

On Milton and Mazy Error

Thanks to Professor Schor and the Council of Humanities for inviting me to celebrate with all of you today.

I say, in earnest, that I loved so many of the texts I encountered in the Humanities Sequence. But I would be lying to you if I told you it was difficult to decide which one to speak about today.

Paradise Lost was my immediate choice—not, I'd like to contend, because I wrote my senior thesis on Milton. The choice is subtler than an outright devotion to the subject of my independent work. It has to do with *how* I experienced the epic poem as a freshman—and, naturally, the passage I chose to explicate. My story is one of “mazy error”—but I'll come back to that later.

It rained the day I began reading *Paradise Lost*, the kind of unexpected afternoon showers that clear into a flawless evening.

I remember the spot in the Trustee Reading Room where I sat. It was one of *those* texts. You look up from the page and wonder how everyone could still be working, or sleeping, or doing whatever it is they do so seriously in the Reading Room—you want to shout at them: “Have you read this? You need to read this now!”

Many texts in HUM surprised me. The surprises Milton offered were unprecedented and profound.

Let's start with the fact that he wrote it blind. I know you know this, but I think we need to meditate on it for a moment: the poet was *blind* when he wrote *Paradise Lost*.

Eden overwhelmed me. I wanted to know what it was like to be Eve, to have that Narcissus-like moment of self-discovery and to hear a voice come down from the heavens to say: “This is you.”

The most penetrating surprises in my first reading had to do with Satan. I was raised Catholic, we had read Genesis in HUM—I *knew* how the story of Eden ended. But I

didn't expect Satan to be a revolutionary hero of republicanism. I didn't expect to *like* him so much—to want him to succeed in what was a resounding political, as well as ethical and theological, endeavor.

As in reading *Paradise Lost*, my intellectual life here can be characterized as a series of unexpected encounters:

I arrived at Princeton with a desire to study Philosophy. After loving the philosophical texts we read in HUM, I didn't *expect* that I would feel utterly alienated in taking Philosophy courses.

I didn't expect to find a home in the Religion Department—that I would be able to study philosophy and literature and politics, as well as religion, under the guidance of one of Princeton's greatest minds and master pedagogues.

I didn't expect that it would take me another year and a half after completing HUM to feel in my bones the power of a successful close reading: Annie Dillard's essay "Total Eclipse" took me captive until I followed a hunch I had to its end—a seventeen-page term paper in which I sensed, for the first time, that I had uncovered something original, something no one had seen or written about before.

I didn't expect that I would write a junior paper about a contemporary novel and its use of religious concepts like miracles and grace in re-envisioning the relationship between imagination and moral obligation. I had, after all, planned to write about Ralph Waldo Emerson.

But most of all—I certainly didn't expect that any of that work would lead me back to Milton. When Jeffrey Stout, my advisor, suggested I take a look at Milton's political tracts—well, I was embarrassed to realize that I had no idea Milton was a political theorist. Milton? The poet? I am sure that I am at fault for having forgotten the biographical context Professor Schor surely gave at the beginning of her lecture my freshman year.

When I started reading the political tracts—*Areopagitica*, *Eikonoklastes*, *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*—I didn't levitate. The Reading Room

looked the same. If the poetic brilliance of *Paradise Lost* swept me off my feet in a short-lived romance—after all, I only wrote that one paper for HUM—the theoretical mysteries of the political tracts nestled their way into my mind and heart, and won a deep, enduring love.

Paradise Lost will never, can never, be the same for me after my senior thesis. Milton centered himself in political and theological debates about monarchy and regicide, reformation and revolution, freedom and servitude, heresy and true virtue. He was radical. He believed in divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. He redefined the ethics of covenant such that *breaking* a covenant, under the right circumstances, could be the best way to preserve the ends for which the covenant was created, thereby keeping a covenant in breaking it. And he lost. Miserably. England restored their monarch, and now Americans obsess over the royal family. Then, after that great political loss, after a long hiatus from poetry, he wrote an epic poem.

So, I didn't expect to fall in love with this other version of Milton I came to know, with his ideas, or with political theory. And I never expected that the thesis I wrote would be recognized outside my department for its accomplishments in political thought.

At this point, I must be sounding all too loyal to my thesis subject. So it's time to return to the text. I'd like to read some of the lines from Book IV I chose for my HUM paper:

whereof here needs no account,
But rather to tell how, if Art could tell,
How from that Saphire Fount the crisped Brooks,
Rolling on Orient Pearl and sands of Gold,
With mazie error under pendant shades
Ran Nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
Flours worthy of Paradise which not nice Art
In Beds and curious Knots, but Nature boon
Poured forth profuse on Hill and Dale and Plaine,
Both where the morning Sun first warmly smote
The open field, and where the unpierc't shade

Imbroud the noontide Bowrs: Thus was this place,
A happy rural seat of various view;

I had been taken with the phrase “curious knots.” Literally, it refers to carefully designed gardens—the kind that *aren’t* in Eden, where “Nature boon poured forth profuse.” But “knots” also signifies “the central point of something intricate, involved, or difficult” and “curious,” in earlier definitions, implies skillfulness and ingenuity as well as a desire for knowledge. Milton entangles sensory experiences in this passage with the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge: while God may be the master designer, Milton suggests that perfect Eden, in its natural abundance, is also messy.

Take, for example, the “mazy error” of the streams. “Mazy error” describes a labyrinthine, wandering path, as if the waters mistake their way through the garden.

At many times since reading *Paradise Lost*, I have thought myself to be off-course, unsure of my destination. Those times of uncertainty—in the middle of writing a paper, before finding the Religion department, or most of my junior year—led me to my most elating revelations.

Mazy error has everything to do with unexpected discoveries: it has allowed me to arrive where I wanted to be all along, which is to say, at the place I never knew I wanted to be.

If you’ve listened to a mesmerizing jazz solo, you know that sometimes the improviser has to wander deeper into their riff before resurfacing to the original tune. I didn’t expect I’d ever get to address my brother on his completion of HUM—didn’t even expect he’d want to take HUM, but as a jazz musician and an old soul who seeks revelation, I should never have been surprised.

So, in accordance with Eden’s “mazy error,” it makes sense that I returned to Milton—the poet-philosopher-political theorist—I am a writer as well as researcher, always striving to balance my intellectual life with my artistic one. And it makes sense that I have spent the past two years trying to teach tenth graders how to tap into the transformative power of close reading.

Now, I have to be perfectly honest. The reading I've just offered, of my relationship with Milton, may be self-serving: in about a week, I'll conclude the two-year teaching fellowship I began after graduating, and then, who knows. I have decided to give myself the summer... and maybe a few months after that, too... to figure out what's next. In other words, I'm on the brink of entering a period of "mazy error," hoping that the wandering leads me exactly where I want to be.

But such is the joy of these texts that become our life-long partners: we can return to them and, as we uncover new ways of seeing them, we can also stumble into new ways of understanding ourselves.