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Lesser, Madeline

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Nation of Prophets:
Aesthetics and Politics in Revolutionary England

By
Madeline Lesser

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Committee in Charge:

Professor Joanna Picciotto, Chair
Professor Steven Goldsmith
Professor David Marno
Professor Jonathan Sheehan

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Abstract

Nation of Prophets: Aesthetics and Politics in Revolutionary England

by

Madeline Lesser

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Joanna Picciotto, Chair

In the years 1640 to 1660, England was awash in prophecy. The breakdown of official censorship, coupled with political unrest and a rising number of sectarian religious groups, led multitudes of English people – including children, the unlearned, and over 400 women – to feel the spirit of God upon them, and to expound divine will in pulpit or pamphlet. This dissertation explores the major epistemological problem that accompanies England’s dramatic prophetic proliferation. By inviting conflicting, irreconcilable truth claims into the public sphere, prophecy threatens to divide (and perhaps even dissolve) the commonwealth. Prophecy crystallizes the central question facing revolutionary England (not to mention a central question of twenty-first century political life): in a “Nation of Prophets,” with each person or sect claiming the authority to speak the truth, how do we reach consensus? Mired in intractable differences of belief, how can the nation function at all?

Existing scholarship largely describes revolutionary prophets modeling their authority on the canonical Old Testament prophets; in this tradition, the prophet claims authoritative, unmediated knowledge of divine will, asserting their own message over and against an opposing falsehood. This narrative dovetails with accounts of the civil war that emphasize sectarian conflict and the burgeoning of individual, antinomian authority. In contrast, *Nation of Prophets* traces a strain of New Testament prophecy through revolutionary prophets and prophetic poets, as well as through civil war politics more broadly. In the New Testament, responding specifically to issues of sectarianism, Paul reframes prophecy as inherently partial, insistently communal, and meaningless without a spirit of charity. I show how the discourse of New Testament prophecy inflects key revolutionary political debates about toleration and liberty of conscience, and develop a new understanding of prophecy’s role in the public sphere. The central prophets and prophetic poets addressed here – Elizabeth Poole, John Milton, and Lucy Hutchinson – refuse to claim comprehensive, authoritative knowledge of divine will; instead, they suggest that God can be felt in and through collective experience, and aim to help readers feel themselves to be incorporate members of a broader whole. The prophet transforms history not by revealing hitherto obscured divine knowledge, but by generating a sense of shared being that in turn motivates political action. Through their discussion of prophecy, my first three chapters recover the role of collective affect in the literature and politics of revolutionary England.

My final chapter uncovers a legacy of collectivist, civil war prophecy in the Romantic period. While scholars have noted the “line of vision” from Milton to the Romantics, they often stereotype the Miltonic poet-prophet as an authoritative individual (whether drawing the Romantics into this tradition or distinguishing them from it). I show how William Godwin, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley, drawing on the history of the civil wars, frame the function of prophetic authorship in parallel to the revolutionary prophets of the previous three chapters: augmenting the “social sympathies,” the prophetic author transforms politics by transforming social relations. Finally, this chapter questions the viability of such a prophetic mode in the context of secular modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

Prophecy and the Problem of Pluralism

Then Zedekiah son of Kenaanah walked up to Micaiah and slapped him across the face.
 “Since when did the Spirit of the LORD leave me to speak to you?”
 -1 Kings 22:24, New Living Translation

I had a vision
 of all the people in the world
 who are searching for God

massed in a room
 on one side
 of a partition

that looks
 from the other side
 (God’s side)

transparent
 but we are blind.
 Our gestures are blind.
 -Anne Carson, “The Truth about God”

“Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!”¹ So proclaims Moses in Numbers; in 1644, John Milton declares that “now the time seems come, wherein *Moses* the great Prophet may sit in heav’n rejoicing to see that memorable and glorious wish of his fulfill’d, when not only our sev’nty Elders, but all the Lords people are become prophets.”² Revolutionary England was awash in prophecy. Of course, a history of English prophecy extends back to the 12th century (at least), and a “steady procession of would-be prophets” people the 16th century.³ But in the years of the civil wars, the breakdown of official censorship, coupled with political unrest and the increase of sectarian religious groups, gave rise to what Christopher Hill has termed “almost a new profession – the prophet, whether as interpreter of the stars, or of traditional popular myths, or of the Bible.”⁴ As a “profession,” prophecy was remarkably capacious and egalitarian. Prophecy could signify anything from Biblical interpretation, akin to preaching, to predictive claims about the future. In the years 1640 to 1660, multitudes of English

¹ Numbers 11:29. All Biblical quotations are from the *King James Bible*.

² John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton volume II*, ed. Ernest Sirluck (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959), 555-6.

³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1971), 133.

⁴ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 99.

people – including children, the unlearned, and over 400 women – felt the spirit of God upon them, and expounded divine will in pulpit or pamphlet.⁵

Milton extols the proliferation of prophecy – and yet, as prophecy’s detractors have long realized, the proliferation of prophecy presents a major epistemological problem. As Robert Carroll observes in the context of late seventh-century Biblical prophecy, “If men may claim to be inspired by God and therefore equate what they say with the words of God then there will be no protection against any number of so inspired persons proclaiming any number of discrete, and even incompatible, messages in society.”⁶ Prophecy’s seventeenth-century critics leverage the same argument. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes observes, “If a man pretend to me that God hath spoken to him supernaturally and immediately and I make doubt of it, I cannot easily perceive what argument he can produce to oblige me to believe it.”⁷ Frustratingly interior, prophecy resists shared understanding. It claims authority according to individual conviction, in turn gaining followers to the extent that they are compelled by that individual. “If every private man should have leave to [prophecy],” Hobbes continues, “there could no Law be made to hold, and so all common-wealth would be dissolved.”⁸ By inviting conflicting, irreconcilable truth claims into the public sphere, prophecy threatens to divide – and perhaps even dissolve – the commonwealth.

While the contemporary reader might be skeptical of Hobbes’s proposed solution to this problem (defer all decisions to the sovereign), they might also admit that prophecy’s critics have a justifiable point. If the proliferation of prophecy during the civil war period emblemizes the democratic possibilities of the emerging public sphere, it also anticipates a problem that has plagued the public sphere for as long as it has existed. If every individual is authorized to voice their own interpretation of truth, how will we reach agreement on which interpretation to believe? As a discourse that grounds its truth claims in divine inspiration, prophecy renders this problem particularly vexed, for Habermas’s ideal solution – reasoning among disparate viewpoints – no longer applies.⁹ As Keith Thomas summarizes, since “prophecy claimed to supersede the mere written law of God... there was no way of refuting it, save by recourse to counter-prophecy.”¹⁰ Prophecy crystallizes the central problems facing revolutionary England. In the absence of sovereign, centralized ecclesiastical and political authority, how does the nation reach consensus? Who speaks and enacts divine will? On the basis of what authority? These are also, some would argue, the central (albeit secularized) questions of our own time. How does the nation reach

⁵ Phyllis Mack, “The Prophet and her Audience: Gender and Knowledge in the World Turned Upside Down,” in *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the Work of Christopher Hill*, eds. Geoff Eley and William Hunt (London: Verso, 1988), 150 n.1.

⁶ Robert Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Reactions and Responses to Failure in the Old Testament Prophetic Traditions* (London: Xpress Reprints, 1996).

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 246.

⁸ Hobbes, 197.

⁹ In his later works, *The Dialectics of Secularization: on Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) and *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), Habermas acknowledges the divide between “the secular discourse that claims to be accessible to all men and the religious discourse that is dependent upon the truths of revelation” (*Dialectics*, 42). He admits, in other words, that some kinds of truth resist rational debate; ultimately, however, he advocates translating “the rational content of religion” into universally communicable terms – to my mind, a daunting and often unachievable task (*BNR*, 213).

¹⁰ Thomas, 139.

consensus? How do we mediate among conflicting, irreconcilable truth claims – not divine revelations per se, but beliefs held as strongly as if they were so?

Contemporary scholarship on civil war prophecy revolves around two major arguments, both of which consider prophecy in relation to the problems of authority so pressing in revolutionary England.¹¹ Most recently, feminist scholars – led by Katharine Gillespie, Shannon Miller, Teresa Feroli, and Carme Font Paz – have emphasized the surge of women prophets during the civil war decades. In the 1640s and 1650s, the “incidence of female authorship more than doubled” – from 0.5% to 1.2% of all published works – and prophecy formed the majority of these new writings.¹² Early scholars of female prophecy concluded that “[a]ppel to divine inspiration was of very questionable value as a means of female emancipation,” given that women prophets tend to foreground “the omnipotence of God and the helplessness of his chosen handmaid should she be thrown upon her own resources.”¹³ Prophecy offered women a means of addressing the public – and yet, of course, they could only claim such authority by disavowing their own agency. Listeners flocked to the bedside of sixteen year old Sarah Wight, for instance, to witness her divine trances; but on each page of Wight’s *The Exceeding Riches of Grace*, she declares herself an “Earthen Vessell” and “an empty Nothing creature.”¹⁴

Gillespie, Miller, Feroli, and Font Paz read around these (quite insistent) modesty topoi, arguing instead that female prophecy should be understood as part of “the tale of the birth of the possessive self.”¹⁵ The woman prophet privileges “individual agency over and against the dictates of a predetermined hierarchy.”¹⁶ “Vesting power in the self,” the woman prophet – according to these narratives – reflects a broader narrative about the political significance of the civil wars: the civil wars transferred authority from hierarchical heads – Kings, priests, husbands – to newly empowered individuals.¹⁷

The problem with such interpretations, as mentioned, is that they are not entirely convincing. Women prophets do not typically celebrate their authority so much as endlessly and anxiously qualify it. But such endless and anxious qualification of one’s claim to authority was not a problem exclusively for women during this time period (though women certainly experienced this problem most acutely); everyone had to fend off accusations of “self-interest,” and, as Margery Kingsley and Clement Hawes have noted, “the appeal to the divine Word” offered a means of doing

¹¹ Not included in this overview is an older body of scholarship devoted specifically to Milton’s visionary mode; this scholarship – most prominently, the work of William Kerrigan, Joseph Wittreich, John Guillory, and Michael Lieb – will be addressed in the second chapter.

¹² Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 299-300.

¹³ Keith Thomas, “Women and the Civil War Sects,” in *Crisis in Europe, 1560-1660*, ed. Trevor Aston (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 355.

¹⁴ Henry Jessey, *The exceeding riches of grace advanced by the spirit of grace, in an empty nothing creature, viz. Mrs. Sarah Wright* (London: 1647), *Early English Books Online*.

¹⁵ Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 8. For the original “tale of the birth of the possessive self,” see C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

¹⁶ Teresa Feroli, *Political Speaking Justified* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

so, for the prophet speaks not as him or herself but as divine vessel.¹⁸ At the same time that prophets claimed to be speaking as disinterested, objective mediators of divine will, however, their visions tended to favor particular political causes, inevitably inviting accusations of self-interest. Kinch Hoekstra has argued that prophecy after 1640 is distinguished precisely insofar as it is “flagrantly partisan,” as “each side accused the other of false prophecy.”¹⁹ According to these interpretations, prophecy epitomizes the challenge of reaching consensus; these scholars paint the civil war era as a period of intense, irreconcilable, polemical conflict.

Whether they cite prophetic inspiration primarily as a means of obtaining or disavowing individual agency, these interpretations suggest that the prophet attempts to resolve the problem of uncertainty by claiming certain knowledge of divine will. The prophet supplants the sovereign, or, at very least, becomes the earthly vessel of the divine sovereign. In this dissertation, I attend to figures I tentatively label “bad” prophets. These figures – the all-but-unknown prophetess Elizabeth Poole; the pious, republican poet and historian, Lucy Hutchinson; and, in part, the archetypal seventeenth-century poet-prophet, John Milton – frame themselves as prophets, insistently addressing the public and claiming divine inspiration. And yet, they profess mostly the impossibility of knowing divine will, the certainty of human uncertainty. Self-conscious of the unachievable task of distinguishing between true and false prophecy – of determining who speaks for God, and who is deluded by the devil, or the devil of self-interest – they deny the ability of any individual prophet to discern divine will.

This is not to say, however, that their prophecies communicate nothing, or that they profess a purely apophatic theology. While no individual can claim certain knowledge of divine will, these prophets suggest that God can be felt in and through collective experience; the prophet boasts a particularly sensitive attunement to the collective, and to the divine potentiality coursing through it. The prophet, then, transforms history not by revealing hitherto obscured divine knowledge, but by generating a sense of shared collectivity. At times, such collectivity manifests a sense of affective tolerance that preconditions political action. In *Areopagitica*, for instance, Milton enables his readers to feel themselves to be incorporate members of a cohesive nation, thus enabling them to “[acknowledge] and [obey] the voice of reason from what quarter soever it be heard speaking”; divine tolerance preconditions the work of reasoned debate.²⁰ At other times, affect literally dictates political decision-making. For the prophet Elizabeth Poole – and for the Leveller writers that her prophecies draw upon – sympathy is divine mandate; Poole defends the King’s life because, as William Walwyn puts it, “whosoever is possesst with love, judgeth no longer as a man, but god like, as a true Christian.”²¹ Whether affect precedes or supplants reason, I argue that amplifying collective feeling – the current feeling sense of the nation – is the work of these prophets, and that they consider collective feeling fundamental to political action.

This prophetic strain – focused on collective affect rather than individual revelation – diverges from the Old Testament prophetic tradition that scholars typically consider paradigmatic for the civil war prophet. In the Old Testament, prophecy serves many functions: the prophet might

¹⁸ Margery Kingsley, *Transforming the Word: Prophecy, Poetry, and Politics in England, 1650-1742* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 41. Clement Hawes, *Mania and Literary Style: the Rhetoric of Enthusiasm from the Ranters to Christopher Smart* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

¹⁹ Kinch Hoekstra, “Disarming the Prophets: Thomas Hobbes and Predictive Power,” *Rivista Di Storia Della Filosofia* 1 (2004): 97-153, 100.

²⁰ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 490.

²¹ William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane unbinding the conscience* (London, 1644), *Early English Books Online*.

divine the future, but he also might serve more simply as the mediating figure between God and nation, whether interceding on behalf of humanity or warning humanity of God's impending wrath.²² Civil war prophets often adopt the mantle of the jeremiad or the prophetic complaint, excoriating their political opponents.²³ Margery Kingsley notes that "even Cavaliers and loyalists frequently chose to model themselves after the prophets of the Old Testament as a means of crying down the 'false priests' of Parliament and the Army, identifying explicitly with the figure of the outcast prophet crying in the wilderness, or lamenting the fall of a modern-day Jerusalem."²⁴ To take on the role of the Old Testament prophet was to claim that one "had been specially called and specially gifted to be [the vessel] for a Word that represented the only true law."²⁵ In Kingsley's interpretation, Old Testament prophecy claims the authority of knowing divine will, often mediated through a privileged, individual vessel, and often asserting the prophet's message as truth over and against an opposing falsehood – a narrative, once again, that dovetails nicely with narratives of the civil war's burgeoning individualism and partisanship.

Even within the context of the Old Testament, however, prophecy does not entirely accord with such a narrative, as evidenced by Moses's celebration of seventy elders spontaneously and ecstatically prophesying. The *nebiim* wandered and prophesied together, Obadiah hid a company of 100 prophets in caves, 1 Chronicles 25 describes a prophetic choir of Levites, and Isaiah, far from an exclusively privileged bearer of the Word, "went unto the prophetess" in order to conceive and bear a son.²⁶ Not only did prophecy (as is often noted) serve many different functions, prophecy was also often a communal activity. The New Testament further frames prophecy as communal; "Let the prophets speak two or three," Paul exhorts, "and let the other judge."²⁷ In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul offers the most explicit discussion of the nature of New Testament prophecy. Facing an increasingly divided community at Corinth, with numerous competing truth claims, Paul emphasizes the importance of charity to any prophetic utterance:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing... Charity never faileth: but whether *there be prophecies*, they shall fail; whether *there be tongues*, they shall cease; whether *there be knowledge*, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophecy in part.

²² See "Prophets," in *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 1: Authority*, ed. Michael Walzer (New Haven: Yale UP, 2015), as well as chapters one and two of William Kerrigan's *Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), which provides a comprehensive overview of both pagan and Christian prophecy.

²³ For an account of the jeremiad in the American context, see Sacvan Bercovitch *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012). For an overview of the English jeremiad, see Laura Lunger Knoppers, "Milton's *The Readie and Easie Way* and the English Jeremiad," in *Politics, Poetics, and Heremeneutics in Milton's Prose*, eds. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990): 213-25.

²⁴ Kingsley, 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁶ Isaiah 8:3, *KJV*.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:29, *KJV*.

Just short of dismissing prophecy altogether, Paul suggests that prophecy is meaningless without charity, that charity must be foundational to prophecy. The prophet must not claim absolute authority of divine will, over and against all other prophets, but understand her own words as but one part of a complete accounting of divine will, which resists complete understanding. In recent years, New Testament prophecy has become a source of heated debate among Christian scholars, for whom the question of whether prophecy still exists – whether their church members can claim to speak God’s Word – remains pressing.²⁸ Some consider Old and New Testament prophecy equally authoritative; others describe New Testament prophecy as “discontinuous to and less authoritative than that of the Old Testament.”²⁹ Without sharply distinguishing between Old and New Testament prophecy, given that prophecy in both Testaments appears multifaceted, it seems clear that Paul’s description of New Testament prophecy describes not the conclusive, authoritative word of a uniquely inspired individual, but a widespread, communal practice, undergirded by a sense of tolerance and charity toward prophecies that might conflict with each other. It is not, in this telling, the work of the prophet to emphatically, combatively proclaim God’s word, whether his followers believe him or not. The New Testament prophet both speaks and listens; the prophetic community builds divine knowledge together, on the foundation of divine feeling.

Again, in 1 Corinthians, Paul is explicitly responding to the challenge of mitigating sectarian divisions, and so it is no coincidence that his verses form the textual crux of so many civil war debates. The toleration debates of the 1640s hinge on what exactly Paul means when he beseeches his listeners that “ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”³⁰ Paul’s description of the *corpus Christi* – a joint body composed of differentiated parts – likewise animates debates over whether England’s body politic remains intact or gangrenously disjointed: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is* Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether *we be* Jews or Gentiles, whether *we be* bond or free.”³¹

Over the course of the coming chapters, I will gesture toward the ways that radicals and conservatives interpreted these verses differently. What I am primarily interested in, however, is the way that Paul’s verses justify the “universalist drift” of sectarian groups like the Ranters, Diggers, Levellers, and Quakers.³² Over the course of the 1640s, these groups – which David Como aptly terms a “sectarian slurry,” insofar as their beliefs spill across strict categorizations – increasingly suggested that God’s love extended not only to his Church but to all persons.³³ As one early

²⁸ See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1982). For a comprehensive critique of Grudem’s analysis, and a summary of all theological scholarship that addresses this issue, see John Penney, “The Testing of New Testament Prophecy” *JPT* 10 (1997): 35-84.

²⁹ Penney, 37.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:10, *KJV*.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 12-13, *KJV*.

³² David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians and the English Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 191.

³³ See Como, 206-7, for a thoughtful discussion of the usefulness of sharply categorizing civil war sects. On one hand, sectarian members defied particular categorization; they could join a particular sect without wholly subscribing to all of its beliefs, and often shifted positions many times, creating “new, sometimes dizzying permutations” (206). On the other, Como acknowledges that “there existed real and distinctive ideological positions and encampments, and to understand the nature of religious experience in this period, it is necessary that we abstract them into discrete categories –

universalist publication, Lawrence Sanders' *The Fulness of Gods Love Manifested*, writes, "God is Love, hee is the fountaine and Father of Love."³⁴ In terms very much resonant with Corinthians, Sanders goes on to insist that "hearing, praying, and discoursing... is abomination if love be wanting... who so hath this worlds goods, and seeth his brother hath need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion, from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him, all his Religion is vaine."³⁵ The prophetic strain I describe in this project is best contextualized within this "universalist drift," characterized by arguments for toleration, charity, and egalitarianism. By focusing on a narrative of civil war politics emphasizing the emergence of collectivism (rather than individualism), I uncover a new prophetic radicalism. These prophets model themselves not on the (supposed) Old Testament model of prophecy as the utterance of a singular, authoritative vessel, but on the New Testament model of prophecy as a communal practice, predicated on a feeling openness toward others.

Why devote such attention to uncovering this prophetic strain? As mentioned, prophecy crystallizes one of the central challenges of the civil wars: how to mediate among innumerable, opposing truth claims in order to reach political consensus. By amplifying a New Testament prophetic strain, my project joins a body of scholarly work that reimagines civil war politics as notable not insofar as it celebrates individual agency but insofar as those individuals attempt to envision new ways of thinking, being, and acting together. I am particularly indebted to Joanna Picciotto's *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*, which demonstrates that "the public sphere was not initially imagined as a space for debate in which rights-bearing individuals argued on behalf of their interests," but "a corporate body engaged in the labor of truth production."³⁶ "Even explicitly polemical claims," Picciotto attests, "were presented as the disinterested products of this work." While prophecy has been understood as one of the most polemical discourses of the revolutionary period, I emphasize a prophetic strain that was explicitly anti-polemical, depicting a God capable of dialectically uniting even seemingly incompatible truths.³⁷

I build on Picciotto's work by attending to the affective infrastructure that underlies the labor of truth production in revolutionary England. If, in Picciotto's narrative, the public sphere is composed of laboring bodies and reasoning heads, here the public is an insistent affective space. The prophet derives authority not from his or her claim to privileged truth or even a corporate

antinomianism, anabaptism, universalism, millenarianism – just as contemporaries themselves did" (206-7).

³⁴ Lawrence Sanders, *The Fulness of Gods Love Manifested: Or, A Treatise discovering the Love of God, giving Christ for All* (London: 1643), *Early English Books Online*, 145-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁶ Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010), 5.

³⁷ In her analysis of Thomas Edwards's polemical *Gangraena*, Ann Hughes aptly articulates such a move. Hughes notes that historians' perspectives on the extent of England's schismatic fragmentation in part depends on the extent to which they take Edwards's account of sectarian divisions as "dispassionate description" (*Gangraena and the Struggle for the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 325). Yet Hughes argues that "Edwards's account of divisions should be seen as invocation, as an attempt to bring polarization into being" (325). "From one angle – Edwards's angle – we discern bitter religious divisions; from another we can see a broader unity of purpose among the orthodox godly" (329). In part, the work of this project is to read the inspired literature of the civil wars through the lens of the latter angle. For an overview of historical scholarship that privileges consensus versus conflict in the early modern period, see Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion, and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 20-26.

reasoning capacity, but his or her ability to tap into the currents of feeling coursing through the body politic. Such affective attunement imbues political life in this period to an extent not always acknowledged. When scholars talk about affect in the context of the civil wars, it is insistently individualized (most often, the saccharine, Kingly tears of royalist poetry). But the prophets discussed in this project seek to amplify collective feeling: shared sorrow at political strife, shared pride in national vitality, shared wonder at the workings of God in the world. In varied ways, it is for them the feeling of collectivity itself that has the power to transform history. To manifest the *corpus Christi* – to engender in each individual a sense of membership in a common, divine body – is to manifest God’s will on earth.

More than just offering a counter-narrative of civil war politics, however, the project also intervenes in a longer literary history of prophetic writing. Skipping across a century of near silence, English prophecy resurges in the wake of the French revolution as both religious practice and literary mode. From Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers to Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, Romantic authors explicitly adopt the mantle of the civil war prophet. The major poets envisage themselves incorporated into a Miltonic lineage of inspired writing, yet scholars often stereotype the Miltonic poet-prophet as an authoritative individual, whether drawing the Romantics into this tradition or distinguishing them from it. Joseph Wittreich and Harold Bloom describe the Romantics as inheriting a “visionary tradition,” derived from Chaucer, Langland, Sidney, and Spenser, but “whose great exemplar is Milton and whose holding spool is the Bible,” according to which “prophetic poetry is considered to be a secular effort to reveal spiritual Truth.”³⁸ Most recently, Christopher Bundock has argued that while pre-modern prophets (Milton included) evince “confidence in making new systems [that] stems from a claim to special knowledge, very often knowledge of metaphysical truths and of the future,” Romantic prophecy’s “greatest potentiality stems from its negativity, fragility, and failure.”³⁹ “The prophetic subject,” Bundock continues, “is powerful because of her or his capacity, through self-immolation, to clear spaces for new thought, especially genuinely different, unprethinkable futures.”⁴⁰ Bundock, that is, follows the theoretical footsteps of Benjamin, Adorno, and Blanchot by suggesting that prophecy’s transformative potential lies not in its ability to imagine or re-envision the future, but in its annihilation of the future, enabling a truly new, previously unimaginable future to emerge.

In my fourth chapter, I uncover a legacy of collectivist, civil war prophecy in the Romantic period. In the 1820s, William Godwin – father of Mary Shelley, father-in-law and mentor of Percy Shelley – spends nearly a decade writing a four-volume history of the civil war period, *History of the Commonwealth of England*. In contrast to Tory narratives of the civil wars, praising the divine reinstatement of monarchy, and Whig narratives, praising the revolution’s role in securing individual liberties, Godwin considers the political value of the civil wars in terms quite similar to this project. “The commonwealthmen,” he lauds, “aspired to a system and model of government, that was calculated to raise men to such an excellence as human nature may afford, and that should render them magnanimous, frank and fearless, *that should make them feel, not merely each man for himself and his own narrow circle, but as brethren, as members of a community, where all should sympathize in the good or ill fortune,*

³⁸ Joseph Wittreich, *Milton and the Line of Vision* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 99. Christopher Bundock, *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 20. See also M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), and Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971).

³⁹ Bundock, 4, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

the sorrows or joys, of the whole."⁴¹ Civil war government, in Godwin's telling, engenders within the individual a sense of affective membership in a broader collective. For Godwin, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley, the prophetic author attempts to revive a sense of collective being. Drawing on a tradition of civil war collectivism, which in turn draws on the *corpus Christi* metaphor, these authors cross the prophetic axes of individual/collective and present/future. Prophecy transforms the future by uncovering a sense of collectivity within the present: as individuals feel themselves affectively conjoined to a broader collective, they act on behalf of the collective. As for the civil war prophets of the previous chapters, the future is neither declared nor destroyed. As Percy Shelley puts it, "the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed"; augmenting "the social sympathies," the prophetic author enables the public to manifest the latent potentiality of the present.⁴²

This chapter recasts the legacy of the civil war in the Romantic literature, but, more importantly, it grapples with the significance of this particular strain of prophetic authorship in a secular context. The prophet's ability to manifest collective being is contingent on the existence of a cohesive, collective form, of a felt link between part and whole. The Bible ensures that "the body is one, and hath many members"; providence ensures that each present moment is laden with divine potentiality and future emergence. Percy Shelley translates this religious foundation into vaguely spiritualized, secular terms. The chapter ultimately turns to *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley's apocalyptic retelling of the civil wars, which critiques the prophetic possibilities of both civil war politics and Romantic inspired authorship. How can the prophetic author foment sympathetic community when humanity has grown impossibly complex and differentiated? What commonness exists among an English nation that does not share common religious beliefs, or even, in the wake of colonization and imperial expansion, common national boundaries or rights of citizenship? Elizabeth Poole might claim to share in the suffering of revolutionary England, but Mary Shelley suggests that nineteenth-century English empire – spanning not only multiple religions but oceans, landscapes, races – has grown too vast and formless to facilitate such affective intimacy. In the context of secular modernity, the prophetic author cannot sense the relation between part and whole, for the very notion of the whole – all humanity united in one body, one spirit – has lost its metaphysical foundation.

This final chapter casts important doubt on the notion of an affective public sphere, and of an aesthetic mode that attempts to facilitate an affective politics. Carl Schmitt complained of the Romantics that, for them, "antitheses themselves are not antitheses, but merely occasions. No concept retains its form. Everything dissolves into an oratorical music... The antitheses are immediately mediated and reconciled, and an agreement invariably follows. The 'community,' which in fact is always assumed, is the immediate corporeal and spiritual proximity of friends and those of like mind. Here the 'true' concept, in opposition to the false, can be spoken of unhesitatingly and without the necessity of entering into laborious conceptual or substantive demonstrations."⁴³ I am, in many ways, offering a Romanticized interpretation of early modern politics and aesthetics, tracing the resonance between a God who is "neither this nor that," "who is love, peace, and a generall

⁴¹ William Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth of England from its Commencement to the Restoration of Charles the Second* (4 vols., London, 1824-1828), II, 499.

⁴² Percy Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," in *Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 675-6.

⁴³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 128.

good, gives being to all, and cherishes all,” and a secularized Romantic universalism.⁴⁴ The prophet makes no decision, privileges no decision, but instead attunes the reader to the “oratorical music” that Schmitt disparages. Such sympathetic universalism risks effacing the distinction between “true” and “false,” just and unjust – or rather, privileging agreement and reconciliation over justice. Moreover, the claim to feel *as* the whole can all too easily mutate into a claim to feel *on behalf of* the whole. A politics grounded in a nebulous *communitas* risks papering over structural inequities with a cozy fellow-feeling, and dismissing felt experience that does not accord with one’s own. As minister Jeremy Taylor observes, “[w]e are not now in those primitive daies, when there was one common sense among Christians, when if one member suffer’d, all the members suffer’d with it.”⁴⁵ If not in 1647, certainly not in 1826, much less in 2021.

At the same time, when one is self-conscious of such drawbacks, a case for an affective politics can still be made – and these prophets are nothing if not self-conscious. At the heart of their writings – and at the heart of the English revolution – is an insistent admission of unknowing: never fully knowing God’s will, not being able to certainly distinguish between true and false prophecy, not even completely understanding the workings of one’s own conscience and conviction. It is no coincidence that the three central figures of the project – Elizabeth Poole, John Milton, and Lucy Hutchinson – prophesy in the wake of defeat (Poole’s insistence on saving the King’s life goes unheeded; as republicans, Milton and Hutchinson witness their providential victory overturned). In and of itself, “I do not know” cannot constitute a political program. But, in these texts, aesthetic indeterminacy takes on political valence by constellating new forms of community, unmaking the trenchant divisions of party line. The prophet enables the reader to feel likeness across and through difference, to feel him or herself as part of a common form even when the precise contours of that form resist rational understanding. There is a reason that consensus derives from the latin *consentire*, “to feel together.” These prophets suggest that feeling together – not as an unchanging, uniform structure, but as a joint body undergoing perpetual flux – is what enables political action. And for them, feeling together is not simply a matter of fact, true or not, as Jeremy Taylor suggests; feeling together, feeling oneself to be part of a common divine form, is a sense experience that must be cultivated, that the prophetic author cultivates in themself and attempts in turn to cultivate in their interlocutors.

In some ways, then, this is a work of political theology, uncovering the religious dimensions of a particular strain of revolutionary political thought. And yet, the reason prophecy so interests me as an object of study is because prophetic, or inspired, writing is also a literary genre. The prophet conjoins questions of political, religious, and literary authority, and aesthetic form plays a significant role in furthering the author’s spiritual and political message. And so, before turning to the chapters themselves, it is worth offering some brief commentary on the theory of the aesthetic put forth in this project. Traditional theories of Renaissance aesthetics often describe human creativity as modeled on the divine creativity of God.⁴⁶ More recently, Victoria Kahn has suggested “poesis” as

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Poole, *A Vision Wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the Kingdom being the summe of what was delivered to the Generall Councel of the Army* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*, 7. William Sedgwick, *Justice upon the Armie Remonstrance* (London, 1649), *Early English Books Online*, 38.

⁴⁵ Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse on the Liberty of Prophesying* (London: R. Royston, 1647), *Early English Books Online*, 184.

⁴⁶ See, to name just a few examples, M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953); Milton Nahm, *The Artist as Creator: An Essay on Human Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1956); Erwin Panofsky, “Artist, Scientist, Genius: Notes on the ‘Renaissance-Dammerung,’” in *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York: Harper, 1962). For an overview of recent complications of the

“the missing third term in both early modern and contemporary debates about politics and religion.”⁴⁷ Kahn describes poesis as “the principle, first advocated by Hobbes and Vico, that we can know only what we make ourselves,” a “kind of making [that] encompasses both the art of poetry and the secular sphere of human interaction, the human world of politics and history.”⁴⁸ Following Blumenberg’s argument for “a decisive break between modernity and theological modes of explanation” – modernity “reoccupies” religious questions rather than secularizes religious beliefs – Kahn tracks a secular political theory through early modern aesthetics.⁴⁹

My vision of the aesthetic here, as my vision of the political, is firmly grounded in religious belief; inspired writing, after all, is the opposite of that which “we make ourselves.” Indeed, in his letter to Davenant, Hobbes (a key figure for Kahn’s argument) scorns the presumed passivity of the prophetic author:

But why a Christian should think it an ornament to his poem, either to profane the true God or invoke a false one, I can imagin no cause but a reasonless imitation of Custom, of a foolish custome, by which a man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a Bagpipe.⁵⁰

Hobbes, of course, means to denigrate the prophetic claim to serve as an empty vessel; and yet, centuries later, Percy Shelley will triumphantly theorize prophetic authorship as another passive instrument, as wind blowing over a lyre. Crucially, however, the lyre not only plays the wind’s melody, but harmonizes as it is played: “It is as if the lyre could accommodate its cords to that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound, even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre.”⁵¹ This complex, dialectical interplay of what Shelley might consider “the spirit of history” and the human collective – what Poole, Milton, and Hutchinson would term God or divine providence and human actors – describes prophetic authority in the terms of this project. Providence is, of course, pervasive and omnipotent for these prophetic authors, and yet (perhaps because they address a cause, by all appearances, not currently favored by God), they consider providence a complicated dance between God’s plan and the choices of his earthly actors. Rather than modeling their own creative agency on an omnipotent, divine sovereign, they consider themselves creators whose authority derives from an affective openness to God and to the human collective. Their aesthetic refuses to either champion human agency or deny it altogether. For these prophets, our creative power lies not in the ability to make what is not, but to manifest the potentiality of what is.

analogy between poetic making and divine creation, see Michael Mack, *Sidney’s Poetics: Imitating Creation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 81-3.

⁴⁷ Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁰ William Davenant, *Preface to Gondibert*, in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Spingarn, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-9), 2:59.

⁵¹ Shelley, “A Defence,” 675.

CHAPTER ONE

Affect, Politics, and the Prophecies of Elizabeth Poole

How do we know if, whilst we are disputing these things, another company of men shall not gather together, and put out a paper as plausible perhaps as this? I do not know why it might not be done by that time you have agreed upon this, or got hands to it if that be the way. And not only another, and another, but many of this kind. And if so, what do you think the consequence of that would be? Would it not be confusion? Would it not be utter confusion?
 -Oliver Cromwell, *The Putney Debates* (1647)

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body.

-1 Corinthians 12:12

We were a heterogenial body, consisting of parts very diverse from another, settled upon principles inconsistent one with another.

-Henry Denne, *The Levellers Design Discovered* (1649)

Our story begins with a familiar crisis – the very same kind of crisis that prompts Paul to remind his followers that they share “one body” in Christ, and the very same kind of crisis that we witness daily playing out in the news: the crisis of reaching agreement. How can a group of “heterogenial” persons, “settled upon principles inconsistent one with another,” reach political consensus? For that matter, how can such a “heterogenial body” share any kind of sociopolitical structure at all? In the context of the English civil wars, the problem of mediating between disparate perspectives is, if not entirely novel, nonetheless confronted on an unprecedented scale. As Cromwell pleads with the Council to reach agreement during the Putney Debates, we hear – even in a figure who holds liberty of conscience as a freedom worth fighting and dying for – the fears of sect and schism that animate the writings of the most conservative figures of the period. In the absence of a singular, sovereign authority, the *jure divino* of the King, the number of potential papers describing the mode of governance risks limitless proliferation – “another, and another,” and another.

From the Aldermanbury Accord, an agreement by prominent ecclesiasts to suppress any differing opinions, to the unparalleled freedom of the press, the civil war period offers a taxonomy of responses to the challenge of societal division. Accordingly, scholars have long turned back to this period as a resource for responding to contemporary issues of heterogeneity. Charting the development of the public sphere in the seventeenth century, Jurgen Habermas has promoted rational debate as a means of mediating between divergent worldviews.⁵² Brad Gregory, echoing the position of civil war conservatives like Thomas Edwards and Thomas Hobbes, has excoriated the absence of “any shared or even convergent view about what ‘we’ think is true or right or good” – a lacuna of commonness he attributes to the Reformation, and deems far beyond the reach of “reason alone.”⁵³ Most recently, Teresa Bejan has argued for “mere civility” in response to irreconcilable

⁵² Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

⁵³ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012), 11, 126.

difference – a concept she discovers in Roger Williams’ response to the gulf of understanding between seventeenth-century New England Puritans and Native Americans.⁵⁴

The civil war period lends itself so readily to such analysis not only because it grapples with issues of pluralism on an unprecedented scale, but also because it grapples specifically with the pluralism of religious belief – a mode of knowledge that Gregory describes as involving “doctrinal claims” that “explicitly or implicitly affirm that certain things are true, which logically always implies that others are false,” and that Habermas likewise describes as a “worldview,’ or a ‘comprehensive doctrine’ in the sense that it claims the authority to give structure to an entire way of life.”⁵⁵ In these formulations, religious belief poses an existential threat to societal harmony because it is predicated on a claim to absolute truth – truth that does not require and even defies human understanding.

As discussed in the Introduction, this project reframes what is, perhaps, the most authoritative mode of religious belief in the civil war period: prophecy. At this moment in history, prophets flooded the public sphere, proclaiming unequivocal knowledge of divine will. Scholars often contextualize the proliferation of prophecy during the civil war period in terms of a shift from hierarchical to individual authority.⁵⁶ Rather than deferring to ecclesiastical leaders or the sovereign in order to mediate between conflicting truth claims, the prophet resolves the problem of consensus by claiming privileged knowledge of divine will. In this telling, prophecy exemplifies the difficulty of unifying a “heterogenous body.” Civil war prophets promoted markedly factional interpretations of divine will; republicans and royalists alike aligned God with their own political agenda. “If every private man should have leave to [prophecy],” Hobbes warns, “all Common-wealth would be dissolved.”⁵⁷

In this chapter, I challenge narratives – from contemporary feminist scholars and civil war conservatives alike – that associate prophecy with a claim to individual, authoritative knowledge of divine will. I do so by reconsidering the prophecies of Elizabeth Poole. On December 28, 1648 and again on January 5, 1649, Poole comes before Cromwell and the Army Council to offer her advice on the regicide. Presumably, the Army hopes for divine guidance in relation to this most pressing, most controversial decision of the civil wars (at very least, whoever brings in Poole likely wants to enlist prophetic authority in service of his own political motives). On both occasions, however, Poole disappoints them. At one point, the Council asks “whether she had any direction to give the Concel?” to which Poole replies, “not for the present.”⁵⁸ Pressed again “whether she spake against the bringing of him to triall, or against their taking of his [life],” Poole ultimately advises the Army to bring the King “to triall, that he may be convicted in his conscience, but touch not his person.”⁵⁹ Scholars of female prophecy have been confused by the perceived discrepancy between Poole’s “social conservatism and religious radicalism,” by the rambling incoherence of her visions, and by her reluctance to assert divine will.⁶⁰

I demonstrate how Poole’s “social conservatism,” far from being at odds with her “religious radicalism,” actually stems from a radical religious perspective circulating in the 1640s: namely, from

⁵⁴ Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017).

⁵⁵ Gregory, 75. Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 48.

⁵⁶ This central proponents of this argument, Katharine Gillespie and Carme Font Paz, will be addressed throughout the chapter.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 27.20.

⁵⁸ Poole, *Vision*, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁰ Manfred Brod, “Politics and Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England: The Case of Elizabeth Poole,” *Albion* 31.3 (Autumn 1999): 395-412, 137.

the egalitarian Leveller notion that “there is no respect of persons with God.” She defends the King’s life, that is, not due to his privileged position within the body politic, but due to his status as a mere member. In a mode we will come to see as emblematic of New Testament prophecy, Poole’s prophetic authority parallels her understanding of political authority: rather than claiming privileged knowledge of divine will – the kind of exclusive authority that parallels the *jure divino* of the King – I argue that Poole’s prophetic authority stems from her membership within the body politic, and specifically from her sensitive attunement to the feeling of the body politic as a whole.

Poole alerts us to another way of understanding how religious belief responded to the challenge of pluralism in the civil war period. Far from claiming doctrinal certainty, her prophecies reflect the profound epistemological uncertainty that underpins radical religion in the early revolutionary period. Rather than resolving such uncertainty through recourse to sovereign decision, individual revelation, or a corporate reasoning capacity, Poole suggests that public feeling – an open-ended, non-coercive, affective relationship to otherness – might hold together England’s increasingly “heterogenous body.”

I. The Uncertainty of Knowledge in this Life: Liberty of Conscience and the Problem of Consensus

As with many women actors of the civil war period, we do not have a complete history of Elizabeth Poole. We do not know when she was born or when she died. What we have instead are Poole’s two published pamphlets, *A Vision wherein is manifested the disease and cure of the Kingdome* and *An Alarum of Warre*, and passing mentions of the life that she lived before and after their publication.

Elizabeth Poole, daughter of Robert, was christened at St. Gregory near St. Paul on December 20, 1622.⁶¹ Her first entry into public view comes in the form of an exchange of letters in July 1645 between her father and William Kiffin, a prominent advocate of adult baptism among the radical religious communities of London. Around the age of 16, Elizabeth Poole, apparently under the influence of one of her father’s servants, leaves home to join Kiffin’s congregation. In the letters, Kiffin lambasts Robert Poole for his lack of control over his household, emphasizing the futility of infant baptism.

But sometime before 1648, for unknown reasons, Poole leaves Kiffin’s congregation and migrates to Abingdon, where she meets Thomasine Pendarves, the wife of a minister there. On December 28, 1648 and January 5, 1649, again, through unknown circumstances, Poole twice addresses the Army Council with regard to the regicide. In her first address, Poole describes a vision of the Army curing the diseased body of the Kingdom. Her vision does little more than support the Army’s authority, and she is well-received by the Council. When she returns to address them in January, she makes a series of convoluted arguments in defense of the King’s life. This time, Poole has come to address the Army uninvited, and her advice runs directly against their proposed course of action. On January 30, 1649, the King is executed, disproving Poole’s claim to prophetic authority. Kiffin and her old congregation accuse her of heretical views and sexual immorality, and send a letter to John Pendarves urging him to denounce her from the pulpit. In another twist of providence, Pendarves’ wife, Poole’s friend Thomasine, intercepts the letter. In her final publication, *An Alarum of War*, Poole defends herself against these accusations, explains why her prophecy did

⁶¹ This history comes from Brod, “Politics and Prophecy,” which provides the most comprehensive account of Poole’s life.

not come to pass, and excoriates the Army for refusing to follow her advice.⁶² From here, her story trickles off. There is mention of a “Mistress Pool” who invades the pulpit at Somerset house (as Brod notes, “not a congregation known for its radicalism”) in July 1653 in order to preach on behalf of Lilburne. In 1668, Poole is imprisoned for maintaining an unlicensed printing press at her home in Southwark.

Contemporary scholars looking back on Poole’s prophecies have long dismissed her as, quite simply, a bad prophet. Her claim to privileged knowledge of divine will is hesitant at best. If she occasionally subverts hierarchical authority – as when she suggests that the Army might divorce the King, for the head of the body politic has become “flesh” – she at other times reaffirms established forms of authority, informing the Army that “you are for the Lords sake to honour his person. For he is the Father and husband of your bodies, as unto men... and therefore your right cannot be without him.”⁶³ And so, Rachel Trubowitz describes Poole as only “moderately revolutionary.” Brian Patton characterizes her intentions as “anything but subversive of the status quo.”⁶⁴

More recently, scholars have sidestepped the relatively conservative politics of Poole’s prophecies in order to enfold her into narratives of female prophecy that describe “the tale of the birth of the possessive self.”⁶⁵ In professing privileged knowledge of divine will, according to scholars like Katharine Gillespie, Teresa Feroli, and Carme Font Paz, the woman prophet lays claim to the political authority of a sovereign, inviolable, proto-Lockean “I.” Indeed, Poole’s conversion to the “Anabaptisticall way” is one of the grounding anecdotes of Gillespie’s book, a conversion Gillespie describes as “an irresistible call ‘home’ to sovereign or possessive personhood.”⁶⁶

When we turn our attention to Poole’s pamphlets in the next section, we’ll see that both of these readings – Poole as bad prophet and possessive individual – have merit. Especially in *An Alarum of War*, the pamphlet in which Poole defends herself against accusations of ungodliness and impropriety, Poole repeatedly admonishes the Army for failing to follow her advice, asserting her own sovereign authority to speak divine will. At other moments throughout all three messages, however, Poole advocates absolute passivity and self-abnegation in a manner that seems irreconcilable with anything resembling possessive individualism. Scholars have cast these readings – female prophecy as passive submission to God or active assertion of selfhood – in oppositional terms (I particularly like Phyllis Mack’s retort that scholars like Gillespie and Font Paz “have celebrated the assertive strategies of prophets who did not even claim to be awake during the time they preached”).⁶⁷ Yet both camps – Poole-as-bad-prophet and Poole-as-possessive-individual – share the underlying assumption that what is radical about England’s revolutionary period is the emergence of individual rights, in the form of the liberal, possessive individual. Either the female

⁶² Elizabeth Poole, *An Alarum of War, given to the Army, and to their High Court of Justice* (London, 1649), *Early English Books Online*.

⁶³ Poole, “A Vision.”

⁶⁴ Rachel Trubowitz, “Female Preachers and Male Wives: Gender and Authority in Civil War England,” *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution*, ed. James Holstun (London: Frank Cass, 1992): 112-133, 112. Patton, 143.

⁶⁵ Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity*, 8. See also Teresa Feroli, *Political Speaking Justified* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), and Carme Font Paz, *Women’s Prophetic Writings in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁶⁶ Gillespie, *Domesticity*, 8.

⁶⁷ Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 88.

prophet does or does not claim freedom from the hierarchical authority of Kings and husbands; according to these terms, she either is or is not to be celebrated as radical.

The reception history of female prophecy accords with broader trends in the historical reception of the English revolution. In the 1960s, C.B. Macpherson posited the emergence of the possessive individual in the kind of “self” advanced by the Levellers; J.C. Davis retorted that “what was being asserted in the various debates of the late 1640s was an (albeit radicalised) form of Christian individualism, in which a person had a ‘limited sphere or autonomy bounded by duties to God’ rather than a boundless and acquisitive possession of their own self.”⁶⁸ In more recent years, however, historians have cast aside polarized descriptions of radical self-assertion and conservative, Christian submission in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how revolutionary actors understood the evolving rights of early modern religious and political subjects. In this section, I aim to look closely at the historical context of November 1648 to January 1649, the months in which Poole addresses the Army Council. What we find through this context is a strange, almost paradoxical version of self-sovereignty that will accord with Poole’s prophecies much more fully than either proto-feminist assertion or Christian submission: a defense of individual sovereignty founded on its very impossibility.

