Fish to reach after the Platonic ideals of ‘harmony’ and eternal form. By extension, Fish renders Milton’s poetry (labor, motion, sound, rhythm) as an art whose ‘aim,’ like ‘the aim of life,’ is stillness, quiescence, death. Poetry is linked to spirit, a spiritual form achieved only by extinguishing life and poetic vitality. The materialism that Fish borrows from Freud is in turn linked to poetic deviation ‘aimed at getting back in tune with heaven’ (Fish, 2001, 4). Out of tune, the rhythms of life are thus directed toward death, but a death that is, oddly enough, truer than life itself: ‘It is in this sense that the aim of life, rightly lived, is death’ (Fish, 2001, 4). For Fish, the force of life’s essential dynamism points to a deviation, a lapse, and so mirrors the psychological deviations of Milton’s Satan. In Fish’s programmatic words, ‘the direction of knowledge’ in Milton’s poetry ‘is from the inside out Rather than confirming or disconfirming belief, the external landscape, in all its details, will be a function of belief’ (Fish, 2001, 23–24). And again: ‘affirming God is not something you do on the basis of evidence [in Milton’s poetry]; it is something you do against the evidence provided by forms of life considered apart from his creative and sustaining power, forms of life that appear real and compelling in their attraction but that are finally (and always) unreal and therefore without any claims on us at all’ (Fish, 2001, 10).

What follows from Fish’s retooling of Freud is an interlocking series of binaries: inside/outside, belief/fact, center/deviation, stasis/movement, man/nature, mind/materiality, life/death. Although Fish qualifies his appropriation of Freud (‘All we need do is substitute for Freud’s organist vocabulary the vocabulary of creation, sin, redemption, and reunion’ [Fish, 2001, 2]), he does not escape the latter’s conception of matter as tending toward lifelessness or homeostasis. For Fish, Milton ‘works’ precisely insofar as matter in his poem does not – insofar as it is rendered lifeless and inert, ‘without any claims on us at all’ (Fish, 2001, 10). Fish’s reading produces a monoculture in which there is only fallen nature, and death. A more astute reading, Joanna Picciotto’s, notes that for Milton there is no ‘rigid boundary between two states of being whose incommensurability provides the mechanism for readerly self-correction Milton’s famous dips into fallen language when describing Eden are just what they seem to be: efforts to disrupt an at once naive and corrupt understanding of innocence as a reassuringly lost state of perfection’ (Picciotto, 2010, 403).

On the other hand, what makes Freud’s account so gratifying is his paradoxical claim that internal to the reproductive logic of the organism is a machine of regressive a-futurity. The words ‘rest’ and ‘stasis’ mark not only life’s beginning but also life’s end. Thus the problem with beginnings: that the reproductive logic of life – what Freud calls ‘pleasure’ – is already outstripped by its opposite – the



machine of death. Freud's 'earlier state of things' is as much proleptic as it is analeptic, both prospective and retrospective at once; for his view of 'life' is essentially anachronistic insofar as the organism itself is torn between separation and return, time and no time, movement and death. 'Life' vexes the living organism and redirects it to beginnings that are already endings.

A Miltonic test case for this vexatious temporality appears in Book 11, *after* the Fall: there, the Angel Michael marks the temporal rupture between pre- and postlapsarian life by invoking the 'original crime' (11.424), that of eating the forbidden fruit, and cuts to a future scene in which Adam and Eve's offspring, Cain and Abel, offer up the fruits of their labors to feed a carnivorous God. In this scene, the trauma of the first crime doubles and repeats: Cain and Abel, cursed to labor for their parents' sins, offer up not one sacrifice, but two: first, a vegetable sacrifice:

A sweaty reaper from his tillage brought
First fruits,

(11.434–435)

and second, an animal sacrifice,

a shepherd next
More meek came with the firstlings of his flock
Choicest and best; then sacrificing, laid
the innards and their fat, with incense strewed.