When Poole delivers her first message to the Army Council in December 1648, they are in the midst of discussing *An Agreement of the People*, a document first introduced by the Levellers roughly a year earlier, in October 1647. Now, with Charles I securely held in Windsor Castle, and Cromwell and the Army Council debating his fate, John Lilburne, the infamous Leveller leader, was revising the document, attempting to establish the immutable fundamentals of governance that would shape England’s new political order. The *Agreement* outlines the proposed mode of electing parliamentary officials and the duration of Parliament’s term. But its crowning achievement – the significance of which has been debated by generations of historians – lies in the rights it grants to the individual, irrespective of “tenure, estate, charter, degree, birth or place.”⁶⁹ In striking contrast to the *jure divino* of the King, *An Agreement* asserts that the authority of elected officials derives from the people: “the power of this and all future representatives is inferior only to theirs who choose them.” These representatives have the power to alter laws, courts, magistrates and officers, to make war or peace, and to conduct diplomacy. But, in addition to setting limits on the amount of time that an elected official could serve in parliament, *An Agreement* restricts the power of political representatives by setting aside a series of “reserves,” powers that no elected official could exert over another person. And of these reserves, the most fundamental was the unifying tenet of the revolutionary cause: liberty of conscience, the freedom of every individual to decide matters of belief for him or herself.

From a bird’s eye view, the central importance of liberty of conscience to the revolutionary cause supports the narrative of possessive individualism expounded by Macpherson, Gillespie, Feroli, Font Paz, and others. Again, from their vantage point, the revolutionary period inaugurates a shift from external, hierarchical authority – of Kings, bishops, and husbands – to individual authority. And yet, as numerous historians have pointed out, the Levellers’ actual description of liberty of conscience belies the notion that individuals have possessive control over their own

⁶⁸ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. J.C. Davis, “Religion and the Struggle for Freedom in the English Revolution,” *HJ* 35 (1992): 507-30. This summary of Davis’s thought comes from Elliot Vernon and Philip Baker’s excellent introduction to *The Agreements of the People, the Levellers, and the Constitutional Crisis of the English Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 17.

⁶⁹ Anon., *An Agreement of the People for a Firme and Present Peace* (London, 1647), *Early English Books Online*.

beliefs. That is, *An Agreement* does not hand over control of conscience from the clergy to the individual; *An Agreement* reserves the right to liberty of conscience because the powers of political representatives derive from the people – yet “the restraint of conscience was not a power which anyone could (rightly) exercise over *themselves*.”⁷⁰ Rachel Foxley develops this interpretation of Leveller conscience – individuals cannot willfully compel their own conscience, and so neither can an elected representative – by tracing the wording of the *Agreement* back to the 1646 *Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens*, which offers a more prolific account of the issue:

Yee may propose what Forme yee conceive best, and most available for Information and well-being of the Nation, and may persuade and invite thereunto, but compell, yee cannot justly; for ye have no Power from Us so to doe, nor could you have; for we could not conferre a Power that was not in our selves, there being none of us, that can without wilfull sinne binde our selves to worship God after any other way, then what (to a tittle,) in our owne particular understandings, wee approve to be just.⁷¹

That matters of Religion, and the wayes of Gods Worship, are not at all intrusted by us to any humane power, because therein wee cannot remitt or exceed a tittle of what our Consciences dictate to be the mind of God, without wilfull sinne: neverthelesse the publike way of instructing the Nation (so it be not compulsive) is referred to their discretion.⁷²

Davis countered Macpherson by suggesting that the conscience operates like a “fax machine,” a passive, mechanical dictation from God rather than an autonomous, self-determined faculty.⁷³ Foxley, in an important variation on Davis’s argument, emphasizes that “the key for the tolerationist argument is that it is not about obeying ‘the mind of God’ but ‘what *our Consciences dictate* to be the mind of God.’”⁷⁴ “Somehow,” Foxley concludes, “our most basic and inalienable self-propriety seems to *consist* in not having these powers to give away.”⁷⁵ Conscience is set aside as a reserve not because the individual has power over it, but because no one has power over it. Liberty of conscience – again, the central creed of the revolutionary cause – is a right accorded to an extremely murky faculty. “Our *Consciences* dictate... the mind of God.” How they do so is not entirely clear.

We can trace the idea of the uncontrollable conscience – and the problems that it ultimately generates for the revolutionary cause – back even further, to Leveller arguments for toleration in the early 1640s.⁷⁶ William Walwyn’s 1644 *Compassionate Samaritane*, a text foundational to the *Agreements* and Poole’s prophecies, offers three reasons for defending liberty of conscience. First, “Because of what judgment soever a man is, he cannot chuse but be of that judgement... there ought to be no punishment, for punishment is the recompence of voluntary actions, therefore no man ought to be

⁷⁰ Rachel Foxley, “Freedom of Conscience and the Agreements of the People,” in *The Agreements of the People, the Levellers, and the Constitutional Crisis of the English Revolution*, 123.

⁷¹ “Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens,” as quoted in Foxley, 123.

⁷² *Agreement of the People*, as quoted in Foxley, 123.

⁷³ J.C. Davis, “Religion and the Struggle for Freedom in the English Revolution,” 515-6.

⁷⁴ Foxley, 124.

⁷⁵ Foxley, 125.

⁷⁶ See Abraham Stoll, *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), for the origins of liberty of conscience in the English and European traditions.

punished for his judgment.”⁷⁷ Again, belief cannot be punished because the individual cannot willfully control the beliefs of his or her own conscience. Matters of conscience are involuntary; separatists “are necessarily enforced to be of the mind that they are.” Second, Walwyn determines that liberty of conscience is necessary due to “the uncertainty of knowledg in this life: no man, nor no sort of men can presume of an unerring spirit: ‘Tis knowne that the Fathers, Generall Councells, Nationall Assemblies, Synods, and Parliaments in their times have been most grosly mistaken.” Even if individuals could compel their own consciences, we as a society cannot “unerring[ly]” privilege one belief over another (and certainly cannot do so based on the political status of the believer). Third, even if we could determine the truth of a particular practice or belief, “To compell me... against my conscience, is to compell me to doe that which is sinfull: for though the thing may be in it selfe good, yet if it doe not appeare to be so to my conscience, the practice thereof in me is sinfull, which therefore I ought not to be compelled unto.” No belief is good or bad in and of itself, but only insofar as it is good or bad to the individual conscience. Given Walwyn’s emphasis on the ineluctability of conscience, the uncertainty of knowledge, and the relativity of truth, we can (perhaps) sympathize with even the most conservative detractors of liberty of conscience, like Thomas Edwards, who decry the proliferation of sect and schism that (they posit) will result from the tolerationist vision. How can we reach political consensus and societal harmony if individual belief is involuntary and incorrigible, and truth is unknowable?

In response to such fears, Walwyn defers to the powers of reason and truth. He defends religious sects by explaining that even “the Brownist and Anabaptist are rationally examiners of those things they hold for truth, milde discoursers, and able to give an account of what they believe.” If conscience is involuntary, rational “argument and perswation” can nonetheless “rectifie” mistaken beliefs. And if truth is uncertain, it is also divine, transcendent, victorious: “Truth was not used to feare, or to seeke shifts or stratagemes for its advancement! I should rather thinke that they who are assured of her should desire that all mens mouthes should be open, that so errorr may discover its foulnes and trueth become more glorious by a victorious conquest after a fight in open field; they shunne the battel that doubt their strength.” Opening “all mens mouthes” will only, inevitably, further Truth’s progression. In the early years of the civil wars, deference to truth and reason sufficed. Though individuals posited divergent beliefs, they were united against a common enemy.⁷⁸ Cromwell embodied the “anti-formalist” stance, citing reason as the solvent for any potential categorical division: “As for being united in formes (commonly called uniformity) every Christian will for Peace sake, study and doe as far as Conscience will permit; And from brethren in things of the mind, we looke for no compulsion, but that of Light and reason.”⁷⁹ Inventing a tendentious etymology, Cromwell subsumes any call “for being united in formes” into absolute “uniformity.” He shuns enforced compulsion in favor of compulsion that stems, effortlessly, from “Light and reason,” as if such a consensus will emerge merely by looking for it.

In the wake of victory against Charles, however, the parliamentarians struggle to define their own political agenda, to articulate what beliefs they share aside from their conviction that belief not be compulsory. In the 1647 Putney Debates, Cromwell continues to defer to reason as a means of reaching consensus: “I know a man may answer all difficulties with faith, and faith will really answer all difficulties really where it is, but we are very apt, all of us, to call that faith, that perhaps may be

⁷⁷ William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane*. Walwyn’s strangely static account of mental processes – “he cannot chuse but be of that judgement” – may jump out to the perceptive reader. This will contrast, in the next chapter, with Milton’s ever-evolving truth.

⁷⁸ David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians*, 386.

⁷⁹ As quoted in Como, 340.

but carnal imagination, and carnal reasonings... we ought to consider the consequences, and God hath given us our reason that we may do this.”⁸⁰ Cromwell defines reason as a matter of “consider[ing] the consequences,” turning away from the “carnal reasonings” tainted with individual will and desire in favor of considering the effect of the Army’s decisions on the commonwealth as a whole. And yet, his language betrays the fallibility of reason, as the word “reason” appears in the very term describing its opposite (“carnal reasonings”). The problem is less that men are choosing to privilege “carnal imagination, and carnal reasonings” over a consequentialist, public reason, but that “we are all very apt, all of us” to confuse these faculties. Walwyn admits this same fallibility. His defense of the sects rebuts the notion that “the Separatists are a rash, heady People, and not so much concluded by their Reason, as their Fancie, that they have their *Enthusiasms*, and Revelations, which no body knowes what to make of.” He classifies “the Brownist and Anabaptist” as “rationall examiners” in order to suggest that liberty of conscience will not provoke anarchy, that reason will be capable of yielding consensus. But even as Walwyn describes the consolidating effect of reason on errant consciences, his parenthetical aside undermines his conviction: “The conscience being subject only to reason (*either that which is indeed, or seems to him which hears it to be so*) can only be convinced or perswaded thereby.” Reason itself is an imperfect solution to the challenge of convincing another’s conscience, for one can scarcely tell what is indeed reason and what merely “seems to him which hears it to be so.”

For a Habermasian proponent of the public sphere, the difficulty of distinguishing between true reason and that which “seems to him which hears it to be so” is the difficult, but no less vital, work of democracy. This is not, however, the resolve that the Army reaches at the end of 1648. In November, the Army’s *Remonstrance* proposes abandoning negotiations with Charles. Yet on December 4, Parliament voted to continue negotiations with the King. And so, on December 6, Colonel Pride stood on the steps of the House of Commons, barring the entry of about 180 Presbyterian MPs sympathetic to the King. The revisions that Lilburne proposes to *The Agreement* likewise document the Army’s new strategy of excluding their political opponents. While the first *Agreement* “took a self-consciously irenic direction and provided no disability or punishment for activity on either side in the first Civil War... the *Agreements* that emerged in this polarised environment [of late 1648-49] sought to politically disable royalists and, in the case of the officers’ *Agreement*, many Presbyterians from the vote for a period of between seven to ten years. The effect of these exclusions would have meant that the ‘people’ would have been drawn from the relatively small pool of army partisans and ‘well-affected’ neutrals.”⁸¹ The very men that proposed opening “all mens mouths” began to close them – in part because the cause they defended, liberty of conscience, eluded the control of magistrates, of individuals, of reason itself. The idea that individuals were ineluctably compelled to their beliefs, and could not be coerced into resigning those beliefs, was fundamentally incompatible with the need to reach political consensus.

II. Elizabeth Poole, Bad Prophet

We can understand, then, why the Army might call in a consultant prophet to help illuminate divine will in regard to this most pressing of political decisions, the regicide. “The minde of God” was

⁸⁰ Oliver Cromwell, *The Putney Debates*, ed. Phillip Baker (London: Verso, 2007), 64.

⁸¹ Elliot Vernon, “A Firme and Present Peace; Upon Grounds of Common Right and Freedome?: The Debate on the *Agreements of the People* and the Crisis of the Constitution, 1647-59,” in *The Agreements of the People, the Levellers, and the Constitutional Crisis of the English Revolution*, 203.

mediated by the individual conscience, a slurry of faith, carnal imagination, carnal reasonings, and spiritual stirrings. But the prophet claimed to bypass the fallibility of human judgment. Female prophets in particular describe themselves as entirely passive – and therefore, reliably transparent – mediators of divine will. Anna Trapnel’s 1654 *Cry of a Stone*, for instance, begins with the prophet “Lying in bed with her eyes shut, her hands fixed, seldom seen to move,” scarcely eating for twelve days, and delivering “many and various things; speaking every day, sometimes two, three, four and five hours together; and that sometimes once a day, and sometimes oftner, sometimes in the day only, and sometimes both in the day and night.”⁸² Trapnel herself “desired of the Lord to tell me whether I had done that which was of and from himself,” worrying that she might act of self-will. But the Lord reassures her, again and again, that she is his “instrument.”⁸³ He delivers visions of his presence within the Army, and, lest Trapnel misread them, God supplies the correct interpretation: “I shrunk down in the room; and cried out in my heart, ‘Lord what is this?’ It was answered me, ‘A discovery of the glorious state of whole Sion, in the reign of the Lord Jesus, in the midst of them, and of it thou shalt have more visions hereafter.’”⁸⁴ Should the Army have called upon Trapnel in December 1648, she would have informed them of the divinely ordained path ahead in no uncertain terms; over the course of her prophesying, she, like many prophets of the civil war era, would repeatedly claim privileged knowledge of God’s will with regard to earthly political actors. Trapnel describes her own role as that of a handmaid, a vessel, a mouthpiece; nonetheless, we can understand how a prophet like Trapnel might support Gillespie’s narrative of “the tale of the birth of the possessive self,” if only in an incipient, imperfect manner. Even as she submits entirely to God, even as she professes her own deadness, Trapnel claims privileged, exclusive knowledge of divine will – a claim that essentially grants the prophet the *jure divino* once reserved for the King. Revelation, in her case, resolves the problem of uncertainty.

As already intimated, Poole is not this kind of prophet. Far from reflecting England’s increasing factionalism over the course of the civil wars, Poole’s prophecies accord better with texts like Walwyn’s *Power of Love* (1643) and *Compassionate Samaritane* (1644) that pair arguments in defense of liberty of conscience with extreme tolerationist positions, bordering on skepticism, that emphasize “the uncertainty of knowledge in this life.” Indeed, Poole’s commitment to the uncertainty of divine will underlies the ambivalence of her first two messages to the Council, and helps explain why she has been so long regarded as a “bad” prophet. Her final pamphlet, *An Alarum of Warre*, most clearly demonstrates her commitment to the tolerationist argument. In this pamphlet, anticipating the political position of the revolutionary in the wake of the Restoration, Poole writes not only as an advocate for “the uncertainty of knowledge in this life,” but as a person who must admit her own fallibility – the proponent of a failed prophecy, proved wrong through the providence of history.

Reading *An Alarum* through the bifurcated lens of tolerationist arguments – which marry a defense of the individual’s liberty of conscience to an insistence that no individual can profess certain knowledge of God – clarifies how arguments for Poole as a possessive individual can coexist with her undeniably passive self-abnegation. On one hand, Poole’s objective in *An Alarum* is to excoriate the Army for not heeding her advice, defending her own claim to discern divine will. She explains that “these things [the regicide] came to passe according to divine will... to blinde the eyes of the wise, that they seeing might not perceive,” joining a legacy of unheeded prophets who speak

⁸² Anna Trapnel, *The Cry of a Stone*, ed. Hilary Hinds (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 4.

⁸³ Trapnel, *Cry*, 7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

to an audience insufficiently perceptive to receive God's message.⁸⁵ I speak, she informs them, "as the Prophet who saith to the people, if ye will not heare, my soule shall mourne in secret for you."⁸⁶ This aspect of her self-defense – an unfulfilled prophecy is as much the fault of the people as the fault of the prophet – appeals to the fact that the regicide is not the final decree of providence, as becomes clear in Poole's imagined dramatization of the event:

O Lord, say you, appeare in our Counsels; thus you stand with your resolutions and impossibilities in your hand (for when you were warned you would not heare) behold (say you) we must execute Justice (as you call it) upon the King, for we have bin seeking the Lord to appear in our Counsels, and these are the resolutions and impossibilities that we brought forth with us (no marvel, when you carried them in) and presentlie you call your Court, and proceed, never covering your faces for shame, that you should carry your resolutions and impossibilities with you, before the Lord, who onely should resolve, and appoint, what shall be possible; well saith the Lord, are you resolved upon your impossibilities, goe on, I will overtake you in my appointed time, *Charles*, bow downe thy head to the stroke, thou hast deserve it at my hands, saith the Lord, and doe thou confesse it, but accuse them not, leave them to my Judgement, I will proceed in equitie saith the Lord, this have yee done, the will of the Lord, or thus is his will done on your part.⁸⁷

Throughout the passage, Poole accuses the Army of self-will, parenthetically clarifying that the judgments they attributed to God were actually their own preconceived "resolutions and impossibilities." God may have permitted the regicide to occur (for all historical events reflect the workings of providence), but he resolves to "overtake you in my appointed time" (one of Poole's prophecies that does actually come true). Poole essentially defends herself by reminding the Army of "the uncertainty of knowledge in this life," excoriating them for denying that "the riches of the wisdom of God is past finding out; these are thine Idols O *England*, with thy Princes and Governours, wherefore returne and say no more *God is here, but not there*, for behold he is both here and there, though thou perceivest it not, who whilt say, if this be God then that is not, because the wheelles are contrary."⁸⁸ "The wheelles are contrary": Poole refers here to a contemporary analogy comparing the unknowability of providence to the wheels of a complicated clock. As John Wilkins attests in his 1649 *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence*, "the greatest statesmen, the wisest politicians, cannot discern whether the wheels move forward or backward... The motions of providence are so perplex and various, that it comes not within the compass of wisdom of man to gather any certain conclusions from them."⁸⁹ Defending her own right to claim knowledge of divine will, Poole simultaneously admonishes the kind of instrumental providentialism – God is on our side, not yours, as evidenced by this victory – running rampant among both republicans and royalists at this moment.

On the other hand, however, Poole offers a second reason for why "these things came to passe according to divine pleasure": "to staine the pride and glory of all flesh in me."⁹⁰ If the Army

⁸⁵ Poole, *Alarum*, 14.

⁸⁶ Poole, 7-8.

⁸⁷ Poole, 10-11.

⁸⁸ Poole, 14.

⁸⁹ John Wilkins, *Discourse concerning the Beauty of Providence* (London, 1649), *Early English Books Online*, 52.

⁹⁰ Poole, 2.

was wrong to ignore Poole's prophecy, Poole admits that she too was wrong, at least in part, because the regicide did, in fact, come to pass. Even though she considers the regicide evil, she notes that "my eyes are also open to behold the righteous judgements of God in it."⁹¹ She too argued that "*God is here, but not there*," in her own divine vision of reconciliation with Charles, not in the Army's vision of divine retribution; and she too, she admits, was mistaken. Indeed, *An Alarum* becomes newly legible once we recognize that all of Poole's accusations against the Army – you were resolved upon your own resolutions and impossibilities, ignoring the divine wisdom expounded by others – equally apply to her own prophecies. Take, for example, her account of the Army's "Religions," the first of a seven-point rebuttal explaining how their "religions, knowledges, faiths, lights, ordinances, orders, and State policies" were developed from self-interest rather than divine will:

First, for your Religions, that you received such knowledges of God, that therein you might serve God; I might grant, but that you might so keep to this knowledge, that you might know him no more nor otherwise, I denie; (*for no knowledge of God doth exclude a more full, certaine, or various knowledge of him*) for this is a molten Image, the which being cast into the Mold, it can hold no more; (or thus) if you should say the Lord hath given me such certain knowledge of himselfe, how I should worship him, the Father in the Sonne, who is God, Man, the Saviour of us all, our Mediator and Redeemer, in whom I have found satisfaction, and admit of no further knowledge of religious worshipping of him then you have received, is to deny that Scripture, *The knowledge of God passeth all understanding*, and not onely to make a molten, but a graven Image also, by engraving upon that Image before cast into the Mould, all the conceptions, and receptions of knowledge, light, and life, the which you by so doing will say, you have comprehended the incomprehensible; and this is the curtaine, or vaile, which is drawne over, you received it of God, curiously working it with a needle in these figures, at such a time, in such a place; but I will tell thee, not for such an end, for thou art forbidden to make to thy selfe any Image, of any thing, in Heaven or Earth, to bow down to and worship it.⁹²

At first, Poole seems to articulate a relatively common, tolerationist argument against idolatry. As Milton argues in *Areopagitica*, "the light which we have gain'd, was giv'n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge."⁹³ To hold to a singular, certain account of God – even if that knowledge of God is, in fact, true – is to render that belief false, "a molten Image, the which being cast into the Mold, it can hold no more." "No knowledge of God doth exclude a more full, certaine, or various knowledge of him." In a parallel formulation, Poole admonishes the Army for "despis[ing] the knowledge of another because it is not bound up in thy bundle."⁹⁴ Again, this phrasing invokes self-defense, Poole accusing the Army of mistakenly ignoring her advice, selfishly confining divine will to their own conception of it.

Yet Poole – surely in light of her own failure to discern divine will – then adopts the most skeptical iteration of the tolerationist argument: not only is all knowledge of God inherently partial, but "*The knowledge of God passeth all understanding*." Any articulation of divine will – the Army's claim that the regicide reflects divine will, or Poole's initial claim that it doesn't – falsely circumscribes

⁹¹ Poole, 3.

⁹² Poole, 10-11.

⁹³ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 550.

⁹⁴ Poole, 14.

God's capacious infinitude to human particulars, "curiously working it with a needle in these figures, at such a time, in such a place." At times, Poole posits that the Army need only change the method through which they claim access to divine will, adopting the deadness to self characteristic of the female prophet: "you must be dead to all your owne Interests, lives, liberties, freedoms, or whatsoever you might call yours, in the will of the Lord."⁹⁵ Here, however, Poole implies that knowledge of God is fundamentally impossible – that any claim to knowledge of God inevitably becomes a form of idolatry. "*True liberty is not bound to any thing, nor from any thing.* It is neither this nor that, either this or that, neither this nor that in Divine will."⁹⁶ As for Cromwell, Poole's God requires neither uniformity nor compulsion of belief. Yet her God not only opposes uniformity, but form itself. Divine will cannot be articulated in oppositional terms, which is also to say that it cannot be articulated at all: "here it is that you have not done justly, for you would be this but not that."⁹⁷ Even her prose, toggling between neither and either as if these opposites were synonymous, defies semantic differentiation. Cromwell and Walwyn oppose uniformity, but suggest that rational examination can yield, or at least reach toward, divine truth. Trapnel defers to the authority of revelation. Poole argues that any attempt to articulate divine will is inherently idolatrous, and that divine will can only be understood in retrospect. She prophesies, in essence, against prophecy, deriding any claim to knowledge of God.

III. If you could see sutable sorrow: Affect and Political Authority

If we were to end our analysis here, we might well conclude that Poole is an apolitical skeptic, a testament merely to the confusion of these times and to the challenge of religious pluralism as a political cause. She seems to advocate only absolute passivity, both in her disavowal of any attempt to act on behalf of divine will, and in her frequent exhortations to the Army to be "dead to all your owne Interests, lives, liberties, freedoms, or whatsoever you might call yours, in the will of the Lord." And yet, turning back to Poole's first two messages to the Council, we find that she suggests a means of detecting divine will in a way that does not inevitably congeal into idolatry. While "the knowledge of divine will passeth all understanding," Poole suggests that divine will can be felt; sympathy informs divinely authorized political action. In the context of the revolution, scholars often cast recourse to feeling as a conservative, royalist impulse.⁹⁸ This section demonstrates the

⁹⁵ Poole, 2.

⁹⁶ Poole, 7.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ See, for an excellent overview of the role of affect in civil war politics, Brandon Chua, "The Purposes of Playing on the Post Civil War Stage: the Politics of Affection in William Davenant's Dramatic Theory," *Exemplaria* 26.1 (2014): 39-57. Seventeenth-century kingship posited the relation between the monarch and his subjects as one of familial affection, and drew heavily on the idea of emotional bonds between king and subject (Mitchell Greenberg, *Baroque Bodies: Psychoanalysis and the Culture of French Absolutism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 8). As Chua notes, countering royalist charges that opponents of the king were willing to sacrifice filial love – by committing parricide in effect – for mercenary self-interest or blind ambition, parliamentary supporters worked hard to associate parliamentary representation with a form of self-effacing love for fellow citizens" (43). More frequently, however, the republican cause is seen as attempting "to disrupt a royalist economy of affection, replacing the ecstatic fervor induced by the infantilizing rhetoric of paternalistic kingship adopted by the Caroline court with a form of logical rationality" (44;

centrality of public feeling to Leveller accounts of political authority and Poole's account of prophetic authority, developing a new understanding of how revolutionaries responded to divine uncertainty and sociopolitical pluralism.

We will return in a moment to Poole's defense of the King. But I want to begin by considering the way that Poole frames her prophecies, for the way a prophecy begins demonstrates how the prophet conceives of the divine intersecting with the human. Trapnel, as we have seen, initiates her prophecies by professing her own sensory deadness, the voice of God sounding forth to her alone. Poole, in marked contrast, foregrounds her own sensory experience, and her membership within the body politic:

I have been (by the pleasure of the most High) made sensible of the distresses of this Land, and also a sympathizer with you in your labours: for having sometimes read your *Remonstrance*, I was for many daies made a sad mourner for her; the pangs of a travelling woman was upon mee, and the pangs of death oft-times panging mee, being a member in her body, of whose dying state I was made purely sensible. And after many daies mourning, a vision was set before me...⁹⁹

I am in divine pleasure made sensible of the might of the affaires which lye upon you; and the Spirit of sympathie abiding in me, constraineth me to groane with you in your paines...¹⁰⁰

Poole claims some kind of privileged knowledge of God; in both openings, she is "made sensible" of England's plight "by the pleasure of the most High" and "in divine pleasure." And yet, the kind of privilege she describes does not stem from her privileged relation to God, but from her particularly attuned relation to the body politic. Reading the Army's *Remonstrance* – the document that abandons the Army's earlier irenic stance in favor of declaring the King "the Cappitall and grand author of our troubles" and insisting that non-obliging delinquents must be "exil'd as Enemies and Traytors, and... die without mercy" – Poole feels England's plight so acutely that she registers the pain of the body politic upon her own body.¹⁰¹ Wracked with groans and "the pangs of a travelling woman" (a woman in labor), Poole has been granted "by pleasure of the most High" less an understanding of how to resolve England's conflicts than the felt intensity of their import, "the might of the affaires which lye upon you." Her right to speak, her claim to offer essential, divinely ordained guidance, emerges from her entwined status as a political supporter of the cause and a feeling member of the body politic.

This account of prophetic authority – whereby revelation emerges from feeling attunement to the collective rather than a privileged position in relation to God – differs from some of the best

paraphrasing Derek Hirst, "The Politics of Literature in the English Republic," *Seventeenth Century* 5.2 (1990): 133-55, 147-8). For an account of feeling as central to revolutionary action, see Esther Yu, "Tears in Paradise: the Revolution of Tender Conscience," which discusses the "tender conscience" as "something like an affective ecology": "Within its supple moral order, citizens gained political voices by becoming tender; a constitutional crisis ensued. In liberalism's formative age, the fragility of the tender conscience was both a regulative public ideal and the very condition of political voice" (*Representations* 142 (2018): 1-32, 2). Yu's tender conscience focuses on a feeling mode of "sensitive perception" rather than "sensuous appetites."

⁹⁹ Poole, *A Vision*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Poole, 3.

¹⁰¹ Anon. *A remonstrance or declaration of the Army* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*.

known civil war prophets. Ranter Abiezer Coppe, for instance – a man accused, among other things, of preaching “stark naked” by day and lying drunk with a wench “stark naked” at night – shifts between God and himself readily enough to obscure the difference between them: “My most Excellent Majesty (in me) hath strangely and variously transformed this forme. And behold, by mine owne Almightynesse (In me) I have been changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the Trump.”¹⁰² Coppe speaks from a position of absolute authority, casting himself as a modern day Ezekiel. Told by God to “Go up to *London*, to *London*, that great City, write, write, write,” Coppe beholds a hand with “a roll of a book.”¹⁰³ The roll is then thrust into his mouth, soon “broiling” and “burning” in his stomach. Coppe invites accusations of enthusiasm, quite literally claiming to have produced and consumed the word of God.

Civil war scholars acknowledge that prophecy takes many forms, existing on a spectrum from the relatively modest act of inspired Biblical exegesis, akin to preaching, to claims of direct revelation. At the same time, however, literary scholars have been most often drawn to prophets like Trapnel and Coppe, who avow direct contact with God, and fashion themselves on the canonical Old Testament prophets – in part because the Old Testament serves as “the central book of puritan religious and political culture,” as Steven Zwicker has claimed; in part because such prophets profess radical, exciting political visions; and in part because their prophecies accord with narratives of civil war politics focused on the advent of individual authority and polemical dissent.¹⁰⁴ Like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, Coppe rails against the existing political order, excoriating the nation’s sins, and the sins of those in power in particular. While the prophet can never be understood solely as an individual (the prophet is always both individual and not, speaking God’s words through their own mouth), Old Testament prophecy nonetheless tends to emphasize the authority of the individual prophet. In order to determine whether a prophecy is authentic or not, Old Testament criteria focus “narrowly on the standing of the prophets, their legitimacy, as it were, and not on the specific content of their messages.”¹⁰⁵ The prophet claims the absolute authority of God; once the community determines whether the individual prophet is false or true, his words are entirely discarded, or taken entirely as the word of God. And the Rabbinic sages – contrasting the 400 prophets of 1 Kings, speaking in unison, to Micaiah, speaking alone – explicitly characterize true prophecy as individualist: “only a prophet who speaks in his own voice can be trusted to speak for God.”¹⁰⁶ In the context of the Old Testament, the prophet claims direct contact with God, and a comprehensive, authoritative account of divine will, often explicitly opposed to the accounts of other false prophets and existing political rulers.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (London, 1649), 1.

¹⁰³ Coppe, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Steven Zwicker, *Lines of Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), 28. In addition to the scholars already cited in this chapter, see Joseph Wittreich’s foundational *Visionary Poetics: Milton’s Tradition and his Legacy* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1979), which emphasizes the “antagonistic relationship between the prophet and his audience,” the link between prophecy and revolutionary action, and the prophet’s rejection of “established reality” (30, 34, 49).

¹⁰⁵ *The Jewish Political Tradition*, 204.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁰⁷ A number of scholars have undermined interpretations of Old Testament prophecy as authoritative, noting, especially, the tension between the need for prophetic accuracy (Deuteronomy distinguishes between true and false prophecy based on whether or not the prediction is fulfilled) and the desire to sway the community and thus divert divine wrath. “The only successful prophet,” Terry Eagleton observes, “is an ineffectual one, one whose warnings fail to materialize. All good

Poole explicitly rejects prophecy of the canonical, Old Testament variety: prophecy that claims privileged, polemical knowledge of divine will. Yet prophecy does not end with the Old Testament, and Poole's prophetic positioning accords quite well with the New Testament's reimagining of the prophetic mode.¹⁰⁸ As a number of contemporary Christian theologians have argued, in 1 Corinthians, Paul shifts focus away from the authority of the individual prophet; testing prophecy becomes "a qualitative process rather than an absolute judgment of the prophet."¹⁰⁹ "Let the prophets speak two or three," Paul posits, "and let the other[s] judge."¹¹⁰ As one theologian describes New Testament prophecy, "[t]he role of the prophetic community and the prophet is blurred."¹¹¹ Prophecy ceases to be an office apart from the people; any number of people might prophecy, and the community must work to sort through their message. Rather than emphasizing the vertical relation between the prophet and God, New Testament prophecy emphasizes the horizontal relation between the prophet and the community. Divine will, in the New Testament version, emerges in the interaction between the prophet and her interlocutors, not through direct revelation.

New Testament prophecy, testifying to the absence of certain, direct knowledge of God, preserves only a glimmer of Old Testament prophetic authority.¹¹² And yet, precisely because the account of prophecy in the New Testament is so hazy and hesitant, it offers an essential resource for discerning between differing accounts of divine will during the civil war period. Paul theorizes his account of prophecy specifically in response to issues of sectarianism: "every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ."¹¹³ In light of these divisions, he reminds the people at Corinth that they share "one body" in Christ: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or gentiles, whether we be bond or

prophets are false prophets, undoing their own utterances in the very act of producing them" ("J.L. Austin and the Book of Jonah," in *The Book and the Text: the Bible and Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 233). For a compelling account of "weak prophecy," analyzing the Old Testament prophets as well as Romantic poet-prophets, see Yosefa Raz, "Weak Prophecy: Recasting Prophetic Power in the Classical Hebrew Prophets and in Their Modern Reception," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ For a scholarly work that emphasizes the New Testament origins of civil war prophecy, see Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1946. "Prophesying'... was an activity of biblical exegesis, coupled with personal testimony and exhortation, after the preacher 'had donn his stuffe,' and was open to all. Its *provenance* was the New Testament, where such 'prophesying' seems to have been a regular feature of Christian worship, and it reappeared with the rediscovery of the New Testament at the Reformation" (76).

¹⁰⁹ John Penney, "The Testing of New Testament Prophecy," 64. Penney summarizes all Christian theological scholarship that addresses this issue.

¹¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:29.

¹¹¹ Penney, 58.

¹¹² Such a view, sharply distinguishing between Old and New Testament prophecy, is contentious. See Penney for an overview of the argument. Wayne Grudem argues for a decisive break between OT and NT prophetic authority (*The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*); F.D. Farnell considers OT and NT prophecy continuous ("The Gift of Prophecy in the Old and New Testaments," *BSac* (Oct-Dec 1992): 387-410). For Christian theologians, the question of whether or not prophets speak God's actual word – in part or entirely – is pressing, determining policy on whether or not church members are authorized to prophecy.

¹¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:12.

free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”¹¹⁴ In fact, Paul argues that prophecy that claims absolute authority is meaningless: “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing... For we know in part, and we prophecy in part.”¹¹⁵ In Paul’s formulation, prophecy is a means of knowing God with and among others, possible only by exhibiting a spirit of charity toward them.

A focus on canonical, Old Testament prophecy suggests one story about the civil war period: divine will is known by individuals rather than ecclesiastical authorities. A focus on New Testament prophecy tells a different story: divine will is manifest through human community rather than within any individual, whether King or prophet. Crucially for our purposes, knowledge of divine will, in a New Testament context, depends equally on collective intellectual *and* affective labor. Not only does the community work to rationally discern between the true and false components of any prophecy; as every tolerationist argues, each member must exhibit charity toward the others because “we know in part, and we prophecy in part” – and we can’t certainly know which part we have right and which we have wrong. An affective relation to otherness is necessary to discern divine will. When Poole describes herself experiencing the pangs of the body politic, she literally embodies the Pauline injunction “*that* the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”¹¹⁶ Paul routes divine will through human community; accordingly, Poole claims prophetic authority not based on her own privileged relation to God, but based on her affective attunement to the body politic.

If Old Testament prophecy parallels monarchical authority (insofar as it grants one individual a privileged position in relation to God), New Testament prophecy parallels Leveller political authority: a mode of authority that derives from feeling membership in the collective. In fact, the first draft of *The Agreement of the People* essentially translates the egalitarian suffering of the *corpus Christi* metaphor into political practice:

those whom yourselves shall choose shall have power to restore you to, and secure you in, all your rights; and they shall be in a capacity to taste of subjection as well as rule, and so shall be equally concerned with yourselves in all they do. *For they must equally suffer with you under any common burdens and partake with you in any freedoms.* And by this they shall be disabled to defraud or wrong you – when the laws shall bind all alike, without privilege or exemption. And by this your consciences shall be free from tyranny and oppression, and those occasions of endless strifes and bloody wars shall be perfectly removed.¹¹⁷

Throughout, the passage attests to the reciprocal nature of individual freedom and collective membership. “Your consciences shall be free from tyranny and oppression” not *ex nihilo*, but “when the laws shall bind all alike, without privilege or exemption” – by being bound to the collective. Similarly, individual power is restored and secured not by the individual him or herself, but by the individual choosing a representative, conferring their own power upon another. That representative will be chosen by the collective, and have no being or authority apart from them. Individuals retain their rights, and political representatives retain their authority, only through membership in the

¹¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

¹¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 8.

¹¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:25-26.

¹¹⁷ Anon., *An Agreement* (London, 1647).

collective. The principle of continuity between the people and their political representatives was not, for the Levellers, an idealized abstraction. The Levellers designed the terms of political representation in the *Agreement* – that parliament “ought to be more indifferently proportioned according to the number of the inhabitants,” that “this present parliament be dissolved upon the last day of September,” and “that the people... choose themselves a parliament once in two years” – in order to facilitate cohesion between the representatives in parliament and the people from whom their authority derived.¹¹⁸ Frequently rotating parliament would ensure that political representatives remained in contact with the general public. The Levellers aspired, in political theorist Hanna Pitkin’s terminology, to “descriptive representation” – to make political representatives resemble those being represented.¹¹⁹ Following the terms of Paul’s *corpus Christi* metaphor, however, “descriptive representation” did not necessitate a shared demographic between the people and their representative (“Jews or Gentiles... bond or free”), but a shared affective experience of the law: “For they must equally suffer with you under any common burdens and partake with you in any freedoms.”

When we return, in this context, to Poole’s defense of the King’s life, it figures rather differently. Initially, Poole defends the King based on his status within the body politic, suggesting that the Army’s right to rule derives from the King: “he is the Father and husband of your bodies, as unto men, and therefore your right cannot be without him.” Yet she soon abandons a defense based on the King’s appropriate hierarchical status in favor of a defense based on his experience of suffering:

you may hold the hands of your husband, that he pierce not your bowels with a knife or sword to take your life. Neither may you take his, I speake unto you as Men, Fathers and Brethren in the Lord: (who are to walke by this rule) *Whatsoever you would that men should doe unto you, doe yee the same unto them*: I know it would affright you to be cut off in your iniquity; but O, how faine would you have your iniquity taken away! Consider also others in their amazement; I know you have said it, and I believe, that if you could see sutable sorrow for so great offence, you should embrace it: I beseech you in the bowels of love, for there it is I pleade with you, looke upon the patience of God towards you, and see if it will not constraene you to forbearance for his sake.¹²⁰

Here, Poole casts husband and wife, King and people, not as head and body, but as two separate, equal persons, each worthy of defense from the other: “you may hold the hands of your husband, that he pierce not your bowels with a knife or sword to take your life. Neither may you take his.” She defends the King not according to his privileged position within the body politic, but according to his very lack thereof. Walwyn posits that “there is no respect of persons with God: and whosoever is possesst with love, judgeth no longer as a man, but god like, as a true Christian.”¹²¹ This argument carries truly radical connotations, leveling sociopolitical hierarchies. And yet, in the context of regicide, it necessitates a defense of the King’s life. In fact, the very rule that Poole’s defense rests on is a direct quotation from Walwyn: “[t]he greatest glory of authority is to protect the distressed; and for those that are Judges in other mens causes to beare themselves as if the afflicted mens cases were their owne; observing that divine rule of our Saviour, *What soever yee would that men*

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1967).

¹²⁰ Poole, *Vision*, 6.

¹²¹ Walwyn, *Compassionate Samaritane*.

should doe unto you, even so doe yee to them.”¹²² Poole comes to remind the Army of the Leveller claim that “justice” stems from love – an ethos manifestly abandoned in their contemporaneous political documents. Just as her original revelation emerged through a sensitive attunement to collective feeling, here she likewise claims that feeling directs correct political action: “if you could see sutable sorrow for so great offense, you should embrace it.”

For many scholars, such an argument – that the Army should actively exhibit sympathy toward the King – smacks of conservatism. And indeed, this was a common conservative position at the time. Charles’s *Eikon Basilike* cast the King as sympathetic, suffering, and repentant; even previously vociferous defenders of the revolutionary cause wavered in support. As William Sedgwick, a.k.a. “Doomsday Sedgwick,” Army chaplain turned royalist sympathizer, confesses (in a prophetic pamphlet contemporaneous with Poole’s, and likewise responding to the Army’s *Remonstrance*), “When nothing will gain me, affection will; I confess his sufferings make me a Royalist, that never cared for him.”¹²³ Milton excoriates such sympathy as “blind affections” in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*: “If men within themselves would be govern’d by reason, and not generally give up thir understanding to a double tyrannie, of Custom from without, and blind affections within, they would discern better, what it is to favour and uphold the Tyrant of a Nation.”¹²⁴ In terms to be discussed more fully in the next chapter, Milton advocates excising “Custom” and “blind affections” from the public sphere in favor of reason; as the individual should be “govern’d by reason,” so too should the commonwealth. Aligning justice and reason, and opposing justice to feeling, Milton upholds the distinction (outlined in Carole Pateman’s seminal *Sexual Contract*) between the male public sphere, in which “justice is the first virtue,” and the female private sphere, characterized by family, sentiment, and love.¹²⁵ So too, he affirms a distinction between corporate, disinterested reason and private, emotive interest very much legible to us as subjects of modern liberalism. Interest – the private interest of King and Clergy, the private interest of individual emotion – has no place in collective government or decision making. In contrast, disinterest – a position cultivated through an appeal to reason, a culling apart of the true and the carnal, a consideration of consequences alone – is understood as the correct stance of a political representative.

And yet, as we’ve seen in the first section of this chapter, the primary issue at this moment of the revolution was not that the Army acted on behalf of private, interested emotion rather than public, disinterested reason; the issue was that it was all but impossible to discern between private and public (the very contours of which were undergoing heated debate), faith and reason, interest and disinterestedness. Poole suggests that, in addition to cultivating a position of disinterestedness (the absence of self-interest, “dead to all your owne Interests, lives, liberties, freedoms, or whatsoever you might call yours”), political actors must actively attempt to feel as the nation feels. The Levellers do not insist that political representatives judge objectively or dispassionately, but “beare themselves as if the afflicted mens cases were their owne.” They should feel the suffering of the subjects they represent. Hence Poole allies the “disinterested” work of reimagining England’s

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ William Sedgwick, *Justice upon the Armie Remonstrance*, 38.

¹²⁴ Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton: 1648-1649*, ed. Don Wolfe (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953), 214-5.

¹²⁵ See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018). Gillespie also notes Poole’s subversion of the domestic and political spheres, describing Poole and Margaret Cavendish as women who “found room for innovation *within* the traditional analogy between the marriage contract and the social contract” (*Domesticity*, 123).

government with the physical labor of childbirth, describing herself as “a sympathizer with you in your labors,” experiencing “the pangs of a travelling woman.” She bears the affliction of her addressees, imploring them to bear the affliction of the nation. Poole does not simply scramble private, domestic feeling and public, corporate reason. Such an inversion is more characteristic of a figure like Margaret Cavendish, who reimagines the social contract as a romance. Following the *Agreement* itself, Poole casts feeling as a fundamentally public faculty, central to the work of the public sphere.

Looking back to the early revolutionary period, we discover that deference to disinterested, corporate reason was only one of many possible ways that English subjects responded to “the uncertainty of knowledge in this life,” and, in light of the Army’s difficulties and political purges, not a response that was extremely successful. As Teresa Bejan has noted, we can locate many contemporary critiques of liberalism in the early modern period itself. Poole and the Levellers anticipate one of the most standard of these critiques, helpfully elucidated by Frances Ferguson:

... political liberalism [has] for some time drawn criticism for ignoring individual beliefs and emotions. And it is certainly true that rational law does not have emotional intonations. Its directives – ‘Don’t leave your car in the middle of an intersection,’ for example – can appear irritatingly superfluous, like something that most people recognize as a good idea without feeling the need for any direction. For it aims to speak even to the insensitive, the obdurate, and the autistic. It aims to make it possible for even those with a dull capacity for sympathy to develop the means for avoiding the wrath of others... It has come to be a standard criticism of liberalism that, in abstracting from the beliefs and interests of actual persons, it insists upon a completely impersonal view, that it ignores the things that people care about and the strength with which their emotional attachments speak to them.¹²⁶

While Ferguson routes her account of liberalism through Bentham, the idea of government as an arena of rationality, impersonality, and abstraction – with the egalitarian effect on society that presumably results from such ideals – is very much alive in the revolutionary period, as evident via *Eikonoklastes* and the longstanding liberal tradition of civil war historiography. On one hand, *An Agreement* clearly corresponds with this history: “the laws shall bind all alike, without privilege or exemption.” On the other hand, however, the Levellers foreground, rather than repress, the role of “the beliefs and interests of actual persons” in government. Representatives “shall be disenabled to defraud or wrong you” not because of the law’s objective rationality, but because representatives share the feeling of the people they represent. Poole and the Levellers eschew claims of transparency in both religion and politics – unmediated reception of divine will, unmediated reception of divine reason – and instead attempt to attend to public feeling.

I don’t mean to suggest this perspective – an attunement to public feeling – as a cure-all, perhaps not even a single suture, for twenty-first century sociopolitical division. Surely Jeremy Taylor, a minister who pivots from supporting to sharply opposing toleration, is right to insist that “[w]e are not now in those primitive daies, when there was one common sense among Christians, when if one member suffer’d, all the members suffer’d with it.”¹²⁷ Law that reflects shared, common feeling presumes that all members of a collective body are capable of feeling the same way about anything. At the same time, Paul advises charity not because his followers agree, but because they

¹²⁶ Frances Ferguson, “Beliefs and Emotions (from Stanley Fish to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill),” in *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, eds. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006): 199-215.

¹²⁷ Jeremy Taylor, *A Discourse on the Liberty of Prophesying*, 184.

disagree. Charity, acknowledgment of our own understanding as fallible and partial, a feeling openness toward others' perspectives, becomes the affective precondition to knowledge of God – the affective infrastructure necessary to respond to the profound epistemological “uncertainty of knowledge in this life.” Taylor, dismissing Christian *concordia*, accepts a nation with “a dull capacity for sympathy.” In contrast, Poole attempts to feel alongside her interlocutors, even as, in her final pamphlet, she excoriates them: “How are my bowels straightened, and yet am I come forth to launch deepe into the sides of my Brethren; are yee not to me as mine owne bowels? is not my soule as your soules, in all your pursuite of Justice, Judgement, and Truth?”¹²⁸ Sedgwick mirrors her sympathetic positioning: “And as I lay it on you, so I suffer it with you, and shall be content to suffer till you are restored from this condition of shame and wrath, to honour and love, and so dwell with you in these everlasting burnings.”¹²⁹ Sympathy becomes, for Poole and Sedgwick, crucial to prophetic authority, which cannot be abstracted from membership within the community.¹³⁰

Cromwellian anti-formalism anticipates what we would term negative freedom – the absence of compulsion. In contrast, the figures I have been discussing – Poole, the Levellers, now Sedgwick – anticipate the backlash to a sociopolitical vision characterized by negative freedom. Rather than “a society free from... persecution,” they call for (in the words of Jeremy Waldron) “a society in which people cohabit and deal with one another, in spite of their... differences, in an atmosphere of civility and respect.”¹³¹ Sedgwick, for instance, theorizes “interesse,” a sense of shared, public feeling, as a counter to the binary of private interest and public disinterestedness:

you all along carry the interest of the publike in opposition to the Kings; which is a wicked thing, to divide them that God hath joynd: wherein you doe, as swordmen, cut in pieces, and indeed destroy and mangle, not onely the Kingdome, but the word *interest*, which is of a uniting signification; *interesse* is to be in or amongst each other: The publike hath its interest in the King, and the King his interest in the publike; or they have the same *esse*, or *interest*, which is to be together in each other; the King is in the people, and the people in the King; the Kings being is not absolute, or alone but an interest, as he is in union with, and relation to his people, which are his strength and life; and the peoples being is not naked or solitary, but an interest in the greatnesse and wisdom of their King, who is their life and honour: And though you will disjoyn your selves from Kings, God will not, neither will I...¹³²

The contemporary meaning of interest, “that which is to or for the advantage of any one,” circulated widely in the period, as royalists and republicans alike advised the Army to eschew “all pride and selfishness, whether it be self-righteousness, self-will, self-wisdom, self-interests,” and to instead act on behalf of “publique good.”¹³³ Innumerable pamphlets complain that the Army confuses public

¹²⁸ Poole, *Alarum*, 1.