(11.436–439)

If what makes prelapsarian life Edenic is the absence of death – or in this case, animal sacrifice – what makes Book 11 so intriguing is that it militates against the notion of an 'original crime' by collapsing past, present and future into a scene of traumatic repetition. From the vantage of the future anterior, Adam witnesses his own crime doubled by the sacrifice of 'First fruits.' In Christian typology, this future anterior doubling looks both ahead to Christ's sacrifice on the cross and backwards again in time to Christ's circumcision, as is recounted in Richard Crashaw's devotional lyric, 'Our Lord in his Circumcision': 'To thee these first fruits of my growing death/(For what else is my life?) lo I bequeath' (Crashaw, [1646] 1974, 1–2). In the lines above, not only are we confronted with an image of 'what is to come' (12.11), but included in this image is a new relation to eating. Milton's God becomes quite literally a God of visual consumption:

His [Abel's] offering soon propitious fire from heaven
Consumed with nimble glance, and grateful steam.

(11.441–442)

God's eye devours. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida asks: 'Might sovereignty be devouring? Might its force, its power, ... its absolute potency' *to exteriorize and to kill* 'be, in essence and always in the last instance, a power of devourment ...?' (Derrida, 2009, 23). While Milton's postlapsarian vision seems

to answer this question in the affirmative, positing both God and man as sovereigns *because* they have the right to kill and eat animals, he does not simply adhere (*pace* Stanley Fish) to a strict timeline of before and after. Put differently: *if* what makes prelapsarian life Edenic is the absence of animal death, what about plants? Remembering that the first sacrifice to take place ‘after’ the Fall involves plant life, or ‘First fruits,’ I would like to suggest that one of the ways Milton ‘dips into fallen language’ in his poem is through the eating, sharing, cultivation and calculation of plant life and death. The question posed to the reader, then, is not whether or not to renounce death (Fish’s question) but rather how to live with death. As Derrida says, it would be a question of how to eat well (see Derrida, 1995). Unworking Milton entails grappling with the calculations of plant life and death from (and in) the beginning.

All About Eve

To delight of human sense exposed
In narrow room nature’s whole wealth, yea more,
A heaven on earth, for blissful Paradise
Of God the garden was, by him in the east
Of Eden was planted.

(4.206–210)

Paradise Lost begins with a question: ‘what cause/Moved our grand parents in that happy state,/... to fall off/From their creator ...?/Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?’ (1.28–33). Leaving aside the obvious answer – that Satan was the ‘cause’ of that ‘foul revolt’ – I would like to point out that some of the more complex figurations of seduction that occur in Milton’s poem take place not with Satan, but among a wider field of bodies, namely plants. Echoing the naturalist’s delight that we first saw in the case of Gerard and his garden, Milton’s poem is replete with references to the seductions offered by Eden. From the beginning of Book 4, in which Satan first spots ‘delicious Paradise,’ to the many trials Eve faces in relation to that ‘fair plant,’ the tree of knowledge, Milton suggests that the first seductions to lead ‘our grand parents’ astray came not from Satan, but from the first gardner and his plants: ‘Of God the garden was, by him in the east/Of Eden planted.’ And like the ‘sovereign planter’ (4.690), Milton, too, delights in the rhetorical excess afforded by Eden, weaving lavish descriptions of the garden’s flora into his own flowering verse. Nowhere is this overlay of rhetoric and botanical description more animate than around the figure of Eve, who, from the very first description, appears entangled with the garden: ‘Her unadorned golden tresses wore/Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved/As the vine curls her tendrils’ (4.305–307). In the following passage, this hybridization of plant and



human enters the realm of classical mythology, intersecting between Eve's desire and that of Ovid's Narcissus:

I first awaked, and found myself reposed
 Under a shade of flowers, much wondering where
 And what I was, whence thither brought, and how.
 Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
 Of waters issued from a cave and spread
 Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved
 Pure as the expanse of heaven; I thither went
 With unexperienced thought, and laid me down
 On the green bank, to look into the clear
 Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky.
 As I bent down to look, just opposite,
 A shape within the watery gleam appeared
 Bending to look on me, I started back,
 It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
 Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
 Of sympathy and love.