¹²⁹ Sedgwick, 3.

¹³⁰ In fact, Coppe's prophecies, avowing the wrath of the Old Testament prophet alongside the community of the New, begin to sound oddly discordant in light of this analysis: “And as I live, I will plague your Honour, Pompe, Greatness, Superfluity, and confound it into parity, equality, community; that the neck of horrid pride, murder, malice, and tyranny, &c. may be chopt off at one blow. And that my selfe, the Eternall God, who am Universall Love, may fill the Earth with universall love, universall peace, and perfect freedom” (4).

¹³¹ Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012), 207.

¹³² Sedgwick, 10.

¹³³ “interest, n.” 2b. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

and private interest: “we have alwayes observed that the most publike ruine, and particular interests, have been alwayes fomented under the plausible, and specious advantages of publike and common good.”¹³⁴ Sedgwick recalls, in contrast, the etymological root of interest, *interesse*, meaning “concern, part, share *in*.”¹³⁵ He abjures any sense of private benefit for a distinct body of persons – whether the private interest of an individual or the alleged interest of the public in contrast to the interest of the King – in favor of a shared, collective being in which no individual interest can be separated from the fate of the public as a whole.

Sedgwick enlists *interesse* in support of what seems, undeniably, a royalist argument. This is not, however, how Sedgwick saw it. In fact, accused of being a royalist, he refrains from publishing between 1648 and 1656 in an attempt to dispute the charge. Sedgwick’s earlier 1648 pamphlet, provocatively titled *The Spirituall Madman*, blends, in taxonomy-defying ways, what scholars looking back on this period might classify as royalist and republican arguments. Sedgwick describes “a perfect Levell” whereby “The People the originall of the Parliament and King, by a free giving up themselves and their Estates to the Parliament and King, are in the King and Parliament, and fully partake of the royalty and power of both; and are levelld with it: The people give honour and glory to the King, and so higher then he, or he their Subject.”¹³⁶ That is, because the King’s authority derives from the people, the people actually have authority over the King. The people thus become “most perfectly content in the Kings greatnesse, being that which themselves constitute: making it themselves, they live in it and enjoy it.”¹³⁷ Sedgwick ascribes to the King the same form of political representation described by the Levellers: authority grounded in the people, a concept itself grounded in the *corpus Christi* of 1 Corinthians.

My point is not really to sort between royalist and republican arguments, determining whose perspective, tainted with conservatism, should be dismissed, and whose celebrated. Just the opposite, in fact: it is to illuminate a strain of religious thought – the very radical strain that initiates the revolution – that grapples with the profound unknowability of divine will and responds by refusing to privilege one perspective, or one party, over another. As Sedgwick puts it, “I fear no party nor interest because I love all, I am reconciled to all, and all is reconciled to me... every faction of men striving to make themselves absolute, do directly warre against God, who is love, peace, and a generall good, gives being to all, and cherishes all.”¹³⁸ Thomas Collier, a fellow Army preacher who rebuts Sedgwick’s pamphlet, articulates the obvious flaw of such a perspective: “you say *That peace makers, who are blessed, can see all things in union*, although the scripture saith, that light and darknesse, Christ and *Belieal*, beleivers and infidels, have neither union nor communion.”¹³⁹ Seeing God in all, deferring judgment, endlessly vying for union no matter with whom – these irenic impulses preserve, even reify, the status quo (one thinks of certain moderates vying to represent the Democratic party). And yet, those very same affective impulses are, at least in part, necessary to create and sustain any social body made up of heterogenous parts. In a passage borrowed from *Areopagitica*, Sedgwick illustrates the conundrum of discerning the disjointed body of truth: “All men are in the dark, and

Thomas Collier, *A Vindication of the Army-remonstrance* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*, 3.

¹³⁴ Anon., *The Groans of Kent* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*.

¹³⁵ “interest, n.” 1b. *Oxford English Dictionary*. As he puts it in *The Spirituall Madman*: “to be in others a joynt, or common subsistence” (11).

¹³⁶ William Sedgwick, *The Spirituall Madman, or, a Prophecie Concerning, the King, the Parliament, London, the Army* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*, 4.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁸ Sedgwick, *Justice*, 38.

¹³⁹ Collier, 15.

know not the whole body of divine truth, only lay hold each of some part of it; So that *truth*, which is one in it self, in and amongst the darknesse of men, is divided, cut in pieces, and lies scattered about here and there; and every one holds what hee holds in enmity and contrariety to others, and through pride and malice with that good that is in him, opposes God and goodnesse in others.”¹⁴⁰ Rarely, in such a world, are any prophet’s words entirely true or entirely false. While Collier excoriates Sedgwick for “declar[ing] unity, where is nothing but contrariety,” Sedgwick conceives of God as the unity that underlies seemingly irreconcilable contrariety.¹⁴¹ “It is neither this nor that, either this or that, neither this nor that in Divine will.”¹⁴²

IV. *The Largeness of God: Towards a Tolerationist Aesthetic*

Ultimately, the premise of this project is very simple. Our understanding of political authority in any given time period informs our understanding of all other forms of authority in the period; the private sphere mimics the public, the author mimics the sovereign. Even scientific theories of agency reflect existing models of the political.¹⁴³ And in the narratives we have of the English civil wars, we often focus on the emergence of individual authority.¹⁴⁴ But, of course, this is not the only story one can tell about the period. This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that, in parallel to a shift from the hierarchical to individual authority, the revolutionary period witnesses a shift from individual to corporate authority. I have also attempted to show that corporate authority was not necessarily predicated on one’s capacity for disinterested reason, but that, for figures like Walwyn, Poole, and Sedgwick, corporate authority emerged through affective membership in the body politic. In contrast to the binary of interest/disinterestedness that informs liberalism’s vision of political representation, these figures theorize a public sphere characterized by *interesse*, a body politic not composed of separate, private persons, endowed with inalienable natural rights, but persons in and amongst each other, the suffering of any one member inseparable from that of the body as a whole.

The upshot of this argument for the project overall is two-fold. First, this narrative reveals an alternative account of prophecy and the prophetic mode in the revolutionary period. Despite casting prophetic authority in opposition to the hierarchical authority of the sovereign, many accounts of prophecy nonetheless describe a mode of Old Testament prophetic authority that parallels the *jure divino* of the King. Just as divine light shines into Charles’s head in the frontispiece

¹⁴⁰ Sedgwick, 14.

¹⁴¹ Collier, 15.

¹⁴² There exists a large body of historical research devoted to uncovering the irenic impulses, or “middle way,” of civil war moderates. See, for instance, Peter White’s *Predestination, Policy, and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992): “The essence of theology is the resolution of the great antinomies... In proclaiming the reconciliation of God and man, it finds itself reconciling opposites” (5). Ethan Shagan’s *Rule of Moderation* provides an excellent review of scholarly works that focus on early modern consensus and moderation, as well as works (like his own) that view consensus and conflict, moderation and coercion, as inextricably intertwined (20-26).

¹⁴³ See, for instance, John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996).

¹⁴⁴ As discussed in the Introduction, see Stoll, *Conscience in Early Modern Literature*, and Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*. Of course there are numerous exceptions – most notably, Picciotto’s *Labors of Innocence*.

of *Eikon Basilike*, the prophet avows authoritative, unmediated knowledge of divine will. Replacing reason with revelation, prophecy often figures as a claim to disinterested objectivity. Luther, for instance, lists John's prophecies – in which he professes himself entirely “concealed and dumb” – as the highest form of prophetic revelation.¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, when Anna Trapnel is called upon to explicate the mode of her visionary experience, she proclaims her own sensory absence:

What frame of spirit was upon you in uttering those things in Whitehall, was it only a spirit of faith was upon you, or was it vision wrapping up your outward senses in trances, so that you had not your senses free to see, nor hear, nor take notice of the people present?

I neither saw, nor heard, nor perceived the noise and distractions of the people, but was as one that heard only the voyce of God sounding forth unto me.¹⁴⁶

Trapnel repeats the conditions named by her questioner – “I neither saw, nor heard, nor perceived” – as if rehearsing the necessary criteria of her prophetic legitimacy. She can only describe the sound through simile, distancing the immediate experience of an “I” to the mediated experience of being “as one that heard.” Later in the pamphlet, Trapnel dissolves even further, as God transforms her from substance to sound: “Thy servant is made a voyce, a sound, it is a voyce within a voyce, another's voyce, even thy voyce through her.”¹⁴⁷ Trapnel's prophecy aspires to a voice without any distinguishing characteristics, as the prophet is legitimated by the *absence* of her own mediation. To render a voice “a sound” is to eliminate its human quality, and, indeed, Trapnel's references to herself devolve from the earlier “I” to “Thy servant” to the un-subjectified “it.” Trapnel makes her final claim to authority – “thy voyce through her” – by repeating and qualifying the word “voyce” long enough that it no longer carries any connotation of the personal.

When Poole undergoes a very similar line of questioning, her response is quite different. Far from emphasizing her own absence or silence, she emphasizes her own presence within the message:

Col. Deane: I must desire to aske one question: whether you were commanded by the spiritt of God to deliver itt unto us in this manner.

Woman: I believe I had a command from God for itt.

Col. Deane: To deliver this paper in this forme?

Woman: To deliver this paper or otherwise a message.

Col. Deane: And so you bringe itt, and present itt to us, as directed by his spiritt in you, and commanded to deliver itt to us?

Woman: Yea Sir, I doe.

Mr. Sadler: doe [you] offer this paper or from the Revelation of God?

Woman: I saw noe vision, nor noe Angell, nor heard no voice, butt my spiritt being drawne out about those things, *I was in itt*. Soe far as it is from God I thinke itt is a revelation.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaim'd* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 86.

¹⁴⁶ Anna Trapnel, *The Cry of a Stone*, 391.

¹⁴⁷ Trapnel, 417.

¹⁴⁸ *The Clarke Papers*, ed. C.H. Firth (London: The Historical Society, 1992), ii, 164-5, 167-8.

What I have been trying to demonstrate is that such a claim – “*I was in itt*” – is not merely characteristic of “bad” prophecy, but is in fact a refusal to distinguish between public and private faculties – a refusal to understand prophetic authority as disinterested or devoid of selfhood. Poole applies the Levellers’ mode of political authority, an authority that derives from membership within the people, to her experience of God. Like the Levellers, she rejects a vertical transmission of divine will in favor of a horizontal one. She struggles to answer the Council’s questions because she does not subscribe to the strong distinction they draw between self and God, interest and disinterestedness. Describing herself as “in itt,” Poole offers an account of New Testament prophetic authority based in *interessee* (a feeling immersion in earthly events) rather than disinterestedness (an objective transmission of divine will) or enthusiastic interest (a claim of identity between self and God, of the kind we see in a figure like Abiezer Coppe).

Underlying and informing this account of prophetic and political authority is also a shift in how we understand the relation between religion and politics in the revolutionary period. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the key characteristics of prophecy in this period is its factionalism. Republican and royalist prophets often ascribed opposing interpretations, favoring their own political leanings, to the very same revelation or astrological phenomena. Religion and politics parallel each other in this telling: in ordaining the victory of one political opponent over another, God endorses one political cause over another. And yet, as we’ve seen in this chapter, such instrumentalization of divine will was as often criticized as cited. Poole describes God as “neither this nor that,” “both here and there” – a dialectical unity fundamentally opposed to partisanship. Sedgwick gives a similar account through what he calls “the largeness of God”: “the spirit of God is large, and reconciles, composes, gathers all into one.”¹⁴⁹ Walwyn, Poole, and Sedgwick remind us that, if individual conscience developed unprecedented authority in this period, if individual prophets claimed unprecedented knowledge of God, they could do so only because divine will (in the absence of the sovereign) took on an unprecedented obscurity in this period. One argument for individual conscience insisted that women and even children might claim authoritative knowledge of God as readily as any member of the clergy; another explained that liberty of conscience was necessary because no one could claim authoritative knowledge of God.

Now, in and of itself, this may not be a very novel interpretation. The descriptions of divine unknowability that we find in these writings – “*Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his waies past finding out!*” – are commonplace in this period (and beyond).¹⁵⁰ At the same time, in the turnings and overturnings of revolutionary victory, divine will seemed more profoundly obscure than ever before – and (here’s the second upshot for the project as a whole) the accounts we have of aesthetics in this period do not reflect this obscurity. They tend to reflect the narrative of emerging individual authority and factionalism that I have sought to diversify in this chapter. Victoria Kahn theorizes poesis as “the missing third term in both early modern and contemporary debates about politics and religion,” by which she means “the principle, first advocated by Hobbes and Vico, that we can know only what we make ourselves.”¹⁵¹ She contrasts this notion to “the more familiar Renaissance notion that human creativity is modeled on the divine creativity of God.”¹⁵² Whether in secular or religious terms, however, both of these accounts of early modern aesthetics are predicated on individual, authorial creation. More directly

¹⁴⁹ Sedgwick, *Justice*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ William Sedgwick, “Mr. William Sedgwicks Letter to his Excellency Thomas Lord Fairfax” (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*.

¹⁵¹ Kahn, *Future of Illusion*, 2-3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

speaking to the question of aesthetics in relation to the civil war, Steven Zwicker has noted that marginalia in the 1640s turned partisan and harshly polemical. Miltonic animadversion – tearing one’s enemy apart point by point – is often cast as the dominant literary mode of this moment. “If my assumptions about reading c. 1649 are correct,” Zwicker writes, “then a book’s every gesture could anticipate not only a politicized but a deeply polemical response.”¹⁵³

Again, all these accounts are true in part. But in attending to the prophet as a figure whose authority derives from membership in the collective, and prophecy as a way of conveying the intrinsically unknowable, dialectical union of God, I hope to offer a new understanding of the relation between religion, politics, and aesthetics in the revolutionary period. Divine inspiration was one of the dominant aesthetic modes of this period; in expanding our understanding of what it meant to claim divine inspiration, I hope to expand our understanding of aesthetic form more broadly. After all, Elizabeth Poole’s revelation emerges from an experience of reading c. 1649 – one that is political but certainly not polemical. What would it be like to read the aesthetic output of the civil war period in terms of the uncertain anti-formalism that initiates the revolutionary cause rather than the polemic factionalism that ultimately defeats it?

¹⁵³ Steven Zwicker, “Passions and Occasions: Milton, Marvell, and the Politics of Reading c. 1649,” in *Form and Reform in Renaissance England: Essays in Honor of Barbara Kiefer Lewalski*, eds. Amy Boesky and Mary Thomas Crane (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000): 288-305, 293.

CHAPTER TWO

Milonic Tolerance: Feeling the Collective in *Areopagitica* and *Samson Agonistes*

Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?
 Whence furnish such a vast expanse of mind?
 Just heaven thee, like Tiresias, to requite,
 Rewards with prophecy the loss of sight.
 -Andrew Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (1674)

Stunned by the scope and achievement of *Paradise Lost*, Marvell inaugurates a longstanding tradition of regarding Milton not merely as a poet, but a prophet. Most centrally to our purposes, though, he also inaugurates a tradition of questioning exactly what kind of prophet Milton is, and what kind of prophetic authority the poet claims. In a single line ("Just heaven thee, like Tiresias, to requite"), Marvell blends reference to the Christian and classical prophetic traditions, following, of course, Milton's own blending of these traditions in the invocations of *Paradise Lost*. Marvell describes Milton's prophetic capacity as just reward granted by heaven; simultaneously, he implies that Milton's prophetic power might eclipse the power of God himself: "Just heaven[,] thee." William Kerrigan's 1974 *Prophetic Milton* reopened these same questions for current scholars:

Often critics vary the tedious repetition of "Milton," "poet," "narrator," and "author" with the designation of "poet-prophet." The term is an English amalgam uniting two of the three meanings of the Latin *vates* – "priest," "poet," and "prophet." Writing "poet-prophet" for "Milton," the critic assumes that he and his audience hold a communal definition to which he can appeal without explanation. But this definition does not exist, and "poet-prophet" is critical jargon. In Milton studies, as in most literary criticism, the bastard word blurs all the prerequisite distinctions. Is the poet a prophet like Isaiah, a prophet like Teresias, or a prophet like Nostradamus? Furthermore, the term derives from a classical language. Is Moses as much a "poet-prophet" as Virgil? Exactly how can this word apply to a Christian poet in the late renaissance?¹⁵⁴

Along with his close contemporaries, Joseph Wittreich and Michael Lieb, Kerrigan devoted his scholarly life to explicating Milton's "visionary mode," successfully contextualizing Milton within the framework of both Biblical and pagan prophetic traditions.¹⁵⁵ While Kerrigan, Wittreich, and Lieb each emphasize different aspects of Milton's visionary mode (Wittreich, for instance, focuses on the "line of vision" from Milton to the Romantics; Lieb explores the iconoclastic violence of the prophet), all cite the authority of the individual prophet: "Prophecy appears throughout history as a protection against wrongdoing and falsehood, a kind of invulnerable authority from a necessarily

¹⁵⁴ William Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton*, 8-9.

¹⁵⁵ See Joseph Wittreich, *Milton and the Line of Vision, Angel of Apocalypse: Blake's Idea of Milton* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), *Visionary Poetics: Milton's Tradition and His Legacy, Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), and *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002); Michael Lieb, *The Visionary Mode: Biblical Prophecy, Hermeneutics, and Cultural Change* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), *Theological Milton: Deity, Discourse, and Heresy in the Miltonic Canon* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2006), as well as numerous edited collections.

hidden attitude toward God; no one experiences prophecy but the prophet.”¹⁵⁶ Kerrigan’s Milton “sings with the upright rectitude of the prelapsarian Adam and sees with the authority of Moses.”¹⁵⁷ In this telling, Milton epitomizes the polemical, interior, authoritative positioning of the Old Testament prophet.¹⁵⁸

At the same time, as many Miltonists have acknowledged and as Kerrigan’s assessment already implies (“no one experiences prophecy but the prophet”), Milton’s prophetic authority is always vexed and vexing. The same narrator who professes in Book 1 to “assert Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men,” in Book 7 implores his Muse to return him to earth, “Least from this flying Steed unrein’d” (referring to his narration of prelapsarian, heavenly events), “I fall / Erroneous.”¹⁵⁹ Doubt always accompanies Milton’s prophetic mode, whether doubt of one’s fitness as a prophetic vessel, or doubt of divine presence itself. Directly addressing the problem of prophetic inspiration in his 1659 *Treatise of Civil Power*, Milton acknowledges divine illumination as both a necessary and intensely fallible means of understanding God’s will:

it cannot be deni’d, being the main foundation of our protestant religion, that we of these ages, having no other divine rule or autoritie from without us warrantable to one another as a common ground, but the holy scripture, and no other within us but the illumination of the Holy Spirit so interpreting that scripture as warrantable only to our selves and to such whose consciences we can so perswade, can have no other ground in matters of religion but only from the scriptures. *And these being not possible to be understood without this divine illumination, which no man can know at all times to be in himself, much less to be at any time for certain in any other,* it follows cleerly that no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any mens consciences but their own.¹⁶⁰

Milton’s account of divine illumination – and concomitant argument for liberty of conscience – echoes with that of Walwyn and the Levellers from the previous chapter: no one can mandate the beliefs of the individual conscience because no one – including the individual believer – can ascertain who speaks the word of God. While Stanley Fish has emphasized the relativism of Miltonic

¹⁵⁶ Kerrigan, 10. Wittreich describes an “antagonistic relationship between the prophet and his audience” in Milton’s prophetic mode, which “rejects the established reality” (*Visionary Poetics*, 30, 49). Lieb argues that “in the act of reenvisioning... in writing the vision anew, the heremeneut is able to claim an interpretive authority tantamount to that which promulgated the visionary experience at its most primal level” (*Visionary Mode*, 8). See also John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983): “inspiration asserts the authority of the poetic text by invoking the participation of divinity in its production” (viii).

¹⁵⁷ Kerrigan, 161-2.

¹⁵⁸ As Milton himself attests in *The Reason of Church Government*, comparing his own role to Jeremiah’s, “This is that which the sad Prophet Jeremiah laments ‘Wo is me my mother, that thou hast born me a man of strife, and contention.’ And although divine inspiration must certainly have been sweet to those ancient profets, yet the irksomenesse of that truth which they brought was so unpleasant to them, that every where they call it a burden... But when God commands to take the trumpet and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in mans will what he shall say or what he shall conceal” (in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton: 1624-1642*, eds. Don Wolfe, French Fogle, J. Max Patrick, Paul Blackford (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953)).

¹⁵⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, eds. Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007), 1.25-6, 7.17-20.

¹⁶⁰ John Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton: 1659-1660*, eds. Don Wolfe, Robert Ayers, Austin Woolrych (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954), emphasis mine.

truth, most scholars have suggested that Milton responds to the challenge of divine uncertainty in a similar manner to Cromwell and Walwyn, advocating the importance of exerting one's reasoning capacity in order to distinguish truth from falsehood.¹⁶¹ If the fallibility of divine illumination troubles Milton, he nonetheless insists that reason and public debate will yield truth victorious: "Let her and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter."¹⁶² In this context, Milton's approach to divine illumination begins to recall Jürgen Habermas's recent writings on the place of religion in the public sphere.¹⁶³ Though divine illumination is essential to interpreting divine will, it enters public discourse only via translation into rational, communicable terms that can be examined, debated, and discussed. If Kerrigan, Wittreich, and Lieb suggest the prophet as a figure of "invulnerable authority," and the function of the prophet in the public sphere as a voice of antinomian dissent, this telling emphasizes divine illumination as one means of understanding God's will among others; if "no one experiences prophecy but the prophet," it is nonetheless the prophet's responsibility to appeal "to the force of reason and convincement" in himself and others.

This chapter continues probing the central problem of the prophetic mode: in a "Nation of Prophets" (as Milton's *Areopagitica* describes revolutionary England), with each professing contradictory, wholly interior interpretations of divine will, how do we develop a collective understanding of truth? Of course, reasoned debate plays a fundamental role in this process. But I hope to suggest that, for Milton, affective tolerance, a feeling openness toward the other, crucially preconditions the nation's ability to discern divine will and reach consensus.¹⁶⁴ At least in part, Milton's prophetic role subsists in facilitating such affective tolerance, enabling his reader, through the use of literary form, to feel him or herself to be part of a broader, national collective. In this context, rather than dividing the righteous from the unrighteous as the Old Testament prophet might, or valuing divine illumination solely insofar as it is translatable into discursive reason, Milton fulfills the role of the New Testament prophet, inciting the spirit of charity that Paul deems essential to any prophetic utterance.

While one might trace this issue through any number of Milton's writings, I focus my attention on the two works in which Milton most directly addresses the problem of prophetic proliferation: *Areopagitica* and *Samson Agonistes*. Milton composes these works in very different historical moments. He writes *Areopagitica* in 1644 at the height of the toleration debates – a moment just before the fracturing of the "presbyterian" and "independent" parties, when a united,

¹⁶¹ See Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001). Martha Nussbaum succinctly articulates the case against Fish: "The discovery that there is not a divine code fixed eternally independently of our existence and thought, the discovery that truth is to some extent or in some manner human and historical, certainly does not warrant the conclusion that every human truth is as good as every other, and that such time-honored institutions as the search for truth and the rational criticism of arguments have no further role to play" (*Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 242).

¹⁶² John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 554, 561.

¹⁶³ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization and Between Naturalism and Religion*.

¹⁶⁴ Here, I follow a distinction developed in political science between toleration, a negative freedom connoting "the practice of deliberately not curtailing the freedom of others," and tolerance, "an attitude or disposition," "a willingness to admit the possible validity of seemingly contradictory viewpoints, a hesitancy to pass value or 'truth' judgments on individual or group beliefs" (Jonathan Harrison, "Utilitarianism and Toleration," *Philosophy* 62 (1987): 421-34; Andrew Murphy, "Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition," *Polity* 29.4 (Summer 1997): 593-623.

parliamentary coalition still seemed possible.¹⁶⁵ By the time Milton writes *Samson Agonistes* in 1671, the revolutionary cause has been thoroughly defeated, and England seems locked in a repetitive, cyclical narrative of partisan exclusion.¹⁶⁶ Both *Areopagitica* and *Samson* depict a world in which God is all but absent, and human understanding of God is intensely fallible. Yet while *Areopagitica* celebrates the prophetic manifestation of a corporate body as a means of reaching toward divine truth, *Samson Agonistes* un-writes its optimistic vision of the nation, reflecting the loss of corporate feeling in the post-Restoration landscape. Tracking the interplay between the advancement of truth and collective feeling, the chapter counters scholarly accounts that regard Milton's aesthetic as political solely insofar as it hones individual reasoning capacity and prompts action. For Milton, I suggest, the poet-prophet enables a kind of affective openness that is itself political; only when the nation can feel likeness across and through difference can it begin to build the body of divine truth.

I. The Metaphor of Commonness, the Commonness of Metaphor

In 1641, seeking to reform the Church of England, and thus united against a common enemy, Congregationalist and Presbyterian leaders adopted the "Aldermanbury Accord," an agreement not to discuss ecclesiastical matters on which they disagreed. As noted in the previous chapter, this agreement was one of many strategies for responding to the proliferation of religious sectarianism in revolutionary England, but, predictably, it wouldn't last; in early January 1644, five Independent preachers, led by Thomas Goodwin, broke rank to publish *An Apologeticall Narration*, which sought "to reassure readers that congregationalists, while prioritizing particular congregations, held that each church was to remain in communion with all others, and could participate in synods and consultations."¹⁶⁷ They professed belief "in a *middle way* betwixt that which is falsly charged on us, *Brownisme*: and that which is the contention of these times, the *authoritative Presbyteriall Government*."¹⁶⁸ Rather than defending all forms of belief, Goodwin, Nye, Simpson, Burroughs and Bridge distinguish their own position from separatists, essentially attempting to sacrifice separatists for their own benefit.

As pamphlets rapidly multiplied in the early 1640s, from 2,000 published pamphlets in 1641 to 4,000 in 1642 ("some six or seven times the average for each year in the 1630s"), England seemed, at least to some Presbyterians, "swallowed up with Sects, Schismes, Divisions, disorders, contentions and confusions."¹⁶⁹ In his 1646 *Gangraena*, Thomas Edwards depicted a body politic deformed by the proliferation of sects and schism: "the monster Toleration [was] conceived in the

¹⁶⁵ David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians*, 294.

¹⁶⁶ Paul Halliday, *Dismembering the Body Politic: Partisan Politics in England's Towns, 1650-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

¹⁶⁷ Como, 227.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremy Burroughes, William Bridge, *An Apologeticall Narration, Humbly Submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament* (London, 1643), *Early English Books Online*, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Ann Hughes, "Milton, *Areopagitica*, and the Parliamentary Cause," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, eds. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009): 202-218, 207. Anon., *A Testimony to the Truth of Jesus Christ* (London, 1648), *Early English Books Online*, 29-31.

womb of the sectaries long ago, they having grown big with it ever since.”¹⁷⁰ Gone was the natural body politic, a united form with the King or Christ as its head, subjects or believers as its members. In its place, toleration birthed “strange monsters, having their heads of Enthusiasme, their bodies of Antinomianisme, their thighs of Familisme, their legs and feet of Anabaptisme, their hands of Arminisme.”¹⁷¹ As David Loewenstein describes, “Toleration, in the minds of the orthodox godly, threatened to tear apart religious unity, thereby generating political and religious anarchy and a frightening world overrun with errors, schisms, and heresies. If the growth of menacing heresy evoked images of contagious disease and gangrene from mainstream godly writers, toleration evoked images of chaos, inundation, violent dismemberment, and deformity.”¹⁷² But even writers that advocated toleration had to confront the question of its limitations. Were there opinions too heretical to be admitted into public discourse, opinions actively dangerous? Who would decide, and how? And if all opinions were admitted, what kind of national body could the people of England possibly share?

The previous chapter introduced many of these questions, and began to sketch some of the ways contemporaries responded. In 1644, a growing number of texts argued for toleration; among the most prominent were John Goodwin’s *M.S. to A.S. with A Plea for Libertie of Conscience*, which blamed coercive human authorities for the proliferation of sect and schism, Roger Williams’ *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution*, which advocated absolute toleration (including toleration of Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and atheists), and William Walwyn’s *Compassionate Samaritane*, which argued for a capacious toleration, inclusive of Catholicism, but reserved Parliament the right to censor books that were “scandalous and dangerous to the State.”¹⁷³ This section aims to explore Milton’s contribution to the toleration debates, and to question how his use of literary form contributes to his argument. I argue that metaphor allows Milton to figure the body politic as a joint form composed of differentiated parts; through metaphor, Milton enables the reader to feel themselves an incorporate member of the national collective (modeled on the *corpus Christi*, or “invisible church”), even when the precise contours of its form resist rational understanding. In a “Nation of Prophets,” mired in seemingly intractable sectarian conflict, Milton frames the prophetic author’s task as generating an affective openness – “tolerance,” in political science terminology, “charity,” in Pauline terms – that necessarily facilitates the ongoing development and rational discernment of divine Truth.

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Areopagitica is filled with metaphors of both England and truth itself as a body. Yet in each case, in contrast to Edwards’s schismatic depiction in *Gangraena*, it is the internal differentiation of the body, not its uniformity, that comprises its strength. Though not explicitly a body metaphor (we will return to those in a moment), Milton’s use of the Biblical temple-building metaphor exemplifies this point. The form made of difference, far from a monstrosity, is the very foundation of a “goodly and graceful symmetry”:

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Edwards, *The first and second part of Gangraena, or, A catalogue and discovery of many of the errors, heresies, blasphemies and pernicious practices of the sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these four last years* (London, 1646), *Early English Books Online*, 1.64-5.

¹⁷¹ Edwards, 1.16-7.

¹⁷² David Loewenstein, “Toleration and the Specter of Heresy,” in *Milton and Toleration*, eds. Achinstein and Sauer (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 47.

¹⁷³ Como, 264.

these are the men cried out against for schismatics and sectaries; as if, while the temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrational men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world. Neither can every piece of the building be of one form; nay, rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional arises the goodly and graceful symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure.¹⁷⁴

Core to the passage is the distinction between “continuity” and “contiguity,” a distinction between an entirely unified, continuous substance, and one touching, adjoining, bordering, while remaining distinct. Milton re-figures schism, etymologically emerging from rent, cleft, or split, as the necessary distinction between components of “the goodly and graceful symmetry that commends the whole building.” Continuity, or absolute wholeness of truth, is impossible in this life. But it is also inadvisable, as perfection consists not of “one form” but of “many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional.” Rather than attempting to cure the body politic, to reorganize it into a unified body properly hierarchized, Milton recasts the very form toleration’s critics abhor – a body comprised of “many schisms and many dissections” that “cannot be united into a continuity” – as the sign of perfect vitality.

But a logical omission also undermines the force of the passage, an omission that scholars accusing Milton of intolerance tend to exploit, and scholars associating Milton with toleration tend to overlook.¹⁷⁵ What constitutes “moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional”? What differences are *too* different to be included in the temple? Or, put another way, what distinguishing characteristics prevent the “moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes” of Milton’s temple from collapsing into schism? Milton returns to this kind of vague language in all of *Areopagitica*’s passages regarding toleration, evincing both the “escape from rigid dualisms” that is the key innovation of his argument, and the disappointing absence of any more specific criteria.¹⁷⁶ In his most explicit argument for toleration, Milton admits that “popery and open superstition” cannot be tolerated, but refers to all other differences as “neighboring differences, or rather indifferences”:

Yet if all cannot be of one mind (as who looks they should be?), this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather than all compelled. I mean not tolerated popery and open superstition, which as it extirpates all religions and civil supremacies, so itself should be extirpate, provided first that all charitable

¹⁷⁴ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 555.

¹⁷⁵ David Loewenstein, for instance, does not trouble himself over this vagueness: Milton’s “linguistic formulations (e.g. his double negative ‘not vastly disproportionall’), allow him to escape from rigid dualisms when it comes to thinking about religious differences – to offer an image that contains proportion and disproportion, schism as well as unity. In the new religious world of this pliant godly nation, opposites are not unopposed” (“Toleration and the Specter of Heresy,” 69). Ben LaBreche, in contrast, argues that Milton, through his exclusion of Catholics, restricts “a priori discussion of what distinguishes acceptable ‘neighboring differences’ from the difference between good and absolute evil” (“Milton and the Limits of Pluralism,” *Milton Studies* 54 (2013): 139-160, 141).

¹⁷⁶ Loewenstein, 69.

and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and the misled; that also which is impious or evil absolutely either against faith or manners no law can possible permit, that intends not to unlay itself. But those neighboring differences, or rather indifferences, are what I speak of, whether in some point of doctrine or of discipline, which though they may be many, yet need not interrupt “the unity of spirit,” if we could but find among us “the bond of peace.”¹⁷⁷

Those “neighboring differences, or rather indifferences” refer to the category of *adiaphora*, things “neither decidedly good or evil” that Milton refers to throughout *Areopagitica*: “What great purchase is this Christian liberty which Paul so often boasts of? His doctrine is that he who eats or eats not, regards a day or regards it not, may do either to the Lord.”¹⁷⁸ On one hand, Milton seems to be referring to a specific category of “neighboring differences” as *adiaphora*, particular points “of doctrine or of discipline” that need not be treated uniformly by all persons.¹⁷⁹ “Popery and open superstition” lie outside the domain of *adiaphora*; they simply cannot be permitted under any circumstance. So too, one might suspect, there exist a host of other differences that are not “neighboring” but absolute, simply too different to be accepted as part of the temple. Herein lies a frequent portrayal of the only partially tolerant Milton, whose capacious pluralism is actually sharply curtailed.

On the other hand, however, Milton gives no indication of what differences – other than popery, which refuses to admit difference, and that which is “impious or evil absolutely” – would *not* qualify as *adiaphora*. While many of his contemporaries probe *adiaphora* as a theological, rationally determined category of permitted differences, Milton readily assumes (almost) all differences as “unimportant,” “not mattering or making no difference.”¹⁸⁰ He responds to those who fear sectarianism simply by insisting that what they perceive as differences are really “indifferences.” *Areopagitica* adopts this dismissive attitude again and again, casting “all these supposed sects and schisms” as “fantastic terrors of sect and schism,” the imagined projections of schismatic fear-mongers like Edwards.¹⁸¹

Several readers have observed Milton’s indifference to fears of sectarian division. David Loewenstein notes that “Milton is indeed scornful about the specter of ‘all these supposed sects and schisms,’ as if their dangers to the new Protestant nation in the process of being forged are nothing more than a frightening fantasy and an imaginary terror projected by the orthodox godly.”¹⁸² While the orthodox godly sought to inflame “visceral and irrational feelings” – to them, Loewenstein observes, “the notion of toleration was so frightening that there were limits to the degree in which they were able – or indeed wished – to engage in reasoned debate and careful argument about an

¹⁷⁷ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 565.

¹⁷⁸ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 563.

¹⁷⁹ On Milton and *adiaphora*, see Victoria Kahn, “Revising the History of Machiavellism: English Machiavellism and the Doctrine of Things Indifferent,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46.3 (Autumn 1993): 526-561, and Melissa Caldwell, “Minds Indifferent: Milton, Lord Brooke, and the Value of *Adiaphora* on the Eve of the English Civil War,” *The Seventeenth Century* 22 (2007): 97-123.

¹⁸⁰ The Parliamentarian Robert Greville, Lord Brooke, who Milton references in *Areopagitica*, attempted “to articulate a fully rational explanation of how to resolve the conflict between moral certainty and the toleration of religious pluralism” (Caldwell 103). See Caldwell, “Minds Indifferent,” for a complete discussion of Greville’s argument.

¹⁸¹ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 556, 554.

¹⁸² Loewenstein, 68.

issue that aroused deep fears of moral chaos and confusion” – radical religious writers like Milton and Walwyn appealed to “the efficacy and convincing power of sound reason and argument.”¹⁸³ As Ann Hughes summarizes, “Milton, like Walwyn and John Goodwin, was immune to the terrors of ‘sects and schisms’ that populated the nightmares of Prynne, Calamy, and Edwards... For Milton, division was inevitable, not a source of panic as it was to Edwards.”¹⁸⁴ And so, Hughes concludes, “If division was ever-present, debate and informed discussion were the only means of reaching the truth.”¹⁸⁵

In many ways, Loewenstein and Hughes perfectly articulate *Areopagitica*’s vision of a burgeoning public sphere in which individuals engage in reasoned discussion in order to perpetually advance truth. Envisioning “pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions... others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement,” the diligent work of reason and debate, Milton effuses, “What wants there to such a towardly and pregnant soile, but wise and faithfull labourers, to make a knowing people, a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies.”¹⁸⁶ Milton admits that a “Nation of Prophets” will also be a nation of conflict, and yet ultimately dismisses such concerns:

Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making. Under these fantastic terrors of sect and schism, we wrong the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr’d up in this city. What some lament of, we rather should rejoyce at, should rather praise this pious forwardnes among men, to reassume the ill deputed care of their Religion into their own hands again. A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and som grain of charity might win all these diligences to joyn, and unite into one generall and brotherly search after Truth¹⁸⁷

While conservatives lament division, Milton praises such divisions as indicative of “the earnest and zealous thirst after knowledge and understanding which God hath stirr’d up in this city,” of a vibrant public sphere, progressing ever-onward in its search for truth. Milton does not, however, dismiss the fear of division without comment; it is not, as Loewenstein and Hughes suggest, that Milton is entirely “immune” to fears of sect and schism. Rather, Milton describes an affective method for inoculating the body politic against such fears. “A little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and som grain of charity,” as if ingredients in a recipe, “might win all these diligences to joyn, and unite into one generall and brotherly search after Truth.” The labor of reasoned interpretation and debate produces knowledge, but it is affective labor that transforms each individual’s search for knowledge into a collective and congenial search. It takes affective labor – actively conditioning oneself to exhibit prudence, forbearance, and charity while listening to “much arguing, much writing, many opinions” – in order to experience differences as indifferent.

Milton’s account of affective labor figures less overtly than this emphasis on reasoned debate and informed discussion. And yet, it is, I hope to suggest, essential to his argument; he consistently suggests that tolerance – an affective openness characterized by the “willingness to admit the possible validity of seemingly contradictory viewpoints, a hesitancy to pass value or ‘truth’

¹⁸³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸⁴ Hughes, 217.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 554.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 554.

judgments on individual or group beliefs” – will enable knowledge to burgeon without inexorably fragmenting the nation. The passage on neighboring differences likewise cites affective union as the ground of productive disagreement: “Those neighboring differences, or rather indifferences... need not interrupt ‘the unity of spirit,’ if we could but find among us ‘the bond of peace.’” Referring to “forbearance,” “the unity of spirit,” and “the bond of peace,” Milton cites Ephesians 4, which suggests that, even if we cannot yet understand how, our differences are truly indifferences, for we are already united in “one body, and one Spirit”:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all... Till we all come in the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ... From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.¹⁸⁸

Ephesians 4 resounds throughout *Areopagitica*, and serves as the foundation for Milton’s thoughts on toleration. First, as mentioned, it justifies toleration, allowing for differences to coexist. Ephesians 4 is a favorite verse among those attempting to dissuade schism; Matthew Newcomen, in a pamphlet attempting “to endeavour union, not division, nor toleration,” reads Ephesians 4 as proof of the need to be “perfectly joined together in the SAME MIND and in the SAME JUGEMENT”: “First (saith he) There is one body... whereof you are all members, therefore be ye one, let there be no discord among you.”¹⁸⁹ Like Edwards, Newcomen understands the body politic as a perfect, whole form. Milton’s reading (as it manifests in the temple passage and throughout *Areopagitica*) instead focuses on the insistently future tense of “Till we all come,” placing an absolute “unity of faith” in a distant future unachievable through human means. And even in that distant future, the “whole body” will not become a single, undifferentiated mass. The body of Christ is itself a body made of difference, “fitly joined together by that which every joint supplieth.” As evident from the touching contiguity of Milton’s temple, the word “joint” is classically Miltonic in the same sense as “cleave,” “bound,” and other Miltonic contranym; it depicts his ideal relation among persons insofar as it simultaneously depicts a juncture of union and separation. While one might consider Miltonic contranym an instance of dialectical antagonism between two conflicting meanings, the contranym word might also serve as the touching, common body of two presumably divergent meanings. Like the second coming itself, the contranym word combines the seemingly disparate joints of truth into a whole, single body, yet without collapsing their disparate meanings, retaining the diversity of “that which every joint supplieth.”

Second, Ephesians 4 disregards fear of sect and schism insofar as it claims that a profound commonness (“one body, and one Spirit”) undergirds any perceived differences. That is, although the “unity of faith” and the “whole body” will not be complete until the second coming, all believers are already united in “one body, and one Spirit.” Even if that body is not yet literally discernible, we

¹⁸⁸ Ephesians 4: 1-16. *King James Bible*.

¹⁸⁹ Matthew Newcomen, “The duty of such as would walke worthy of the Gospel: to endeavour union, not division nor toleration” (London, 1646), *Early English Books Online*.

are to treat the other with “lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love” in an attempt “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In Milton’s reading, Ephesians 4 advocates toleration insofar as it does not call upon the reader to eliminate difference. Neither, however, does it simply avow a negative toleration, allowing differences to coexist as if all persons will live in isolated bubbles of individual interpretive perspective until the second coming. Instead, it urges readers to forbear one another “in love,” to treat the other as part of “one body, and one Spirit” even if we cannot yet understand how that could be so. It urges not just toleration – permission of difference – but tolerance – a willingness to engender a “unity of Spirit” across difference. That is, Ephesians 4 asks us to change our affective relation to difference, to treat differences as the “neighboring differences, or indifferences” of “one body, and one Spirit” through the endeavoring of charity and compassion.

By advocating a positive, affective tolerance based on membership in a common body, Ephesians 4 helps explain Milton’s dismissive attitude toward difference. “Many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional,” “neighboring differences, or rather indifferences”: we need not worry the exact specifications of these categories for we are all already “one body, and one Spirit”; these differences are neighboring differences even if we cannot yet understand how. At the same time, however, the “unity of Spirit” is not merely an abstraction. Just as each person must reason for oneself in order to determine their own belief, we must endeavor charity and compassion in order to manifest the “unity of Spirit,” to feel ourselves as part of the “one body, and one Spirit.” Milton’s insistently affective language – “brotherly dissimilitudes,” “neighboring differences” – points to the key insight he draws from Ephesians 4: to endeavor charity and compassion toward these differences is to render them indifferent. Simply by changing one’s affective relationship to difference through prudence, forbearance, and charity, differences attenuate into “one general and brotherly search after truth.” This is an affective variation on *Areopagitica*’s “to the pure all things are pure” argument, according to which the subjective perspective of each reader determines the meaning of the text. Those who project “fantastic terrors of sect and schism” onto the body politic create these divisions; as Lord Brooke (a key touchstone of *Areopagitica*) avows, “They cry out Schisme, Schisme, Sects and Schismes; and well they may: They make them.”¹⁹⁰ Milton, treating these schisms as “neighboring differences, or rather indifferences,” makes them so.

If, then, *Areopagitica* makes a reasoned argument for toleration (they are “irrational men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber ere the house of God can be built”), its argument for tolerance relies less on reasoned argument than on a feeling faith in the “one body, and one Spirit” of the *corpus Christi*. One must accept the impossibility of fully understanding how the joint body will come together; in the meantime, one must endeavor to feel “the unity of Spirit” in order to manifest it. Consider, for example, Milton’s visionary description of the Samson-ian body politic. Once again, Milton depicts a bodily form that resonates with Edwards’ schismatic, monstrous body politic: it is a body made of component metaphors, shifting gender and species, metaphors seemingly too different to qualify as “brotherly dissimilitudes.” Yet the only figures excluded from this body politic are not Catholics or even atheists, but those that “would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms”:

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her

¹⁹⁰ Lord Brooke, *A Discourse Opening the Nature of that Episcopacie* (London, 1641), *Early English Books Online*, 95.

mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance, while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.¹⁹¹

The “timorous and flocking birds” do not consider themselves component members of an incorporated body. Instead, they “flutter about” in the twilight, gabbling and gossiping. We can clearly detect Milton’s dismissive attitude toward those who fear sect and schism; their argument is a meaningless “noise,” devoid of content. At the same time, it is precisely the birds’ focus on discursive meaning that prevents them from being a part of the body politic. They are “amazed at what she means,” attempting to understand both what the eagle signifies and what she portends. Yet, as Ephesians 4 has illuminated, we cannot understand “what she means,” how this disparate body politic will come together as an entirely coherent form. The body politic is no longer an allegorical fable of King as head or belly; to be incorporate into this body politic is not to understand one’s hierarchical position, or the precise coordination of disparate positions, but to feel oneself as part of a common form. Indeed, absent from this depiction of enlightenment is any focus on discursive knowledge. Instead, the passage depicts enlightenment as literal *enlightenment*, “kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam.” Counter to semantic meaning, the eagle feels knowledge on and through the body, as heat and physical strength.¹⁹² *Areopagitica* repeatedly insists that the felt experience of truth supersedes any discursive understanding of it: “See the ingenuity of Truth, who when she gets a free and willing hand, opens herself faster then the pace of method and discourse can overtake her.”¹⁹³ Rather than excluding any perspectives as too different to be included in the body politic, not sufficiently “neighboring” or “brotherly” on the basis of content, Milton’s body politic incorporates all persons except those who refuse to feel themselves a part of it.

Loewenstein and Hughes contrast the rational arguments of the tolerationists to the fear-mongering of Presbyterians; and yet, as Andrew Escobedo has observed, in contrast to a public sphere that “tends to operate by principle and rhetorical position,” “Milton’s national imaginary emphasizes communal affect and identity.”¹⁹⁴ In mid-century debates over toleration and sectarianism, the *corpus Christi* or *corpus myticum* also animates discussion of “the invisible church” – the “mystic body,” as Milton defines it in *Christian Doctrine*, which emerges “from this union and communion with the Father and with Christ and among the members of Christ’s body themselves.”¹⁹⁵ As Escobedo notes, Milton describes the nation as “a partially ‘imagined’ community

¹⁹¹ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 558-9.

¹⁹² Milton makes a similar comparison between knowledge and heat in *The Readie and Easie Way*, when he writes that having schools spread throughout England would “spread much more knowledge and civilitie, yea religion through all parts of the land, by communicating the natural heat of government and cultur emore distributively to all extreme parts” (In *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, volume 7, ed. R.W. Ayers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980)).

¹⁹³ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 521.

¹⁹⁴ Andrew Escobedo, “The Invisible Nation: Church, State, and Schism in Milton’s England,” in *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton’s England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) 173-196, 193.