(4.450–465)

The scene of Eve's awakening, which portrays her ensconced by flowers and in search of answers regarding 'what,' 'whence' and 'how' she came to be, unfurls according to what would seem like a familiar story. In Ovid's story of Narcissus we recall the lovely boy looking in the pond and falling for his own image. Not able to possess himself, Narcissus is driven by his frustration to the point of despair and, with no way out of this circular fate, dies. After death he is transformed into a flower. While there is significant diegetic overlap between the two versions, Milton's retelling of the Narcissus story has Eve less in a state of despair and more in a state of awe over what appears at first as 'A shape,' an 'It.' Before discovering that the 'shape within the watery gleam' is in fact her shape, Eve entertains the possibility of 'sympathy and love' between her and this 'it.' The seduction between Eve and the 'watery' thing floating on the lake's surface is manifest in the dilatory repetitions of 'Pleased' and 'returned,' doubling in each case the 'I' and the 'it,' and recreating in prose the 'murmuring sound/Of waters' that first drew Eve to the lake. These audiovisual 'murmurings' significantly alter the status of Eve's staring: for though the image is a reflection, Eve apprehends it as a material composite of sound and light, a sonorous, 'watery image.' The effect of this passage is to make Eve the female simulacra of the Narcissus figure, but the delayed recognition of the 'self' in the water makes this a scene unlike that of the Lacanian mirror stage, for in it there is not the presupposition of human identification but the more peculiar crossing of 'it' and 'I' (see Lacan, 2006). Although the father's 'no' (to put this in Lacanian terms) does impede Eve's looking: 'Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,/Had not a voice thus

warned me, What thou seest,/What there thou seest fair creature is thyself' (4.466–468); although God's voice displaces Eve's inhuman desire away from the watery signifier onto the human signified: 'I will bring thee where no shadow stays/Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, he/Whose image thou art' (4.470–472); nonetheless, Eve's narcissism continues to blur forms of identification across the inhuman landscape: 'I espied thee, fair indeed and tall,/Under a platan, yet methought less fair,/Less winning soft, less amiably mild,/Than that smooth watery image' (4.477–480).

Parker, along with a host of other critics (Gregerson, 1995; Guillory, 1995), reads Eve's crucial moment of staring as the dilation of a choice between temptation and Fall, and suggests that 'Eve's momentary staying upon her own image becomes within the epic an emblem of all such suspensions' (Parker, 1979, 116). But just as important, I argue, is the suspension of difference in the desire for sameness that Eve's narcissism enables.

Writing on the subject of narcissistic attachment, Bersani claims that 'Every theory of love is, necessarily, a theory of object relations' (Bersani, 2008, 72). I highlight this sentence in order to point to what is unthought – and what Milton, by contrast, would have us consider – in its transitive description, namely, the unthought role of the object. For the key question that psychoanalysis raises, Bersani argues, is not how we choose objects to love, but, more fundamentally, how we proceed to love an object at all. Bersani quotes Freud in asserting that from its inception, psychoanalysis has been doubtful of that possibility: "The finding of an object," Freud famously declared in the 1905 edition of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, "is in fact a re-finding of it." Love, which we like to think of as a discovery, is inseparable from memory' (Bersani, 2008, 72). Bersani adds to Freud's claim that love is about 're-finding' a lost object (prototypically the mother's breast) by asserting that 'the resurrected object may really be the loving subject, a self we lovingly recover at the very moment we may wish to celebrate our openness to the world, that is, to an irresistibly seductive otherness' (Bersani, 2008, 72). The difficulty of loving an object, then, is that we never know who or what the object is: whether it is the singular and unique object, or the object of one's past. It may even be oneself.

Significantly, Bersani does not reject narcissism. Instead, following Foucault, he asks whether there might be a way of 'modeling an impersonal relational field' that uses narcissism as a resource, not an obstacle, for exploring different forms of relationality. Bersani calls this relational field 'impersonal narcissism,' and through a reading of Plato's *The Symposium* argues that 'narcissistic love in both the lover and the beloved ... is exactly identical to a perfect knowledge of otherness' insofar as the 'self the subject sees reflected in the other is not the unique personality central to modern notions of individualism' (Bersani, 2008, 85).