¹⁹⁵ John Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 6, ed. Maurice Kelley, trans. John Carey (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973) 500.

that bears the trace of religious affect in its analogical relation to the invisible church of Christ.”¹⁹⁶ That is, just as the invisible church or *corpus mysticum* entails a body united in spirit, though not in physical form (“since the ascension of Christ, the *pillar and ground of the truth* has not uniformly been the church, but the hearts of believers, which are properly ‘the house and church of the living God’”), the nation is bound not by a uniform set of beliefs, but by “a mutual bond of amity and brother-hood,” as Milton puts it in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.¹⁹⁷ As Richard Hooker explains in his *Laws*, the invisibility of the invisible church mandates active participation on behalf of the believer:

That Church of Christ, which we properly term his body mystical, can be but one; neither can that one be sensibly discerned by any man, inasmuch as the parts thereof are some in heaven already with Christ, and the rest that are on earth (albeit their natural persons be visible) we do not discern this property, whereby they are truly and infallibly of that body. Only our minds by intellectual conceit are able to apprehend, that such a real body there is, a body collective, because it containeth a huge multitude; a body mystical, because the mystery of their conjunction is removed altogether from sense.¹⁹⁸

According to Hooker, the organic unity of the *corpus Christi* can only be mentally apprehended, not “sensibly discerned.” The notion of the invisible church is fundamentally antithetical to Parliament’s demands, in the early 1640s, for separatist groups to increasingly codify and justify their beliefs. The *corpus mysticum* dictates that “the mystery of their conjunction” – the precise relation between, say, the Brownists, the Anabaptists, and the Congregationalists – “is removed altogether from sense.” In its recourse to poetic imagining, however, *Areopagitica* attempts to give sense and form to the *corpus mysticum* – an especially important task given the fine line between the invisible and the fictional (a distinction that critics of the invisible church typically collapsed). As Escobedo notes, “*Areopagitica*, more than any of the other tracts Milton wrote, takes... pains to *imagine* the nation.”¹⁹⁹ Indeed, as much as Milton’s redefinition of heresy as static rather than false belief, it is Milton’s recourse to the affective capacity of literary form that builds on Walwyn’s rational argument; through metaphor, I suggest for the remainder of this section, Milton enables the reader to feel the unity of a diverse body politic, a unity that can be felt but not rationally understood. Milton not only insists that English people exert affective tolerance toward each other; his prose utilizes metaphor and syntax to

¹⁹⁶ Escobedo, 176. On Milton’s use of the invisible church, see also Michael Lieb, *The Sirens of Ulysses: Form and Convention in Milton’s Works* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1989), 21-37, and Stephen Honeygosky, *Milton’s House of God: the Invisible and Visible Church* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993). Lieb argues that Milton considered the visible church “decidedly inferior” to the invisible, as he “associated the visible church with the Old Dispensation, the invisible church with the New” (23). Honeygosky notes that “while Milton’s church doctrine depends on a corrective against a luxurious, overritualized, and tyrannical visible church, it nonetheless depends on the visible church’s establishing and maintaining a vital and healthy intersection with the invisible mystical church” (6). In addition to drawing connections between the invisible church and the nation, Escobedo provides an excellent overview of the importance of the visible church to Congregationalists, challenging longstanding narratives that associated radical Puritans exclusively with the invisible church (such as Lieb’s).

¹⁹⁷ Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, 279. Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, 214-5.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (London, 1604), *Early English Books Online*, 19.

¹⁹⁹ Escobedo, 192-3.

enact such affective tolerance, to enable the reader to feel themselves a member of a joint, national body that cannot be wholly understood.

Let us return, for example, to the Samson passage. This passage might be considered emblematic of an iconoclastic, deconstructive reading of *Areopagitica*. The images of the passage do not line up, as if (according to such a reading) “refus[ing] to let us forget that they are illusions.”²⁰⁰ Instead of keeping the vehicle and tenor separate and coherent – as would be the case if Milton wrote “rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking *his* invincible locks” – Milton moves from a comparison (“like a strong man,” “as an eagle”) to a blended metaphor (“shaking *her* invincible locks,” “mewing *her* mighty youth”), allegedly registering the impossibility of envisioning such a metaphorical form:

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam, purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance, while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.

In many ways, the reading holds: the passage does not readily enable us to envision the nation; each time an image begins to form, Milton iconoclastically breaks it. The strong man rises, but then transforms back into the nation (“*her* invincible locks”) which can hardly be imagined shaking its hair. The eagle is perhaps easier to envision, although “the fountain itself of heavenly radiance” actively resists human imagining. Finally, the reader encounters the birds flitting about the eagle; yet Milton does not describe the birds themselves fluttering, but “the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds,” a synesthesia of sound in motion. “The light which we have gain’d, was giv’n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge”; the passage indeed offers a metaphor that the reader cannot easily navigate, no image in which readers can contemplatively rest.²⁰¹

At the same time, what strikes me as notable about the metaphor, in light of Milton’s account of the nation as *corpus Christi*, is the seamless transition between gender and species, the way that Milton navigates so readily to and from the nation, Samson, and the eagle. The reader may not be able to rest in a single image, but that does not necessarily indicate “the inadequacy of all signs to express the truths they serve,” the emptiness of metaphor, but might instead suggest the fullness of metaphor, its ability to carry a single tenor through multiple vehicles.²⁰² Here, Milton presents the metaphorical equivalent of the nation as “body mystical,” “a huge multitude,” though “the mystery of their conjunction is removed altogether from sense.” If, that is, the deconstructive, iconoclastic reading suggests that every time the imagery contorts, Milton intends for the reader to recognize its inadequacy (the nation is *not* Samson, *not* female, *not* an eagle), the contortion of imagery might also suggest that the nation is Samson *and* female *and* an eagle all together, all at once, even if we cannot quite envision such a nation in visible form.

²⁰⁰ Lana Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton’s Iconoclasm and the Poetics of Desire* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 119.

²⁰¹ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 550.

²⁰² Cable, 117.

While Hooker insists that “only our minds *by intellectual conceit*” can apprehend such a body, Milton seems, in this particular use of metaphor, more invested in lending sensory perception to this body than in prompting mental exertion. Again, it is the “timorous and flocking birds” who gabble and gawk, “amazed at what she means,” worrying over the internal divisions of the metaphor. Milton seems to intend for the reader to instead feel the vigor of the nation across and through difference, its invincibility to even discursive incoherence, as one might feel the heat of “the full midday beam.” As Geoffrey Nuttall has explicated, and as we will return to in greater depth in the next chapter, radical Puritans often experienced divine truth as sensory: “The radical Puritans, in particular, through their reaction alike against dead ‘notions’ and an over strict morality, sought to associate the Holy Spirit less with reason or conscience and more with a spiritual perception analogous to the physical perception of the senses and given in ‘experience’ as a whole.”²⁰³ Milton’s iconoclastic metaphors posit not just the breaking of “dead” or static “notions” of truth, but aim to create the sensation of truth – in this case, the feeling of a noble, puissant nation, readily shape-shifting, as if its nonsensical disjuncting was not a disjuncting at all.

Metaphor functions in a similar way in Milton’s most explicit retelling of Ephesians 4, the passage comparing Truth’s fragmented body to the disjointed body of Osiris. Once again, as in the Samson passage, Milton blends metaphors, combining the female body of Truth with the male body of Osiris, and the Christological and mythological belief systems:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on. But when he ascended and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who, *as that story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, *the sad friends of Truth*, such as durst appear, *imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master’s second coming. He shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mold them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. Suffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity, forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyred saint.²⁰⁴

One can scarcely parse where the story of “Egyptian Typhon” ends and that of “the virgin Truth” begins. The text itself transforms these very different stories of Osiris and Truth into “neighboring differences,” both by casting them in a metaphorical relationship to each other and by quite literally placing them in neighboring clauses: “who, as that story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth.” If the whole body of Truth is hopelessly fragmented, metaphor makes “one body, and one Spirit” of disparate belief systems nonetheless. As in the temple passage, this body may not be continuous until Christ “bring[s] together every joint and member,” but it is made insistently contiguous through Milton’s use of metaphor and syntax.

Here, my understanding of the way metaphor works in *Areopagitica* differs somewhat from previous accounts. On one hand, as mentioned, a deconstructive reading proclaims *Areopagitica*’s use

²⁰³ Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit*, 38.

²⁰⁴ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 549-550.

of metaphor symptomatic of a disjointed, unachievable, hopelessly distant truth.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, scholars consider the proliferation of metaphors as an exercise in virtuous choosing.²⁰⁶ “Just as the realm of things indifferent allows for the exercise of virtue,” Victoria Kahn infers, “so rhetorical figures are things indifferent which can be used in a variety of ways by the author and the reader. The indeterminacy and instability of certain words and metaphors serves as an illustration of the author’s, and by occasion of the reader’s, exercise of virtue.”²⁰⁷ Milton employs the same metaphor in multiple contexts (truth has “more shapes than one”), prompting the reader to exercise discernment in sorting and assessing among them. Fundamentally, both accounts cite the instability of Miltonic truth, whether underscoring skepticism or the individual’s reasoning capacity. Yet neither account really acknowledges the affective resonance of *Areopagitica*’s metaphors. What it feels like to read the metaphors of *Areopagitica* is what it feels like to read the Samson passage: to be caught up in a soaring description that defies logical sense and yet adheres to felt sense, to feel coherence in spite of, upon closer examination, incoherence, to feel the unity of each metaphorical body even as that body defies the uniformity of a whole, cohesive form.

In *Areopagitica*, metaphor allows the reader to feel the unity of “one body, and one Spirit” across and through difference, as Milton quite literally creates a metaphorical body out of disparate, component parts. As Paul Ricoeur notes in his treatment of metaphor, “To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different.”²⁰⁸ To create or read a metaphor is to participate in an exercise of affective tolerance, which is exactly how Milton figures metaphorical creation in the Osiris/Truth passage. “The sad friends of Truth” neither reason their way to Truth’s bodily composition, nor inertly bemoan her loss. They attempt to metaphorically recreate her body through an act of joint intellectual and affective labor. Milton physicalizes and collectivizes the “careful search” of reason (as Picciotto notes), while simultaneously imbuing that search with feeling; to reform Truth is to do the work of metaphor – to seek after diffused likeness – a seeking which Milton here figures as an act of feeling compassion (“the sad friends of Truth... continue to do our obsequies”).²⁰⁹ Metaphor in *Areopagitica* is not the same as comprehensive knowledge, for metaphorical re-creation, gathering up limbs, cannot and will not restore breath to Truth’s body. But it can do something equally important for the purposes of *Areopagitica*: it can posit a felt relation between seemingly disparate things and persons. It can create a metaphorical body of commonness (as with Milton’s Osiris/Truth metaphor) where before there was only a vast gulf of un-touching difference. Again, it can not only create such a body; it can make the reader feel the truth of that relation (of the commonness of mythological and Christological belief, for instance) without having to explicitly or exhaustively articulate every similarity and difference between them, which, of course, no one could ever accomplish (in our case, ever; in Milton’s, until the second coming).

Metaphor need not always function this way. Blaine Greteman makes a compelling case for Milton’s use of metaphor in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* as a kind of mathematical formula.

²⁰⁵ See Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works*; Victoria Silver, *Imperfect Sense* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001); Catherine Gimelli Martin, *The Ruins of Allegory: Paradise Lost and the Metamorphosis of Epic Convention* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998); and Lana Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric*.

²⁰⁶ See Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric from the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) and Blaine Greteman, “Exactest Proportion”: The Iconoclastic and Constitutive Powers of Metaphor in Milton’s Prose Tracts,” *ELH* 76.2 (Summer 2009): 399-417.

²⁰⁷ Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, 175.

²⁰⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” *Critical Inquiry* 5.1 (Autumn, 1978): 143-159, 148.

²⁰⁹ Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence*, 425-6.

“The Golden Rule,” Greteman posits, “allows us to find the unknown term in an equation like $4/5 = 8/X$, and the way it equates its terms without actually connecting them, transferring meaning in a way that leaves us constantly aware that nothing is really being transferred bears a striking similarity to metaphor.”²¹⁰ In the context of *Tenure*’s argument about kingship, metaphor enables the reader to understand the relation between subject and sovereign as “transferred figuratively but not actually from one term to another.”²¹¹ Greteman’s argument resembles Kahn’s insofar as it seeks to align figurative language with rational thought. For even as metaphor describes a figurative, not actual, form of relation, Milton’s use of metaphor “is governed by rational proportion” in Greteman’s telling.²¹² It allows the reader to quite precisely solve for the proper relation between King and people: “to read a metaphor aright means... to assert the correct relations and hold them in even proportion while reason does its work, draws its conclusions, and seeks its consequences.”²¹³ Milton’s use of metaphor in *Tenure* thus dovetails with the early modern definition of metaphor, whereby, as Henry Peacham puts it, “Metaphora is the artificial translation of one word, from the *proper* signification, to another *not proper*, but yet nigh and like.”²¹⁴

Yet *Tenure* and *Areopagitica* differ in two critical ways. While Milton’s intent in *Tenure* is to reassert “proper signification” between the two proportions of King and people, the goal of *Areopagitica* is the precise opposite: to refute the existence of any fixed proper or improper signification, to disrupt the hierarchy of competing visions of truth. And while *Tenure* seeks to cast a presumably fixed relation (King and people) into question, *Areopagitica* seeks to establish a relationship among differing perspectives of truth, one that seems not to exist. That is to say, metaphor still operates in a manner metaphorically akin to a mathematical equation, like $4/5 = 8/X$; yet in the context of *Areopagitica*, the variable cannot be solved for. Instead, metaphor allows us to posit a non-hierarchical relation whose precise contours will not be clear until the second coming. At one point, for example, Milton censures the “Fool!” who “sees not the firm root out of which we grow, though into branches... [we] shall laugh in the end at those malicious applauders of our differences.”²¹⁵ The skeptical reader – the very same reader who might question the imprecise language of “brotherly dissimilitudes” – might be taken aback by Milton’s confidence in the “firm root,” pressing him to explicitly articulate the connection between divergent viewpoints. But, for Milton, the difficulty of describing “the firm root” in concrete terms does not disprove its existence. Instead, the metaphor enables Milton to posit a common form as yet inaccessible from the perspective of human understanding. Metaphor goes where reason cannot; it becomes the holding space for a felt belief in commonness. This is why, rather than simply using metaphor, *Areopagitica* needs metaphor. Metaphor becomes Milton’s best defense against schismatic fear-mongers, for it creates a feeling of rooted commonness, staving off accusations of England as devolving into endlessly fragmented schism, without having to explicitly define a set of common beliefs.²¹⁶

²¹⁰ Greteman, 409.

²¹¹ Greteman, 403.

²¹² Greteman, 413.

²¹³ Greteman, 410.

²¹⁴ Henry Peacham, *Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1593), C2r, *Early English Books Online*, emphasis mine.

²¹⁵ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 556.

²¹⁶ Cognitive scientists discussing metaphor emphasize that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), 4). To describe an argument as “war,” for example, is to “[structure] the actions we perform in arguing... Imagine a culture where

The kind of commonness that metaphor creates in *Areopagitica* is, admittedly, rhetorical. Yet *Areopagitica* seems not to be undermining the force of rhetoric, nor professing its insufficiency. Rather, it seems to be heralding the power of “mere” rhetoric, the fact that the feeling of commonness generated through figurative language and forms might be sufficient to manifest that commonness, negating the phantasm of sect and schism. According to Milton, *Areopagitica* does not whole-sale create a commonness from nothing. It manifests a commonness of “one body, and one Spirit” already latent within the present; indeed, the very word *manifest* might be considered the driving purpose of *Areopagitica*. Milton begins his address to Parliament by announcing, “When complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for. To which... I now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter, that we are already in good part arrived.”²¹⁷ Milton does not demonstrate that England’s current licensing laws represent “the utmost bound of civil liberty” solely through the force of discursive argument; he *manifests* this fact “by the very sound of this which I shall utter,” through the felt sensation of his words – written words that assume the sonic resonance and presence of an oration – washing over the reader. Unlike the twittering birds who “prognosticate a year of sects and schisms,” *Areopagitica* does not foretell an imagined, invented future; instead, it prophetically exposes the future commonness that already exists within the present. “Methinks I see,” Milton proclaims, squinting to metaphorically envision a common form across and through difference. And in attempting to see that common form, in enabling the reader to see and hear and feel it, he makes it so.

II. “Samson bath quit himself / Like Samson”: Un-Writing the National Body

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
-1 Corinthians 13:1-2.

The Christian Church now is crumbled into so many sects and forms, that were prophecy now in the world, men would be apt to receive it as testimony, not to their Church, but to their Party.
-John Spencer, *A Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies* (1665)

argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently” (4-5). I emphasize, however, not only the ability to conceptually think through metaphor but the ability to feel through metaphor. That is, while metaphor creates new conceptual possibilities, it also bypasses a strictly conceptual understanding of relation (e.g. my argument is like your argument insofar as we both claim x, y, or z) insofar as one could never exhaustively understand the meaning of a metaphor. That is, there is an aspect of feeling to metaphor that defies articulation, just as the *corpus christi* must be felt though it cannot be understood.

²¹⁷ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 487.

By the time Milton writes *Samson Agonistes*, he lives in a very different historical moment. Gone is the glorious imagining of the English nation; in the place of a corporate Samson, rousing in communal strength, kindling its eyes at the fountain of heavenly radiance, is a body imprisoned and blind. The poem's historical context has led to numerous autobiographical readings. In some cases, Samson stands in for the New Model Army, or the "Good Old Cause."²¹⁸ His bondage represents the bondage of a dissenting political subject, the Philistines represent the lascivious Restoration Court, and, with Samson's final violence, Milton prophesies political regeneration. In this narrative, political failure fuels anger; *Samson* is a story of the Old Testament, and the God of the Old Testament is precisely what Milton desires in this historical moment.²¹⁹ Failure to understand violence as divine, we are told, is a failure to read *Samson* in its appropriate historical context.

This reading functions if we understand Milton to be on one side of the post-Restoration political divide: the side of the righteous-in-exile. Such a reading identifies Milton's sympathies with Samson exclusively. And yet, *Samson* is a radically ambivalent poem, the only one of Milton's poems to present the voices and perspectives of a non-Judeo-Christian people. We can hardly valorize Samson's final action, given its ambivalent presentation, unless we simply insist that – because he is a Biblical figure, because he is Milton's protagonist – we must valorize him, an always-already-determined reading that Milton would surely consider heretical. Rather than associating Samson with an exclusionary political cause (even one as important to Milton as the "Good Old Cause"), I suggest that *Samson Agonistes* registers, in the context of Restoration politics, the impossibility of *Areopagitica*'s central insight: the capacity of collective humanity to build the body of truth insofar as they are able to feel themselves as part of a common form.

This reading, rather than having Samson and the Philistines stand in for the combat between the defeated revolutionaries and the Restoration court, regards these two sides as members of a joint body that do not recognize themselves as such. *Samson Agonistes* returns to the *corpus mysticum* metaphor of *Areopagitica*, devoting particular attention to the component parts of Samson's physical body. *Samson*, however, registers the failure of this metaphor; the characters of *Samson Agonistes* refuse to see themselves as part of a common form, and the very functioning of the body politic (in the figure of Samson's body) breaks down as a result. So too, the absence of a common form triggers a breakdown of form itself. *Samson* ultimately registers the failure of *Areopagitica*'s capacious, national body as a failure of metaphor, a formal manifestation of Samson's unwillingness "to see the same in spite of, and through, the different."

This reading emerges clearly when we shift our historical perspective just slightly, from privileging the position of the republican righteous-in-exile to considering the state of the nation at large.²²⁰ The Restoration was indeed a time of increasing political division; yet it was also, like the 1640s, a time of conflict between partisanship and corporate-ness. In fact, historians have often

²¹⁸ See Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: the Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978): "The error of the Independent leaders was not their self-indulgence so much as their unwise belief that they might sweep the people into freedom, that an 'implicit faith' in the Good Old Cause would suffice. The corresponding failure of the English nation was their inability to see how they must apply to themselves the self-discipline, the dedication to the cause, the watchfulness and the personal commitment they found in their leaders" (173).

²¹⁹ See, for instance, Sharon Achinstein's *Literature and Dissent in Milton's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): "that fiery ancient rage instills meaning for the present and future, spending a passion that will yet be spent in a final moment of revealed truth" (152).

²²⁰ On the conflict between the Jews and the Philistines as an international conflict, see Elizabeth Sauer, *Milton, Toleration, and Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

noted the similarities between the crises of conscience versus consent in the 1640s and those of the 1660s. After the dismemberment of the body politic from civil war in the 1640s and non-monarchical rule in the 1650s, the architects of the Restoration sought to restore a corporate body. Simultaneously, however, the 1660s marked a rise in partisan politics, inimical to the idea of the corporate body. As historian Paul Halliday has argued, partisan politics was in essence paradoxical; rather than setting “two mutually recognized groups *within* government against one another – this is our modern notion – it pitted one group claiming to be the government against another group they argued should be excluded from government.”²²¹ The only way to restore corporate unity, then, was to exclude “those perceived to be ‘factious,’ ‘malignant,’ or otherwise illegitimate as participants in public life... The paradox of partisan politics was that the search for unity ended up provoking more disunity.”²²² England became divided over the very question of what constituted disagreement. The history of the 1650s to the turn of the century takes on a repetitive, cyclical narrative of partisan exclusion: “The rhetoric of unity compelled each side to seek the total victory by which party would be eradicated; as each sought victory with equal vigor, neither could win for long. Purges of the 1650s were met by purges in the 1660s, followed by more of the same in the 1680s, and again in the decades after 1688; orgies of purgation, intended to end partisan division, invariably made it worse.”²²³ Partisan politics yields the very same paradox pointed out by *Areopagitica* and all seventeenth-century defenders of liberty of conscience: seeking absolute uniformity will only, inevitably, promulgate schism.²²⁴

Samson Agonistes operates precisely according to the irreconcilable and unending conflict between absolute uniformity and absolute difference. The poem’s characters refuse the possibility of “neighboring differences.” Instead, they frame the relation between the Jews and the Philistines as one of exclusionary poles, either/or alternatives. God, Manoa insists, “will not long... Endure it, doubtful whether God be Lord, / Or Dagon.”²²⁵ Samson boasts to Harapha that “thou shalt see, or rather to thy sorrow / Soon feel, whose god is strongest, thine or mine.”²²⁶ The poem’s emphasis on exclusionary poles has led readers to proclaim the importance of determining meaning for oneself. We cannot say, Gordon Teskey asserts, “that the poem simply has two meanings that exist side by side. The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it.”²²⁷

Yet though the characters of the poem understand meaning and truth as exclusionary – the righteousness of Samson necessitates the unrighteousness of Dalila – the poem itself does not. Quite to the contrary, the either/or comparisons of the poem are consistently revealed to be *false* contraries, a trend Anthony Low once labeled “the irony of alternatives.”²²⁸ Throughout the text, a character will posit “either this is true or that, or more usually, either this will happen or that; but in the working out, both choices eventuate, even though they had been thought of as mutually exclusive.”²²⁹ The key example might be the discussion of Samson’s final action. Manoa posits, “they

²²¹ Halliday, 6.

²²² Halliday, 6.

²²³ Halliday, 15.

²²⁴ This is not only a problem of extremists in this time period but even of moderates. See Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation*.

²²⁵ Milton, *SA*, 474-8.

²²⁶ Milton, *SA*, 1154-5.

²²⁷ Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006), 184.

²²⁸ Anthony Low, “Action and Suffering: ‘Samson Agonistes’ and the Irony of Alternatives,” *PMLA* 3 (May 1969), pp. 514-519.

²²⁹ Low, 514.

have slain my son,” to which the Chorus responds, “thy Son is rather slaying them.”²³⁰ Both, of course, are true. The either/or relationship between God and Dagon thus raises suspicion of Samson’s hatred for the Philistines. Paradoxically, rather than reading the poem as a competition that Samson’s God ultimately wins, the poem’s broader treatment of either/or comparisons as false contraries places God and Dagon in conjunction rather than in contrast. The poem implies, in line with the exhortation for tolerance in *Areopagitica*, that the Israelites and the Philistines might both bear witness to a shape of truth, even if those shapes appear wholly disparate. More broadly, the poem implies potential continuity between two factions, each of which considers itself the only legitimate authority and seeks to eliminate the other.

Perhaps, one might contend, to suggest tolerance toward the Philistines is a step too far. But if Milton’s intent is to describe a people so impious that one can only respond to them with unapologetic violence, surely he could have provided more evidence. Recall that the true enemy of *Areopagitica* is not the heretic – he who believes falsely – but (as Milton puts it in his 1673 “Of True Religion”) “he who is so forward to brand all others for heretics.”²³¹ Even when Milton castigates “tolerated popery and open superstition,” he hedges, “provided first that all charitable and compassionate means be used to win and regain the weak and mislead.” Samson approaches the other first with the intent of maintaining his own separation, and then, in the few occasions where he does interact with them (his marriages and the destruction of the theater), with the intent to purge them entirely. Rather than understanding his marriage as miscegenation, for instance, Samson subsumes Dalila, as evidenced by his use of the possessive: “I before all the daughters of *my* tribe / And of *my* nation chose *thee* from among / *my* enemies, loved *thee*.” Dalila figures entirely as object, and Samson considers marriage a complete transfer of ownership and identity:

Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave
Parents and country; nor was I their subject,
Nor under their protection but my own,
Thou mine, not theirs: if aught against my life
Thy country sought of thee, it sought unjustly,
Against the law of nature, law of nations,
No more thy country, but an impious crew
Of men conspiring to uphold their state
By worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends
For which our country is a name so dear²³²

The passage, as the entirety of the poem, is riddled with sharp distinctions between “my” and “thy.” “Thou mine, not theirs” might stand in for a description of Samson and Dalila’s entire marriage. Samson perpetually refuses allegiance or even connection with any other person, instead almost paradoxically pronouncing his own independence. The lines “nor was I their subject, / Nor under their protection but my own” seem to emerge from nowhere, protesting an argument (Samson was the subject of the Philistines since he married Dalila) that no one is making. Most notably, Samson casts his and Dalila’s relation to their nations in the exact terms of partisan politics. As soon as

²³⁰ Milton, *SA*, 1516, 1517.

²³¹ John Milton, “Of True Religion, Heresy, Schism, and Toleration,” in *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse and Prose, Volume II: Prose*, eds. Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black, and Holly Faith Nelson, 363.

²³² Milton, *SA*, 885-894.

Dalila married Samson and became his, she was to consider her own country “but an impious crew / Of men conspiring to uphold their state / By worse than hostile deeds.” Their state directly violates the ends of “our country”; joining a new country means pledging complete allegiance to it, and renouncing one’s former nation as impious. In short, Samson has no capacity to imagine “our country” in terms that might integrate even a modicum of Dalila’s former identity. Instead, Samson considers “our country” synonymous with “my country,” the exclusive proponent of righteousness. “Our country” – a country that actually incorporates both Samson and Dalila – exists as nothing but an empty name.

Samson’s final action likewise epitomizes the paradox of partisan politics; again, he can imagine bridging difference only by purging the other. Unable to find a way of purging them alone, he kills himself in the process. What has been seen as a celebratory action of political regeneration actually figures, in the context of Restoration partisanship, as a single point in an unending cycle of violence. Samson’s destruction of the Philistine temple in the Biblical narrative does not end the imprisonment of the Israelites. In fact, Milton’s poem further emphasizes the futility of Samson’s final action, its incapacity to change the historical trajectory. Manoa ends the poem by intending to build Samson a monument, in which “virgins... shall on feastful days / Visit his tomb with flowers.”²³³ Yet this ending is deeply suspect given Dalila’s earlier invocation of her own “tomb / With odors visited and annual flowers. / Not less renowned than in Mount Ephraim / Jael, who with inhospitable guile / Smote Sisera sleeping through the temples nailed.”²³⁴ Dalila too draws on a Biblical prophet as precedent in justifying the righteousness of her actions. As she notes, righteousness will be determined by the sect of the people viewing the narrative: “Fame if not double-faced is double-mouthed, / And with contrary blast proclaims most deeds; / On both his wings, one black, th’ other white.”²³⁵ Samson’s destruction of the temple does nothing to alleviate the suffering of the Israelites, nor to resolve the conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. Instead, it figures as one drop in a long historical narrative of killing and being killed, purging and re-purging the other.

The most important point for the purposes of our argument, however, is not simply that *Samson* dramatizes the problem of sectarian, partisan politics, but that it dramatizes this problem as the breakdown of a shared, sensory body. In so doing, Milton again figures the body politic as a form not only created (and dissolved) on the basis of abstract commitments and ideals, but also on the basis of shared feeling. Most readings of the poem cast Samson as a figure for the body politic; the Chorus describes him at the poem’s opening as lying “at random, carelessly diffused, / With languished head unpropped,” suggesting an inert and disordered England in the wake of the Restoration.²³⁶ John Rogers has read Samson’s lament of his blindness, surely one of the most lovely and fascinating moments of the poem, as a longing for a monistic body politic, hearkening back to the “radical egalitarian utopianism of the poet’s earliest forays into political speculation.”²³⁷ “Why was sight,” Samson implores his absent God, “To such a tender ball as the eye confined? / So obvious and so easy to be quenched / And not as feeling through all parts diffused, / That she might look at will through every pore?”²³⁸ Joanna Picciotto concurs with Rogers’ argument: “the alignment of Samson’s strength with the length of his locks identifies this power with an immanent

²³³ Milton, *SA*, 1741-2.

²³⁴ Milton, *SA*, 986-90.

²³⁵ Milton, *SA*, 971-3.

²³⁶ Milton, *SA*, 118-9.

²³⁷ John Rogers, “The Secret of Samson Agonistes,” *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 111-132, 126.

²³⁸ Milton, *SA*, 93-7.

process working through a body, one that refuses all hierarchical organization.”²³⁹ Samson’s desire to be all eye, then, reflects Milton’s desire for a diffuse, non-hierarchical body politic, a possibility that returns with Samson’s hair.

Yet Samson’s invocation of the “monistic body” also refers to a Biblical passage, one that problematizes any utopian reading. We might recall from the chapter on Elizabeth Poole that the “one body, and one spirit” of the Bible is also a sensory body. Just as the physical body must integrate the input of disparate sense organs, the strength and vitality of the body politic relies on the integration of disparate members with disparate capacities:

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole body were the hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body?... God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundance and honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all members suffer with it.²⁴⁰

1 Corinthians’ description of the *corpus mysticum* alerts us to the co-constitutive, relational nature of sensory experience – precisely the relationality that Samson refuses in his desire that “the whole body were an eye.” Indeed, in light of 1 Corinthians and *Areopagitica*, the monistic body suggests a Miltonic *dystopia*. While “there should be no schism in the body,” the body should certainly not be composed of a uniform substance, the kind of starch conformity insisted upon by anti-tolerantists. Rather than a “radical egalitarian utopianism” that the poem never again references (except in the disturbing terms of Samson’s final leveling), Samson’s desire to be all “eye” reflects his desire to be all “I,” his refusal to tolerate any difference within himself. Samson espouses his longing for uniformity repeatedly throughout the poem. In the place of the gender-bending metaphors of *Areopagitica*, Samson blames his misfortune on his “foul effeminacy,” on the otherness within. Both 1 Corinthians and *Areopagitica* teach, however, that to be separated from all otherness is in fact to be self-divided, for the individual body is not made of identical self-sameness but of joint difference.²⁴¹

In fact, the entire poem might be read as a commentary on 1 Corinthians, dramatizing the fate of the partisan body politic through the sensory breakdown of a single body. In his desire to be all eye/I, Samson refuses the process of integration. And in the absence of integration, in Samson’s refusal to feel himself as one part of a common form, his ability to register the surrounding environment deteriorates.²⁴² Take, for instance, the poem’s treatment of sound and hearing. From

²³⁹ Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence*, 501.

²⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 12: 17-26.

²⁴¹ In the first moments of the poem, Milton depicts Samson, a Nazarite, “a person separate to God,” as internally schismatic, divided from his own body, his past, his own thoughts: “Ease to the body some, none to the mind / From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging, and present / Times past, what once I was, and what am now” (*SA* 31, 18-22).

²⁴² Amanda Goldstein uncovers a similar dynamic at work in Herder’s account of poetry and sensation, and her language is quite helpful here (Amanda Jo Goldstein, “Irritable Figures: Herder’s Poetic Empiricism,” in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Dalia Nassar (New York: Oxford UP, 2014). “Sensation’ for Herder, is really and radically relational: the ‘circle of thinking and sensing,’ like the ‘deepest self in us,’ is coconstituted with other beings and

the very opening of the poem to his final action, Samson has trouble discerning the words of others. Words come to him (quite notably when read within the context of *Areopagitica*) “unjointed”: “I hear the sound of words, their sense the air / Dissolves unjointed ere it reach my ear.”²⁴³ Disjointed sounds echo most notably in Samson’s final action. “What noise or shout was that?” Manoa exclaims, “it tore the sky.”²⁴⁴ And again, “O what noise! / Mercy of Heav’n what hideous noise was that?”²⁴⁵ Scholars have suggested that this uncategorizable sound registers the need for the reader to construct meaning, or the violence of the historical event that defies comprehensive apprehension.²⁴⁶ But its uncategorizable quality is not exclusive to Samson’s final, historical action; Milton portrays all the characters of the poem as unable to hear one another properly. Samson complains of his fellow Israelites that “they persisted deaf” to his deeds.²⁴⁷ Likewise, Dalila declares Samson “more implacable, more deaf / To prayers, than winds and seas.”²⁴⁸ Each of Samson’s conversations shares this sense of two persons speaking past one another, and Samson ends each conversation hardened against his interlocutor. Even after his conversation with Manoa, presumably sympathetic to Samson’s plight, Samson pronounces “death’s benumbing opium” “my only cure,” “speedy death... the close of all my miseries, and the balm.”²⁴⁹ The Chorus accedes that even the most learned consolations cannot reach a grieving person: “with th’ afflicted in his pangs their sound / Little prevails, or rather seems a tune, / Harsh, and of dissonant mood from his complaint.”²⁵⁰ Trapped “in his pangs,” the words of others come to Samson as a “sound” or a “tune,” as disjointed noise.

That is, the indiscernible nature of sound in the poem stems not only from the noise of an as-yet-unprocessed violence, the need for time or readerly participation to make sense of the event. It also stems, quite plainly, from the characters’ incapacity to see, hear, or feel themselves as part of a common form. Over the course of reading *Samson Agonistes*, we witness the sensory collapse of the

thereby exceeds the scope of our own skin. Sensation... is a bilateral act of figuration in the material sense of to fashion, form, or shape: sense organs physiologically fashion ‘obscure irritations’ into assimilable images, sounds, or scents” (285). Goldstein’s attention to the figurative element of sensory integration helps unite two central strains of my argument for *Samson*: the breakdown of the body politic/Samson’s body and the breakdown of metaphor. Both present the breakdown of a relational, co-constitutive process of integration.

²⁴³ Milton, *SA*, 176-7.

²⁴⁴ Milton, *SA*, 1472.

²⁴⁵ Milton, *SA*, 1508-9.

²⁴⁶ For the readerly construction of meaning, see Ryan Netzley’s “Reading Events: the Value of Reading and the Possibilities of Political Action and Criticism in *Samson Agonistes*” (*Criticism* 48.4 (2006): 509-533), which argues that “*Samson Agonistes* forces readers to participate in... sense-making... we readers, in order to be readers, must do precisely what the Chorus does: turn Manoa’s exclamation into a sensible sentence” (521). For Samson’s violence as unapprehensible historical event, see Steve Goldsmith, “Cracked Across’: Blake, Milton, and the Noise of History,” *Studies in Romanticism* 51 (Fall 2012): 305-342. Goldsmith describes this noise not only within *Samson Agonistes*, but as “an irregular sound path... that corresponds to the inconsistent movement of violence in history and to Blake’s unresolved ambivalence toward that violence” (308). Goldsmith draws on Kevis Goodman’s discussion of “cognitive noise” and “affective... dissonance” that occurs when “discursive ‘categories cannot accommodate the flux or the excess of events” (309).

²⁴⁷ Milton, *SA*, 248-50.

²⁴⁸ Milton, *SA*, 960-1.

²⁴⁹ Milton, *SA*, 630, 650-1.

²⁵⁰ Milton, *SA*, 657-662.

body politic – first blind, then deaf, then mute – the malfunctioning that results from refusing to acknowledge other members of that body. “If they were all one member,” the Bible asks, “where were the body?” As Samson refuses to integrate the other, remaining “one member,” his capacity for sensory perception breaks down.

In one sense, then, Milton presents the loss of commonness as a loss of shared, discursive exchange. Rather than a register of meaning or communication, Samson considers language a form of violence, describing himself “vanquished with a peal of words” after giving up his “fort of silence to a woman.”²⁵¹ This relationship to language becomes most apparent in the Chorus’s comparison of Samson to Jephtha, who murdered his fellow Israelites “for want of well pronouncing ‘Shibboleth.’”²⁵² Language becomes a means of perceiving difference rather than likeness – and, in fact, one that ends in violence even for the slightest difference (one might suggest that the pronunciation of “Shibboleth” as “Sibboleth” is merely a “neighboring difference” – quite literally, the difference of neighboring peoples).²⁵³ Language becomes nothing more than a series of disjointed signifiers, and words nothing more than sound.

At the same time, *Samson* registers the loss of commonness not only as the loss of discursive exchange, but also, more simply, as the loss of shared sense experience. The breakdown of the body politic is not limited to those sensory portals that allow for reasoned conversation. Samson cannot hear others, he cannot see them, but he cannot, above all, feel them. In what constitutes, in this reading, a climactic moment of the poem, Dalila asks Samson if she might “touch thy hand” in forgiveness, to which Samson replies, “Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake / My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint.”²⁵⁴ It seems no coincidence that these lines are the precise inverse of *Areopagitica*; unlike the “sad friends of truth” who seek to “limb by limb” rebuild her body, Samson threatens to tear Dalila apart “joint by joint.” In *Areopagitica*, the body politic acquires “perfect symmetry” not only through a shared practice of discourse and reasoning, but also through an extra-rational, metaphorical feeling of commonness, through merely being “contiguous.” In this moment, Samson denies contiguity, and with it, the possibility of commonness between himself and Dalila. In the place of “neighboring difference,” Samson can only imagine absolute unity or absolute separation.

In one reading of this poem, regardless of what happens early on, Samson’s final action redeems him. His tearing down of the theater, according to Low, resolves the opposition of false contraries, revealing itself as divine truth: “Samson’s final action is both active and passive; he conquers in defeat, suffers and inflicts, slays and is slain, is reborn and dies.”²⁵⁵ And indeed, in the Chorus’s narration of Samson’s final action, the metaphorical proliferation of *Areopagitica* – the formal manifestation of commonness, the ability to feel likeness across difference – returns. *Areopagitica*’s metaphor of Samson as eagle returns, and with it the capacious national body. The metaphor shifts from “ev’ning dragon” to “eagle” to the “self-begott’n bird,” from genderless to male to female, defying any fixed or uniform identity:

But he though blind of sight,
Despis’d and thought extinguish’t quite,

²⁵¹ Milton, *SA*, 235-6.

²⁵² Milton, *SA*, 289.

²⁵³ For a fascinating theoretical treatment of the word, see Marc Redfield, *Shibboleth: Judges, Derrida, Celan* (Fordham: Fordham UP, 2020).

²⁵⁴ Milton, *SA*, 951-3.

²⁵⁵ Low, 518.

With inward eyes illuminated
 His fierie vertue rouz'd
 From under ashes into sudden flame,
 And as an ev'ning dragon came
 Assailant on the perched roosts,
 And nests in order ranged
 Of tame villatic fowl; but as an eagle
 His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads.
 So virtue giv'n for lost,
 Depressed, and overthrown, as seemed,
 Like that self-begott'n bird
 In the Arabian woods embossed,
 That no second knows nor third,
 And lay erewhile a holocaust,
 From out her ashy womb now teemed,
 Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
 When most unactive deemed,
 And though her body die, her fame survives,
 A secular bird ages of lives.²⁵⁶

Samson is like the evening dragon, sneaking upon the Philistines from below. So too, he is like the eagle, whose “cloudless thunder” suggests that Samson’s act stems from God above. Even the phoenix metaphor, which might elicit concern about the “self-begott’n” nature of Samson’s action, skirts accusations of solipsistic interiority. The phoenix is not exclusively self-contained, but joined metaphorically with Samson and typologically with Christ. The Chorus blends the mythological and the Christological in the very same sense as the Osiris/Truth metaphor of *Areopagitica*, making one body of disparate belief systems. The form of the passage likewise suggests that Samson again resembles the body of truth, at once diverse and cohesive. The rhyme scheme avoids any fixity for the first fourteen lines, disjuncting (ABAC) only to coalesce unexpectedly (lost/embossed, seemed/teemed). We again see likeness through difference; Samson becomes polysemous and uncategorizable, and his action destabilizes the previously fixed historical narrative.

Samson’s action does seem, briefly, to enact a higher, dialectical truth, both active and passive, uniting both Jews and Philistines. And yet, I would argue, Milton ultimately presents redemptive violence as a fantasy, with no lasting regenerative potential, an argument implied by the syntax and form of the passage itself. In the final lines of the stanza, the Chorus describes the replacement of Samson’s living body with a narrative of fame: “though her body die, her fame survives, / A secular bird ages of lives.” The lines pull the reader in two directions. First, the perfect closure of the final couplet (survives/lives) suggests the fixed, univocal nature of Samson’s fame. Manoa plans to build him “A Monument,” the idolatrous antithesis to *Areopagitica*’s “streaming fountain” of perpetually progressing truth.²⁵⁷ The closing couplet epitomizes a common argument made about the Chorus: it mistakenly forecloses complexity in favor of self-assured certainty.

Simultaneous to the perfect closure of the couplet, however, is a syntactical formulation that thoroughly denies closure, though in a way that invites utter confusion more than interpretive richness: “her fame survives, / a secular bird ages of lives.” Most readings of the poem quickly gloss

²⁵⁶ Milton, *SA*, 1692-1707.

²⁵⁷ Milton, *SA*, 1734.

over these lines, as they are exceedingly difficult to parse – so difficult, in fact, that readers have debated over whether or not Milton made an error in punctuation for a few centuries now.²⁵⁸ Current editions of the poem reproduce the lines as originally published, with a comma after survives. In this formulation, “a secular bird ages of lives” serves as a subordinate clause to “her fame,” yet we must insert another comma after bird for this version to make syntactical sense. As Rev. John Hunter’s 1872 version glosses, “though her body die, her fame survives, / [As] A secular bird, ages of lives [For or through ages].”²⁵⁹ If we do not place the additional comma, the final line becomes completely nonsensical, for “secular” at this time connotes “living or lasting for an age or ages,” rendering the line incoherently repetitive: a bird that lives for ages ages of lives. Alternatively, H. Th. Wolff’s 1871 dissertation proposes that we omit the comma after survives, which would suggest that “her fame” (virtue’s) survives beyond even the phoenix by ages of lives; as he glosses, “Virtue, given for lost, like the phoenix, that self-begotten bird, consumed and now teemed from out her ashy womb, revives, reflourishes; and though her body die, yet her fame outlives ‘a secular bird’ i.e. a phoenix ‘ages of lives’ many ages.”²⁶⁰

Putting aside any argument about the “correct” punctuation here, the reason that these lines have confounded readers for so long is due to a problem of relation in the metaphor. The reader cannot tell, from the given punctuation, whether we are to think of virtue’s fame as akin to that of the secular bird, or beyond it, if we are supposed to see likeness or difference in the metaphor. The question of comma placement may seem like a microscopic concern. Yet the first metaphor of the stanza exhibits a similar problem of relation: “His fierie vertue rouz’d... And as an ev’ning Dragon came... but as an Eagle...” Some early editors actually shifted the first “And” to an “And not” – “And not as an evening dragon came... but as an Eagle” – for otherwise the use of conjunctions seems quite strange, first additive and then revisionary.²⁶¹ What seems to me to be happening is that the Chorus struggles to compose a metaphor because they cannot see likeness across and through difference. Their impulse – as characteristic of the “irony of alternatives” more broadly – is to create an either/or comparison (not as an evening Dragon, but as an Eagle), even when engaged in an act of metaphorical creation, in which the available options are not mutually exclusive. *Areopagitica*’s Samson-as-Eagle metaphor transitions seamlessly across disparate parts; here, the seams – in the form of punctuation and conjunction, the joints of syntax – are not only exposed, but shoddily constructed (whether intentionally or not), inviting the reader to question the relation between parts, to mistake likeness for difference again and again.

It seems no coincidence that discursive meaning falls apart in the very moment that, again, Samson’s living body is transformed into a narrative of fame. In death, Samson recalls another of

²⁵⁸ Most recently, for instance, Lee Morrissey – in an article that takes this line as its title! – has only the following to say: “Toward the end of *Samson Agonistes*, the Semichorus concludes its ‘lamentation,’ as Manoa calls it, by exclaiming, ‘A secular bird ages of lives.’ This confusing line has many possible glosses. The Variorum edition cites Herodotus, Ovid, Pliny, Claudian, and others, showing the broad temporal scale the Semichorus conveys in it. *In an admittedly willful misreading*, we might say that *Samson Agonistes* is about the experience of a time when some people come to believe that the secular ages, and it fact has grown senescent” (“A Secular Bird Ages?: Samson Agonistes as a Tragic Reaction against Modernity,” in *Milton’s Modernities*, eds. Feisal Mohamed and Patrick Fadely (Evanston: Northwestern UP): 259-77, 273, emphasis mine).

²⁵⁹ Rev. John Hunter, *Milton’s Samson Agonistes and Lycidas* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1872), 76.

²⁶⁰ H. Th. Wolff, *On Milton’s ‘Samson Agonistes’* (Berlin, 1871), 15-6.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Areopagitica's metaphors: the death of Truth's living body, and the sad friends, like Manoa, performing their obsequies. And yet, while the sad friends of Truth rebuild her body, constantly searching, producing a new metaphorical form via their mourning, Manoa refuses to mourn:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause, *Samson* hath quit himself
Like *Samson*, and heroicy hath finish'd
A life Heroic, on his Enemies
Fully reveng'd²⁶²

In the context of *Areopagitica*, the metaphor often read as proof of Samson's righteousness, a celebration of his individual conscience – "Samson hath quit himself / Like Samson" – appears suspect. Samson has become, in death, a body identical to himself, a body that resists comparison to any other entity. In the aftermath of his violence, the poem does not portray the "goodly and graceful symmetry" of the joint body politic. Instead, it portrays either absolute sameness or absolute difference. Samson becomes a blank body among bodies, mixed with the other only in death and mixed in such a way that erases all difference: "Samson with these immixed, inevitably."²⁶³ Manoa's final action will be to separate Samson once again, to find the body "Soaked in his enemies' blood" and "wash off / The clotted gore."²⁶⁴ In its final death, Samson's body – present, if mangled, in limbs and blood – will be translated into a static, immortal narrative, cleansed of all otherness. Manoa's repetitive language hardens the contours of history in a way that closes off interpretive possibility: "*Samson* hath quit himself / Like *Samson*, and *heroicy* hath finish'd / A life *Heroic*." While the Chorus struggles to compose a cohesive metaphor, Manoa denies metaphor altogether: the syntax promises comparison ("Samson hath quit himself / Like"), but short circuits ("Samson"). Even if Samson's violence briefly ruptures a fixed and polarized history, the possibility of actual historical change dies with him, registered in a metaphor that admits no relation.

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Samson Agonistes dramatizes the central problem of prophecy, of Milton's oeuvre, even of the revolutionary period at large: the ambiguity of "divine illumination, which no man can know at all times to be in himself, much less to be at any time for certain in any other." Just before Samson enters the theater to enact his violent murder-suicide, he reports, "I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts" – motions that, problematically, occur just once before, when Samson marries his first wife, who ultimately betrays him.²⁶⁵ His parents disapprove of the marriage, but, Samson retorts, "they knew not / That what I motion'd was of God."²⁶⁶ As Brendan Prawdzik has demonstrated – in contrast to readers like Christopher Hill and David Loewenstein, who enfold Samson into a celebratory narrative of radical enthusiasm – the period from 1656 to 1671 was a time of increasing suspicion toward claims of

²⁶² Milton, *SA*, 1708-12.

²⁶³ Milton, *SA*, 1657.

²⁶⁴ Milton, *SA*, 1725-8.

²⁶⁵ Milton, *SA*, 1381-3.