In the generous narcissism of the exchange between Socratic lovers, each partner demands of the other ... that he reflect the lover's type of being, his



universal singularity (and not his psychological particularities, his personal difference), by recognizing and cultivating that singularity as his own most pervasive, most pressing potentiality. If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about the other (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness.

(Bersani, 2008, 86)

Bersani's important re-conceptualization of the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism is in some sense a late heir to the Lucretian world view that Milton operated within. We can see, for instance, the same stress on sameness and difference in Goldberg's claim, informed by his reading of Lucretius, that 'from the point of view that prevails in early modernity, there is no explanatory principle beyond the aleatory swerve, no god behind the machine, indeed, no machine at all, since the fact that some things, once they arise, are capable of replication is not the fundamental principle of how things are' (Goldberg, 2009, 2). How things are, more exactly, is a question of sameness and difference, or of being differently composed of the same stuff, and of experiencing this sameness as a matter of fullness rather than lack. As Goldberg continues, 'differences-within-the same cannot be the basis for invidious and divisive difference or foundational for juridical concepts of the normal', (Goldberg, 2009, 2) Bersani's impersonal narcissism is one example of this Lucretian ethos.

Still, I would like to take this Lucretian narcissism one step further. Neither Goldberg nor Bersani extend the theoretical architecture of Lucretius or Freud to account for nonhuman entities. Milton, by contrast, forces us to consider what it would mean for Eve to identify with an 'it' and to become, herself, a thing. In Book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, the analogy to Narcissus becomes literalized as Eve, more and more, identifies with the garden:

... Eve
 Perceiving where she sat retired in sight,
 With lowliness majestic from her seat,
 And grace that won who saw to wish her stay,
 Rose, and went forth among her fruits and flowers,
 To visit how they prospered, bud and bloom,
 Her nursery; they at her coming sprung
 And touched by her fair tendance gladlier grew.

(8.40–47)

Here, the 'delight' of the garden is rendered mobile. Eve, going forth among 'her fruits and flowers,' not only occupies the poem's central focus but also wins (won) 'who saw to wish her stay':

With goddess-like demeanor forth she went;
 Not unattended, for on her as queen

A pomp of winning graces waited still,
And from about her shot darts of desire
Into all eyes to wish her still in sight.

(8.59–63)

Eve commands the attention of all in her presence – Adam, Raphael, even ‘Her nursery,’ which ‘at her coming sprung.’ At once the image of ‘lowliness,’ a woman ‘retired in sight,’ Eve commandeers the gaze of both Adam and Raphael, bringing their ‘discourse’ to a halt and interrupting the flow of the passage as the visual register intercedes. Eve does not just appear within the field of vision; she ‘Rose,’ and in doing so mirrors that line’s final word, ‘flowers.’ Eve becomes-flower. This form of mirroring takes Bersani’s theory of narcissism beyond its humanist confines and grounds it in an involutory becoming that links humans and plants. It also foregrounds the active role of visual pleasure as Eve becomes the female object who, as Laura Mulvey argues, both stills and sutures the male gaze through a constant elicitation of visual pleasure and narcissistic desire (Mulvey, 1975).

Writing in her now classic essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ Mulvey asserts that what cinema offers us is visual pleasure matched to female form. We sit in the darkness, peering at the cinema screen, watching while beautiful women are stilled in sight. We are, consequently, all perverts at the movies, Mulvey famously writes. And what is more, this pleasure is asymmetrical. ‘The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world’ (Mulvey, 1975, 6). So powerful is this dependence that, when she is on screen, the female image tends to stop the progress of narrative itself, suspending the action for the male viewer’s erotic contemplation. Milton’s Eve does just that.