²⁶⁶ Milton, *SA*, 221-2.

divine illumination, often associated with the Quakers.²⁶⁷ “Motion” could signify not only spiritual insight, but rote instinct, or libidinous carnality, a characterization Samson’s “rouzing motions” certainly invite.

If Samson, clearly, cannot “know at all times” whether the motions he experiences are “of God,” we, the readers, are left wondering the same. As many have noted, Milton emphasizes the impenetrability of Samson’s violent prophecy; we do not witness the event, but learn of it by overhearing a conversation between Manoa and the messenger, who reports that, just prior to pulling down the pillars, Samson “with head a while enclin’d / And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray’d / Or some great matter in his mind revolv’d.”²⁶⁸ We cannot know whether he acts according to God’s will or his own intent. Stanley Fish is the most ardent proponent of this reading, insisting on the arbitrariness of Samson’s decision, and of divine Truth itself. Arguing that the play resists “the organizing power of discursive reasoning,” Fish essentially paraphrases the problem of divine illumination and prophetic interiority: “God and Samson unite only in being inaccessible, objects alike of an interpretive activity that finds no corroboration in the visible world.”²⁶⁹ In a manner unmatched by any of Milton’s other major poems, God is strikingly absent from *Samson Agonistes*. Humanity is left grappling with the radical uncertainty of discerning divine will – an uncertainty that unites the prophetic authors of this project.

Fish’s reading begs the same question that animated much of the previous chapter: given the indiscernibility of divine will, what is the role of the prophet? Does Milton simply aim to proclaim prophetic uncertainty, to avow skepticism, as Fish suggests? Part of the tolerationist argument cites the impenetrability of divine will: “no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any mens consciences but their own.” Yet while tolerationists like Milton and Walwyn acknowledge divine uncertainty, they do so in order to defend the right of individuals to determine belief for themselves; if we cannot determine what animates other consciences, even if we cannot certainly determine what animates our own conscience, Milton insists that we must attempt to do so. And so, many readings of *Samson* cite the poem’s ambiguity alongside the Miltonic imperative of individual reasoning. Gordon Teskey argues that we readers “cannot avoid deciding for ourselves, on the basis of who we are and what we want, what the poem means and whether it means.”²⁷⁰ Victoria Kahn asserts that *Samson* “explores the tragic dilemma of the individual compelled to judge and to act in the absence of cognitive certainty,” and likewise insists upon “the necessity of interpretation.”²⁷¹ Derek Wood concludes that “the reader must supply the exegesis as Milton’s Christian reader, alone, must interpret Scripture.”²⁷² According to these scholars, Milton aims to activate the reader’s interpretive capacity in the face of divine uncertainty.

In contrast to readings championing the exegetical ability of “Milton’s Christian reader, alone,” I concur with Prawdzik, who notes that “Milton does not exalt the solitary antinomian but, rather, locates the believer within a discursive community that collectively negotiates essential

²⁶⁷ Brendan Prawdzik, *Theatrical Milton: Politics and Poetics of the Staged Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017).

²⁶⁸ Milton, *SA*, 1636-8.

²⁶⁹ Fish, *How Milton Works*, 473.

²⁷⁰ Teskey, 183.

²⁷¹ Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: the Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 219, 227.

²⁷² Derek Wood, *Exiled From Light: Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton’s Samson Agonistes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 62.

Christian truths.”²⁷³ What I hope to add to existing accounts of *Samson*, however, is the recognition that the community necessary to interpret divine will is not solely a discursive community. A truly diverse discursive community – the kind of discursive community essential to working toward a profoundly uncertain divine will – is possible only on the ground of an affective community. *Areopagitica* suggests that only when we treat the other as a member of a joint, shared body, exerting “a little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and som grain of charity” toward them, can diverse perspectives incorporate into “one generall and brotherly search after Truth” rather than disjoint the temple of the Lord. Generating affective commonness, *Areopagitica* attempts to build the temple; everywhere promoting affective dissonance, Samson tears it down.

Yet if Samson tears down the temple, what of *Samson*? That is to say, what is Milton’s intended effect on the reader? Does the poem merely critique Samson’s partisan solipsism, promote it (recanting *Areopagitica*’s argument for tolerance), or seek to assuage it in some measure? In his Preface, Milton directly addresses the purpose of his poem, contextualizing it as Aristotelian tragedy:

Tragedy, as it was anciently composed, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems: therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. Nor is nature wanting in her own effects to make good his assertion: for so in physic things of melancholic hue and quality are used against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humors.²⁷⁴

The Preface suggests that *Samson* attempts to directly impact the reader (tragedy is the “most profitable” of all other poems), and, provocatively for our purposes, to impact the reader’s emotions specifically, to raise “pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions.” Kahn, reading *Samson* in context of Restoration aesthetics, suggests that the Preface promotes “stylistic and political alienation,” and that the poem as a whole attacks “effeminizing pity, compassion, and sympathetic identification that foreshadows modern critiques of aesthetic ideology.”²⁷⁵ As an “unwilling republican [subject] of Charles II,” Milton assaults the tendency of royalist writers like Dryden to facilitate a “purely affective response to the work of art... [placing] art in the service of the political status quo.”²⁷⁶ *Samson*, that is, mandates alienation in order to encourage action: “the aesthetic responses of wonder, delight and amazement are fatal when not properly understood – when they are understood as the occasion for mere contemplation rather than action.”²⁷⁷ In this reading, the poem actively promotes partisan aims. Gaining “a kind of theatrical distance” from his own emotions, Samson is freed from the enslavement of “excessive pity and fear”; likewise, tragic form purges the reader of such excessive and immobilizing emotions.

Such a reading epitomizes the oft-cited polemical nature of revolutionary and Restoration aesthetics: the aesthetic throws off the shackles of sympathy, impelling the reader into an interiorized interpretive praxis, and, ultimately, into combat with the adversary. Yet it also seems possible that Milton aims to temper the passions not in order to promote partisan violence, but to

²⁷³ Prawdzik, 175.

²⁷⁴ Milton, *SA*, “Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call’d Tragedy.”

²⁷⁵ Victoria Kahn, “Aesthetics as Critique: Tragedy and Trauerspiel in *Samson Agonistes*,” in *Reading Renaissance Ethics*, ed. Marshall Grossman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 104.

²⁷⁶ Kahn, 104.

²⁷⁷ Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, 236.

restore the reader to affective receptivity. If Samson's "excessive pity and fear" initially renders him inactive – at the opening of the poem, he lies languishing in his own despair – it also renders him immune to the literally "effeminizing pity, compassion, and sympathetic identification" that Milton, at one point, considered essential to the collective pursuit of Truth. As Paul Sellin explicates, "the 'purgare' of tragedy ought to be taken as the physicians also take it, who... do not intend to blot out or wholly uproot [anger]... but to remove only that part of it which... corrupts the symmetry of life – from which sickness afterwards comes."²⁷⁸ Aristotelian catharsis aims not to alienate or extinguish the emotions, but to transform debilitating emotion – say, a fear of schism so pronounced that it bans all disagreement, an anger so strong that it blinds – into "just measure." In a sense, then, the Preface might be seen as allegorizing and attempting to reform the disjuncting of the Restoration body politic: to seek out a form of purgation that does not annihilate the other, but restores "the goodly and graceful symmetry" of the whole.

²⁷⁸ Paul Sellin, "Sources of Milton's Catharsis: A Reconsideration," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 60.4 (Oct. 1961): 712-730. For a more recent account of catharsis in *Samson*, see Russ Leo, "Milton's Aristotelian Experiments: Tragedy, Lustratio, and 'Secret refreshings' in *Samson Agonistes* (1671)," *Milton Studies* 52 (2011): 221-252. Leo contextualizes Milton among two prominent seventeenth century commentators on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Daniel Heinsius and Gerardus Joannes Vossius, arguing that Milton substantially experiments with the *Poetics*.

CHAPTER THREE

Prodigies, Providence, and Inspiration in Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder*

Back before David Norbrook discovered that *Order and Disorder* – the twenty-canto epic retelling of Genesis and revision of *Paradise Lost* – was, improbably, the work of a woman author, literary critics labeled it “a poem evading anything that might be construed as *transgressing* the wisdom of the ages.”²⁷⁹ We could flip to almost any page and concur. The poem’s Preface pronounces its absolute commitment to Biblical truth:

I resolved never to search after any knowledge of him and his productions, but what he himself hath given forth. Those that will be wise above what is written may hug their philosophical clouds, but let them take heed they find not themselves without God in the world, adoring figments of their own brains, instead of the living and true God.²⁸⁰

While Milton declares that his “advent’rous song... with no middle flight intends to soar,” *Order and Disorder*’s narrator entreats, “let not my thoughts beyond their bounds aspire.”²⁸¹ This profession of bounded-ness persists throughout the poem: “We dare not take from men’s inventive brains,” “We are not told, nor will too far inquire,” “circumstances that we cannot know... we will not dare t’ invent,” and, in one of the clearest rebukes of *Paradise Lost*, “Whether he [Adam] begged a mate it is not known.”²⁸² Even just looking at the poem on the page, we find Miltonic blank verse replaced with rhyming couplets, and Milton’s presumed disregard for Biblical truth countered with almost obsessive marginal annotations of relevant Biblical verses (on some pages, almost a 1:2 ratio of marginalia to poetry). Joseph Wittreich has suggested that Sir Allen Apsley – Lucy Hutchinson’s brother and the alleged author of *Order and Disorder* for many years – considers *Paradise Lost* “defective and imperfect because, quite apart from inscribing Christian clichés, it allows for their interrogation and contains not one but competing systems of interpretation.”²⁸³ According to Wittreich’s reading, *Order and Disorder* instead inscribes un-interrogated Biblical truth, considering the interpretive act a transgression of the divine word.

If Milton epitomizes the republican poet-prophet in his claim to authoritative revelation (a reading the previous chapter attempted to unsettle), Hutchinson represents just the opposite: a republican poet who actively disavows any claim to prophetic authority. In the established tradition of republican prophetic poetry, divine inspiration yields individual freedom; as Roger Moore summarizes, extrapolating his account of the poet-prophet from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poetry*, “the divine Spirit is beyond human control or comprehension, and it confers on the inspired

²⁷⁹ Joseph Wittreich, “Milton’s Transgressive Maneuvers: Receptions (then and now) and the Sexual Politics of *Paradise Lost*,” in *Milton and Heresy*, eds. Dobranski, Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 250 (emphasis mine).

²⁸⁰ Lucy Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, ed. Norbrook (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 3-4.

²⁸¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1.14. Hutchinson, 1.42. Hutchinson thus further moderates DuBartas’s Muse, which “keepes the middle Region,” *DWW* 1.1.136. (Guillaume de Saluste, Sieur du Bartas. *The Divine Weeks and Works... translated by Josuah Sylvester*, ed. Susan Snyder, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford UP), 1979).

²⁸² Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 3.158, 4.305, 4.435, 3.312.

²⁸³ Wittreich, 252.

individual a consequent freedom from earthly constraints.”²⁸⁴ The prophetic poet exceeds and expands the bounds of existing divine decree – the very bounds that Hutchinson’s poem seeks so ardently to retain.

In this chapter, I attend to a prophetic genre that challenges the association between prophetic authority and individual freedom: prodigy pamphlets, which perceived divine will in unusual natural phenomena, from meteors to aberrant births to “great and unusual quantity of mackerel.” In this context, prophecy sheds its claim to authoritative understanding of divine will; prodigies, “the great unsearchable and marvellous things of God,” elicit affective, aesthetic responses – wonder, delight, mystery, fear – but resist comprehensive, discursive articulation.²⁸⁵ Given the uncertainty of prodigious apparitions (does that cloud look like a ship to you, too?), prophecy becomes a fundamentally collective task, an experience of the divine confirmed by the fact that one’s affective responses are shared. The prophet does not, in this context, transgress the bounds of divine decree, augmenting the existing contours of Biblical knowledge. Rather, prodigies demonstrate that the bounds of divine will are in perpetual flux; prophecy connotes an attunement to the unpredictable motion of providence. I argue that *Order and Order*, which frequently references prodigies, evinces a similar prophetic mode. In *Order and Disorder*, divine inspiration occurs not through the assertion but the lapse of individual authority, in moments when feeling frays the bounded edges of the self. Indeed, all bounds in Hutchinson’s poem – of the body, of providence, of the couplet itself – exist in a state of ongoing transformation.

One might be tempted to label such a prophetic mode passive and apolitical, insofar as it engenders feeling rather than authoritative understanding or agency. And yet, casting providence as ongoing, illegible, and unpredictable, prodigy pamphlets puncture the Restoration fantasy of having manifested the final decree of divine will. After 1660, to insist upon the impossibility of discerning providence was to mount a direct political challenge to the sovereignty of Charles II. Yet these texts do not merely throw a wrench into the narrative of providential victory; both prodigy pamphlets and *Order and Disorder* attempt to actively shift public sentiment, creating a body of witnesses alive to the potentiality of the present, and thereby sowing the seeds of political transformation. As English people feel “some *great thing* at the Birth” (as one prodigy pamphlet attests), they begin to feel themselves the potential vessels of that transformation; providence and the human collective, divine and human agency, become impossibly entangled. In this context, the prophetic author transforms history not by revealing the shrouded will of God, but by awakening readers to the immanent, divine presence animating the bounds of the existent world.

I. “The great unsearchable and marvellous things of God”: Reading Prodigies in Revolutionary England

How a people reads the sky tells you a great deal about who they are.
-John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*

They regarded the whole world, and all the parts thereof, but as so many... oracles: not a Star or Comet in the Firmament, not a monster on Earth, not a Staff in the Wood, not a Gut in the Sacrifice, not a Line in the Hand, but was thought prophetic.
-John Spencer, *A Discourse Concerning Vulgar Prophecies* (1665)

²⁸⁴ Roger Moore, “Sir Philip Sidney’s Defense of Prophesying,” *SEL* (2010): 35-62.

²⁸⁵ Anon, *Eniautos terastios, mirabilis annus or The year of prodigies and wonders* (1661), *Early English Books Online*, “The Preface.”

I consider prodigies a branch of the prophetic tradition, following Christopher Hill's capacious definition of the prophet as any interpreter of divine will, "whether as interpreter of the stars, or of traditional popular myths, or of the Bible."²⁸⁶ Of course, Hill defines the prophet in this way following seventeenth-century figures themselves. As we'll see throughout this section, prodigies and prophecies share a common history. Both flourish during the civil war years as a result of lapsed censorship, and readers understood prodigies and prophecies as joint, extra-Biblical means by which God communicated his will in the world.

Prodigies have drawn the attention of literary scholars insofar as reading the skies offers "a reflexive, quasi-literary practice, at least insofar as suspense among competing systems of meaning was built into it."²⁸⁷ The prodigy pamphlets we'll attend to in this section support such claims, as they emphasize the open-ended nature of divine will; prodigies invite multiple interpretations, and no one interpretation can claim absolute authority over another. I hope to add to these accounts in two ways that will inform the coming reading of *Order and Disorder*. First, I emphasize the affective experience of reading prodigies. Prodigies offer "suspense among competing systems of meaning," but, in some cases, they also suspend discursive meaning altogether, suggesting that providence can only be experienced as a sense of wondrous potentiality rather than articulated as any discrete judgment. Second, I attend to the new forms of authority that prodigy pamphlets invite. In striking contrast to prophetic writings, prodigies resist our usual terms of authorship: they are published anonymously, and are typically compilations of many different persons' accounts. This helps explain why prodigies do not often make their way into literary histories of prophecy, given the tendency of such texts to focus on the positioning of the individual prophet. Because the phenomena that prodigy pamphlets cite are so transient and uncertain, prodigies acquire authority via collectivity. In these pamphlets, as well as in *Order and Disorder*, to read providence is to wonder at God with and among others, rather than to discern the hidden secrets of divine will.

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Revolutionary England did not invent prodigies. A tradition of interpreting divine will in unusual natural phenomena extends far back into the history of the church, even into the classical pagan past. As Alexandra Walsham has noted, "the disposition to see prodigies sprang from a theocentric view of the universe, an intensely moralistic cosmology. It rested on the premise that the physical environment and human conduct were closely attuned: aberrations in the natural order literally incarnated the spiritual chaos and anarchy created by sin."²⁸⁸ Unsurprisingly, then, prodigies

²⁸⁶ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 72.

²⁸⁷ Jayne Lewis, *Air's Appearance* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012), 18. In his account of Shakespearean clouds, Rhodri Lewis compares cloud-watching to the experience of theater-going; just as the images in clouds arise from "individual acts of perception and imaginative projection," drama "demands that its audience decode for themselves the imaginative art through which things and events have been shown to them" ("Shakespeare's Clouds and the Image Made by Chance," *Essays in Criticism* 62.1 (2012): 1-24, 19). See also Yves Peyre, "Travels in the Clouds': Metamorphosis, Doubt, and Reason in the Renaissance," in *French Essays on Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, eds. Jean-Marie Maguin and Michele Willems (Newark 1995): 11-38, and H.W. Janson, "The 'Image Made by Chance' in Renaissance Thought," in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York, 1961): 254-66.

²⁸⁸ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 169.

multiplied rapidly in the tumult of the civil war decades. “Gods warnings we see do crowd in very fast upon us,” the preface to one prodigy pamphlet exclaims, “and the throws of Providence come extream thick: certainly there is some *great thing* at the Birth, *and the Lord is rising from his place to do his Work, even his strange work.*”²⁸⁹ While reports of “A Paving Stone in a Cathedral, [that] did of it self rise out of its place a quarter of a yard high, and fell almost into its place again” sound to us like supermarket tabloids, English people did not reflexively scorn or disregard prodigies (though such claims did elicit some healthy skepticism).²⁹⁰ As one German prodigy pamphlet explained, “those things which are more rare in the course of nature, *diverse, contrary, or above*, are more than ordinarily to be thought upon.”²⁹¹ Prodigies signaled a disruption in the sympathetic relation of microcosm and macrocosm that merited special consideration. In the revolutionary period, astrological almanacs – a close relative of the prodigy pamphlet, discerning divine will from the orientation of planets and stars – outsold Bibles.²⁹²

These odd, ephemeral publications share essentially the same plot points as prophecy’s historical trajectory. Indeed, they form part of the prophetic tradition; at least one pamphlet listed prophecies and prodigies as God’s two potential resources for manifesting his message to a sinful nation: “Either by his Prophets and faithfull Preachers, declaring his word and will to his people... Or else, by sending prodigious signes and wonders among them.”²⁹³ Like prophecies, prodigies surged in the 1640s not only due to general existential tumult, but more materially due to the relaxation of previously stringent censorship measures.²⁹⁴ And, as in the case of prophecy, both prodigies and astrological almanacs became “overtly and crudely polemical” in the civil war decades.²⁹⁵ The 1646 “Declaration of a Strange and Wonderfull Monster” offers a paradigmatic example.²⁹⁶ The full title encapsulates its message: “A DECLARATION, *Of a strange and Wonderfull MONSTER: Born in KIRKHAM Parish in LANCASHIRE (the Childe of Mrs. Haughton, a Popish Gentlewoman) the face of it upon the breast, and without a head (after the mother had wished rather to beare a Childe without a head then a Round head) and had curst the PARLIAMENT.*” The pamphlet concludes that this monstrous birth is the just desert of the mother’s papist sympathies, a “wonderful manifestation of Gods anger, against wicked and prophane people.” Sinfulness alters the natural course of providence, causing, in another account, women “of pure flesh and blood to bring forth ugly and deformed monsters; and contrariwise Beasts bring forth humane shapes contrary to their kind.”²⁹⁷ On the side of Royalist propaganda, an infant springs up in a field in 1649, prophesying the downfall of Charles’s executors.²⁹⁸ Royalists and republicans alike read their own victory in visions of airy battles, replete with clouds shaped like cavalry, and the eerie booming of absent canons.

²⁸⁹ Anon., *Mirabilis Annus Secundus: or, the Second Part of the Second Years Prodigies* (1662), “Preface.”

²⁹⁰ Anon., *Mirabilis Annus*.

²⁹¹ L. Brinckmair, *The warnings of Germany By wonderfull signes, and strange prodigies* (London, 1638), “A Brief Discourse of Prodigies, by way of Preface to the Treatise following.”

²⁹² Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 72.

²⁹³ J. Vicars, *Prodigies & Apparitions or Englands Warning Pieces* (1643), *Early English Books Online*.

²⁹⁴ See Patrick Curry, *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

²⁹⁵ Walsham, 220.

²⁹⁶ Anon., *Declaration of a Strange and Wonderfull Monster* (1646), *Early English Books Online*.

²⁹⁷ Anon., *Signes and Wonders from Heaven. With a true Relation of a Monster borne in Ratcliffe High-way* (London, 1645), *Early English Books Online*. On the phenomenon of monstrous births, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, “Monsters: a Case Study,” in *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

²⁹⁸ Anon., *Vox Infantis. Or, the Propheticall Child* (London, 1649), *Early English Books Online*.

Prodigies also share in the decline of prophecy in the wake of the Restoration. Just as the sects recentralized prophetic authority (the Quakers, for instance, began to segregate women and men by 1700, reestablishing church hierarchy), the Royal Society sought to recentralize astrological interpretation, casting astrology (and the interpretation of prodigies) as a “new and safe knowledge,” accessible only to learned experts, “thereby ensur[ing] its survival in a world grown sharply hostile to ‘enthusiasm.’”²⁹⁹ Conflicting theorizations of astrology as a mode of hierarchical versus democratic knowledge (according, respectively, to royalists and republicans) existed during astrology’s civil war heyday as well. Elias Ashmole, the leading royalist astrologer during the revolution, inscribed the frontispiece of his first book with “Astra regunt homines” (the stars rule man), while William Lilly, his republican equivalent, inscribed his with “Non cogunt” (the stars do not compel).³⁰⁰ Lilly suggested that any godly English person could issue astrological predictions – “the more holy thou art, and the neer to God, the purer Judgement thou shalt give” – even writing a textbook to disseminate astrological knowledge more widely.³⁰¹ Ashmole, in contrast, warned his readers,

Trust not to all Astrologers... for that Art is as secret as Alkimie. Astrologie is a profound Science: The depth this Art lyes obscur’d in, is not to be reach’t by every vulgar Plumet that attempts to found it. Never was any age so pester’d with a multitude of Pretenders... of this sort at present are start up divers Illiterate Professors (and Woman are of the Number) who even make Astrologie the Bawd and Pander to all manner of Iniquity, prostituting chaste Urania to be abus’d by every adulterate Interest.³⁰²

Particularly in his disgust for women astrologers, Ashmole invokes conservative admonitions of false prophecy in the period. Interestingly, though, “[d]espite their differences in value and orientation, Lilly and Ashmole still shared not only a common language at least of natural magic, but continuous social worlds.”³⁰³ Ashmole’s journal records evidence of “the Society of Astrologers of London,” a group of about forty astrologers, royalist and republican alike, who met several times a year from 1647 to 1658 for a banquet and a sermon.³⁰⁴ In his 1649 almanac, Lilly salutes “all that civil society of Students, being in number above forty, at our sober meeting October 31. last: among all which number, during our continuance together, there was no one oath heard, no health in drink once mentioned, no dispute of King, Parliament, or Army.”³⁰⁵ In fact, Ashmole and Lilly were close friends; Ashmole actually paid for Lilly’s tombstone after his death.

It’s difficult to imagine such a cross-political friendship flourishing during the Restoration. While the Royal Society was busy transforming astrology into “new and safe knowledge,” Charles II was busy censoring threatening astrological pamphlets. One textbook, for instance, advertised the ability “to judge of the permanency and durability of Kings, or such as are in authority by any Revolution.”³⁰⁶ John Gadbury exemplifies the shifting politics of astrology in the later seventeenth

²⁹⁹ Curry, 39.

³⁰⁰ Curry, 36, 30.

³⁰¹ Curry, 31. Of course, Lilly’s description still entails some hierarchy, just on the basis of godliness rather than learning.

³⁰² Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1652), 453.

³⁰³ Curry, 39.

³⁰⁴ Curry, 40.

³⁰⁵ Curry, 40.

³⁰⁶ William Ramesey, *Astrologia Restaurata* (London, 1653), 225.

century.³⁰⁷ In the 1640s, Gadbury was a devoted follower of the Levellers, and even joined the notorious “Family of Love.” In the 1650s, he studied astrology, comets, and prodigies at Oxford, producing sectarian-leaning astrological readings. By 1660, however, Gadbury turned sharply royalist, explaining that “Coelestial Orbs disown all Anti-Monarchical, Disloyal, and Rebellious Principles.”

It may seem that we’ve strayed somewhat from the question of Hutchinson’s prophetic mode. It is important, however, to understand the place of prodigies in society, in order to understand the divine worldview espoused by these texts, in order to understand how Hutchinson participates in these discourses. For the brief remainder of this section, I want to focus on two of the most famous prodigy pamphlets of the civil war period – pamphlets that Hutchinson’s poem repeatedly echoes – and the modes of 1) reading providence and 2) prophetic authorship that they invite.

Published in 1661 and 1662, *Mirabilis Annus* and *Mirabilis Annus Secundus* document prodigies, “communicated to us from *credible persons*, whose proofs also we scanned and weighed to the uttermost,” as evidence of “some remarkable *changes* and *revolutions* which bring with them very sad *calamities* and *distresses* to the generality of the people.”³⁰⁸ It is no coincidence that this prodigal influx follows the Restoration. As William Burns has noted, “Prodigies were one way for English Dissenters to demonstrate that, despite outward appearance, their cause was still favoured by God.”³⁰⁹ The *Mirabilis Annus* pamphlets “adopted an apocalyptic tactic of delegitimizing the regime through the sheer quantity of prodigies alleged to have taken place in the preceding ‘year of Wonders.’”³¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, arch-Royalist and high-Anglican Robert L’Estrange, “Surveyor of the imprimery” (also the licenser of *Order and Disorder*), seized copies of the pamphlet, destroyed the presses, and imprisoned the printers.³¹¹

At some points, the pamphlets invoke the polemical, teleological reading of divine will that their censorship might imply: “the raining of blood may signifie much slaughter, the noise of Guns and the apparitions of the Armies in the Air, wars and commotions, great inundations, popular tumults and insurrection.”³¹² One might expect to find in these pamphlets clear signs of God’s disapproval of the Restoration – perhaps monstrous births befalling the most ardent Royalists, or a vision of the King’s decapitated head in the sky. But, as Burns notes, the pamphlets adopt a different tactic: “*Mirabilis Annus* avoided particular predictions on the course of events, which could have been disproved, instead attempting to create a mood of uncertainty and impending doom.”³¹³ Rather than interpreting divine will from these signs, *Mirabilis Annus* emphasizes the impossibility of interpreting

³⁰⁷ Curry, 72-3.

³⁰⁸ Anon., *Eniautos terastios, mirabilis annus, or The year of prodigies and wonders being a faithful and impartial collection of several signs that have been seen in the heavens, in the earth, and in the waters* (London, 1661), *Early English Books Online*. Anon., *Mirabilis annus secundus, or, The second year of prodigies being a true and impartial collection of many strange signes and apparitions* (London, 1662), *Early English Books Online*. John Dryden’s *Annus Mirabilis* responds to these pamphlets; see David Alff, “Annus Mirabilis at the End of Stuart Monarchy: Repackaging a Year of Wonders in 1688,” in *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700* 35.2 (Fall 2011): 21-36.

³⁰⁹ William Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics, and Providence in England, 1657-1727* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002), 20.

³¹⁰ Burns, 27.

³¹¹ Curry, 47.

³¹² *Mirabilis Annus*, “Preface.”

³¹³ Burns, 27-8.

them: “we must know that God is unsearchable in his wayes, and our most *critical* and *exact* observations, together with our best experiences will not capacitate us *fully* to race him through the Maze and Labyrinth of his providences, his way being as *Solomon* speaks, *like the way of a ship in the Sea.*”³¹⁴ Even “the ordinary Occurrences of natural causes as the Rain” are “amongst the great unsearchable and marvellous things of God.”³¹⁵

Of course, the incomprehensible infinitude of “a wonder-working God” will surprise no one. But two aspects of the *Mirabilis Annus* pamphlets stand out in terms of the coming reading of *Order and Disorder*. Consider, first, the mode of reading that such an emphasis on the unfathomability of providence invites. The frontispiece to “Declaration of a Strange and Wonderful Monster” (figure 1 below) operates allegorically. The mother lies in bed, a rosary hanging above her, a popish figure hurrying to her side, enrobed in vestal garments, cross already raised. In the other corner, another popish figure (evidenced again by a rosary) reprimands a presumed Puritan holding a Bible (notably positioned above the popish figure’s wagging finger). The strange body of the man-child himself, head upon breast, evokes discussions of the disjointed, diseased body politic common at the time. Providence has never been more legible. In contrast, the frontispiece to the *Mirabilis Annus* (figure 2 below) evokes wonder-struck uncertainty rather than partisan interpretation. The first two pages present a grid of twelve unusual, disorienting images, devoid of text. We cannot easily discern between earth, sky, and water. In several images, figures appear at the bottom left corner, pointing at the sky. But they do not carry any distinguishing characteristics – just a circle of head, a hand raised, merely to say, “some persons saw this.”

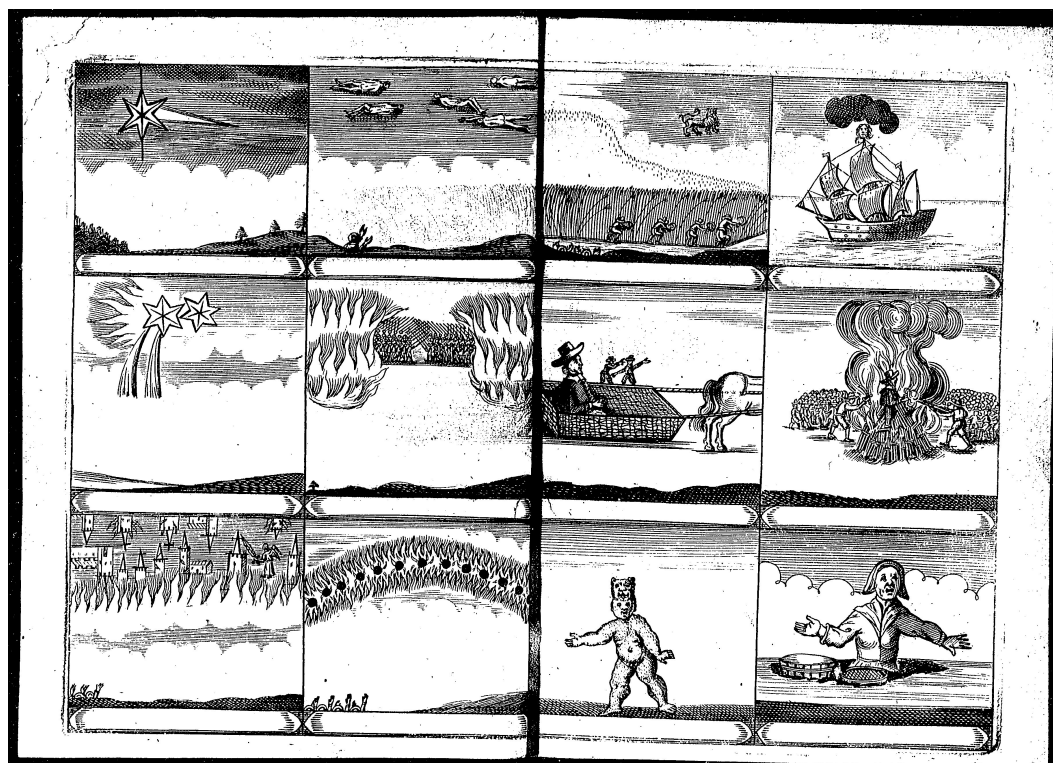
Figure 1. Frontispiece to “Declaration of a Strange and Wonderfull Monster.”



Figure 2. Frontispiece to “MIRABILIS ANNUS, OR The year of Prodiges and Wonders.”

³¹⁴ *Mirabilis Annus*, “Preface.”

³¹⁵ *Mirabilis Annus*, “Preface.”



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Burns suggests that the *Mirabilis Annus* emphasizes the unknowability of God – evoking a feeling of uncertainty rather than positing discrete divine judgments – as political calculus. This interpretation implies that the authors of the *Mirabilis Annus* are canny operators, supplying prodigies that suggestively challenge royalist rule, while stopping just short of drawing a conclusive interpretation, whether to evade predictive failure or censorship. But, reading these pamphlets, one is also struck by their genuine suspension of meaning. Consider several representative examples: the first, from the section “Prodigies seen in the heavens”; the second, in the earth; and the final, in the waters.

In the same month also was seen at *Stratford Bow* near *London*, the likeness of a great Ship in the Air, which by degrees lessened till it came to be as small as a mans Arm, but kept its form all the while, and at last disappeared. This is testified by an able Minister living not far from the place; who received the Information from the Spectators themselves.

The same day were also seen a great swarm of flies flying over the said Town of *St. Edmundsbury*, their multitude was so great that the Sky seemed to be darkned by them; both these relations come from credible persons eye-witnesses, however the Truth of these things is notoriously known to the Generalitie of the Inhabitants in that Town.

Upon the same day also, it is most certain that there was a very strange Tide at *Hull*, after it was fall'n water, and according to its course should have been half ebb, it was flood again, and higher by a foot then at the time of high water; This comes from an honest descreet Merchant that lives there who was an eye-witness.

On one hand, these pamphlets operate politically in just the way that Burns describes. “A swarm of flies” darkening the sky is clearly not an endorsement of Charles II. In fact, some of the prodigies

extend their partisan critique even further, providing historical precedents invoking unrest and revolution. Of a surge of frogs and toads, the pamphlet explains, “*The like to this happened in Alfatia, Anno. 1545... In the same year Pope Paulus tertius died, and the next year after there were great stirs in Germany, the Emperour Charles the fifth was so prosecuted and invironed by those who rose up against him, that he very hardly escaped with his Life by flight.*”³¹⁶ Given their overt politics, the pamphlets invite censorship and point-by-point rebuttals by their opponents – partisan, polemical reading.³¹⁷

On the other hand, however, these visions also initiate a nearly endless proliferation of meaning. “A great Ship,” lessening until “as small as a mans Arm,” might suggest the diminishing role of the English Navy, or the diminishing threat of a foreign Navy, or may refer to Plato’s “Ship of State” metaphor. The flooding tide is almost prohibitively open-ended; it connotes, at base (like all of these prodigies), the overturning of natural order, but what the water itself might signify (the return of revolutionary sentiment? flood as a sign of divine displeasure?) remains unclear. The notion of “*competing systems of interpretations*” suggests that interpretations could be sorted into several dominant strains, perhaps along party lines. Yet though the *Mirabilis Annus* invited partisan, polemical interpretation, it did not evoke total acceptance or rejection according to party line; for instance, one conservative Presbyterian minister, Oliver Heywood, conceded that “tho everything in those books of prodigys be not to be believed, yet some things are most ceertainly true, which... betoken strange judgments.”³¹⁸ “Strange judgments” – these pamphlets acknowledge the profound obscurity of divine will. They invite a mode of reading providence – as will be the case in *Order and Disorder* – best characterized by open-ended wonder. As Gadbury explained, “A Prodigie is a thing (generally) that comes to pass beyond the Attitude of a mans imagination, and begets in him a miraculous contemplation, yea oftentimes horror and amazement, and this by its coming to pass without his expectation or thought.”³¹⁹ Prodigies engender an immediate, affective response in the reader that bypasses the usual workings of rational thought. To read these prodigies is less to gain knowledge of God’s specific will in the world than to feel that providence, in some unfathomable way, is at work – “some *great thing* at the Birth,” as *Mirabilis Annus Secundus* puts it.

Consider, now, the second aspect of the pamphlets to flag for the coming reading of *Order and Disorder*: the role of the individual prophet, in the sense of interpreter of divine will. As Burns explains, “The politically suspect nature of the compilation made one standard way of establishing the truth of prodigy accounts – appending lists and attestations of named witnesses – impracticable, as such witnesses could become targets of the government’s wrath.”³²⁰ Still eager to ground prodigal observations in authority, however, the pamphlets supplied anonymous descriptions of reputable persons who could confirm the sighting: “an able Minister,” “credible eye-witnesses,” “an honest descreet Merchant.” Yet no one person could confer authority upon a prodigy; the more people who witnessed a prodigy, the more credible it became. As Joanna Picciotto notes, prodigy pamphlets evidence “the deliberately collective manufacture of a fact... The authority of this fact is finally grounded in the decision of a group of people agreeing to agree that they can see the same thing, and have in fact done so.”³²¹ Prodigies only become prodigies through collective witnessing; cloud-watching, I must point out the shape I see to my friend, and ask if she too sees it. Even prodigies

³¹⁶ *Mirabilis Annus*, 42.

³¹⁷ See Burns, 34, for partisan rebuttals of the pamphlets.

³¹⁸ Burns, 35.

³¹⁹ John Gadbury, *Natura Prodigiorum* (London, 1660), 4.

³²⁰ Burns, 29.

³²¹ Picciotto, “Circumstantial Particulars, Particular Individuals, and Defoe,” in *Reflections on Sentiment: Essays in Honor of George Starr*, ed. Alessa Johns (Newark: University of Delaware Press), 46.

attested by a single person become credible insofar as they form part of a larger trend, another prodigy within a pamphlet of innumerable prodigies. In contrast to a more familiar republican prophetic tradition, grounded in individual revelation, here is a republican prophetic tradition fundamentally grounded in collectivity, crowd-sourcing its observations and refusing the power of any individual to discern divine will.

Here, clouds – ubiquitous within the *Mirabilis Annus*, as well as within *Order and Disorder* – offer an apt metaphor for the kind of collectivity that the prodigy pamphlets initiate. A favored instance of Merleau-Ponty’s category of “the visible invisible,” clouds resist strict delineation: “Even when it seems clearly truth that there is one, sharply bounded, cloud up there, really there are thousands of water droplets that are neither determinately part of the cloud, nor determinately outside it.”³²² Picciotto observes a “parallel between the porous and shifting boundaries of clouds and the permeability of what Merleau-Ponty calls the perceptual fields of those regarding them”; the shared perception of cloud models “the intertwining of my life with other lives, of my body with the visible things,” and “the intersection of my perceptual field with that of the others.”³²³ That is, the borders of the spectatorial body take on the blurriness of cloud. There exists no distinction between those “inside” and “outside” this community of witnesses, not distinctions of learning, not distinctions of spirit, not even the distinction of those who were present witnesses from those who were not, for the intent of the pamphlet is to incorporate the reader into its witnessing and wondering body. This cloudy kind of collectivity – the borders of the prophetic body shifting each time a new reader wonders at a prodigy, questioning Charles’s reign – recalls the civil war epithets of “well-affected” and “disaffected” for the pro- and anti-parliamentary contingent: adjectives that eschew the fixity of party labels in favor of transient, affective drifting and reconstitution of political communities. Emphasizing the role of non-rational faculties in early modern politics – feeling, wonder, providence, God – need not speak to the backwards, un-democratic quality of the age. It might, rather, bespeak the cloudiness that underlies all political decisions, the extra-rational moods, caught as if by air, that can affect one’s politics more than the party platform.

It is the ability of the *Mirabilis Annus* to generate collective, aesthetic experience – along with the form of community that such experience creates – that becomes politically threatening. For if, on one hand, danger lies with the “strange judgments” of God (prodigies reveal divine displeasure and an impending providential overturning), on the other hand, danger lies simply with the creation of a substantial body of believers who sense immanent and imminent potentiality. Feeling divine presence within the present, the reader begins to sense the possibility of a new political horizon. Historical process itself takes on the blurriness of cloud, as political transformation occurs not as a single event or isolated decree, but via a gradual, “visible invisible” shift in public sentiment.

Royalists ultimately realize that they must debunk prodigies not only by questioning their authority, and providing competing interpretations, but by debunking their fundamental ability to generate wonder. “For indeed,” the pro-government *Blazing-Star, or, a Discourse of Comets* explains, “it is only our ignorance of things that makes them seem prodigious and miraculous to us, whereas if we knew the true cause, the wonder would soon decline, and seem less, so that what at first seem’d monstrous and miraculous, would then become common, if not altogether slighted.”³²⁴ If royalists can promise correct interpretations of prodigies, whether by locating that correct interpretation in an authoritative body of interpreters or in natural science, prodigies lose their subversive potential. But

³²² Brian Weatherston, “The Problem of the Many,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/problem-of-many/>>.

³²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 49.

³²⁴ Anon., *The Blazing-Star, or, a Discourse of Comets* (London, 1664), 6-7.

if prodigies invite wonder rather than interpretation, all readers can sense an ongoing, unpredictable divine presence in the world. There is no role for the individual, authoritative prophet in these pamphlets. Or rather, the individual prophet is merely one witness, among many. And the prophet intends not to enlighten the understanding of the reader, or to interpret these signs for the reader, but to make the reader too a prophet in this sense, to help the reader herself see and feel the wonder of God.

II. *Unbinding the Maternal Body: Biological, Poetic, and Divine Creation in Order and Disorder*

Order and Disorder is a poem that constantly looks to the sky. God's presence is felt when the mists part, shrouded when the atmosphere hangs heavy. Lightning dictates his wrath, rainbows his mercy. The sky in *Order and Disorder* becomes a barometer of divine will, as Hutchinson detects an otherwise invisible God in the changing shapes of the clouds.

Those clouds which over all the wondrous arch
 Like hosts of various-formed creatures march,
 And change the scenes in our admiring eyes;
 Who sometimes see them like vast mountains rise,
 Sometimes like pleasant seas with clear waves glide,
 Sometimes like ships on foaming billows ride;
 Sometimes like mounted warriors they advance,
 And seem to fire the smoking ordinance;
 Sometimes like shady forests they appear,
 Here monsters walking, castles rising there.
 Scorn, princes, your embroidered canopies
 And painted roofs: the poor whom you despise
 With far more ravishing delight are fed
 While various clouds sail o'er th' unhousted head,
 And their heaved eyes with nobler scenes present
 Than your poetic courtiers can invent.³²⁵

Here, Hutchinson references the discourse of prodigies; we can go as far as to say that Hutchinson, living as a former republican during the Restoration, references the prodigy pamphlets themselves.³²⁶

³²⁵ Hutchinson, 2.11-26.

³²⁶ In addition to constantly reading God in the sky, Hutchinson's most explicit reference to prodigies occurs just after the Fall, when, universe newly disjointed, "prodigious meteors" flash across the skies, "the rude congressions of angry stars" exert "malicious influence" upon the earth, "little insects... obscured the skies," and "armies of birds" war in the air (5.328, 5.333, 5.341, 5.343). These lines not only invoke the *Mirabilis Annus*, but even participate in its project, as if providing another historical precedent to affirm the sinfulness of the Restoration regime: "*The like to this happened immediately following the eating of the fruit...*" For Milton's allusions to prodigy pamphlets, see John Leonard, "To Warn Proud Cities': a Topical Reference in Milton's 'Airy Knights' Simile," *Renaissance and Reformation* 19.2 (1995): 63-71. While Milton references prodigies in passing metaphor – "As when to warn proud Cities warr appears / Wag'd in the troubl'd Skie, and Armies rush / To Battel in the Clouds" – he does not devote anywhere near the attention that Hutchinson gives them

More broadly, she cites the idea of nature as the book of God, summarized in her first Canto: “So in God’s visible productions we / What is invisible in some sort see; / While we, considering each created thing, / Are led up to an uncreated spring, / And by gradations of successive time / At last unto Eternity do climb.”³²⁷ The creations of the natural world all lead back to the original Creator. Divine creation far exceeds the “embroidered canopies / And painted roofs” of human artistry – a clear jab, given Hutchinson’s invocation of “princes” and “poetic courtiers,” at the “wit and wisdom” characteristic of contemporary royalist literary culture. The passage articulates the main objective of *Order and Disorder*: to exalt divine creation over human artistry – a task Hutchinson considers essential not only as a means of denouncing “poetic courtiers,” but also in order to denounce her previous translation of Lucretius’s “vain, foolish, atheistical” *De Rerum Natura*.

But, of course, Hutchinson’s denunciation of human artistry begs the question: what of her own poem? That is, if Hutchinson rebukes both the republican, Miltonic poetics of inspiration, labeled “enthusiasm” by its critics, and the new royalist aesthetic of judgment, fancy, and wit, how might we best characterize her own act of poetic creation? What does it mean for Hutchinson to compose a poem that simultaneously declares itself divinely inspired – “O thou eternal spring of glory,” she begins, “Quicken my dull earth with celestial fire” – and yet abjures all acts of poetic invention?³²⁸ This is a poem, as Wittreich once remarked, that hesitates to probe divine decree, and yet that certainly does not denigrate it to “Christian cliché.” I suggest that *Order and Disorder* evinces a prophetic mode quite similar to what we find in the prodigy pamphlets, whereby prophecy (and prophetic poetry) serves not as a means of revealing divine knowledge, but of amplifying the wonder of divine presence. Likewise, as in the case of the prodigy pamphlets, the prophetic author experiences inspiration not as inward revelation, but in moments of porous, affective exchange, when the edges of the individual become blurred, as the edges of a cloud.

This reading counters not only Wittreich’s negative assessment of the poem as rote and un-inspired, but also more recent feminist revaluations of *Order and Disorder*. Scholarly discussion of the poem now tends to focus on its depiction of female agency, manifest in Hutchinson’s depiction of the providential promise of childbirth. Feminist scholars, led by Katharine Gillespie and Shannon Miller, argue for the fusion of poetic, biblical, and biological creation in *Order and Disorder*, considering all these forms of creation in terms of the power they grant (respectively) to author, God, and mother.³²⁹ In their telling, Hutchinson remains within, rather than transgressing, the bounds of providential decree; and yet, providence itself grants Hutchinson a form of individual authority akin to that of the Miltonic poet-prophet. While I disagree with Gillespie and Miller’s emphasis on individual agency and power, they are quite right to note the interplay between literary, divine, and biological creation in the poem. It is in Hutchinson’s account of childbirth that she most capaciously figures the creative act; in the maternal body – not, as Gillespie and Miller suggest,

in *Order and Disorder*, nor does he seem particularly interested in participating in their project (*Paradise Lost*, 2.533-5).

³²⁷ Hutchinson, 1.65-70.

³²⁸ Hutchinson, 1.31, 1.34.

³²⁹ Shannon Miller, *Engendering the Fall* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Katherine Gillespie, *Women Write the English Republic 1625-1671* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016); see also Lauren Shook, “Pious Fraud: Genesis Matriarchs and the Typological Imagination in Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder*,” *Modern Philology* 112, no. 1 (2014). Like Miller and Gillespie, Shook argues that “Hutchinson finds a source of agency in the mother’s womb... the redemptive ‘womb/come,’ which reappears at significant moments in the poem, allows the womb to issue forth redemptive patriarchs” (186-7).

reified and rendered authoritative by childbirth, but affectively unbound by it – we find an analogue for Hutchinson’s treatment of both divine and poetic bounds.

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At first glance, Hutchinson’s depiction of childbearing accords with both the Bible and Miller and Gillespie’s interpretation of her poem: providence grants women authority via the act of biological creation (by extension, for Miller and Gillespie, God grants Hutchinson authority via the act of poetic creation). According to Genesis, woman’s labor pains result from her sinful transgression of God’s commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge. In the wake of the Fall, man must labor for his bread, and woman must labor in pain to produce children; “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception,” Genesis 3:16 decrees, “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.”³³⁰ When the New Testament returns to this edict, it assuages some of the pain by offering a providential exchange. Creating a typological link between Eve and Mary, 1 Timothy 2:14 renders the curse itself a form of redemption: “Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.”³³¹ Woman’s sinful transgression leads to pain in childbearing, but this pain ultimately leads to salvation. John 16:21 renders the exchange even more legible: “A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.”³³² In this formulation, the joy of the man-child will entirely replace the pain of childbirth.

It should come as no surprise that Hutchinson subscribes to this logic of providential exchange. She favors, as any reader will note, “chiasmic formulations,” whereby pain cannot be separated from promise.³³³ “Thus death the door of lasting life became,” she writes after the Fall.³³⁴ Providence underwrites every divine edict, manifesting God’s complete and perfect ordering of the universe. As such, Hutchinson counsels mothers that pain holds the promise of male progeny:

The next command is, mothers should maintain
Posterity, not frightened with the pain,
Which, though it make us mourn under the sense
Of the first mother’s disobedience,
Yet hath a promise that thereby she shall
Recover all the hurt of her first fall
When, in mysterious manner, from her womb
Her father, brother, husband, son shall come.³³⁵

In giving birth, mothers recall the sense – memory and knowledge – of Eve’s sin. They recover from the hurt of the Fall, are cured of their disobedience, by the productive power of the womb to create “father, brother, husband, son,” all. This passage serves as the cornerstone for both Miller and

³³⁰ Genesis 3:16. All Biblical references come from the King James Version.

³³¹ 1 Timothy 2:14.

³³² John 16:21.

³³³ David Norbrook, “Lucy Hutchinson, Theology, Gender and Translation,” *The Seventeenth Century* 30, no. 2 (2015): 139-62, 147.

³³⁴ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 5.199.

³³⁵ Hutchinson, 5.221-228.

Gillespie's accounts of the womb's productive potential. Attending to woman's role as both cause of and cure for the Fall (she causes the Fall, but produces male progeny in return), Miller and Gillespie consider motherhood a source of political authority. The mother redeems herself through the creation of male children, thus countering "the erasure of women in the political hierarchy."³³⁶ Though the Bible speaks in terms of replacing anguish with joy, certainly not with liberal political agency, Miller and Gillespie's arguments parallel its logic of providential exchange insofar as the production of a male child alleviates woman's subjugated position.

In this sense, *Order and Disorder* typifies the seventeenth-century discourse surrounding childbirth. The birthing prayers of Thomas Bentley's 1582 *Monument of Matrones*, for instance, a compendium of devotional materials for women, depict labor pain as the fit outcome of Eve's transgression:

I acknowledge, O Lord, that justlie for our sinfull transgression of thy commandements, thou saiedst unto the first woman, our grand-mother Eve, and in hir to us all; I will increase thy sorowe, when thou art with child: with pain shalt thou bring foorth thy children. All our paines therefore that we suffer in this behalfe, are none other thing, but a woorthie cross laid upon us by thy godlie ordinance, to which with hart and mind I humblie submit my selfe³³⁷

Labor pains become a "woorthie cross," "a just reward of my manifold sins," as another prayer puts it. But God's mercy surpasses his wrath; as one prayer avers, God "hast promised to us good deliverance" in exchange for merited pain. Providence – never random or unjust in its "fatherlie ordering and working" – appoints the bounds of every woman's "paines and throwes":

Thou sendest fire, raine, and snowe from heaven, threatening great destruction, and yet not one of them can passe the bounds that thou appointest them, so that they go, and doo onlie what thine almightie word hath commanded them, the bounds and measures whereof they may not, neither are they able to passe... I doo knowe and assuredly believe that all my paines and throwes are so in thy fatherlie ordering and working that onlie so far foorth shall they be painefull and greevous unto mee, and no further, but as thy divine providence doth appoint.³³⁸

The early prayers of the compendium evince an optimistic faith that the pain appointed by God will accord with the woman's capacity to bear it. This prayer requests that God either "so qualifie, mitigate and order all my throwes, paines, pangs, and pinches of this my child-birth, that the travell thereof do not surmount, nor overcome my strength... or else encrease my strength, encourage my mind, and fortifie my senses so, that I may without mistrust, despaire, or grudging against thy majestie, beare the labour to the end."³³⁹ It beseeches God for proportion, to either lessen the pain in order to fit the woman's capacity or increase the woman's capacity to fit the pain. To suggest that the pain is not proportional, that a woman of "faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" might be killed rather than saved in childbearing, would be to contradict God's "infallible promise and truth."³⁴⁰ Thus, many of these prayers ask not for mercy – which has already been promised by 1

³³⁶ Miller, 133.

³³⁷ Thomas Bentley, *Monument of Matrones* (London, 1582), Early English Books Online, 96.

³³⁸ Bentley, 101.

³³⁹ Bentley, 103.

³⁴⁰ Bentley, 103.

Timothy 2:14 and John 16:21 – but for faith in this mercy: “Increase my faith, O most mercifull saviour Christ, that I may constantlie beleeve thy word, which saiest, Ye shall be sorrowfull, but your sorrowe shall be turned into joiē.”³⁴¹ God has made a promise, and “sooner shall heaven and earth perish, than Gods promises be unperformed.”³⁴²

And yet, at the same time that women recited these prayers, heralding the just decree of pain in childbearing, historical circumstances challenged the promise of providence. The mid- to late seventeenth century marked a sharp uptick in maternal mortality rates; the rate of maternal mortality at the time Hutchinson wrote *Order and Disorder* has been estimated at about 15 to 16 per 1,000 women in rural areas of England, and about 21 in London. In London, then, about one woman died for every forty births (the rate today in the industrialized west is 6 or 8 deaths per 100,000 births).³⁴³ Hutchinson would have been particularly attuned to this issue; she herself births nine children, two of whom die in childhood, and, in *The Memoirs*, she relates the death of a beloved daughter-in-law in childbirth. Given Paul’s promise that women would be saved in childbearing, and Christ’s promise of a child to replace anguish with joy, these deaths were vexing. Some, like Percival Willughby, a male midwife and obstetric surgeon active from 1621 to 1670, attributed the deaths to human error rather than divine judgment. According to Willughby, midwives sometimes increased the woman’s suffering, either accidentally or intentionally. He urged them to “mitigate their woman’s sorrows, and in no way augment them, by hailing, and pulling their bodies, to help forward, & to increase their sufferings.”³⁴⁴ Pamphlets like Willughby’s, outlining best birthing practices, considered maternal mortality a sad human accident rather than a divine edict (and, in fact, these pamphlets significantly contributed to the decline in maternal mortality rates over the course of the next few centuries). As Willughby put it, God said that woman would “In sorrow... bring forth children,” “not that he would *destroy* her.”³⁴⁵

But not all shared Willughby’s conviction in human error; excessive pain (or death) in childbirth led some women to feel that God was transgressing his own promise of delivery, allowing the pain to exceed the capacity of the woman experiencing it. As *Monument of Matrones* transitions to prayers in response to more difficult labor (“The praier in long and dangerous travell of child,” for instance), the prayers take on a desperate and confused tone, and the account of childbearing becomes more intensely physical: “How is it Lord, that for no intreatie thou wilt not deliver thine handmaid from such indurable greefes? How long shall I suffer the paines of the birth and the anguish of the travell? How long Lord shall my bowels thus sound like a harp, my bones and sinews be racked asunder, and mine inward parts be thus greevouslie tormented for my sins.”³⁴⁶ Accounts of God’s mercy and graciousness mingle with accusations in a manner rarely seen in women’s writing: “O finish the thing mercifullie, which thou hast begun so graciouslie in me, and let me rejoyce rather that a man-child is borne into the world; els why am I in this plight?”³⁴⁷ The pain will not keep within tolerable bounds, and the child may not even be born. Excessive pain reveals the promise of exchange to be a lie. Rather than exchanging pain for child, pain destroys the woman, yielding nothing in return.

³⁴¹ Bentley, 97.

³⁴² Bentley, 97.

³⁴³ Louis Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 30-1.

³⁴⁴ As quoted in Schwartz, 20.

³⁴⁵ As quoted in Schwartz, 20.

³⁴⁶ Bentley, 115. “Indurable” here connotes the modern meaning of “unendurable” (“indurable,” *adj.* 2, “Unendurable, unbearable,” *OED*).

³⁴⁷ Bentley, 115.

As we will see, Hutchinson's poem not only resonates with the perfect providential exchange described by the earlier birthing prayers, but also with the desperate "intreatie" the later prayers invoke when labor goes awry. The pain of childbearing – a pain that *Order and Disorder* insistently registers – challenges any notion of a perfect, legible providence. Even this most doctrinal of documents – prayers quite literally epitomizing "Christian cliché" insofar as they are fixed prayers to be recited by innumerable women – struggles to understand how God could validate such excessive pain, challenging Blair Worden's claim that "[m]iscarriages by Puritan women were endured without complaint, and instead with acknowledgements of God's mercy."³⁴⁸ The prayer to be recited during "long and dangerous travell of child," for instance, describes the experience of childbearing as a "perplexiti" of "sorrow and griefe":

out alas for the time of this perplexiti of this sorrowe and griefe, which I now sensiblie feele and endure, both in bodie and mind; for it is like the daie and time of Rachel. My sorowe and trouble may be compared to Phinees wives trouble, my state and condition seemeth to me and others, to be not much unlike unto theirs, I saie.³⁴⁹

The midwives of both Rachel and Phineas's wife attempt to comfort the women in the exact terms prescribed by the Bible. They use almost identical phrasing; Rachel's midwife reassures her, "Fear not; thou shalt have this son also," while the women attending to Phineas's wife counsel, "Fear not, for thou hast born a son."³⁵⁰ Both cases, however, epitomize not redemption – the son replacing the pain of labor – but the failure of the promised exchange. Rachel dies, naming the son *Benoni*, son of my suffering, with her last breath.³⁵¹ Phineas's wife not only dies, but witnesses Israel's downfall just before giving birth; her father and husband have died, and the Philistines have taken the ark: "the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou has born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel; because the ark of God was taken and because of her father and her husband. And she said, the glory is departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken."³⁵² In a sense, the comparison between Rachel and "Phinees wives trouble" and the woman experiencing "long and dangerous travell" seems off: Rachel and Phineas's wife produce healthy sons while the prayer describes unending, non-productive labor. But their similarity stems from the providential promise of childbirth flouted – either pain that yields no material return in the form of a son, or a son that cannot alleviate pain.

Accordingly, the mode of consolation shifts; no longer able to console herself with the production of a son, the woman reciting the prayer turns away from the pain of her own body and the promise of her own child. The woman's "state and condition" is no longer attributed to her own sinfulness or incapacity; it is confirmed by those surrounding her ("me and others") as resembling Biblical precedent. The final "I" of the passage – "my state and condition seemeth to me and others, to be not much unlike unto theirs, I saie" – encompasses not only the opinion of the laboring woman, but that of her laboring foremothers and the community of women attending to her. The pain of labor, that is, does not produce a child in order to redeem or politically authorize the mother. Quite to the contrary, the pain of childbearing blurs the borders of the mother's individual person, just as it blurs the promise of providence itself. Providence here bespeaks not the ordered authority,

³⁴⁸ Worden, 49.

³⁴⁹ Bentley, 116.

³⁵⁰ Genesis 35: 17, 1 Samuel 4:20.

³⁵¹ Genesis 35:18. Jacob renames this son Benjamin, "right-hand" or "favorite son."

³⁵² 1 Samuel 4: 20-22.

but the incomprehensible mystery of divine decree.³⁵³ And in the moment that sorrow transgresses its tolerable limits, the woman transgresses the confines of her own body, passing from the self to a trans-historical, collective feeling.

Turning back to *Order and Disorder*, we find that the poem not only resonates with the perfect providential exchange of the early birthing prayers. As Erin Murphy has pointed out, any reading championing the productive power of the womb to create “father, brother, husband, son” “omits the *problem* of maternity in Hutchinson’s poem.”³⁵⁴ Immediately after God pronounces the curse of pain in childbearing, Hutchinson bursts into a 53-line lament about “[t]h’ effect of this dire curse on womankind.”³⁵⁵ She bewails “breeding-sicknesses” in distraught language reminiscent of the later birthing prayers: “How painfully the fruit within them grows, / What tortures do their ripened births disclose, / How great, how various, how uneasy are / The breeding-sicknesses, pangs that prepare / The violent openings of life’s narrow door, / Whose fatal issues we as oft deplore!”³⁵⁶ For Hutchinson, though, the curse of childbearing extends far beyond the initial labor pains; “the mother’s curse... ceases not when... her milk she dries,” but amplifies as the “froward child” ages.³⁵⁷ And, in fact, these pains persist regardless of the child’s virtue:

Even the good, who would our care require,
Would be our crowns, joys, pillars, and delight,
Affect us yet with other griefs and fears,
Opening the sluices of our near-dried tears.
Death, danger, sickness, losses all the ill
That on the children falls, the mothers feel
Repeating with worse pangs, the pangs that bore
Them into life³⁵⁸

One reading of this passage might regard the narrator’s extended lamentation as an authorial misstep, vain grief to be corrected for later in the Canto. Beside the passage describing the “pangs that prepare / The violent openings of life’s narrow door, / Whose fatal issues we as oft deplore!” Hutchinson notes John 16.21, the passage relating the exchange of birthing anguish for the delivered joy of a son.³⁵⁹ The citation thus serves as a rebuke of (or consolation for) Hutchinson’s own outburst about the pains of childbearing, as if reminding the reader that this pain will be forgotten.

³⁵³ Pain offers a fitting medium to experience the incomprehensibility of providence insofar as it resists language, refusing discursive understanding. “Whatever pain achieves,” Elaine Scarry observes, “it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (*The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 4). It seems in these prayers that part of making providence once again legible – or if not legible then at least not entirely absentee – is making pain sharable by bringing it into language, an impulse Scarry herself describes: “the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain” (9).

³⁵⁴ Erin Murphy, *Familial Forms: Politics and Genealogy in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Maryland: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 163.

³⁵⁵ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 5.128.

³⁵⁶ Hutchinson, 5.149-154.

³⁵⁷ Hutchinson, 5.152, 5.159-160.

³⁵⁸ Hutchinson, 5.169-179.

³⁵⁹ Hutchinson, 5.152-4.

But the outburst is so prolonged, so emotive, that it seems inadequate to read the citation as merely preparing to chastise Hutchinson for her grief. Typically, Hutchinson's marginal allusions buttress the claims of her poetry, providing a Biblical source of authority outside of her own poetic invention. Biblical references for the pain of childbirth certainly exist, and Hutchinson uses them throughout the passage. The marginal note just before John 16.21 refers to Matthew 24.19, "And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days," clearly corresponding to Hutchinson's line, "How painfully the fruit within them grows."³⁶⁰ John 16.21 is alone in its discord; the juxtaposition of this citation with an extended depiction of the unending pain of childbirth leaves us feeling as if the poem might simultaneously offer a rebuttal of, or at least a sarcastic jab at, this Biblical reference. If scripture considers childbirth a punctual event – "her hour is come" – Hutchinson eschews event for experience. Rather than emphasizing the product of childbirth, she presents childbearing as an unending process. What should be contained structures – "crowns, joys, pillars, and delight" – instead open "the sluices of our near-dried tears" (emended in a later version to "ne'er dried"). The Fall, via the pain of childbearing, opens the mother to endless feeling.

In other words, *Order and Disorder* reproduces the very same contradictory positions of the birthing prayers, whereby birth figures both as a providential exchange and a horror show of unending pain. In fact, the very passage that describes the productive exchange of labor pain for "father, brother, husband, son" simultaneously resists the easy logic of knowledge and cure:

The next command is, mothers should maintain
 Posterity, not frighted with the pain,
 Which, though it make us mourn under the sense
 Of the first mother's disobedience,
 Yet hath a promise that thereby she shall
 Recover all the hurt of her first fall
 When, in mysterious manner, from her womb
 Her father, brother, husband, son shall come.³⁶¹

Like "The praiser in long and dangerous travell of child," the passage implicitly blurs the borders of the mother's individual body and time.³⁶² For "sense" may not only refer to the knowledge of Eve's sin, as previously suggested, but also to the feeling of it; when mothers "mourn under the sense / Of the first mother's disobedience," they literally re-feel Eve's labor pangs. And to "Recover all hurt of her first fall" does not only suggest the definition "To get over, get better from (an illness, misfortune, or injury)," implying recovery from the Fall.³⁶³ Another contranym, to "recover" equally evokes "To remember; to recall or bring back," with the very opposite implications.³⁶⁴ This definition suggests that childbearing does not offer woman an exchange of child in order to move beyond the Fall, but causes her re-feel the Fall, to re-fall through feeling, just as the resonance between "fall" and "feel" ("That on the children falls, the mothers feel") suggests. With each grief or fear that she feels for her child, the mother falls again, further split open, further affected.

Of course, Hutchinson's depiction of motherhood as unending affective pain might simply amplify the punishment of labor, as if affirming and intensifying woman's sinfulness. Indeed, this

³⁶⁰ Hutchinson, 5.149.

³⁶¹ Hutchinson, 5.221-228.

³⁶² See Erin Murphy, *Familial Forms*, on Hutchinson and typology.

³⁶³ "recover, v.1." 8a., *OED Online*. July 2018. Oxford University Press.

³⁶⁴ "recover, v.1." 6b.

passage closely resembles Sin's birthing of Death in *Paradise Lost*, perhaps bearing the closest similarity to *Paradise Lost* of any passage in *Order and Disorder*. In an account scholars commonly consider to prefigure the horrors of fallen reproduction, Satan rapes Sin (who springs from his own head), and she births Death.³⁶⁵ Death then rapes Sin (his mother), leading to a violent, unending cycle of birth and pain:

Mee overtook his mother all dismaid,
 And in embraces forcible and foule
 Ingend'ring with me, of that rape begot
 These yelling Monsters that with ceaseless cry
 Surround me, as thou sawst, hourly conceiv'd
 And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
 To me, for when they list into the womb
 That bred them they return, and howle and gnaw
 My Bowels, thir repast; then bursting forth
 A fresh with conscious terrours vex me round,
 That rest or intermission none I find.³⁶⁶

Sin's unending childbirth appears to exaggerate the horrors of fallen reproduction. She creates "yelling Monsters" rather than crying children; the hour of her birth never ceases, as the monsters are "hourly conceiv'd / And hourly born." A man-child never replaces her sorrow, both because she experiences "sorrow infinite" and because her labor pangs never end, as her children return to "howle and gnaw" at her bowels, continuing to feed off her womb even after birth. But Hutchinson suggests that this account is no exaggeration; her description of actual, human childbirth also renders children "monsters and unnatural vipers... Eating their passage through their parent's womb."³⁶⁷ She likewise depicts motherhood as unending, offering no "rest or intermission." Both Hutchinson and Milton vex the curative logic of exchange, whereby a woman produces a child in exchange for pain in exchange for sinful transgression. "How are the tortures of their births renewed," Hutchinson proclaims, "Unrecompensed with love and gratitude."³⁶⁸ Childbearing does not save woman via the production of the child; the child is never fully "produced" ("the mother's curse... ceases not when there her milk she dries"), and the children are just as often "sad abortions... cross births... unnatural vipers."³⁶⁹ Given the parallels between the two passages, Hutchinson seems, like Milton, to lament the fallen experience of childbirth as the result of human sinfulness.

Yet there remains a key distinction between Sin's childbirth and Hutchinson's account of fallen woman: Sin remains mired in her own pain, while Hutchinson feels pain for her child. Satan, Sin, and Death cannot feel for each other, as they are all mere extensions of Satan's being. Satan fills with lust for Sin when, as Sin explains, "Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing."³⁷⁰ Sin thus reveals Satan's lust for her as mere narcissism rather than true feeling for another. She exists in

³⁶⁵ See Schwartz, *Milton and Maternal Mortality*, for an overview of the similarities between Sin's birth and fallen reproduction.

³⁶⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.792-802.

³⁶⁷ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 5.165-6.

³⁶⁸ Hutchinson, 5.167-8.

³⁶⁹ Hutchinson, 5.159, 5.164-5.

³⁷⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2.764.

Satan, as Satan exists in her; likewise, Sin describes Death as “my inbred enemy.”³⁷¹ Above all, Satan, Sin and Death present the horror of incest. The monsters that Sin births are the products of a twice inbred pregnancy that continues to feed on its own mother. That is, as in the case of the monstrous birth trope, Sin’s horrific experience of childbirth attests to the legibility of providence. Like generates like: producing monstrous children, Sin replicates her own sinfulness.

Hutchinson, in contrast, emphasizes the difference between the laboring mother and the “froward child.” Birth thus demonstrates the wondrous illegibility of providence: the “mysterious manner” by which the mother produces a being *unlike* her, whether “monsters” or “crowns,” husbands or fathers. And yet she feels for this being that diverges from her; feeling bridges the distance between them. For Hutchinson, the pain of actual childbirth – “How painfully the fruit within them grows” – pales in comparison to the pain the mother feels for her children, who “Affect us yet with other griefs and fears.”³⁷² She introduces the possibility of a sympathetic identification that nonetheless maintains difference. Rather than pain that merely reproduces woman’s sinfulness, suggesting pain within the body, a body whose pain is entirely its own, the unending pangs of childbirth open the category of woman across time to Eve, to her male children, to the affective pangs of another. In Hutchinson’s suggestion that labor causes each mother to “sense... the first mother’s disobedience,” childbearing quite literally opens the female body to “its own indeterminacy (its own openness to elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now).”³⁷³ The very edict that establishes woman as category (“the mother’s curse”) is also that which, through feeling, detaches her from any static, grid-locked position.

I do not mean to valorize the pain of childbirth as carrying some kind of redemptive potential (though one might suggest that it does for Hutchinson). I am interested, rather, in how Hutchinson’s depiction of childbirth might shape our understanding of what it means to read providence in this poem, and, concomitantly, our understanding of the work of prophetic authorship. Throughout *Order and Disorder* – but particularly in its depiction of childbirth – Hutchinson registers the friction between the teleological doctrine of providence and the lived experience of it. What it feels like to live in providence (rather than understand, question, avow) approximates what it feels like to read this poem: to be constantly citing and seeking toward a promised end, only to find that expectation flouted. Rather than a fixed end in itself, each narrative event becomes a single step of a longer, ongoing process. Canto 5, for instance, ends with the consolation provided by “just submission” in the wake of the Fall: “Return, return, my soul, to thy true rest, / As young benighted birds unto their nest; / There hide thyself under the wings of Love / Till the bright morning all the clouds remove.”³⁷⁴ As certainly as the “bright morning” removes the clouds, the ordering force of providence offers consolation and “true rest,” a stabilizing fixity to counter the disorder of the Fall. But Canto 6 begins by looking to the sky once again, revealing the dispersal of dark clouds to be a passing weather system, not a set, pre-determined end:

When midnight is blackest, day then breaks;
But then the infant dawning’s pleasant streaks,
Charging through night’s host, seem again put out
In the tumultuous flying shadows’ rout,
Often pierced through with the encroaching light

³⁷¹ Milton, 2.785.

³⁷² Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 5.149, 5.171.

³⁷³ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 5.

³⁷⁴ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 5.699-702.

While shades and it maintain a doubtful fight.
 Such was Man's fallen state when, at the worst,
 Like day appeared the blessed promise first.
 The temporary curse this overlaid;
 Comfort again new cheering sallies made
 When types the promises did represent
 And clothes were given for new encouragement.
 Then their expulsion and their sad exile
 Again contracted the late gracious smile.
 When God their woeful state with pity viewed,
 Again their consolation was renewed,
 And made the woman man's first fruit conceive,
 In hope of which her husband called her Eve³⁷⁵

Here, providence does not resemble immutable teleology, but the ever-shifting, ongoing motion of the sky. The blackness of the night yields daybreak, only for the “flying shadows” of clouds to obscure the light. Likewise, the Fall leaves Adam and Eve alternately consoled and despairing, finding “comfort again,” then the smile “Again contracted,” then “Again their consolation was renewed.” Hutchinson professes faith in the teleological narrative of providence, and attempts to see that providence at work throughout Biblical history. Yet *Order and Disorder* also emphatically registers the fact that providence is not teleological in any straightforward manner. “Easier we may the winds in prison shut,” Hutchinson writes in her first Canto, “the whole vast ocean in a nutshell put, / The mountains in a little balance weigh, / And with a bulrush plumb the deepest sea, / Than stretch frail human thought unto the height / Of the great God, immense and infinite.”³⁷⁶ Humans are not capable of fully understanding the workings of divine will. And so, to live within providence is to live within an ongoing, unfathomable narrative, to perpetually adjust one's expectations to the flux of the future taking shape in the present.

Once again, Hutchinson takes the experience of childbearing as the key trope through which to relate providence, insofar as childbearing reveals a promised end (the production of the child) to be a perplexingly open-ended process. Eve's name, connoting life, indicates “the sweet mitigation” of her sinful doom, “Promising life to enter through her womb.”³⁷⁷ Presumably, the delivery of her child will fulfill this promise: “Then brought she forth; and Cain she called his son, / ‘For God,’ said she, ‘gives us possession.’”³⁷⁸ Miller suggests that “Naming is traditionally acknowledged as a form of power in the Genesis story... Thus, Eve's act of naming indicates a form of her authority over children.”³⁷⁹ Indeed, Eve names Cain to signify “possession” (“Cain” derives from the Hebrew word for “got, obtained”), as if establishing motherhood as a form of authority akin to liberal possessive individualism. But of course, as we have seen, no child (let alone Cain) truly delivers the promise of possession – of having “obtained” “the sweet mitigation” of sin – in a straightforward way. Cain, the very life that Eve brings into the world, will once again bring death. “Her teeming womb with new fruit swelled again,” delivering Abel, yet another child whose initial promise will come to naught.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁵ Hutchinson, 6.1-18.

³⁷⁶ Hutchinson, 1.53-8.

³⁷⁷ Hutchinson, 6.21-2.

³⁷⁸ Hutchinson, 6.25-6.

³⁷⁹ Miller, 125.

³⁸⁰ Hutchinson, 6.27.

Like the story of providence, childbearing does not deliver a promised, legible outcome, but rather initiates endless generation and re-generation, an unpredictable process of promise and disappointment and renewed hope.

As in the case of the *Mirabilis Annus*, and as David Norbrook has pointed out, the unpredictability of providence carries a politics. Emphasizing “the blindness of fallen humanity,” Hutchinson suggests “that the existing political order is very far from reflecting the divine order.”³⁸¹ We can frame this critique even more pointedly: Hutchinson’s emphasis on the unpredictability of childbirth critiques the idea of hereditary kingship. Counter to Restoration claims to have manifested the final decree of divine will, Hutchinson suggests that, on the very next page of history, the clouds might easily gather again. The haziness of providence belies its ability to bestow authority upon any particular individual or group – a marked contrast to the omnipresent providentialism of the civil war years, in which royalists and republicans alike read every victory as a portent of divine will.

What results from this cloudy account of providence is a form of authorship that is not contingent on individual authority, for no individual prophet can reveal providence, or claim providential authority. Instead, the authorial position in *Order and Disorder* – like that of the mother – is best characterized by an affective porosity to otherness. Consider, for example, a strange moment of Canto 5, not long after the Fall and the pronouncement of woman’s curse. Adam, attempting to comfort Eve, reminds her of all the post-lapsarian good that remains for them: their companionship, God’s mercy, and, again, Eve’s own ability to continue posterity. “Let not my share of grief afflict thy mind,” he tells Eve, “But let me comfort in thy courage find,”

We both will join in mutual fervent prayer
To him whose gracious succour never fails
When sin and death poor feeble man assails,
He that our final triumph hath decreed
And promised thee salvation in thy seed.³⁸²

Hutchinson relates the chiasmic exchange of sin and death for triumph, grief and suffering for the “salvation in thy seed.” Just after this passage, though, she again bursts forth, interrupting the narrative: “Ah! can I this in Adam’s person say, / While fruitless tears melt my poor life away?”³⁸³ Again, the proposed exchange – fallen, but reassured by “salvation in thy seed” – feels inadequate to Hutchinson’s grief. In the moment the providential exchange fails, the moment that providence eludes Hutchinson’s own understanding, the affective space between persons opens; the poem unmask the illusion of self-containment, as the first person outburst destabilizes the tenuous boundary between character and author. The narrator’s outburst does not so much alert us to Adam’s status as a fictional character, a sham figure papered over the author’s words, as to the fact that Adam’s words are not wholly his own: “can I this in Adam’s person say?” It simultaneously collapses and augments the space between Adam and author, reminding the reader that another person speaks “in Adam’s person” while reasserting the distance between their persons, contrasting the author’s “fruitless tears” to Adam’s consolation.

I begin to refer to Hutchinson as “author” here for her choice to publish the first five cantos anonymously is crucial to this reading. As Norbrook notes with regard to these lines, “If we know

³⁸¹ Norbrook, “*Order and Disorder: the Poem and its Contexts*,” in Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, xxxvi.

³⁸² Hutchinson, 5.594-8.

³⁸³ Hutchinson, 5.599-600.

that the writer is a woman, this interjection marks a repudiation of a male disguise”; we see these lines, in other words, as a necessary return to the position of woman, highlighting her feeble, grief-struck inadequacy in contrast to male rationality.³⁸⁴ If we do not know the author’s identity, however, the “I” remains indeterminate. Just as the feeling of childbearing extends woman beyond the bounded confines of her own person, Hutchinson’s affective response to Adam’s words (which are, at least in part, her own words) opens previously whole, separate persons to the porous space between them. In her anonymous outburst, the female author belies any sense of “female author” as a static position. She both is and is not Adam. If the entrance of an authorial “I” risks overwriting the entire work with its own identity, here the authorial “I” becomes a character of indeterminate identity, open to being affected by its own creation.

If not in quite as explicit terms, this kind of moment recurs throughout the poem. Hutchinson espouses a teleological promise from an omniscient perspective (“And his most certain oracles declare / They man’s restored peace at last shall share”) only to delve into the blind, feeling experience of her characters (“But to our parents, then, sad was the change”). Miller and Gillespie have argued for a confluence between biological and poetic creation in *Order and Disorder*, attending to the way that both modes of creation lend authority to the mother/poet. In so doing, they actually incorporate Hutchinson into a discourse of inspiration ubiquitous among seventeenth-century male poets, and inadequate to the way that authorship actually figures in *Order and Disorder*. As Katherine Maus has demonstrated, seventeenth-century medical discourse cast the womb as an inverted penis; the female reproductive organ, hidden within the body rather than externalized, thus became “the private space of thoughts yet unuttered, actions yet unexecuted. It is a container, itself concealed deep within the body, with something further hidden within it: an enclosed, invisible organ, working by means unseeable by, and uncontrolled from, the outside.”³⁸⁵ Accordingly, male poets including Sidney, Johnson, Donne, and Milton use the womb as a metaphor of organic, un-alienated poetic creation. As Maus points out, however, the womb’s association with internal inspiration functioned only in a metaphorical sense. The actual female body was “cold and moist” (a classification inherited from Galen), the precise counter to the hot and dry conditions of the male body that (unsurprisingly) facilitated creativity.³⁸⁶ Moreover, the womb was quite emphatically not “an emblem of a ‘closed’ subjectivity,” as childbirth renders the womb “a paradigm of permeability.”³⁸⁷ The very metaphor that male poets champion for its *impermeable* interiority is, simultaneously, the most permeable part of the female body. This disjuncture led poets to strange contortions of the womb metaphor, describing their pregnancies as “self-generated” in order to efface the link between the womb’s fecundity and outside influence.

Miller and Gillespie treat the actual womb in much the same way as these male poets treat the virtual one, as a source of “self-generated” pregnancy. The body becomes, in their telling, a material form one has ownership over; the production of the child becomes the source of the

³⁸⁴ David Norbrook, “Lucy Hutchinson: Theology, Gender and Translation,” *The Seventeenth Century* 30, no. 2 (August 2015): 155. Norbrook likewise notes that, given the anonymous publication of the manuscript, the “I” is indeterminate. Yet he concludes that “Hutchinson relies on a male authority for a moment of exceptional boldness,” intentionally concealing her own gender (155). I consider these moments of affective porosity endemic to Hutchinson’s poetics – not an attempt to masquerade as potentially male, but emblematic of the indeterminacy of any fixed identity in this poem.

³⁸⁵ Katharine Maus, “A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body,” in *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England*, ed. Douglas Brooks (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 93.

³⁸⁶ Maus, 95.

³⁸⁷ Maus, 96.

mother's agency and authority. As we have seen, however, Hutchinson emphasizes the physical and affective permeability of the womb. What her poem seems to imagine, or at very least register, is what it would be like to take the actual womb – in all its porous fecundity, its generative permeability – as one's metaphor of poetic inspiration, as the author is affectively influenced by God, by her children, by her own characters. Indeed, the very term Hutchinson gives her composition – “in these outgoings would I sing his praise” – bespeaks an outwardly oriented, rather than interiorized, mode of creation.

Hutchinson does not limit affective porosity to the female body, nor to the experience of childbirth. Rather than rehearsing clichés of feminine emotiveness, she portrays affective penetrability as an inherent quality of all human bodies, male or female. Her very first description of the body in *Order and Disorder* – Adam's archetypal form – at first lauds the body as an architectonic structure: eyes as “windows,” ears as “ports,” nose as “arch,” lips as “ruby doors,” teeth as “ivory piles,” and the mouth as “this portal's inner vault.”³⁸⁸ The perfect architecture of the human body recalls Pauline and Calvinist accounts of bodily sanctity, as the body becomes the work of the divine architect, and the senses regulate the clear threshold between interior and exterior.³⁸⁹ Over the course of the passage, however, this controlled exchange slowly begins to unravel:

At two ports on each side, the hearing sense
Still waits to take in fresh intelligence,
But false spies both at the ears and eyes
Conspire with strangers for the soul's surprise
And let all life-perturbing passions in,
Which with tears, sighs, and groans issue again.
Nor do those labyrinths which like breast-works are
About those secret ports serve for a bar
To the false sorcerers conducted by
Man's own imprudent curiosity.³⁹⁰

The sensory portals that should be capable of preventing stimuli from penetrating the interior – the curvature of the ear is compared to a faulty “bar,” the teeth are later imagined as a “double guard” – are simply not very good at controlling this exchange.³⁹¹ False spies conspire entry through the ear and the passions creep in. In fact, each description Hutchinson gives of a sensory opening as sensory barrier fails, as the nose that takes in “life-feeding air” discharges the suggestive “panting bosoms” in return, as laughter inevitably opens “the ruby doors” and “ivory piles” of the mouth.³⁹² The lines regarding the “false sorcerers” of the ears might recall Satan, crouched beside the unsuspecting Eve of *Paradise Lost*, instilling false promises into her dreams. Yet the fault here lies not with some external “false spies,” but with the porous form of the human body itself. The “false sorcerers” are “conducted by / Man's own imprudent curiosity.” Humanity's fallen condition is prefigured by the very form of the human body that gives way to the exchange between interior and

³⁸⁸ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 3.76, 3.81, 3.91, 3.97, 3.100, 3.105.

³⁸⁹ Hutchinson may very well be thinking of Paul and Calvin here; Norbrook has noted Paul and Calvin as two of the most significant influences on Hutchinson's thought and theology. See “*Order and Disorder: The Poem and its Contexts*,” xxxii, xlv.

³⁹⁰ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 3.81-90.

³⁹¹ Hutchinson, 3.88, 3.101.

³⁹² Hutchinson, 3.93-4.

exterior. A cycle of passions, tears, sighs, and groans inevitably undoes the body's own self-containment.

Hutchinson's attention to the affective porosity clearly draws on her earlier translation of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* – in which penetrability becomes a quality of all material bodies, as their atoms collide with each other.

Since various things have many passages
And penetrable pores, wee hence conclude
They are not with like natures all indued.
Each its owne nature hath, and its owne way
Which proper seeds to various things convey.
Here juices, sounds, more easily penetrate,
Then steame and sent themselves insinuate.
One kind of moysture through the rocks doth passe
Another sap, through wood; gold, silver, glasse,
Admitt transitions of another kind
For there the heate, here species passage find.³⁹³

Jonathan Goldberg illuminates Lucretian epistemology through the relation of “identity and difference,” recalling our discussion of maternal sympathy. All matter is composed of the same atoms interpenetrating each other, yet “Each its owne nature hath”: “This passage affirms individual difference even as it also insists on the fact that everything is penetrable... everything is, at base, these seeds, the ultimate matter which cannot be destroyed and which is endlessly recycled as the seeds from which all things arise.”³⁹⁴ The interplay between identity and difference carries over from *De Rerum Natura* to Hutchinson's account of generation in *Order and Disorder*. In some moments, motherhood quite literally operates in the mode of Lucretian atomism, as when Hutchinson describes daughters as regenerated forms of their mother: “When the declining mother's youthful grace / Lies dead and buried in her wrinkled face, / In her fair daughters it revives and grows / And her dead cinder in their new flames glows.”³⁹⁵ At other times, Hutchinson translates the epistemology and physiology of Lucretian materialism into a bodily sympathy, as when she emphasizes the interplay of identity and difference in her passage on the horrors of childbirth. The mother, as if riddled with “penetrable pores,” feels the child's pain as her own. Even so, she can scarcely recognize the child itself as human, as if acknowledging that “Each its owne nature hath, and its owne way.” In *Order and Disorder*, bodily form – like Lucretian bodies, and like a sympathetic identification that nonetheless recognizes difference – both maintains its own structure (the ports, windows, and arches of the sensory openings) and undoes that structure (through the “life-perturbing passions” that traverse these borders). In short, bounds in this poem, though everywhere professed, are never quite as stable as they seem.

³⁹³ Lucy Hutchinson, *Lucy Hutchinson's Translation of Lucretius, 'De rerum natura,'* ed. Hugh de Quehen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 6.1036-46.

³⁹⁴ Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 167-8.

³⁹⁵ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 3.449-452.

As Jonathan Sheehan has noted, *Order and Disorder* exemplifies a form of “providential materialism” increasingly common in the mid- to late seventeenth century.³⁹⁶ Providential materialism resolved the perceived tension between a divine world order and the new materialisms by imbuing matter with God: “providential thought activated the things of the world and animated a mechanistic universe, giving it purpose, variety, motion.”³⁹⁷ According to providential materialism, God himself created the swerve. “A Lucretian body but a Christian soul,” as Sheehan puts it, typifies Hutchinson’s depiction of matter.³⁹⁸ Implicit in such a scientific epistemology is a politics, an observation that has provided fodder for many a literary project. In a markedly distinct seventeenth-century scientific lineage, for instance, John Rogers has argued that “the philosophy of monistic vitalism” – also termed “animist materialism,” or “self-moving matter” – “emerged in this period to provide a conceptual framework for that social and political structure of self-determination we recognize as liberalism.”³⁹⁹ Rogers locates a seventeenth-century scientific tradition that bolsters C.B. Macpherson’s narrative of the burgeoning possessive individualism of the period.

At first thought, providential materialism seems to posit just the opposite: absolute passivity, mute deference to a God that controls all human happenings. The least generous readings of *Order and Disorder* leverage such qualities as accusations. The most generous readings instead cite the political ramifications of such passivity: to admire the true sovereignty of God is also to deny the absolute sovereignty of earthly authorities. But one might also detect a politics in the form of human relation engendered by the Lucretian body of providential materialism. The individual atom acquires form and meaning only in porous relation; concomitantly, the forms generated by these atoms are, at base, composed of the same substances. A radical egalitarianism and a radical collectivism underwrite providential materialism. In this philosophy, we find historical resonance not with the “social and political structure of self-determination,” but with the social and political structure of an emergent public, drawn together through shifting force-fields of feeling, which in turn provoke the providential shifting of historical tides. Authorship in this context neither reflects nor promotes self-determination, but instead offers “many passages / And penetrable pores,” through which one might feel with and as another.

III. *The Forms of Anti-Formalism*

If anti-formalism – “a discourse challenging formality in religious and thereby political life,” “eschewing forms as fleshly and divisive” – is a central tenet of republican, civil war belief, it has also been considered a central tenet of republican, civil war aesthetics.⁴⁰⁰ As a politics, anti-formalism rejects “outward practices and institutions of church life.” God, radical Puritans claimed, regularly revealed new knowledge of his will to the individual spirit, authorizing inner revelation in a manner

³⁹⁶ Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2015), 13-4.

³⁹⁷ Sheehan, 13-4.

³⁹⁸ Sheehan, 29.

³⁹⁹ John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution*, xi.

⁴⁰⁰ David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians*, 384. Como’s discussion of anti-formalism expands on J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge, 1986); “Cromwell’s Religion,” in J. Morrill, ed. *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1990); “Puritanism and Revolution: Themes, Categories, Methods and Conclusions,” *HJ* 34 (1991): 699-704; “Against Formality: One Aspect of the English Revolution,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 3 (1993).

that emboldens Milton to claim divine inspiration. Milton's God encourages questioning existing religious forms, exerting individual reason, and probing the inner workings of the spirit. Milton also demonstrates the translation of religious anti-formalism into an aesthetic; he famously rejects the "troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming" – the empty, "jingling sound of like endings," a preconceived, un-thinking order – in favor of the "ancient liberty" of blank verse, a form that enables the poet absolute freedom of expression.⁴⁰¹ As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, herein lies what we have inherited as the tradition of republican prophetic poetry: a claim to divine inspiration that yields individual freedom.

Evaluated in light of these terms – divine inspiration as a rejection of existent forms, the poet-prophet characterized by boundless, individual freedom – *Order and Disorder* appears wholly un-inspired. Indeed, Hutchinson directly rejects prophetic revelation of this kind. Her resolve "never to search after any knowledge of [God] and his productions, but what he himself hath given forth" closely echoes the anti-prophetic arguments of civil war conservatives.⁴⁰² As William Wilkinson, an early seventeenth-century religious writer and ecclesiastical lawyer, remarked, true Christians are "sufficiently instructed in the truth of Gods word, without any further search after fonde and curious visions, which are expressly forbidden by the written word of God, and holy Scripture."⁴⁰³ Like Wilkinson, Hutchinson considered claims of new, individual revelation "out of bounds," false augmentation of a divine word perfectly complete within itself.

At the same time, however, such an account of prophecy and inspiration is contingent on a definition of prophecy grounded in the revelation of new knowledge of divine will (what I schematically labeled, in the introduction, Old Testament prophecy). Foregrounding the prophetic mode of prodigy pamphlets, I hope to illuminate a different prophetic mode in *Order and Disorder* – one that does not claim the authority of revelation, but is instead a collectively generated experience of, or attunement to, divine will. After all, Hutchinson does not, like some conservative writers, chastise claims of revelation in contrast to a deferral to ecclesiastical authorities. Rather, she contrasts (in much the same way as Poole) idolatrous, individual conceptions of divine will from the universally accessible "living and true God," a comparison again figured in cloud: "Those that will be wise above what is written may hug their philosophical clouds, but let them take heed they find not themselves without God in the world, adoring figments of their own brains, instead of the living and true God."⁴⁰⁴ This comment evokes the same distinction Hutchinson makes in the cloud passage, contrasting the princes' praise of "painted roofs" to "th' unhoused head[s]" open to divine creation: philosophers "may hug their philosophical clouds," static – and therefore inherently idolatrous – ideas of God; Hutchinson will instead bear witness to natural clouds, godly creations constantly transforming across the sky. If Hutchinson's poetic-prophetic mode does not correspond with a tradition of individual antinomianism, of exceeding the given bounds of divine decree, she

⁴⁰¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, "The Verse." See John Creaser, "Prosodic Style and Conceptions of Liberty in Milton and Marvell," *Milton Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2000): 1-13, who argues that "In politics, theology and social policy, Milton is, as in prosody, a radical individualist and libertarian, prepared to shake the foundations and destroy established forms" (4). Creaser describes Marvell's couplets, in contrast, as "a prosody not of individuality and expressiveness but of containment" (2). I do not mean to suggest that Milton entirely eschewed form (of course, he composed sonnets), but rather that critical consensus emphasizes his use of form as a deliberate and self-determined re-forming.

⁴⁰² Hutchinson, "The Preface," in *Order and Disorder*, 3.

⁴⁰³ William Wilkinson, *A Confutation of Certain Articles Delivered unto the Family of Love with the Exposition of Theophilus* (London, 1579), 49.

⁴⁰⁴ Hutchinson, 3-4.

nonetheless participates in a poetic-prophetic tradition of feeling divine presence, with and among others, in the shifting contours of the present.

If the stereotypical Miltonic poet-prophet aims to allow the reader to question divine decree, Hutchinson aims to help the reader feel divine decree. As she explains in the Preface, the inspired poet enables affective access to God's creation: words to help us feel the Word, and the world.

If any one of no higher a pitch than myself be as much affected and stirred up in the reading as I have been in the writing, to admire the glories and excellencies of our great Creator, to fall low before him, in the sense of our own vileness, and to adore his power, his wisdom, and his grace, in all his dealings with the children of men, it will be a success above my hopes.⁴⁰⁵

Hutchinson advocates submission to God in a way Milton never would. At the same time, the intent of this chapter is to challenge the classification of submission as conservative, anti-aesthetic, or un-inspired. In fact, when Hutchinson chastises claims to know divine will in favor of experiencing it – becoming “affected and stirred up” by it – she participates in a tradition of Puritan reading practices, skeptical of those who attempt “to understand Spirituall things Rationally,” akin, in the words of Peter Sterry, preaching before Parliament in 1645, “to plough[ing] with an Oxe and an Asse.”⁴⁰⁶ As seventeenth-century divine Richard Sibbes explains,

A carnal man can never be a good divine, though he have never so much knowledge. An illiterate man of another calling may be a better divine than a great scholar. Why? Because the one hath only notional knowledge, discursive knowledge... How do you know the word to be the word? It carrieth proof and evidence in itself. It is an evidence that the fire is hot to him that feeleth it, and that the sun shineth to him that looks on it; how much more doth the word... I am sure I felt it, it warmed my heart, and converted me. There is no other principle to prove the word, but experience from the working of it. Experience is the life of a Christian. What is all knowledge of Christ without experience... ?⁴⁰⁷

That is, Wittreich fundamentally misunderstands the tradition in which Hutchinson writes when he describes the opposite of rational interpretation as “Christian cliché.” In fact, Hutchinson participates in a Puritan tradition of valuing felt experience of God over “notional” or “discursive” knowledge. As Geoffrey Nuttall puts it, “The radical Puritans, in particular, through their reaction alike against dead ‘notions’ and an over strict morality, sought to associate the Holy Spirit less with reason or conscience and more with a spiritual perception analogous to the physical perception of the senses and given in ‘experience’ as a whole.”⁴⁰⁸ What the prodigy pamphlets illuminate – and what *Order and Disorder* likewise suggests – is that spiritual perception, like physical perception, is relational, especially so when the sun is shrouded in cloud.⁴⁰⁹ I feel the heat of the fire, but so too do

⁴⁰⁵ Hutchinson, 4.

⁴⁰⁶ Peter Sterry, *The Spirits Conviction of Sinne* (1645), 16.

⁴⁰⁷ Richard Sibbes, *Works*, ed. A.B. Grosart (1862), III. 434; IV. 334 f., 363; II. 495; IV. 412.

⁴⁰⁸ Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith*, 38.

⁴⁰⁹ As Elaine Scarry summarizes, “Contemporary philosophers have habituated us to the recognition that our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world, that we do not simply ‘have feelings’ but have feelings *for* somebody or something, that love is love of *x*, fear is fear of *y*, ambivalence is ambivalence about *z*... all the emotional, perceptual, and somatic

all who stand near it; I feel the wonder of the cloud Army, and so too do all who see it. Our experience of the world is both internal and interactive, confirmed by the fact that such experience is shared. Hence the inspired poet of *Order and Disorder* attempts to carry the “proof and evidence” of God, to help the reader feel the truth of it. For as Hutchinson herself demonstrates, part of what causes one to become “affected and stirred up” by the Word is affective resonance with others. One might, as Milton’s Adam, awake and look directly to the sky.⁴¹⁰ Or one might follow the line of sight of one’s neighbor, see the comet streaking across the sky, and suddenly feel the wonder of God.