Beginning with the description of Eve as ‘lowliness majestic,’ Milton’s passage exemplifies the paradoxical relation of the male viewer to the female object as both image of attraction and image of arrest. Already in a relation of mirroring rapport with the ‘flowers’ in ‘her nursery,’ Eve’s image, both human and plant, elicits the attention of Adam and Raphael by staying their visual pleasure as they, in turn, ‘wish her stay.’ If Mulvey’s theory of visual pleasure puts the male viewer in the position of active agent, Milton has Eve, the object of visual fascination, in the position of master. As the poem unfolds, Eve moves from ‘lowliness’ to ‘majestic’ as she assumes ‘goddess-like demeanor’ and traffics in the scene’s multiple, non-unilateral vectors of visual fascination. Oscillating between movement (‘With goddess-like demeanor forth she went’) and stasis (‘all eyes to wish her still’), the scene works athwart Mulvey’s gender binary by envisioning the female image as agent of arrest and the male viewer as thrall to pleasure. Active and passive lose their gendered index. For if, in Milton’s hands, Eve is image, she is not for that reason merely objectified by desire, ‘cut to the measure of desire,’ as Mulvey insists (Mulvey, 1975, 17). Rather, Eve, the image of visual pleasure, ‘goddess-like,’ flowers-forth through the scene like the goddess Venus, followed



by a train of ‘graces,’ shooting ‘darts of desire/Into all eyes’ who ‘wish her still in sight.’ Amidst Eve and her flowers, a disequilibrium of furtive, florid forces courses throughout, joining *flora* and flesh in a seductive, ecological assemblage.¹⁵

In the following passage, we see the force of this assemblage at work as Adam recounts a highly affective encounter whereby he is ‘transported’ (‘transported I behold’) by Eve’s ‘powerful glance.’ He describes this ‘glance’ in haptic terms as a form of visual ‘touch’:

Thus I have told thee all my state, and brought
 My story to the sum of earthly bliss
 Which I enjoy, and must confess to find
 In all things else delight indeed, but such
 As used or not, works in the mind no change,
 Nor vehement desire, these delicacies
 I mean of taste, sight, smell, herbs, fruits, and flowers,
 Walks, and the melody of birds; but here
 Far otherwise, transported I behold,
 Transported touch; here passion first I felt,
 Commotion strange, in all enjoyments else
 Superior and unmoved, here only weak
 Against the charm of beauty’s powerful glance.

(8.521–533)

Among the definitions current in Milton’s time, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records that to be ‘transported’ meant ‘to cause to be beside oneself, to put into an ecstasy, to enrapture.’ To say that Adam is beside himself, though, may be an understatement. Having ‘told ... all,’ and having ‘brought’ the reader’s mind to ‘the sum of earthly bliss,’ Adam finds still more he ‘must confess.’ His confession produces what we might describe as an ecstatic dismembering of space and time, sense and nonsense. Following an effusion of sensory modalities, ‘I mean of taste, sight, smell, ... and ... melody,’ Adam is torn between ‘here’ (but where is ‘here?’) and ‘far otherwise.’ ‘Here/... Far’: the collapse of immediacy and distance puts Adam outside himself (from the Latin *ek-stasis*, to be put out of place). Adam is, as it were, ‘transported’; he is carried away by ‘vehement desire.’ ‘But here/Far otherwise, ... I behold’: Whom does Adam behold? The meaning is (at least) double: Adam beholds Eve, but he also beholds himself beholding. Adam sees himself as the distance separating ‘here’ and ‘far,’ while at the same time his very locution, ‘behold,’ collapses that distance by turning seeing into a form of touch. Adam describes this encounter as ‘commotion strange.’ So ‘strange’ is this commotion of the seer and the seen that we can no longer be certain who is looking: Who, after all, is the subject of ‘beauty’s powerful glance’? Adam or Eve? Although Eve is the image of beauty, this ‘commotion strange’ blurs the opposition between subject and object, such that Eve is at once the object, the ‘charm’ and the bearer of the ‘glance’ (and note that ‘glance’ already carries with

15 My suggestion that Eve’s narcissism threatens to dissolve subject and object into an ecological assemblage of forces departs from critical assessments that try to redeem Eve’s role from an anti-feminist tradition bent on characterizing her as a figure of wantonness and seduction (see, for example, McColley (1983, 4). My reading instead explores the seductive possibilities for human and nonhuman assemblage opened up by Eve’s narcissistic entanglements. In Milton’s ecological vision, seduction and perversion are integral to the Garden; queering ‘human’ relations is what gardens do.

it the non-visual meaning of touch, as in a weapon or an object struck) – whereas Adam, after repeating his sense of (dis)location, ‘here only,’ conveys feeling ‘weak’ before Eve, ‘transported’ by her ‘glance.’ Touched, weakened, transported by desire, Adam dissolves before Eve into an ecstatic assemblage of affects and pleasures. ‘All higher knowledge in her presence falls’ (8.551).

The image of Eve as ‘beauty’s glance’ returns us to the impersonal narcissistic realm of becoming in which subject and object lose their fixed distinctions. Eve’s image, an assemblage of human and plant, leaves Adam ‘weak’: ‘Not proof enough such object to sustain’ (8.535). But this weakening also exposes Adam to an altered sensory experience in which ‘taste, sight, smell’ and ‘touch’ mutually enfold subject and object in a ‘strange’ affective realm. This type of enfolding grounds Milton’s poetic ecology in what Elaine Scarry refers to as the ‘cross-species desire’ that links humans and plants (Scarry, 2001, 65). It also foregrounds the active role of material life in Milton’s poem, thus going against Fish’s desire to replace materiality with ‘pure’ theology. More importantly, it calls to mind the utter strangeness of plant life – and life in general – in Milton’s poetry.

Plant Seduction and Ecology to Come

In *Cultivating Delight*, subtitled *A Natural History of My Garden*, Ackerman begins with the following observation: ‘I plan my garden as I wish I could plan my life, with islands of surprise, color, and scent’ (Ackerman, 2002, 1). For Gerard, as for the naturalists of his time, the cultivation of delight was a practice that veered unimpeachably upon the strange and unpredictable nature of their life’s work: the careful and painstaking task of cultivating, preserving and describing plants.¹⁶ What is more, gardens were, as Ackerman points out, a means of controlling life. Prefiguring what Foucault later termed the biopolitics of modern life, whereby each life is cultivated to procure more life, and in which life itself becomes – as Agamben notes (Agamben, 2004, 15) – a kind of vegetable existence suspended between life and death, nature’s body entered into the biopolitics of control largely through the local and global transfer of plants between Europe and its colonies in the early modern period (Schiebinger and Swan, 2005). Contemporary scholars Schiebinger (2004) and Parrish (2006), writing from the intersections of historiography, postcoloniality and the history of science, note that plants, though integral to how bodies of knowledge have been formed and reformed throughout human history, continue to be regarded as super-numerary agents in the affairs of human societies. ‘Plants seldom figure in the grand narratives of war, peace, or even everyday life in proportion to their importance to humans,’ Schiebinger writes, ‘yet they are significant natural and cultural artifacts, often at the center of high intrigue’ (Schiebinger, 2004, 3).

16 For an account of how early modern natural history developed a ‘science of describing’ that took the description of nature as an end in itself, thus rejecting the medical rationale of earlier naturalists, as well as the economic rationale of later ones, see Ogilvie (2006).



To paraphrase Schiebinger's argument, plants have been a consistent leitmotif throughout human history, a central yet invisible theme, so apparent as to be inapparent to the economic, political and cultural inquiries of historians and literary critics alike. This blindsight notwithstanding, as historical artifacts, plants have provided for a wide range of human desires, and at great cost, serving variously as sweeteners, spices, pharmacological curatives, narcotics [abortifacients and laxatives, to name just a few of their many uses, while being aggressively] appropriated and sold ('thingified,' to use Aimé Césaire's word [see Césaire, 2000, 42]) as what Schiebinger (quoting a student of Carl Linnaeus) calls 'the base for all economics,' both in the early modern period and after.

Still, there is something else in Gerard's exaltation of plants that, while common enough among the annals of Renaissance botany, now seems strikingly discordant with our own practices of looking and perceiving plants. I want to venture that what is most striking about Gerard's assessment of plants goes beyond his consideration of their uses. French botanist Hallé claims that 'plants to us are principally food, drink, medicine, raw material for industry, pasturage for domestic animals, green space for cities, landscapes for relaxation'; rarely do they 'arouse any real passion in most of us' (Hallé, 2002, 25). Gerard, by contrast, precipitates a sense of the agency of plants, hinting not only at their capacity to be moved (bought, sold, consumed) but to *move*, and thereby to seduce.