Of course, such a religio-aesthetic project – meant to affectively stir the reader to God, often by prompting readers to contemplate others’ spiritual experiences – extends long before the Puritans. William Dyrness has recently described a shift, beginning in the Middle Ages and culminating in the Reformation, from a notion of divinity embedded within an artwork to a focus on “the presence of the viewer and the experience the image was meant to solicit.”⁴¹¹ “Viewers,” he explains, “were to become eyewitnesses to the events described in great visual detail, to join themselves emotionally to the holy persons they are looking upon.”⁴¹² Dyrness argues that, for major Reformers like Luther and Calvin, “God’s presence was not limited to specific religious practices, but was evident in all the details of the natural order and, indeed, potentially in all that humans made of that created order.”⁴¹³ Counter to narratives of the Protestant aesthetic as secularizing in its turn away from religious iconography and toward the larger world, and to narratives of the increasing interiorization of post-Reformation religious experience, Dyrness locates a Protestant aesthetic which considers natural creation imbued with the divine – a religious tradition that expands the scope of aesthetic experience.

As Norbrook has shown, Calvin is the single most significant influence on Hutchinson’s thought, and so it is no surprise that *Order and Disorder* participates in this tradition. In fact, Hutchinson’s desire to stay within aesthetic bounds directly alludes to Calvin’s decree that “only those things are to be sculpted and painted which the eyes are capable of seeing: let not God’s majesty, which is far above the perception of the eyes, be debased through unseemly representation.”⁴¹⁴ What Dyrness helps us understand, however, is that Calvin’s stipulation against “unseemly” representation “represents not a limitation but an expansion of the potential subjects of artistic attention.”⁴¹⁵ That is, Hutchinson’s intention of remaining within bounds need not be understood as a limitation at all. Again, she distinguishes not between outward forms and inner freedom, but between the stasis of human creation and the perpetual transformation of the divine – the boundlessness of divine bounds.⁴¹⁶ Real clouds create a *theatrum mundi* inviting aesthetic contemplation.

states that take an object... [affirm] the human being’s capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, sharable world” (5).

⁴¹⁰ Eve, of course, instead stares at her own reflection in the water, and must be taught by Adam to know God. One might easily conclude that Adam is complete within himself, while Eve is not; Hutchinson does not extend such autonomy to any of her characters.

⁴¹¹ William Dyrness, *The Origins of Protestant Aesthetics in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019), 14.

⁴¹² Dyrness, 14.

⁴¹³ Dyrness, 4.

⁴¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), I, xi, 12.

⁴¹⁵ Dyrness, 70.

⁴¹⁶ For Hutchinson, divine bounds are boundless in a quite literal sense; in Canto 2, Hutchinson sides with Calvin when she describes the firmament – the literal boundary dividing heaven from

Those clouds which over all the wondrous arch
 Like hosts of various-formed creatures march,
 And change the scenes in our admiring eyes;
 Who sometimes see them like vast mountains rise,
 Sometimes like pleasant seas with clear waves glide,
 Sometimes like ships on foaming billows ride;
 Sometimes like mounted warriors they advance,
 And seem to fire the smoking ordinance;
 Sometimes like shady forests they appear,
 Here monsters walking, castles rising there.
 Scorn, princes, your embroidered canopies
 And painted roofs: the poor whom you despise
 With far more ravishing delight are fed
 While various clouds sail o'er th' unhoused head,
 And their heaved eyes with nobler scenes present
 Than your poetic courtiers can invent.⁴¹⁷

As mentioned, Hutchinson here counters the royalist aesthetic of wit and wisdom that foregrounds human agency rather than God.⁴¹⁸ But she also counters an anti-formalist, republican aesthetic that seeks to peer into the invisible, or probe the inner spirit, discounting forms entirely. Hutchinson opposes the stasis of human forms – in this sense, she too is an anti-formalist – but embraces the outward forms of the divine creation. As the anaphora of “Sometimes like” marches us through the passage, the clouds change shape, never quite identical to themselves, always pointing to an invisible force that they invite but never fully deliver. Rather than rejecting given forms altogether, Hutchinson embraces the inherent instability of divine form, never capable of being eternized in a single church, or revealed by a single person. The task of the poet-prophet is not to pull down the clouds, to find what remains hidden behind them, but to feel God’s presence in the visible forms of the natural world, to become the hand pointing her reader to the wonder of God. Such a task carries no particular poetic office with it, but is available to any “unhoused head” – a phrase that suggests the exposure to the external world necessary to feel God’s presence within it. Any person who heaves their eyes to the sky and finds wonder there becomes a prophet.

Hutchinson’s anti-formalism is characterized not by a denial of form altogether, but a denial of the human ability to rationally understand God’s forms, which nonetheless pervade the world anywhere one looks. The same characterization might extend to her poetic form, and in particular to her use of rhyme. In some ways, Hutchinson’s use of rhyme invites all the accusations of un-reflective bondage that Milton wields. Each line enclosed in the neat “given and container” of the couplet, Hutchinson welcomes submission to form as a means of submission to God:

Whatever mortals’ vain endeavors be,
 They must be broken who with power contend,

earth – as atmospheric expanse (the Hebrew *raqia*), composed of cloud, rather than a solid, material structure (the Greek *stereoma*).

⁴¹⁷ Hutchinson, 2.11-26.

⁴¹⁸ Dryden offers a marked counterpoint. His *Mirabilis Annus* poem likewise documents prodigies – yet not in order to elicit wonder at God, but at the righteous providence of the Restoration.

And cannot frustrate their Creator's end,
Whose wisdom, goodness, might and glory shines
In guiding men's unto his own designs.⁴¹⁹

Men who attempt to “contend” with God’s providence will find that they have fulfilled it nonetheless: “Mankind / Alone rebels against his Maker’s will, / Which, though opposing, he must yet fulfil.”⁴²⁰ So too, the reader has no escape from the rhyming couplets, as each rhyme-word is predestined to meet its fellow. The lines become strikingly authoritative. “They” – men in general – “who with power contend” cannot frustrate God’s end. Simultaneously, “They” – atheistic readers and writers – who contend with the message and power of this poem cannot frustrate its ends, the literal ends of each line. The couplet becomes a microcosm of providence, submitting both reader and writer to a set, predetermined order.

And yet, as we have seen, if Hutchinson is interested in form – in the shape divine will takes in the world – she is drawn not to its fixity but its intrinsic instability: the changing contours of the clouds, the affective undoing of the human body. Likewise, her use of rhyme is as much about the unpredictable, affective experience of providence as it is about unassailable order. Here, I draw from Simon Jarvis’s account of rhyme, which suggests that rhyme illuminates a poet’s “distinctive mode of knowing” rather than any singular meaning – meaning that there is no singular explanation for the relationship between the couplet and providence, the form of a poem and the form of God.⁴²¹ For instance, writing of Alexander Pope, Hugh Kenner has described rhyming couplets as aspiring toward a “true language,” dreaming of a union between signifier and signified, sound and sense, whereby “rhyme validates a structure of meaning which other orders of cogency have produced.”⁴²² He observes in Pope “incongruous rhymes for satiric observation, normal rhymes for the realm of law,” imagining language in parallel to a divine order.⁴²³ Hutchinson’s couplets, in contrast, betray no such logic. Even the rhyme pair scholars are most fond of noting, womb/come, carries within it less an ordered, teleological logic than the slant mystery of divine decree.

Rather than understanding language as encoded signifiers, Hutchinson’s defense of rhyme follows again Calvin’s understanding of the need for figurative language in Scripture.⁴²⁴ As Dyrness summarizes, the potential of human language for Calvin and Luther lies in its ability “to carry a surplus of meaning... the point of language is its expressive power, as it is employed by the working of the Holy Spirit... Language makes something happen.”⁴²⁵ Hutchinson deplores the idea of language as ornamental, and emphasizes its inadequacy to capture God: “I acknowledge all the language I have, is much too narrow to express the least of those wonders my soul hath been ravished with in the contemplation of God and his works.”⁴²⁶ At the same time, she defends her

⁴¹⁹ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, 1.16-20.

⁴²⁰ Hutchinson, 1.10-12.

⁴²¹ Simon Jarvis, “Why Rhyme Pleases,” *Thinking Verse* I (2011), 24.

⁴²² Hugh Kenner, “Pope’s Reasonable Rhymes,” *ELH* 41, no. 1 (Spring, 1974), 78.

⁴²³ Kenner, 20.

⁴²⁴ Helpful here is a distinction Dyrness describes, drawing on Charles Taylor’s *The Language Animal*, between a view of language as “designative... a process of naming and decoding” and language as “something that straddles the boundary between mind and body... [that] actually constitutes human social and embodied life” (90-1).

⁴²⁵ Dyrness, 105.

⁴²⁶ Hutchinson, 5.

decision to write in verse – not only because of Biblical precedent (“remember a great part of the Scripture was originally written in verse”), but because of its expressive power:

we are commanded to exercise our spiritual mirth in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; which if I have weakly composed, yet ‘tis a consenting testimony with the whole Church, to the mighty and glorious truths of God which are not altogether impertinent, in this atheistical age; and how imperfect soever the hand be that copies it out, Truth loses not its perfection, and the plainest as well as the elegant, the elegant as well as the plain, make up a harmony in confession and celebration of that all-creating, all-sustaining God, to whom be all honour and glory for ever and ever.⁴²⁷

This song is just the opposite of “things unattempted yet” – a harmony rather than a melody, a consenting testimony rather than an inspired revelation. Yet nothing about Hutchinson’s conception of language is un-inspired, or inert. Language makes something happen beyond the writer’s intent and ability: “How imperfect soever the hand be that copies it out, Truth loses not its perfection.” There is some truth in rhyme (in providence, in order, in God) that we cannot understand, given our human blindness, but that we can feel. Which is to say, again, that linguistic form, like the forms of the natural world, demonstrates the perfection of God – a perfection fallen humans can experience only incompletely as wonder and feeling, not as a legible system. Indeed, when the poem (at a sprawling 20 Cantos) ends, it ends on an un-finished couplet, in the midst of an un-finished story:

for God at first did send
An unseen guard of angels to attend
His servant home, though yet he knew it not,
And Bethel’s certain vision had forgot.
These Laban and his troops could have delayed
Or led them to wrong paths and while they strayed
Carried off Jacob safe.⁴²⁸

Jacob is not, in fact, safe; as Norbrook notes, he “conciliates Laban and reaches agreement with him; but soon afterwards he finds himself in new danger from Esau.”⁴²⁹ One gets the sense that *Order and Disorder* might resume with Canto 21, with a companion rhyme for “safe,” as providence resumes its motion. Yet we do not know what that rhyme-word will be; it will be dictated not by the knowledge but the feeling of the story, not by the poet-prophet herself but by the strange power of poetic language, a vehicle of the divine insofar as it resists understanding yet invites aesthetic contemplation, insofar as it is composed of given, visible forms and yet always exceeds such forms. Such affective unpredictability informs not only Hutchinson’s religio-aesthetic vision, but the politics of her prophetic poetry. The next page of history lies shrouded in cloud; its form will not be detected by any one world-historical actor, but by the unhoused heads, open to the wonders of God.

⁴²⁷ Hutchinson, 5.

⁴²⁸ Hutchinson, 20.143-9.

⁴²⁹ Hutchinson, p. 258, n473.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shelleyan Echoes: the Romantic Afterlives of Civil War Prophecy

The English Civil Wars have never truly ended.
-David Como, *Radical Parliamentarians*

Everything must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but, they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of a void, but out of chaos; the materials must be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself.
-Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, "Preface"

In this chapter, I turn from the civil war era itself to the historical period inarguably most invested in its literary and political legacy: British Romanticism. It is no news to scholars that Romantic authors felt an affinity between their own historical moment and that of the civil wars. Zera Fink has described the English Jacobins who frequented radical publisher Joseph Johnson's shop as "high on Sydney and Milton."⁴³⁰ Nineteenth-century politicians understood the seventeenth century as "the period from which the factions of modern time trace their divergence," and civil war historiography – of renewed interest in the wake of the French Revolution, and throughout the tumultuous decades leading up to the 1828-32 Reform Acts – "played a significant role in contemporary political argument."⁴³¹ Most significant for our purposes, the Romantic period witnesses the resurgence of prophecy, quieted in the wake of the Restoration, as a dominant literary and political mode. Figures like Richard Brothers and Joanna Southcott channeled the tumult of the French Revolution, prophesying (much like the seventeenth-century figures they read and referenced) the coming of God's kingdom on earth, and the demise of earthly authorities.⁴³² From Anna Barbauld to Coleridge and Wordsworth, poets too resumed the mantle of prophecy, though not typically in the sense of claiming unmediated access to divine will, or an ability to foretell the future.

This chapter asks what it means to write in the prophetic mode in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. The central authors of this chapter – William Godwin, Percy Shelley,

⁴³⁰ Zera Fink, "Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 4 (1948): 107-26, 111-2. See also David Erdman, "Milton! Thou shouldst Be Living," *The Wordsworth Circle* 19.1 (1988): 2-9; Nicholas Roe, "Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989): 112-26; Robin Jarvis, *Wordsworth, Milton, and the Theory of Poetic Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 77-83.

⁴³¹ John Morrow, "Republicanism and Public Virtue: William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth of England*," *The Historical Journal* 34.3 (1991): 645-664, 646, 645.

⁴³² So too, as Jon Mee notes, such figures were admonished precisely insofar as their religious enthusiasm recalled the unrest of the civil wars: "During the controversy surrounding the Paddington Prophet Richard Brothers in 1794-5 frequent mention was made of the millenarians of the previous century. Perhaps rather more surprisingly, the judge who presided at the Treason Trials of 1794 compared Thomas Hardy, secretary of the London Corresponding Society, to Thomas Venner, who had led the rising of the millenarian Fifth Monarchists against the Restoration over a century before" (27). See Chapter 1 of Mee's *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) for an account of the regulation of dangerous enthusiasm in the century following the civil wars.

and Mary Shelley – all cast their prophetic mode as the explicit inheritance of the English civil wars, and yet alter that prophetic mode to accommodate their own experience of secular modernity. The chapter, that is, participates in a long-standing tradition of scholarship, initiated by M.H. Abrams, questioning how the Romantics enacted the “assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises.”⁴³³ Following the more recent work of Colin Jager, however, I treat religion less as “a set of cognitive beliefs or mental dispositions,” and more as a mode of felt, never quite articulable, experience.⁴³⁴ The previous three chapters uncover a prophetic politics in the shared, sympathetic body of God; the prophetic poet enables the reader to detect the invisible connection between individual and collective that, felt and amplified, might reshape the future. The key figures of this chapter likewise locate prophecy’s political potential in its ability to transform social relations; what they secularize is not so much a set of doctrinal beliefs as the affective sensation of collective, historical change.

Why, my reader may ask, trace such a lineage through the Shelleys? One might consider almost any Romantic author through the lens of prophecy, and even through the lens of civil war prophecy specifically – William Blake most of all. “The closer we are to 1650,” E.P. Thompson has persuasively argued, “the closer we seem to be to Blake.”⁴³⁵ In fact, Saree Makdisi has read Blake as the inheritor of a radical, egalitarian, Leveller tradition in terms that explicitly resonate with the New Testament prophetic mode described in the previous chapters; for Blake, Makdisi avers, “the ultimate horizon of our affective relations and our infinite desires – and hence the ultimate horizon of our being – is not a narrow formal selfhood, a self as opposed to others, but rather our participation in the common body of God, the ‘divine body’ of which ‘we are his members.’”⁴³⁶ “Would to God that all the Lord’s people were Prophets,” Blake’s inspired poem *Milton* begins.⁴³⁷ The poem goes on to imagine Blake quite literally embodying Milton’s prophetic mode, as Milton, falling from heaven in the form of a star, collides into Blake’s left foot.

⁴³³ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13.

⁴³⁴ Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). See Jager’s Introduction for a synopsis of Romantic literary criticism on religion. Jager counters both a strain of deconstructive and historicist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s that associates religious decline with modernity, and a strain of historicizing studies in the 1990s that treat religion “largely as a set of cognitive beliefs or mental dispositions” (5). In contrast, Jager adopts the now familiar thesis that religion and secularism are inextricably intertwined, and frames Romantic religion as “an experiential, precognitive encounter with the truth of the universe” (215). See my Introduction for a fuller discussion of the relation between literature, affect, and secularism.

⁴³⁵ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 46.

⁴³⁶ Saree Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8. Makdisi identifies a taxonomy of political positions in the 1790s that derive from, and map closely onto, political positions from the civil wars. Liberal-radicals like Thomas Paine, John Thelwall, and Mary Wollstonecraft argued for the “rights of man” and possessive individualism “against the hereditary religious and political order of the old regime” (3). At the same time, these liberal-radicals sought to quell “an older radical subculture” (of which Makdisi considers Blake to be a member) that questioned “the primacy of individual rights and the very status of the individual as a transcendent metaphysical category, a unit granted ontological privilege as the alpha and omega of all historical processes and political developments” (26).

⁴³⁷ William Blake, *Milton*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: UC Press, 2008).

I am drawn to attend to the Shelley circle precisely insofar as they struggle to resuscitate “the common body of God.” While Blake unselfconsciously rejuvenates the spirit of civil war prophecy, remaining a marginalized enthusiast, Godwin, Percy, and Mary question to what extent prophetic authorship, in the context of secular modernity, remains a viable force of socio-historical transformation. They ask: How, precisely, can the prophetic author foment commonness? Who is included or excluded from humanity’s collective body? How can “the common body of God” outlive a belief in God himself? Godwin proposes supplanting the immanent, divine connection between individual and collective with a rational understanding of humanity’s relationality. Percy Shelley attempts to adopt the structure of a religious universalism, absent its metaphysical foundation. Yet the chapter will end not with Percy Shelley’s optimistic assertion of a secular, prophetic power, but with Mary Shelley’s *Last Man* – a novel that denies the prophetic author’s ability to generate a sense of sympathetic community. Mary Shelley’s novel, I suggest, does not merely critique Percy Shelley’s prophetic idealism; it dramatizes the difficulty of feeling collectivity in the modern era, and thus the difficulty of imagining or creating political change.

I. William Godwin, Robert Owen, and the Rational Millenarian

Our motto must therefore be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through analysis of mystical consciousness which is still unclear to itself. It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter, of which it must only possess the consciousness to possess it in reality. It will become apparent that it is not a question of a great thought-dash between past and future, but of the *carrying-through* of the thoughts of the past.

-Marx to Ruge (1843)

(as quoted by Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*)

How does prophecy transform the future? For a prophet like Joanna Southcott, the prophet delivers the future. In 1792, the 42-year-old domestic laborer heard a “voice” relating the details of the coming war with France, and food shortages in the west country.⁴³⁸ Southcott sealed her prophecies, and sent them off to clergy members who could weigh their accuracy. These early prophetic writings inaugurated Southcott’s prophetic career: from 1801 to 1814, she published some sixty five pamphlets, totaling almost 5,000 pages (and at least double that in unpublished manuscripts). In 1814, by which point Southcott had at least 20,000 “sealed” followers, she declared herself pregnant with the second coming, a boy child named Shiloh. Though Southcott was then sixty-four years old, and allegedly a virgin, seven doctors published newspaper accounts confirming her symptoms. On December 27, 1814, Southcott died; her body was autopsied, with no sign of a fetus present in the uterus – a spectacle the newspapers once again documented. According to her believers, the child mysteriously disappeared, perhaps born spiritually if not physically.

In this model, the prophet, as Southcott’s process of “sealing” prophecies and the extensive scrutiny given to her autopsy reveals, is to be believed or doubted according to the accuracy of her claims and predictions, by the prophetic content she espouses.⁴³⁹ Christopher Bundock’s recent analysis of prophetic literature contrasts the prophetic writings of a figure like Southcott, who claims future-oriented revelation, to those of Romantic prophetic authors. Rather than delivering the future

⁴³⁸ Sylvia Bowerbank, “Southcott, Joanna (1750-1814), prophet and writer,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.

⁴³⁹ See also the story of Richard Brothers in Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 95-6.

– no longer possible in the context of temporal modernity, in which the future is absolutely obscure
 – Bundock argues that Romantic prophecy’s “greatest potentiality stems from its negativity, fragility, and failure. The prophetic subject is powerful because of his or her capacity, through self-immolation, to clear space for new thought, especially genuinely different, unprethinkable futures.”⁴⁴⁰ According to Bundock, Romantic prophets instead harness the negative aesthetic theorized by authors like Benjamin, Blanchot, Adorno, and Jameson, dissembling rather than imagining the future. From blankness emerges genuine historical transformation; only absolute annihilation of the present can puncture the entrenched forms of our late capitalist society.

The following two sections investigate an alternative means by which Romantic prophetic authors sought to transform history. For William Godwin, Robert Owen, and Percy Shelley, the prophetic writer neither foresees the future nor negates it, but transforms the listener’s experience of the present, creating the possibility of difference within the existent world. The prophet brings his follower to consciousness of what might be(come). I draw, in this analysis, on Ernst Bloch’s notion of concrete utopia, according to which “the world is full of objective real possibilities, which are not yet actual possibilities because they have not yet fulfilled all conditions of their possibility, and may or may not ever become fully possible.”⁴⁴¹ In Bundock’s analysis of negative prophecy, the prophet emphasizes the unbridgeable gap between what has been and what is to come – what Marx (in a quote Bloch frequently references) terms the “great thought-dash between past and future” – in order to inaugurate the un-pre-thinkable. What I hope to demonstrate is that certain strains of Romantic prophetic writing in fact bridge the “great thought-dash between past and future,” and do so specifically by illuminating the connection between individual and collective within the present. In simplest terms, the prophet transforms the future by transforming the current social relations from which that future will emerge.

As we will see, this prophetic mode resonates with the analysis of the previous three chapters, and all three of the prophetic authors I address here draw on the civil wars as a historical moment that initiated, and yet did not quite realize, the transformation of social relations. In a sense, then, they each attempt a prophetic “carrying-through” of the revolutionary cause. Godwin, Owen, and Shelley all differ, however, in the precise mechanism through which the prophet establishes the link between individual and collective in a society in which no *corpus mysticum* guarantees human community. Godwin and Owen suggest (with varying degrees of confidence) that we must rationally understand the relation between individual and “social man” in order to reshape the future. In contrast, Percy Shelley suggests that merely feeling ourselves to be a part of a broader whole will engender a more equitable future, adopting the mantle of the civil war poet-prophet all but unaltered.

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Theorists often claim that the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries differed in character from the first “modern” revolution, the French revolution, which, famously restarting the calendar at year 0, inaugurated “the start of a future that had never before existed.”⁴⁴² Paraphrasing Reinhardt Koselleck, Bundock describes the distinction between pre-modern temporality, “a state of affairs relatively continuous with present life,” and modern temporality, in which the future is

⁴⁴⁰ Christopher Bundock, *Romantic Prophecy*, 7.

⁴⁴¹ W. Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 90.

⁴⁴² Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 59.

“radically unlike life as it is known, something completely unlike... the futures of the past.”⁴⁴³ Even the briefest reading of Abiezer Coppe punctures the idea of a Romantic stronghold on temporal singularity. “Never,” he pronounces, “was there such a time since the world stood as now is.”⁴⁴⁴ And indeed, far from considering their own historical moment unprecedented, William Godwin and Percy Shelley (among many others) felt that their own time resonated strongly with that of the English civil wars – so strongly, in Godwin’s case, that he devoted more than ten years of his life to planning and writing a four-volume history of the civil war period, *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1822-28).

At a dense 2,500 pages, Godwin’s *History* has attracted few contemporary readers. But it enacts what is, for this project, an important revision of the Romantic understanding of the civil wars. David Hume’s *History of England* (1754-67), “famously dismissive of religious enthusiasm and sceptical of the role of liberty in the history of the English constitution,” long dominated the historiography of the period.⁴⁴⁵ Over the course of the century, a series of radical and Whig retellings began to emerge, from Catharine Macaulay’s *History of England* (1754-67) to George Brodie’s *History of the British Empire* (1822). Hume’s *History* epitomized the Tory narrative, whereby divine providence reinstated monarchy; Whig narratives of the revolution, in contrast, emphasized the sanctity of the constitution, and the revolution’s role in securing individual liberty.

Godwin, however, was invested neither in monarchical order nor individual liberty. In fact, he scorns figures like Lilburne, who, he contends, understood liberty as “merely a freedom for himself and others from the control of arbitrary will,” with no aim to advance “the social character of mankind.”⁴⁴⁶ For Godwin, the true heroism of the revolution, and the significance of the revolution “as a source of intellectual and moral inspiration,” lies in its public spirit.⁴⁴⁷ The “commonwealthmen,” he lauds, “aspired to a system and model of government, that was calculated to raise men to such an excellence as human nature may afford, and that should render them magnanimous, frank and fearless, that should make them feel, not merely each man for himself and his own narrow circle, but as brethren, as members of a community, where all should sympathize in the good or ill fortune, the sorrows or joys, of the whole.”⁴⁴⁸ According to the Whig narrative, the civil wars establish individual rights; for Godwin, however, the period is noteworthy precisely insofar as it refuses to merely champion individuals. Civil war government, in Godwin’s telling, enacts the very same kind of political work I have attributed to the civil war poet-prophet: to engender within the individual a sense of affective membership in a broader collective.

Not only did Godwin describe the ideals of civil war government in these terms, however; he sought, from his earliest political writings onwards, to enable men to feel as “brethren,” to engender a sense of social sympathy. In contrast to the “self-interest hypothesis” of the eighteenth century, according to which “all actions can be traced back to the individual’s (perhaps unconscious) self love,” Godwin argued in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that humans are naturally disposed “to promote the benefit of another, my child, my friend, my relation, or my fellow being... [my neighbor’s] cries, or the spectacle of his distress importune me, and I am irresistibly impelled to

⁴⁴³ Bundock, 10.

⁴⁴⁴ Abiezer Coppe, *A Flying Fiery Roll*.

⁴⁴⁵ Porsha Fermanis, “William Godwin’s ‘History of the Commonwealth’ and the Psychology of Individual History,” *The Review of English Studies* 61.252 (Nov 2010): 773-800, 773.

⁴⁴⁶ Morrow, “Republicanism and Public Virtue,” 656.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 649.

⁴⁴⁸ William Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth of England*, 499.

adopt means to remove this opportunity.”⁴⁴⁹ Sympathy, not self-love, motivated human action. The task of the political theorist (and for Godwin, really, of any author – the novelist, the historian, the prophet) is to shape human action by enabling the reader to access and cultivate their natural sympathetic inclination. Observing humankind, Godwin attests, “[w]e find... that we are surrounded by beings of the same nature with ourselves. They have the same senses, are susceptible of the same pleasures and pains, capable of being raised to the same excellence, and employed in the same usefulness. We are able in imagination to go out of ourselves, and become impartial spectators of the system of which we are a part.”⁴⁵⁰ Rational understanding and observation enable individuals to consider themselves part of a broader whole, enabling all humanity to feel as “brethren,” a sympathetic possibility that in turn motivates political action, and engenders the possibility of a new, more equitable future.

Herein lies the key difference between Godwin’s prophetic mode and that of the earlier chapters (and, as we’ll soon see, between Godwin and Percy Shelley): sympathy may be an innate, human feeling – yet that feeling emerges not through felt experience, but rational understanding. We must become “*impartial* spectators of the system of which we are a part,” *observing* humankind, in order to detect commonness. And so, quite often, Godwin’s work aims not to facilitate fellow-feeling in the reader, but to facilitate an understanding of the relation between individual and collective from which fellow-feeling might emerge.⁴⁵¹ If *Political Justice* implicitly suggests the authorship reshapes futurity through its ability to reshape social relations, Godwin’s 1797 manuscript “Of History and Romance” quite explicitly casts the ability to detect a connection between individual and collective, part and whole, as prophetic, “a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity”:

It will be necessary for us to scrutinize the nature of man, before we can pronounce what it is of which social man is capable. Laying aside the generalities of historical abstraction, *we must mark the operation of human passions; must observe the empire of motives whether grovelling or elevated; and must note the influence that one human being exercises over another, and the ascendancy of the daring and the wise over the vulgar multitude. It is thus, and thus only, that we shall be enabled to add, to the knowledge of the past, a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity.* We shall not only understand those events as they arise which are no better than old incidents under new names, but shall judge truly of such conjunctures and combinations, their sources and effects, as, though they have never yet occurred, are within the capacities of our nature. He that would prove the liberal and spirited benefactor of his species, must connect the two branches of history together, and regard the knowledge of the individual, as that which can alone give energy and utility to the records of our social existence.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁹ Richard Gough Thomas, *William Godwin: a Political Life* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 34; William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 256.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁵¹ See Mee’s discussion of Godwin, 109-117. Godwin was consistently suspicious of the masses, and “anxious about the infectious passions of the crowd overwhelming the light of individual judgment” (113).

⁴⁵² William Godwin, “Of History and Romance,” in *Caleb Williams, or Things as They Are*, ed. Maurice Hindle (Harmondsworth, 1988), 359-73.

As Emily Rohrbach and others have noted, Godwin here contrasts the kind of historical writing he aims to compose from that of the universal historian.⁴⁵³ Eighteenth-century historiography, epitomized by Hume, focused on abstract notions of causation, and regarded both history and humanity as unchanging. “Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places,” Hume explains, “that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.”⁴⁵⁴ Godwin, in contrast, inherits Rousseau’s aim in *The Social Contract* (1762) “to examine things not as they are but as they might be.”⁴⁵⁵ Routing history through the “human passions” rather than “the constant and universal principles of human nature,” the historian unveils “conjunctures and combinations” that “have never yet occurred,” creating the possibility of a genuinely new future. For scholars like Rohrbach and Bundock, Godwin epitomizes Koselleck’s account of temporal modernity: the future no longer marches forward in any predictable manner.

And yet, emphasizing the temporal quality of the future as such, Bundock in particular overlooks the extent to which, for Romantic prophetic authors, the relation between individual and collective dictates the relation between present and future. No Romantic millenarian better evinces the social underpinnings of prophecy than the so-called “father of modern socialism,” Robert Owen. A devout follower of Godwin’s political philosophy, Owen published “A New View of Society: or, Essays on the Formation of Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice” in 1813. Over the next several decades, Owen enacted a series of communitarian experiments at his New Lanark Mill and at New Harmony in southern Indiana, reducing the length of the workday, extending mandates for early childhood education, and introducing communal living and eating arrangements – all reforms that he advocated for in Parliament. At the core of his beliefs was Godwin’s rebuttal of the self-interest hypothesis. “Individual happiness,” Owen attested, “can be increased and extended only in proportion as he actively endeavours to increase and extend the happiness of all around him.”⁴⁵⁶ All that is needed to reform society, Owen argued, is for children to be taught that circumstance dictates individual character; thus they will no longer view individuals as solitary, malevolent actors, but instead see how the whole (society) shapes the part (the individual) – an insight that will again necessitate sympathy and thus reform:

The child who from infancy has been rationally instructed in these principles, will readily discover and trace *whence* the opinions and habits of his associates have arisen, and *why* they possess them. At the same age he will have acquired reasons sufficient to exhibit to him forcible the irrationality of being angry with an individual for possessing qualities which, as a passive being during the formation of those qualities, he had not the means of preventing... instead of generating anger or displeasure, they will produce commiseration and pity for those individuals who possess either habits or sentiments which appear to him to be destructive of their own comfort, pleasure, or happiness; and will produce on his part a

⁴⁵³ Emily Rohrbach, “From Precedents to the Unpredictable: Historiographical Futurities,” in *Modernity’s Mist* (New York: Fordham UP, 2015), 28-57. See also Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 118-20.

⁴⁵⁴ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C.W. Hendel (Indianapolis, 1955), 93.

⁴⁵⁵ Rohrbach, 43.

⁴⁵⁶ Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, ed. G.D.H. Cole (Everyman, 1949), 23.

desire to remove those causes of distress, that his own feelings of commiseration and pity may also be removed.⁴⁵⁷

Even in the 1813 *New View of Society*, Owen suggests that humanity's sympathetic capacity, activated through reason and education, "will increase, not in an arithmetical, but in a geometrical proportion," transforming society as "*shortly, directly, and certainly*" as Southcott's God.⁴⁵⁸ By 1817, as many scholars have pointed out, Owen fully spoke the language of millenarianism.⁴⁵⁹ If Southcott claimed to birth the messiah, Owen considered himself to *be* the messiah, initiating "the emancipation of mankind" and establishing the "new moral world" or "millennial world."⁴⁶⁰ His "system" was so self-evidently "the only path to knowledge" that men need only hear of it to enact it.⁴⁶¹ Owen too was a prophet, "the harbinger," in his own words, "of that period when our swords shall be turned into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks; when universal love and benevolence shall prevail; when there shall be but one language and one nation; and when fear of want or of any evil among men shall be known no more."⁴⁶²

This is all to say: if figures like Blake, Brothers, and Southcott perpetuate a religious, prophetic tradition dating back to the civil wars, Godwin and Owen transform the very same prophetic tradition into a "secular ideology."⁴⁶³ Civil war prophets illuminated England's shared, sympathetic, divine body, initiating political transformation. Godwin and Owen simply theorize "one body, and one Spirit" as emerging from a rational, rather than a divine, origin. Indeed, some of Owen's language might be mistaken as a direct quotation from a prophet like Elizabeth Poole or William Sedgwick. "The time is close," he explains, "when men will love those who differ from them more than they now love those who agree with them."⁴⁶⁴ Owen's dream of a "RELIGION OF CHARITY, UNCONNECTED WITH FAITH" is only a step more radical than that of seventeenth-century anti-formalists, who dreamed of a religion of charity regardless of faith.⁴⁶⁵

Owen maintains faith in his system – whereby understanding yields sympathy yields new world order – throughout his life. In Godwin's writings, however, millenarian professions of human agency (such as his claim that the mind could even gain power over "the matter of our own bodies," eliminating sickness and death) are rarely unqualified. Unlike Owen, that is, Godwin recognizes the epistemological limitations of a prophetic mode grounded in rational understanding of the relation between part and whole. In *History of the Commonwealth*, for instance, Godwin enacts the historiographical methodology of linking individual and species that he described so many years

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵⁹ See, on the millenarian dimensions of Owen's thought, W.H. Oliver, "Owen in 1817: the Millennialist Moment," in *Robert Owen Prophet of the Poor: Essays in Honor of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of His Birth*, eds. Sidney Pollard and John Salt (London: Macmillan, 1971), 166-87; Robert Davis, "Robert Owen and Religion," in *Robert Owen and His Legacy*, eds. Noel Thompson and Chris Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 91-112; and Geoffrey Powell, "Robert Owen and 'The Greatest Discovery Ever Made by Man,'" in *Robert Owen and His Legacy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 175-196.

⁴⁶⁰ Gregory Claeys, "Owen, Robert (1771-1858), socialist and philanthropist," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004.

⁴⁶¹ Owen, *A New View*, 93-4.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 97.

⁴⁶³ Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 7.

⁴⁶⁴ Owen, *A New View*, 132-3.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

earlier, “coupling historical figures into either antithetical or parallel types and drawing comparisons between central figures such as Cromwell, Fairfax, Lilburne, Ireton, and Vane.”⁴⁶⁶ Observing not only the appearance of such men “upon the public stage,” but also in their personal lives (as he puts it in “Of History and Romance”: “I would follow him into the closet. I would see the friend and the father of a family, as well as the patriot”), the historian might glean insight into how these character types created the sympathetic sense of community that foments political change.

And yet, throughout his *History*, Godwin laments that a true understanding of character is impossible. History has barred entry to the closet; the historian cannot fully inhabit the mind and character of his historical subjects:

If we could call up Cromwel from the dead, - nay, if we could call up some one of the comparatively insignificant acts in the time of which we are treating, and were allowed the opportunity of proposing to him the proper questions, how many doubts would be cleared up, how many perplexing matters would be unravelled, and what a multitude of interesting anecdotes would be revealed to the eyes of posterity! *But History comes like a beggarly gleaner in the field, after Death, the great lord of the domain, has gathered the crop with his mighty hand, and lodged it in his garner, which no man can open.*⁴⁶⁷

History here is weak, partial, and incomplete. Godwin aims to render his readers “impartial spectators” of historical processes, and yet those historical processes evade comprehensive, rational understanding. In fact, “Of History and Romance” ends with the very same conclusion. After pages of heralding the superiority of the historical romance writer over the universal historian, on the basis (as mentioned) of his ability to enter fully into his characters and transform the very shape of futurity through the possibilities unveiled, Godwin suddenly reverses course, deciding that the romance writer aspires to an unachievable task.

To write romance is a task too great for the powers of man, and under which he must be expected to totter. No man can hold the rod so even, but that it will tremble and vary from its course. To sketch a few bold outlines of character is no desperate undertaking; but *to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine.* We never conceive a situation, or those minute shades in a character that would modify its conduct. Naturalists tell us that a single grain of sand more or less on the surface of the earth, would have altered its motion, and, in the process of ages, have diversified its events. We have no reason to suppose in this respect, that what is true in matter, is false in morals.

Here then the historian in some degree, though imperfectly, seems to recover his advantage upon the writer of romance. He indeed does not understand the character he exhibits, but the events are taken out of his hands and determined by the system of the universe, and therefore, as far as his information extends, must be true. *The romance writer, on the other hand, is continually straining at a foresight to which his faculties are incompetent, and continually fails.* This is ludicrously illustrated in those few romances which attempt to exhibit the fictitious history

⁴⁶⁶ Fermanis, 790.

⁴⁶⁷ Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth*, II, 30.

of nations. That principle only which holds the planets in their course, is competent to produce that majestic series of events which characterises flux, and successive multitudes.⁴⁶⁸

To fully perceive character – so fully that one could predict a subsequent outcome of events – is a god-like task, of which the romance writer is entirely incapable. While the romance writer strains “at a foresight to which his faculties are incompetent,” the historian simply tells of events already determined by forces beyond him, and already true. The very promise of the romance writer – his ability to glean insight into individual character in order to unveil previously unthinkable possibilities – is also, given the impossibility of such a task, his downfall.

Godwin, an ardent atheist, defers to the intrinsically unpredictable, natural processes of the universe as controlling the course of events: the addition of a single grain of sand transforms human actions; the principle “which holds the planets in their course” drives the unpredictable flux of history. But, suggesting that “to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine,” Godwin also raises the specter of divinity – that source of irrational enthusiasm that Godwin bars from his *History* (which entirely avoids the question of religion in the civil wars), that force singly capable of numbering each grain of sand. Godwin suggests that authorship is prophetic, capable of transforming society, insofar as it enables us “to go out of ourselves, and become impartial spectators of the system of which we are a part.” And yet, he simultaneously recognizes that we can never fully “go out of ourselves” in order to understand other persons; the system in which we live is simply too complex for us to become “impartial spectators” of it. In the context of secular modernity, prophetic authorship stumbles not only because we cannot know the future, but because we cannot fully understand the relation between individual and collective required to re-shape it.

II. “Foreknow the Spirit”: Percy Shelley’s *Poet-Prophet on the Gusts of Historical Feeling*

Once the hands that organize our world are made invisible, after all, they become disconcerting. Whose hands are these, one wonders? Are they still God’s hands, just more carefully hidden and more mysterious than ever? Or are they something different altogether, a new ordering force whose nature is as yet undetermined?
-Jonathan Sheehan and Drohr Warman, *Invisible Hands*

If I see aright, then it seems to me that a writer of history must necessarily also be a poet.
-Novalis

The kind of power that would be “prophetic,” for Godwin, is a power that takes one out of individual sense experience, allows one to access the whole, gleaning the links between individual and collective, present and future. Yet Godwin confronts a profound epistemological limitation insofar as he polarizes human agency and external forces. If we cannot rationally understand the system in which we live, the way that collective experience shapes individual actions, we cannot reform the future. Either history is dictated by external forces, and we cannot control it – or we comprehend the power of external forces, and shape history to our will.

His predicament should strike us by now as quite familiar; it is, in fact, the very same predicament confronted by seventeenth-century providentialists: how does historical change happen,

⁴⁶⁸ Godwin, “Of History and Romance.”

and to what extent do humans have agency to effect such processes? Does God, as Calvin insists, preordain all world-historical events? If not God, does matter, as Lucretius and Epicurus counter, chaotically drive the universe? Or is each individual a free and independent actor, capable of rationally directing his or her own fate? The previous three chapters have charted what Jonathan Sheehan has termed a “third-way thinker” response to this predicament in prophetic writings, whereby God works immanently through the material universe, and specifically through the human collective. Hegel’s dialectical history offers a Romantic variation on the “third-way” response, whereby history works not over but through man, who expresses the Spirit of the Times, or *Zeitgeist*. Percy Shelley, I aim to demonstrate in this section, likewise resolves Godwin’s epistemological dilemma by asserting a dialectical relationship between human agency and external processes. Humans neither dictate the future nor merely receive it. The poet-prophet attunes himself (and, by extension, his readers) to the sympathetic linkages that exist within the present. Enabling the reader to feel (if not to fully understand) the relation between part and whole, the poet-prophet generates a sense of commonness that activates the potential for a new future.

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Percy Shelley’s prophetic mode inherits core components of Godwin’s philosophy. Like Godwin, Shelley suggests that the “social sympathies,” rather than “self-interest,” dictate human action:

The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develop themselves from the moment that two human beings co-exist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social.⁴⁶⁹

The semicolons here relieve Shelley of the need to explain the relation between statements – specifically, from explaining why the middle claim (“the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed”) is sandwiched between two claims about the “social sympathies.” I take Shelley to be drawing the same conclusion as Godwin, crossing the axes of individual and collective with that of present and future: the future exists within the present because human beings are fundamentally social. Our social relations dictate the form of the future because the “social sympathies” are “the principles alone capable of affording the motives” for political action. As social beings, humans naturally discern “the similitudes of things”; when poets express “the before unapprehended relations of things,” the pleasure that results from their sense of relation “communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community.”⁴⁷⁰ The poet, in other words, unveils a sense of relation; his readers then begin to experience that relation and develop their own synthetic, imaginative capacities. From their enhanced sense of relation, readers are motivated to act on behalf of a social whole to which they now feel themselves connected.

Like Godwin and Owen, then, Shelley imagines that multiplying “social sympathies” can prophetically transform the future. And Shelley likewise cites the civil wars as the high watermark of England’s socio-sympathetic capacity. “We live,” he exalts, “among such philosophers and poets as

⁴⁶⁹ Percy Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” 675-6.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty.”⁴⁷¹ The poetry of these periods – Shelley’s own moment as well as the English civil wars – inaugurates “the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution” because “[a]t such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature.”⁴⁷² That is, societal change stems from “the power of communicating and receiving” – because of the porosity of relation in that society, its openness to affecting, and being affected by, others.

And yet, Shelley also alters a key component of Godwin’s philosophy. Godwin suggests that becoming “impartial spectators of the system of which we are a part” necessarily preconditions our sense of sympathetic membership in the whole, and our subsequent ability to generate political change. Shelley, however, eschews entirely the need for impartial understanding, overcoming the epistemological limitations of Godwin’s romance writer. Consider, for example, the passage in which Shelley famously distinguishes between a story and a poem. The passage might be thought to signal Shelley’s distinction from Godwin, insofar as Godwin is exclusively a novelist rather than a poet. But Shelley clearly adapts his conception of poetry’s “eternal truth” from Godwin’s “Of History and Romance”:⁴⁷³

A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; *the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.* Time, which destroys the beauty and use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and *for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains.* Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it.⁴⁷⁴

Needless to say, Shelley does not suggest that poetry is “universal” in the same manner of Hume’s universal history (in fact, he calls out the “epitome” for particular censure). Like Godwin, Shelley is interested in unveiling not what is but what might be. Just as the romance writer recognizes the universal quality of a particular history (“those events as they arise are no better than old incidents under new names”), recovering the “conjunctures and combinations” that might reinvigorate the present, poetry “for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains.” At the same time, however, Shelley alters a key line from Godwin’s tract. In order to develop “a sagacity that can penetrate into the depths of futurity,” Godwin proposes that “we must

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 700-701.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 701.

⁴⁷³ Julie Carlson, *England’s First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2007). “The connection between Godwin and poetry goes underground in *A Defence of Poetry* because of Godwin’s association with ‘story’ and the denigration it receives for confining readers to particular manners, bodies, and times. But this is a gross mischaracterization of the ends of story as Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley variously employ it, all of whom characterize the generic, if not universal, through the individual in their prose fiction and often use their focus on a historical personage... to address present times as well as the thematized differences between the two periods as the grounds for hope” (267).

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 679-80.

mark the operation of human passions; must observe the empire of motives whether grovelling or elevated; and must note the influence that one human being exercises over another.” For Shelley, however, poetry does not *observe* motives and actions, but “contains within itself *the germ of a relation* to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature.” Poetry unveils not knowledge of the relation itself, but some incomprehensible reflection of it. Shelley denies our ability to rationally understand the “*whence*” and “*why*” of human action (the foundation of Owen’s millenarian system): “We know no more of cause and effect than a constant conjunction of events.”⁴⁷⁵ But while Godwin experiences such cognitive limitations as a lack, Shelley does not.

That is, for Shelley, we need not fully understand a relation – whether between present and future, or individual and collective – in order to feel it; merely feeling the potential for transformation unsettles the stasis of the present. The language of immanent potentiality – “the germ of a relation,” “the plant within the seed,” “the root and blossom” – recurs throughout *The Defence*, particularly in Shelley’s most direct explanation of the poet-prophet’s role. “Poets,” Shelley asserts, “were called in the earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets,”

a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry.⁴⁷⁶

Poetry is prophetic not because it knows the future, but because it inevitably reflects some felt aspect of the fundamentally unknowable future. The prophetic quality of poetry lies in its ability to foretell spirit rather than form; such blurriness, rather than a sign of poetry’s political irrelevance, allows the poet to inaugurate fundamentally new historical moments, insofar as he offers a germ without knowledge of what the “flower and fruit” might be. Hence Bundock has argued that, in Romantic prophecy, “the to-come is, precisely, not-yet – is possibility as opposed to actuality.”⁴⁷⁷ But Bundock goes on to claim that prophecy must “eclipse and in a sense collapse” the present in order to introduce the possibility of an entirely new future.⁴⁷⁸ And yet Shelley, like the prophets of previous chapters, seems quite clearly to experience futurity as a sense of immanent potentiality within the present, a potentiality to which the poet-prophet attunes himself. And again, the poet-prophet’s ability to transform the future is predicated on the extent to which he can communicate this potentiality to the reader, generating the “social sympathies” from which political action emerges.

In fact, attunement – the key prophetic modality of this project, as opposed to knowledge or annihilation – is also Shelley’s preferred metaphor of poetic-prophetic composition. At first, Shelley describes humans as the passive recipients of omnipotent, external forces: “Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-

⁴⁷⁵ Robert Owen: “The child who from infancy has been rationally instructed in these principles, will readily discover and trace whence the opinions and habits of his associates have arisen, and why they possess them” (*A New View of Society*, 35); Shelley, “A Defence,” 683.

⁴⁷⁶ Shelley, “A Defence,” 677.

⁴⁷⁷ Bundock, 129.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

changing wind over an Aeolian lyre; which move it, by their motion, to ever-changing melody.”⁴⁷⁹
But he then qualifies the claim, stopping short of attributing total omnipotence to external forces:

... there is a principle in the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. It is as if the lyre could accommodate its cords to that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre.⁴⁸⁰

The relation between instrument and wind is not purely that of a passive object and its active subject; change occurs neither purely via human agency nor external forces. The harmony between instrument and wind shapes the song; the attunement, or accommodation, between humans and the external forces of the universe drive historical change. On a fundamental level, Shelley considers poetry prophetic insofar as it is sympathetic. The poet-prophet neither negates the present nor proclaims the future, but echoes, or harmonizes, with the existent world, awakening the reader to the latent potentiality of the present.

Part of why Shelley’s prophetic mode accords so well with that of the previous chapters is because he ascribes to an essentially providentialist worldview: all expression, in some unknown way, reflects some truth greater than its own particular form. Shelley even compares poetry to providence: “the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence no less than as regards creation.”⁴⁸¹ Poetry not only creates new possibilities; it generates a providential sense of relation among all aspects of the existent world. As in the previous chapters, the poet-prophet uncovers the previously undetected links between individual and collective, present and future. Shelley attributes to the poet-prophet precisely the “divine” powers that Godwin denies: the power to affectively access, if not to rationally explain, the whole.

As Colin Jager has noted, Shelley expresses here a quite familiar romantic-era sentiment (found in Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller, and Schleiermacher, among others), whereby “literature is sort of but not exactly like religion... it accesses the kind of power generally associated with religion, but without committing itself to a particular metaphysic, legitimating itself rather than relying upon some transcendental source.”⁴⁸² To the extent that Shelley offers any metaphysical foundation to replace God, he offers wind as a metaphor – apt precisely because it lacks a firm metaphysical foundation. As Thomas Ford has noted, wind appeals to Romantic writers as an “endlessly elusive and mobile” figure, “a mediating and changeable element that lay in between stable objects and ephemeral states of being.”⁴⁸³ If God appeared to civil war prophets in cloud – providential signs wondrously legible to any unhoused head – divinity has now lost its discernible shape: God has eroded from cloud to wind, a wholly invisible force driving the endless transformation of the universe, and the changes in humanity’s “external and internal impressions.” As evident from the famous Aeolian lyre passage, and even more so from Shelley’s “Ode to the

⁴⁷⁹ Shelley, “A Defence,” 675.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 686.

⁴⁸² Colin Jager, “Romanticism/Secularization/Secularism,” *Literature Compass* 5/4 (2008): 791-806, 801.

⁴⁸³ Thomas Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air: Atmospheric Romanticism in a Time of Climate Change* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2018), 2.

West Wind,” the poet-prophet is no passive recipient of such external forces. He aims, rather, to ride the gusts of historical feeling, conveying to his reader the potentiality of the present moment.

“Ode to the West Wind” poetically dramatizes the Aeolian lyre passage. In the first three sections, Shelley figures the wind as an omnipotent, divine force. “O, wild West Wind,” he implores, “Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere; / Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O, hear!”⁴⁸⁴ “Destroyer and Preserver” refer to titles for the Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu, and Shelley riddles the poem with religious references. He is clearly drawn to wind as an omnipotent power given its invisibility – transformative power unseen, transformative power we require the poet-prophet to detect. Each of the first three sections describes the miracle of atmospheric transformation – something from seemingly nothing, or rather, change always lying in wait: the spring wind rejuvenates the “corpse” of dead winter seeds; “vapours” shatter the “solid atmosphere,” now bursting with “[b]lack rain, and fire, and hail”; sea winds disturb an ocean of calmness.⁴⁸⁵ Each section begins and ends with apostrophe – “Thou... hear, O, hear!” “Thou... O, hear!” “Thou... O, hear!” – as the poet deferentially invokes the invisible, omnipotent power seemingly responsible for all change.

In the fourth section, however, with the entrance of the lyric I, the power dynamic between poet and wind begins to shift. If the “sapless foliage of the ocean... grow grey with fear, / And tremble and despoil themselves” at the wind’s approach, Shelley begins in the fourth section to align himself, or harmonize, with the wind.⁴⁸⁶ He longs to be moved by this omnipotent force: “If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee; / A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share / The impulse of thy strength, only less free / Than thou, O, Uncontrollable!”⁴⁸⁷ He reveals his calls out to the wind – “O, hear!” – to be the “prayer” of his “sore need”: “Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”⁴⁸⁸ In the fifth section, the power dynamic shifts further, from the poet lauding the “Uncontrollable” power of the wind, to the poet aspiring to be moved by such power, to, finally, the poet harnessing the power of the wind for himself:

Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁴ Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” in *Major Works*, I.1, I.13-14.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, I.8, II.27-8.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, III.40-2.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, IV., 43-7.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, IV.52-4.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, V.61-70.

Shelley no longer wants to be moved by the wind; he wants to *be* the wind, his own words to become the invisible, uncontrollable force that awakens the earth. The poem bespeaks, in a sense, the same dynamic of secularization I initially traced through Southcott and Owen (and that Jager describes). Shelley does not aspire to speak on behalf of God; he aspires to claim for the poet-prophet the millenarian possibilities once confined to the divine. Unlike Owen, his words will not define a system. The poet-prophet delivers not the prophecy itself but “[t]he trumpet of a prophecy” – not content, but the possibility of transformation and rejuvenation within the “dead thoughts” of the existent world. The hearth of potentiality, the poet-prophet reveals, remains “unextinguished.” The poet-prophet’s words work like wind upon “[a]shes and sparks,” enlivening the something that remains even within the seemingly inert earth.

Rather than eclipsing and collapsing the present in order to inaugurate a fundamentally new future, Shelley attempts to revive the latent embers of the present, much as Godwin’s writer of historical romance attempted to revive the “conjunctures and combinations” of the past. Indeed, the English revolution itself seems to function for these authors as “an unextinguished hearth,” a historical moment laden with revolutionary potential never fully realized, awaiting a new generation of prophets to take up the commonwealthmen’s cause. So too, prophetic poetry functions here much as it does for the civil war poet-prophets, insofar as the reader can never fully disentangle object from subject, instrument from agent, poet from God. Shelley longs to harness the power of wind to enact historical change, and yet we are never quite sure whether the poet or the wind can be held responsible, whether we should understand the poet more as trumpet or trumpeter. As James Chandler has noted, the poem represents a paradox fundamental to Shelley’s work: “that writers are in some sense the authors of the influence (authors, that is, of the spirit of the age) by which their being is unwillingly pervaded.”⁴⁹⁰ Chandler concludes that “God and the poet are the creators, or authors, of one another. God makes the poet to make God, and vice versa. The Wind makes Shelley make the Wind make Shelley make the Wind and so on” – an observation that again epitomizes Shelly’s dialectical vision of historical change.⁴⁹¹

Focusing solely on the interdependence of poet and God, however, Chandler overlooks the third, and arguably most important, agent of historical change in the poem. In the fifth section of the Ode, begging the wind to “[s]catter... my words among mankind,” Shelley reveals that he was never only calling upon the wind, in the sense of an omnipotent, external force, to change the course of history. Each “hear, O, hear!” calls also upon his fellow humans to hear his poem. Ultimately, the wind – that spirit of invisible transformation – is inextricable from the spirit of collectivity – a literal scientific fact of the time period, as natural philosophers increasingly cast wind as the substrate of universal humanity. As Amanda Goldstein has established, Shelley was taught natural philosophy by Adam Walker, a popular scientific lecturer who described atmosphere as “a grand receiver, in which all the attenuate and volatized productions of terrestrial bodies are contained, mingled, agitated, combined, and separated.”⁴⁹² Air “does not stay safely outside a body, but is ‘so subtil that it pervades the pores of all bodies and enters into [their] composition.’”⁴⁹³ In other words, air became a substrate in which the human collective was quite literally materialized. Moreover, as Mary Favret has shown, atmospheric science was increasingly aware of the fact that air did not correspond to national boundaries (well into the eighteenth century, “scientists drawing on Aristotle, Ovid and

⁴⁹⁰ James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 545.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² Amanda Goldstein, “Growing Old Together: Lucretian Materialism in Shelley’s ‘Poetry of Life,’” *Representations* 128.1 (2014): 60-92, 77.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

other ancient sources reckoned that the *earth* provided the source of all atmospheric change”); it formed, rather, “a global system of communication,” carrying particles from distant persons and nations.⁴⁹⁴ Wind is the invisible, “Uncontrollable” force of transformation in the poem, which is also to say that universal humanity is the invisible, uncontrollable force of political and historical transformation. The poet-prophet’s ability to awaken his readers to the future potentiality within the present, to the collectivity that imbues the very air we breathe, carries millenarian possibilities: to “hear” his words might also be to enact them, “O, here!”

What I have been trying to demonstrate in these first two sections is the way that, for Godwin, Owen, and Shelley, the ability to prophetically know or sense the future is inextricably bound up with the ability to detect and multiply social sympathies. Both Godwin and Shelley associate the social sympathies with the English revolution; Shelley in particular adopts the mantle of the previous chapters’ poet-prophets, who did not claim knowledge of an intrinsically unknowable God, but rather felt his will working through the social collective, surging through the present. Percy Shelley is the closest we will come, in this chapter, to reviving the prophetic mode of the English revolution: the prophet need only alert the reader to the sympathetic link between self and other, present and future, to drive historical change. At the same time, “Ode to the West Wind” is imbued with a hollowness, an open question embodied in Shelley’s repeated “O.” The poem’s aura of confidence all but collapses in the final lines of the poem.

Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Is the question meant to be rhetorical, or genuine? In the manuscript version, Shelley ends on a declarative statement, professing the power of both wind and his own poetry to incite collectivity and drive historical change: “o Wind / When Winter comes Spring lags not far behind.” Yet what certainty can there be when the “trumpet of a prophecy” detects not the spirit of providence, but the wind? What happens when the ground of our shared humanity is no longer belief, a shared body promised by the Bible, but air? God has eroded from a sign in cloud, albeit a shifting and unstable one, to an invisible force, simultaneously invoked and doubted by any poet who attempts to detect it. Potentiality and collectivity remain powerful forces for the Romantic poet-prophet – and yet they have lost any metaphysical foundation, lost any defined outline or form.

III. Mary Shelley’s *Last Man: the End of Collectivity, the End of History*

[H]ow can works that posit the end of history... continue to be in any sense political [?]
-Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*

While *Frankenstein* was the story of the one who was superfluous in the world of men, *The Last Man*
is the story of one who is superfluous in a world without men.
-Barbara Johnson, *The Last Man*

⁴⁹⁴ Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton, 2010), 128, 120.

At the time that Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man*, she lived with her father, who was in the throes of writing his *History of the Commonwealth*. The first volume of the novel takes on Godwin's project, projecting the English civil wars to the year 2073, an alternate future sans regicide, in which the King willingly abdicates the throne. For years, republican values flourish, until Lord Raymond, a particularly charismatic leader of royal origins, proposes a return to the aristocracy of "old times." He assumes the role of Lord Protector, and England experiences hitherto unknown prosperity, completing public utility projects, abolishing disease and poverty, and promoting scientific discovery. "[F]ood sprung up, so to say, spontaneously – machines existed to supply with facility every want of the population."⁴⁹⁵ In these early pages, Mary Shelley truly adopts the role of the Godwinian romance writer, mapping out character types, exploring public and private motives, and questioning what effect such characters have on society. She draws on England's national history in order to unveil new "conjunctures and combinations," as both her characters and their political debates amalgamate the figures and arguments of England's revolutionary past with those of Shelley's own historical moment. To understand these characters, she suggests, enables one to prophetically glean a utopian future, in which humans, sailing across the sky in air balloons, have finally achieved power over the elements, and perfected the form of their own society.

But this utopian dream is short lived. Soon, a plague, carried on wind from Greece, sweeps through England and across the world. Politics, useless in the face of such calamity, recedes as the main focus of the novel. Our narrator, an idealistic writer who clearly evokes the recently deceased Percy Shelley, documents the suffering and death of all who surround him until, in the novel's final pages, he declares himself "THE LAST MAN."⁴⁹⁶ He sets sail toward Africa, hoping for some sign of change, any alleviation of "the monotonous present."

The questions that immediately present themselves to any reader of the novel are "why?" and "to what purpose?" Obviously Shelley critiques the notion of man's mental power over nature, characteristic of both her father (who once proposed that death could be eliminated if we simply refused to believe in it) and her husband (who similarly celebrated the poet's ability to imagine – and thus create – societal change). As Steve Goldsmith has noted, the plague triumphs over "a host of patriarchal and humanist assumptions (presence, universality, transcendence, meaning)."⁴⁹⁷

More challenging is the question of the novel's politics, of how one might attribute a political argument to a novel that so thoroughly denies human agency. Lee Sterrenburg claims that "*The Last Man* deals with politics, but ultimately it is an antipolitical novel. The characters discuss and try to enact various reforming and revolutionary solutions, but all such endeavors prove to be a failure in Mary Shelley's pessimistic and apocalyptic world of the future."⁴⁹⁸ The novel may be framed as the translation of a prophetic text (as we will see in the final section), and the main character may emblemize the role of the poet-prophet, suggesting the potential for initiating socio-historical change, but here, as Morton Paley explains, apocalypse heralds no millennium; "prophecy

⁴⁹⁵ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Anne McWhir (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), 82.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁴⁹⁷ Steven Goldsmith, "Of Gender, Plague, and Apocalypse: Mary Shelley's *Last Man*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4.1 (1990): 129-173, 165. My analysis shares many of Goldsmith's observations, particularly his contrast between Percy Shelley's use of metaphorical similitudes (which Goldsmith associates with the patriarchy) and Mary Shelley's use of metonymy, which "precludes the possibility of a monologic, self-authorizing discourse by localizing language, contextualizing it" (167).

⁴⁹⁸ Lee Sterrenburg, "*The Last Man*: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1978): 324-347, 328.

is seen as entirely divorced from human ends.”⁴⁹⁹ Most recently, Christopher Bundock has argued that Mary Shelley’s dystopian pessimism is political: “In Fredric Jameson’s words... ‘the best utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively’ because in them ‘the prevailing modes of production get exposed and terminated.’”⁵⁰⁰ In short, the novel has challenged readers to question to what extent critique can offer more than mere negation, to what extent the cessation (rather than the imagining) of historical transformation can enable political change.

I concur with those scholars who consider the novel a critique of Godwin and Percy Shelley’s idealism, and concede as well that the novel primarily documents the impossibility of political action. Yet the novel does not critique political action as, in and of itself, futile, but rather registers the difficulty of political action in the absence of a clearly defined social form. *The Last Man* indexes the loss of social forms – national, aesthetic, religious – that allow one to feel in common. In the absence of a common social body, the prophet’s words do not awaken the reader to sympathetic potentiality, illuminating each person’s perspective as one part of a previously undetected whole. In the absence of common feeling, there can be no collective action, and no shared political future.

*

It is often noted that the word “PLAGUE” does not enter the novel until page 137. Yet even if the novel does not name the word itself sooner, the first inklings of plague come some fifty pages before, in the context of an argument between the worldly Raymond and the domestic Perdita, married with a child, recently torn asunder by Raymond’s travels to see Evadne in Greece. Fearing Perdita’s reproach, Raymond resolves to “forsake her, England, his friends, the scenes of his youth, the hopes of coming time, he would seek another country, and in other scenes begin life again.”⁵⁰¹ Before he can flee, Perdita discovers his correspondence with Evadne, and, in the ensuing argument, in which Raymond repeatedly avows his own innocence, the atmosphere begins to turn. Raymond’s manner, in the midst of his lies, is “calm as the earthquake-cradling atmosphere.”⁵⁰² A page later, “every contagion of foul atmosphere” infiltrates his spirit.⁵⁰³ When he briefly considers returning to Perdita, “he lifted his head from the vapours of fever and passion into the still atmosphere of calm reflection.”⁵⁰⁴ From this point on in the novel, even before plague is mentioned, “contagion” figures as a frequent metaphor.

I highlight this interaction because so much early scholarship on the novel describes the plague as pure pessimism, pure critique of Percy Shelley’s idealism. And yet, as more recent scholarship has shown (particularly, Siobhan Carroll’s excellent reading of the novel, to which my analysis is indebted), Mary Shelley offers a clear cause for the plague, suggesting a much broader object of critique. The plague is literally brought into the novel via Raymond’s travels to Greece; it is initiated when he leaves English soil, hitherto the focus of all his affection and labor as Lord Protector, and becomes romantically involved with a non-English person. His travels destroy the sense of sympathetic connection between himself and Perdita (as Carroll notes, “[a]rguably one of the most domestic characters in the narrative”), which seems to stand in, synecdochally, for

⁴⁹⁹ Morton Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 114.

⁵⁰⁰ Bundock, 195.

⁵⁰¹ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 95.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Raymond's relation to all of England.⁵⁰⁵ Just a few pages later, Raymond abdicates the throne, becoming, if not the last man, certainly a lost man, separated from a broader society (and history) that he previously, quite literally, represented: "I have lost that which adorned and dignified my life; that which linked me to other men. Again I am a solitary man: and I will become again, as in my early years, a wanderer, a soldier of fortune."⁵⁰⁶ The plague, that is, arises in the novel at the very moment that England's political representative loses his fixed sense of Englishness, and, in fact, the plague will puncture any sense of English exceptionalism, traveling on air, across national borders, a "cloak that enwraps all our fellow-creatures – the inhabitants of native Europe – the luxurious Asiatic – the swarthy African and free American."⁵⁰⁷ Of course, the commonness of atmosphere might introduce new sympathetic possibilities of community (a perspective that our narrator, Lionel Verney/Percy Shelly, will avow, and that we will turn our attention to in a moment). But the interaction between Raymond and Perdita suggests that the plague – and the increasingly global atmosphere of the nineteenth century that it represents – erodes existing forms of community. "Each individual, before a part of a great whole moving only in unison with others," Verney will later narrate, "now became resolved into the unit nature had made him, and thought of himself only."⁵⁰⁸

Again, the first half of the novel adopts Godwin's historical project, reimagining the English civil wars, and foregrounding the potential for a cohesive, English sympathy to promote political reform. Listening to political speeches early in the novel, "every heart swelled with pride, and every cheek glowed with delight to remember, that each one there was English, and that each supported and contributed to the happy state of things now commemorated."⁵⁰⁹ Sympathy – the people's sense of belonging as members of the British nation – facilitates political changes that support every member of the commonwealth. And yet, as Carroll convincingly demonstrates, the air sweeping in from distant lands punctures the illusion of a comprehensive social sympathy, for the British empire is globally enmeshed to its colonial occupations, to which such sympathy does not extend. The specter of slavery – never, as Young-Ok An shows, overtly referenced in the novel – haunts *The Last Man* via fleeting allusions, such as "an 'American' ship hailing from the historical slave port of Philadelphia, whose sole visible victim possesses 'skin, nearly black' that functions as a sign of his 'long protracted misery.'"⁵¹⁰ Famously, Verney's closest interaction with the plague comes from the grasp of "a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease."⁵¹¹ "With mixed horror and impatience," Verney "disengage[s]" himself from the man's "naked festering arms," running to

⁵⁰⁵ Siobhan Carroll, "Mary Shelley's Global Atmosphere," *European Romantic Review* 25.1 (2014): 3-17, 9. After Raymond leaves Perdita, she begins to experience a "monotonous, lethargic sense of changeless misery," foreshadowing the monotonous, unchanging present of the plague.

⁵⁰⁶ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 117.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 332. See also Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), for a reading of the novel as capturing "a critical moment in the history of epidemiology... the recognition that modern diseases do not respect natural geographical boundaries. On an earth unified by the continual movement of people, goods, and pathogens, there are no safe places and nobody is exempt from possible contact" (296).

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹⁰ Carroll, 10. Young-Ok An, "Read your Fall: The Signs of Plague in *The Last Man*," *Studies in Romanticism* 44 (2005): 581-604.

⁵¹¹ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 265.

return to his son and daughter, “paler than whitest snow.”⁵¹² While England had prohibited the slave trade in 1803, not until 1833 would it ban slavery in (most of) its colonies. As Carroll has illuminated, “Some early nineteenth-century abolitionists... argued that the pernicious effects of slavery could be felt at home even when trade had been stopped: that the famously ‘pure air’ of England was not, in fact, separate from the air of its colonies, but could be permeated by the pestilential ideologies of the slave plantation.”⁵¹³ The nation no longer offers “a system and model of government” that enables men to feel “as brethren,” as members of a sympathetic whole. Shelley suggests, rather, that English people do not recognize – over the distance of oceans – the whole to which they belong. Her novel critiques the hypocrisy of English exceptionalism, England’s sense of itself as a cohesive whole superior to other nations that, in fact, form part of it.⁵¹⁴

Simultaneous to critiquing English imperialism, *The Last Man* – and particularly, its nostalgic, utopian retelling of the civil wars – betrays a sense of loss: the loss of a cohesive, English identity, rooted in a shared history, politics, and geography, out of which a cohesive, English sympathy might emerge. *The Last Man* opens with Lionel Verney professing his “native” membership in England, and describing England’s place in the world.⁵¹⁵ Looking out “to the utmost limits of [his] vision,” Verney considers England his entire universe. He belongs to a certain nation, securely shared by his fellow English countrymen. He need not even think of the rest of the world; England is his whole, and represents the whole. In short, the link between individual and nation, nation and world, is eminently clear:

I am the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land, which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed countries of larger extent and more numerous population. So true it is, that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. England, seated far north in the turbid sea, now visits my dreams in the semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves. In my boyish days she was the universe to me. When I stood on my native hills, and saw plain and mountain stretch out to the outmost limits of my vision, speckled by the dwellings of my countrymen, and

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Carroll, 11.

⁵¹⁴ See, for extensive readings of *The Last Man* as a critique of English (and male) imperialism, Barbara Johnson, “*The Last Man*,” in *A Life with Mary Shelley*, ed. Werner Hamacher (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014): 3-14, and, more recently, Audrey Fisch, “Plaguing Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, eds. Audrey Fische, Anne Mellor, and Esther Schor (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993: 267-86. “He [Verney] both takes apart the myth of imperial England and retains the image of it differently, thus making room for a new understanding of England as a lone ship, unable to master everything, unable to see past itself or to see itself as part of the rest of the world” (Fisch, 269). Fisch ultimately concludes that Shelley means to critique male leadership (“Mary Shelley’s innovative critique lies in her insistence that these political leaders, and their systems are flawed in their emphasis on the idealization of the male leader and their glorification of imperial England, separate and safe,” 273), while I conclude that Shelley registers a broader, sociohistorical challenge to one’s ability to observe the relation between part and whole.

⁵¹⁵ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 7.

subdued to fertility by their labours, the earth's very centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest of her orb was as a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort.⁵¹⁶

The entire novel will be the story of England's unfixing. "I spread the whole earth out as a map before me," Verney will later explain, searching for where to relocate his family, "On no one spot of its surface could I put my finger and say, here is safety."⁵¹⁷ England no longer offers a refuge, an island of safety confined by geographic boundaries. "The air of England is tainted, and her sons and daughters strew the unwholesome earth": a literal description of the effects of the global slave trade.⁵¹⁸ England is no longer a single spot, extending as far as one's gaze extends from its native hills. England spans the globe, and the extension from nation (all citizens share geographical borders, a history, and a politics) to empire (the colonies do not share the geography, history, or political rights of English citizens) weakens England's capacity for social sympathy. The link between individual and society, England and the world, is no longer accessible from the embodied perspective of the individual. Just as Godwin concludes "Of History and Romance" by admitting that the complex interrelation of the universe prevents the writer from truly knowing the other ("Naturalists tell us that a single grain of sand more or less on the surface of the earth, would have altered its motion, and, in the process of ages, have diversified its events"), Shelley suggests that the global enmeshment of empire, beyond the ability of any one individual to grasp, inhibits a sense of sympathetic relation between individual and collective, part and whole.

Those individuals willing to extend their sympathetic gaze beyond the confines of the English island must imagine the plights of others, in distant lands, as their own. They must imagine themselves as individuals linked to a much broader collective. As if clockwork, the moment that the nation recedes as the ground of a sympathetic link between individual and society, the aesthetic ascends, offering a new, more comprehensive possibility of community. Just three pages after Lord Protector Raymond abdicates the throne, renounces his Englishness, and declares himself to have lost "that which linked me to other men," Verney describes authorship as "a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures":

As my authorship increased, I acquired new sympathies and pleasures. I found another and a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures; my point of sight was extended, and the inclinations and capacities of all human beings became deeply interesting to me. Kings have been called the fathers of their people. Suddenly I became as it were the father of all mankind. Posterity became my heirs. My thoughts were gems to enrich the treasure house of man's intellectual possessions; each sentiment was a precious gift I bestowed on them. Let not these aspirations be attributed to vanity. They were not expressed in words, nor even reduced to form in my own mind; but they filled my soul, exalting my thoughts, raising a glow of enthusiasm, and led me out of the obscure path in which I before walked, into the bright noon-enlightened highway of mankind, making me, citizen of the world, a candidate for immortal honors, an eager aspirant to the praise and sympathy of my fellow men.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

Kings are merely “the fathers of their people,” but the author is “the father of all mankind,” the bearer of a universal sympathy. At this point, the novel abandons the Godwinian project of linking individual and society via the analysis of a shared national history in favor of Percy Shelley’s poetic project: linking the individual to universal humanity via the aesthetic. Verney’s sympathetic gaze extends from England to the world; he walks down from his native hills “into the bright noon-enlightened highway of mankind.” If the nation no longer serves as a viable foundation for sympathy, the aesthetic enables man’s sympathetic capacity to encompass the entire world.

Herein rests the strange duality of the plague (and, indeed, of globalism itself). On one hand, the plague severs individuals from their local communities, reducing all persons to bare, physical existence.⁵²⁰ On the other hand, however, the plague erases distinctions between individuals themselves, rendering all humanity part of a broader, universal whole. Verney waxes poetic about such universality; in fact, he often does so in terms that evoke religious sanctity, professing that all humans, having lost their national affiliations, are nonetheless the equally precious children of God: “now man had become a creature of price; the life of one of them was of more worth than the so called treasures of kings. Look at his thought-endued countenance, his graceful limbs, his majestic brow, his wondrous mechanism – the type and model of this best work of God is not to be cast aside as a broken vessel – he shall be preserved, and his children and his children’s children carry down the name and form of man to the latest time.”⁵²¹ Thinned, humanity re-inhabits a pre-lapsarian state, in which each individual is the forefather of future generations. God, not government, links individual and social man; reestablishing a link between individual and social man, Verney restores the link between the present and the promise of an ongoing, incipient future. Hence several scholars have lauded the plague’s ability to generate new forms of human community. In fact, at one point, wealthy landowners “portion out their parks, parterres and flower-gardens, to necessitous families.”⁵²² Taking “hoe in hand,” they re-enact the work of the Diggers (or “true Levellers”) – an allusion made explicit by the fact that Verney frequently refers to the plague as “the great Leveller.”

And yet, one is more often struck by Verney’s failure to exhibit actual sympathy for any group other than his own family than by any new forms of sympathetic community. His encounter with the African man – literally reaching out to Verney – most clearly dramatizes the limits of Verney’s sympathetic capacity. This kind of moment – in which Verney’s reactions to the actual persons he encounters belie his professions of universal sympathy – recurs throughout the novel. Again and again, he turns away from the “blank reality” of the plague. Witnessing “the horrible sights” of war and disease in Greece, he yields “to the creative power of the imagination, and... the sublime fictions presented to men.”⁵²³ After a chorister dies in the midst of “solemn religious chaunt,” Verney flees outside, finding relief “among nature’s beauteous works,” where “God reassumed his attribute of benevolence, and again I could trust that he who built up the mountains, planted the forests, and poured out the rivers, would erect another state for lost

⁵²⁰ See, for another reading emphasizing the plague’s annihilation of community, Hilary Strang, “Common Life, Animal Life, Equality: *The Last Man*,” *ELH* 78.2 (2011): 409-431. Strang contextualizes the novel in relation to “the problem of emergent democracy,” discussing Shelley’s allusions to Burke, Paine, Malthus, and Godwin (411). With the plague functioning as “the great leveller,” a harbinger of absolute egalitarianism, *The Last Man*, Strang observes, questions “what kind of life humans might have in common other than the basic, unwilling functionality of animal life.”

⁵²¹ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 205.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 157.

humanity, where we might awaken again to our affections, our happiness, and our faith.”⁵²⁴ Verney’s idealism can only persist from the vantage point of a people-less world. He explicitly describes his own role as composing “events” into “pictures”: “I gave the right place to every personage in the groupe, the just balance to every sentiment. This undercurrent of thought, often soothed me amidst distress, and even agony. It gave ideality to that, from which, taken in naked truth, the soul would have revolted: it bestowed pictorial colours on misery and disease, and not unfrequently relieved me from despair in deplorable changes.”⁵²⁵ In order to restore a sense of ideality to the present, Verney sees not what is, but what might be. He blinds himself to human suffering, focusing his gaze only on the few remaining aspects of the world that might bespeak a benevolent God ordering the universe, the clouds about to part on a new, plague-less day.

Verney’s ideality literally keeps him alive, allowing him to breathe a different air than the people surrounding him: “the spirit of good shed round me an ambrosial atmosphere, which blunted the sting of sympathy and purified the air of sights.”⁵²⁶ Yet his own “ambrosial atmosphere,” the effect of his idealizing aesthetic, does not “reduplicate” human community; rather, it shields him from a true sense of community, a collective whose suffering is too painful for him to bear. A particularly poignant moment at the end of the novel demonstrates the thinness of Verney’s aesthetic community. Already the last man (as far as we know), Verney wanders through Rome, passing “long hours in the various galleries,”

I gazed at each statue, and lost myself in a reverie before many a fair Madonna or beauteous nymph. I haunted the Vatican, and stood surrounded by marble forms of divine beauty. Each stone deity was possessed by sacred gladness, and the eternal fruition of love. They looked on me with unsympathizing complacency, and often in wild accents I reproached them for their supreme indifference – for they were human shapes, the human form divine was manifest in each fairest limb and lineament. The perfect moulding brought with it the idea of colour and motion; often, half in bitter mockery, half in self-delusion, I clasped their icy proportions, and, coming between Cupid and his Psyche’s lips, pressed the unconceiving marble.⁵²⁷

In fact, this scene merely literalizes what Verney has been imaginatively enacting all along: transforming persons into idealized, aesthetic objects – a task he takes on in the name of sympathy, and yet one that disallows all sympathetic possibility. At one point, he literally describes his wife as a statue: “Idris... who was herself the personification of all that was divine in woman, she who walked the earth like a poet’s dream, as a carved goddess endued with sense, or pictured saint stepping from the canvas.”⁵²⁸ The aesthetic functions, in Verney’s vision, as a Midas touch, transforming all those he looks upon into “unconceiving marble,” into images that mask reality. The only way he seems capable of imagining himself part of a broader collective is via abstraction, deferring to a collectivity rooted not in actual others, but in “the human form divine.”⁵²⁹

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 136.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 216.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 363.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁵²⁹ Shelley alludes here to the narrator’s lamentation of blindness in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*: “Thus with the Year / Seasons return, but not to me returns / Day, or the sweet approach of Ev’n or Morn, / Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose, / Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine”

The religious connotation of such a phrase is no coincidence: as in the case of Percy Shelley, Verney derives his notion of a universal human collective from faith in a divine force underwriting the form of the universe. If the nation supplies one foundation for a broader social whole to which every individual belongs, religion provides another. Providence promises that the present is a mere moment of an ongoing narrative, that each person is a member of a broader collective body. It promises a system of representation, whereby even the least significant occurrence, or the words of the least significant member of the body politic, carry a more capacious truth within them. Verney describes his commitment to “fate” and “the visible laws of the invisible God” as that which keeps him alive: “Could I have seen in this empty earth, in the seasons and their change, the hand of a blind power only, most willingly would I have placed my head on the sod, and closed my eyes on its loveliness for ever. But fate had administered life to me, when the plague had already seized on its prey – she had dragged me by the hair from out the strangling waves – By such miracles she had bought me for her own; I admitted her authority, and bowed to her decrees.”⁵³⁰ Even at the close of the novel, having seen all humanity perish, he “read[s] fair augury in the rainbow – menace in the cloud – some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything,” claiming that “the ever-open eye of the Supreme” looks down upon him.⁵³¹ Yet Mary Shelley’s entire novel suggests that it is precisely a “blind power only” that governs the earth, that the aesthetic is false because its idealistic vision emerges from a false, divine foundation. As Goldsmith has noted, the plague resists signification, reducing all wholes into parts. The force that unites the universe – plague, carried on wind – drives separation rather than wholeness.

Verney enacts the worst version of the Percy Shelleyan poet-prophet, not attuning himself to potentiality within the existent world, but willfully asserting a potentiality that does not exist. He becomes a false prophet, overwriting the present. *The Last Man* catalogues a series of false prophets of this type, those who attempt to impose an alternative vision of the future rather than gleaning futurity within the present – which is also to say, those who impose their own individual vision rather than attempting to detect collective feeling and foment collective action (we might recall Milton’s Samson here). The astronomer Merrival becomes so obsessed with theorizing “the state of mankind six thousand years hence” that he misses the plague entirely: “he neither heard his children cry, nor observed his companion’s emaciated form, and the excess of calamity was merely to him as the occurrence of a cloudy night, when he would have given his right hand to observe a celestial phenomenon.”⁵³² Like Verney, Merrival is lost in his own abstraction, though the abstraction of an intellectual rather than an aesthete. Both men mirror the most explicitly false prophet of the novel, a Southcottian figure who professes to be God’s direct messenger, and that “those who believed in, and followed him, were the remnant to be saved, while all the rest of mankind were marked out for death.”⁵³³ Verney mocks the superstitious beliefs of the “*ipse dixit* prophet” – and yet how different are such invisible, unfounded beliefs from Verney’s own insistence that a benevolent God continues to order the universe (despite all evidence to the contrary), or from Merrival’s scientific theories of aliens? All men harbor a belief in invisible forces, none of which square with their current reality.

My point, however, is not to merely accuse these men of being false prophets, for, again, Mary Shelley’s object of critique is much broader than her late husband’s writings. In the context of

(3.40-44). Lamenting his own loss, Verney notably transforms the more familiar “human face” to an abstracted “human form.”

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 367.

⁵³² Ibid., 227, 226.

⁵³³ Ibid., 317.

this novel, human community – the whole to which all individuals belong – exists only as an abstraction. The novel registers the loss of an imaginable, cohesive social body. England’s imperial expansion has destroyed the possibility of national community, of a social body with a shared geography, history, and politics. Likewise, God has abandoned the world, and with it, the possibility of a religio-aesthetic community, a shared “human form divine.” The grounds of commonness integral to the English revolution – the nation and God – no longer exist in *The Last Man*, just as they no longer exist, as solid, metaphysical foundations, in nineteenth-century England. In the absence of such metaphysical foundations, individuals can no longer access the whole, can no longer attune themselves to a collective feeling that spans oceans, to a commonness as thin as air. These conditions render political action impossible: if we cannot feel ourselves to be members of a broader collective, the future holds no potentiality, no possibility of transformation. From Godwin to Owen to Percy Shelley, Romantic millenarians understood that political action occurs in the connective tissue between individual and collective, when people “feel, not merely each man for himself and his own narrow circle, but as brethren, as members of a community, where all should sympathize in the good or ill fortune, the sorrows or joys, of the whole.” Mary Shelley’s plague dissolves the connective tissue between individual and collective, casting all persons as either monadic individuals, isolated from any sense of community, or members of a universal community, so abstract, so divorced from individual particularity, as to be entirely meaningless. This plague does not arise from nothing and nowhere, the fantastically pessimistic imagination of a hope-less widow; Mary Shelley’s plague allegorizes the formlessness of global, secular modernity, the forces that deny the prophetic author’s capacity to connect individual and collective, and thus to re-form the future.

IV. “For we prophecy in part”: Globalism, Secular Modernity, and the Poet-Prophet

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after Him were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *Ægyptian Typhon* with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second comming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortall feature of lovelines and perfection.
-Milton, *Areopagitica*

It has been affirmed that, with one single exception (capitalism itself, which is organized around an economic mechanism), there has never existed a cohesive form of human society that was not based on some form of transcendence or religion.
-Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”

“How,” Fredric Jameson has asked, can “works that posit the end of history continue to be in any sense political?”⁵³⁴ He suggests – in the spirit of the negative aesthetic – that imagining the end of

⁵³⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xiv.

history clears the way for a new politics. The aesthetic, in this telling, takes up the mantle of religious eschatology (or at least half of it): “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”⁵³⁵ Bundock extends such analysis to *The Last Man*, asserting that *The Last Man* prophetically “eclipse[s] and in a sense collapse[s] the ‘space of experience,’” clearing away “an actual state of being” in order to introduce the possibility of an “impossible and yet immanent historical other.”⁵³⁶ And yet, *The Last Man* refuses history and politics not *de facto* – as if the political world has simply aged and decayed and must be swept away. History and politics collapse in this novel because their foundational grounds – sympathetic human community, enabling individuals to feel themselves part of a broader whole, and therefore to act on behalf of the whole – no longer exist. If Jameson articulates the question that occurs to most readers at the conclusion of *The Last Man* (and perhaps at the conclusion of many a dystopian novel: what’s the point?), I see Shelley grappling with a slightly different set of questions. What politics, what history, can exist in the absence of collective feeling? What is the role of the author in a world where the relation between part and whole is hopelessly obscure – indeed, in a world where the parts may not coalesce, even in a manner we cannot understand, into any meaningful whole?

The Last Man heralds the end of the Percy Shelleyan poet-prophet – what we have described, over the course of this project, as the New Testament civil war prophet – in an age of secular globalism. In fact, the Preface to *The Last Man* quite explicitly frames the novel as the disintegration of a certain English, Judeo-Christian prophetic mode, whereby the author restores a sense of felt collectivity, and a sense of confidence in a greater divine force authoring history. In her Preface, Shelley explains that she did not write these pages; rather, she transcribed them from the prophetic fragments of Sibylline leaves, found in the Sibyl’s cave while she and a friend (read: Percy Shelley) wandered through Naples:

At length my friend, who had taken up some of the leaves strewed about, exclaimed, ‘This *is* the Sibyl’s cave; these are Sibylline leaves.’ On examination, we found that all the leaves, bark, and other substances, were traced with written characters. What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed in various languages: some unknown to my companion, ancient Chaldee, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, old as the Pyramids. Stranger still, some were in modern dialects, English and Italian. We could make out little by the dim light, but they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed; names, now well known, but of modern date; and often exclamations of exultation or woe, of victory or defeat, were traced on their thin scant pages.⁵³⁷

In a sense, the passage recalls *Areopagitica*’s famous account of gathering up the limbs of truth, the divided body of Osiris. Shelley describes herself piecing together “the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaen damsel obtained from heaven.”⁵³⁸ Like Milton, she frames the act of recovering prophetic truth as insistently collective, fragments of truth revealed in disparate times and places. And yet, while the Babylonian task of gathering up these various fragments of truth might bespeak a working, feeling collective, might engender, as it does for Milton, a vision of “pens and heads... musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas,” Shelley

⁵³⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁵³⁶ Bundock, 123.

⁵³⁷ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 3.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

finds herself alone.⁵³⁹ “For awhile my labours were not solitary,” she explains, “but that time is gone,” alluding to the death of her aforementioned “friend,” Percy Shelley.⁵⁴⁰ And as in the case of the novel itself, isolation within domestic relations stands in for a broader sense of socio-political isolation. The prophetic fragments linguistically span the globe, many of them in language neither Shelley nor her companion can understand. Ultimately, they select only the fragments they can read, and return home. Everywhere, Shelley signals the inadequacy, the incompleteness of these “thin scant pages.” Nowhere does she suggest that these many, partial prophecies might reveal some broader whole. She instead laments her isolated condition, the fact that so many of the prophetic fragments remain unintelligible and inaccessible.

Again, this prophetic composition, gathering together the scattered pieces of a lost “divine intuition,” in a sense perpetuates the poetic-prophetic tradition we have been following: affectively restoring the obscured links between past, present, and future, between self and other. Yet Mary Shelley disavows the confidence of Milton or Percy Shelley, the sense that her authorial efforts will, inevitably, echo with some greater whole. She frames her own authorial role not as revelator – the privileged sensor of some truth greater than any one individual could know – but as translator:

I have often wondered at the subject of her [the Sibyl’s] verses, and at the English dress of the Latin poet. Sometimes I have thought, that, obscure and chaotic as they are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should give to another artist, the painted fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael’s Transfiguration in St. Peter’s; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind and talent. Doubtless the leaves of the Cumaean Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition.⁵⁴¹

The whole, always shifting and transforming, even in the previous chapters, here loses any sense of cohesion. Each person composes the whole from fragmented parts according to “his own peculiar mind and talent.” The form in which the artist arranges them does not reveal a greater truth, but simply represents one way of deciphering their otherwise “obscure and chaotic state.” And again, the act of composition is fundamentally individual – not, as in Milton’s case, each individual painting one part of the mural, but each individual composing her own mosaic, distinct from any other. It seems no coincidence that, as her figure for mosaic authorship, Shelley imagines Raphael’s Transfiguration – a painting commonly thought to depict the meeting point of the human and the divine – broken into “painted fragments.” At the center, Raphael shows Christ ascending; in the bottom right, a possessed boy Christ will heal. As Goethe observes of Raphael’s Transfiguration, “The two are one; below, suffering, need, above, effective power, succour. Each bearing on the other, both interacting with the other.”⁵⁴² Goethe articulates precisely the sympathetic union, and divine relief of suffering, that *The Last Man* will deny. Shelley’s is a world in which the relation between the divine and the human has been broken, a relation that can be rearranged but not restored. Again, the same might be said of the human collective itself; the prophetic leaves composed in “ancient Chaldee,” “Egyptian hieroglyphics,” are left behind, unintelligible to the English reader. In the previous chapters, composition, even penned by an incomplete and imperfect

⁵³⁹ Milton, *Areopagitica*, 554.

⁵⁴⁰ Shelley, *The Last Man*, 4.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Italienische Reise, band 2* (Project Gutenberg, 2000).

hand, inevitably relayed a sense of divine immanence in the world. For Mary Shelley, however, composition results in the “distortion and diminution of interest and excellence,” registering the irreparable absence, not the inevitable presence, of the divine.

Leaves thin and scattered, human collective disbanded: Mary Shelley’s Preface (and indeed, her entire novel) revises the first stanza of Percy Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” in which leaves are metaphorized as “Pestilence-stricken multitudes” that the poet’s prophetic words will blow over and restore. In *The Last Man*, the poet cannot harness the wind, which drives death and disease indifferent to humanity’s plight, death and disease that divides rather than unites. No longer can the prophetic author sense and inspire collective feeling, for the collective is too vast and formless, united neither by nation nor God. No longer, that is, can the prophetic author “prophecy *in part*,” assured that the words of even the most insignificant member of the body politic hold a truth that will resound among all its members. Collective life has grown too complex for any individual to access collective feeling; or rather, collective life has grown too complex for feeling to truly be collective, shared among an entire nation, let alone all humanity.

At the same time, Mary Shelley’s account of mosaic authorship cannot be written off as purely pessimistic. Despite the absence of any cohesive whole – the lacuna between individual and collective, present and future, where was once the invisible promise of providence – she nonetheless attempts to re-fashion the Sibyl’s leaves in a new form, even a form professedly imperfect and incomplete. She composes a prophecy *of parts*, so to speak: one individual’s sense of the relation between parts that makes no claim to illuminate some invisible, immanent connection. “My only excuse for thus transforming them,” she explains of the Sibylline leaves, “is that they were unintelligible in their present condition.” Here, a different aspect of Jameson’s thought becomes a useful means of theorizing Shelley’s mode of partial, prophetic authorship, and the political possibilities that it might invite. In “Cognitive Mapping,” Jameson describes the very same “unfixing” of individual experience dramatized in *The Last Man*:

At this point [in the later stages of capitalism] the phenomenological experience of the individual subject traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art, becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.⁵⁴³

The passage might be an explication of that first paragraph of *The Last Man*, as Verney looks out over the English countryside, describing his sense of “immediate lived experience,” his sense of belonging to a part with a clearly defined, and representative, relation to the whole. Jameson’s later aesthetic theorizing – cited by Bundock – will suggest that the dystopian aesthetic text eclipses “lived experience,” the existent world of all that is, to clear the way for a new future. Yet, in this essay, Jameson proposes a more constructivist account of the aesthetic. He compares the experience of the individual living in “social and global totality” to that of the city-dweller (as described in Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City*) living in “urban alienation... directly propositional to the mental

⁵⁴³ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (1988): 347-357.

unmapability of local cityscapes.”⁵⁴⁴ Spatial markers, from monuments to rivers, “[allow] people to have, in their imaginations, a generally successful and continuous location to the rest of the city.”⁵⁴⁵ Ideology – “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence” – takes on a positive connotation, allowing the individual to locate their own experience within the whole.⁵⁴⁶ “The incapacity to map socially,” Jameson concludes, “is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project.”⁵⁴⁷ It remains, then, essential to imagine the relation between part and whole, even if that imagining is always partial, flawed, and fallible – for without some imagined relation between part and whole, there can be no political action.

Prophetic writing, in the terms I have addressed in this project, essentially serves as a spatial marker – a means of affectively (rather than cognitively) mapping the absent relation between part and whole. For the seventeenth-century authors of this project, “immediate lived experience” continues to allow the individual access to the feeling of a broader collective (Poole, joined in “one body, and one Spirit” with all of England, groans with her nation in pain); Percy Shelley attempts to revive such a prophetic mode, convinced that the poet, breathing the air of universal humanity, can rejuvenate collective spirit. Mary Shelley, in contrast, recognizes that individuals can no longer detect the collective forces that shape their phenomenological experience, and can no longer feel themselves a part of the whole to which they belong. And yet, *The Last Man* seems to register the concomitant futility *and* necessity of affectively mapping the relation between part and whole: Mary Shelley attempts to realign the prophetic leaves knowing that such realignment proves impossible; she writes a novel documenting the relation between individual and collective that denies the existence of any such ties. Verney, to a certain extent, though certainly less self-consciously, shares her predicament. At the close of the novel, he quite literally attempts to produce a spatial marker that will enable future humans to map their relation to a departed collective. Rambling through Rome, he determines to create the “world’s sole monument,” a record of the plague, the pages we are reading.

I also will write a book, I cried – for whom to read? – to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I write,

DEDICATION
TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.
SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE
LAST MAN

Yet, will not this world be re-peopled, and the children of a saved pair of lovers, in some to me unknown and unattainable seclusion, wandering to these prodigious relics of the antepestilential race, seek to learn how beings so wondrous in their achievements, with

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

imaginations infinite, and powers godlike, had departed from their home to an unknown country?⁵⁴⁸

On one hand, Verney's dedication epitomizes the problem of the false prophet by claiming representation of a whole that in fact resists any cohesive form. Words capitalized as if etched in stone, he overlays the flux of the present with his own idolatrous inscription (fixing history into the form of a monument: an impulse that might once again recall the ending of *Samson*). On the other hand, however flawed a character, however inadequate his sympathetic capacity, Verney simultaneously offers the only hope of a politics in this novel. Verney epitomizes the fundamental need to continue giving form to the collective, without which there can exist no political future. If he survives in part because he remains unaffected by humanity's plight, refusing to breathe in their shared, pestilential air, he also survives because he continues attempting to feel his relation toward a broader whole, even toward a whole that no longer exists. Herein lies the interpretive richness of this novel – its “un-pinnable” and at times frustrating quality. *The Last Man* neither denies nor professes a clear politics, but rather articulates the political paradox of secular modernity. We have no choice but to feel that we form part of a broader whole, even as no God underwrites such a belief, no choice but to believe that a disparate future might emerge from a woeful present, even as the wind carries death.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

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