Gerard's text illustrates that plants not only have the capacity to move, but they move us as well. Plants seduce: from the Latin *seducere*, meaning to lead, to persuade. Though we are used to thinking of plants as passive beings lacking in movement and sense, arguably the two attributes most often chosen – reason notwithstanding – to set plant life apart from the existential affairs of humans, for Gerard, not only do plants move, their movements are an invitation to refocus our attention on the ways that humans can end up acting as prosthetics for other things in the world, in this case plants. This, we might say, is what constitutes the uncanny sentience of plants: their ability to invite, to teach and no doubt to seduce. Ackerman reminds us that although 'when we describe ourselves as "sentient" beings we mean that we are conscious,' thoughtful, intentional beings (in Latin, *sent* means 'to head for,' hence, to go out or to intend mentally), 'the more literal and encompassing meaning is that we have sense perception' (*sentir*, 'to feel') (Ackerman, 1990, xvii). Ackerman's more literal, more lowly definition of intelligence offers critical insight for those interested in countering the human exceptionalist tendency of reducing the greater ecology of mind to a rather limited, philosophically and biologically speaking, datum of sense.

Seen in this context, Milton's way of looking at plants is less straightforwardly epistemological or pragmatic; it is, rather, pharmacological in Derrida's sense of *pharmakon*: it infects the viewer by crossing the traditional boundary between objective contemplation and affective response

17 On the applicability of Derrida's definition of *pharmakon* to ecological practice, see Stengers (2010, 28–41).

(Derrida, 1981).¹⁷ Indeed, it exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's language of worlding. As they put it, 'We are not in the world' as thinkers absolved from life's forces, but rather, 'we become with the world; we become by contemplating it' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, 169). Foucault describes this way of looking as an act of curiosity. Despite its negative valuation within the orders of objective knowledge, Foucault sees curiosity, along with its related affects of interest, excitement, surprise and wonder, as essential goads to inquiry. In this respect, Foucault can be placed in an uncanny alliance – stretching across the premodern–modern divide – with the purveyors of Renaissance natural history, who saw, as Daston and Park have argued, 'objective order and subjective sensibility' as 'obverse and reverse of the same coin' (Daston and Park, 2001, 14). According to Daston and Park, early modern naturalists organized their science of looking around the affects of wonder, curiosity and delight, which were 'as much about knowing as about feeling.' For these early modern scientists, 'To register wonder was to register a breached boundary, a classification subverted. The making and breaking of categories – sacred and profane; natural and artificial, animal, vegetable and mineral; sublunar and celestial – is the Ur-act of cognition, underpinning all pursuit of regularities and discovery of causes' (Daston and Park, 2001, 14). Indeed, it was René Descartes who called wonder the first of the passions, 'a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary' (quoted in Daston and Park, 2001, 13). To read Foucault next to Descartes is to risk more than anachronism. It is to suggest something monstrous. Yet from the perspective I have tried to map out here, a perspective based on the *aesthetics* of scientific or ecological perception, the distance between the two is not at all far. They are simply 'obverse and reverse' of the same coin. As Foucault himself says, curiosity, read etymologically as 'care,' calls for a different way of looking. It 'evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; ... a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; ... a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental' (Foucault, 1997a, 325). An *aesthetics without* criteria, then (see Shaviro, 2009).

Milton conjures the sense of an ahierarchal aesthetics based on a belief that all beings, be they 'less or more, or soon or slow,' partake of the 'All is.' To take steps to the 'All is' is, for Milton, an ecological and thus material endeavor. It does not come from beyond. Nor does it grow from the earth. It is a work. But what Milton's georgics of the mind essays (that is, puts to the test) more precisely is the unwork, the practices of *askesis*, whereby a community or cosmopolity of 'strange strangers'¹⁸ may take shape in the very fault lines of instrumental labor. To quote Gregory Bateson, this ecological way of thinking that outstrips human agency 'does not yet exist as an organized body of theory or knowledge' (Bateson, 2000, xxiii); it is not yet a commodity or a convention; happily, it is *to come*. Milton urges its coming.

18 See Morton (2010, 41), who translates the irreducible otherness of Derrida's *arrivant* as 'strange stranger.'



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