

**‘Simple, sensuous and passionate’:**

**John Milton and Geoffrey Hill**

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In an interview in 1976, Geoffrey Hill articulated his ‘ideal in writing poetry’ with a quotation from John Milton’s *Of Education* (1644): ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’ (1978) – Hill’s inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds and the opening chapter of *The Lords of Limit* – he again acknowledges ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’ as a dictum ‘to which I am sympathetically inclined’.<sup>2</sup> Having quoted Milton’s phrase in further interviews in 1980 and 1981, when Hill spoke to the *Paris Review* at the turn of the millennium he felt obliged to preface a similar remark with the caveat that ‘I have said, almost to the point of boring myself and others, that I am as a poet simple, sensuous and passionate’.<sup>3</sup>

While ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’ encapsulates Hill’s ‘ideal in writing poetry’, for Milton the phrase explains why poetry concludes his ideal syllabus in *Of Education*. As Stephen M. Fallon writes: ‘Milton gives it pride of place at the end, crowning a curriculum devoted to grammar, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, politics, theology and church history, history, tragedy, drama, and rhetoric’.<sup>4</sup> Having outlined a programme that builds towards the ‘organic arts’, Milton places at its culmination the study of poetry, which is distinguished from logic and rhetoric (which directly precede it) on the grounds that they are disciplines.

To which Poetry would be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent, as being lesse subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous and passionate. (CPW II. 401-3)

‘Subsequent’ for its being placed last in the scheme of learning but ‘precedent’ in the importance accorded such a position, poetry in Milton’s programme is valued for its ‘simple,

sensuous and passionate' nature while the breadth of study required before a pupil can approach the art simultaneously counters any simplistic view of it. However, the idealism of Milton's radical agenda for education derives not just from the breadth of its curriculum but also from the envisioned outcome of its course of study. In *Of Education's* opening paragraphs, Milton provocatively articulates the 'end' of his curriculum:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the neerest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. (*CPW* II. 366-7)

By positing the ideal outcome of education to be a partial reversal of the Fall's effect on human understanding, Milton opens his treatise with a striking statement of intent. The ultimate aim of educational progress is, paradoxically, one of restoration, with the 'end then of learning' being in fact a return to humanity's unfallen origins: 'to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright'.

How might the 'subsequent, or indeed rather precedent' position that Milton accords poetry be understood when considered against this earlier passage in his treatise? Given that the 'end' of learning is to enable humanity partially to overcome the limitations of fallen consciousness, might poetry's subsequence in the educational scheme derive in some degree from its capacity to imaginatively render humanity's unfallen precedence, just as Milton will have it do in *Paradise Lost* (1674)? It is particularly striking with this in mind that 'sensuous', the central tenet of Milton's tripartite definition, had no precedence in the English language before him. The phrase 'simple, sensuous and passionate' is one of only two occurrences of the word in Milton's entire oeuvre and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'sensuous' is a neologism of Milton's coinage:

Apparently invented by Milton, to avoid certain associations of the existing word *sensual*, and from him adopted by Coleridge; evidence of its use in the intervening period is wanting. Coleridge seems to have been mistaken in saying that it occurs in 'many others of our elder writers'.<sup>5</sup>

In 1814, Coleridge remarks upon how he has ‘re-introduced the word, *sensuous*, used, among many others of our elder writers by Milton in his exquisite definition of poetry, as “simple, sensuous, passionate”’.<sup>6</sup> Which, if any, other ‘elder writers’ Coleridge has in mind here remain unclear, as the *OED* acknowledges. Writing in 1701 for example, John Dennis alludes to Milton’s famous definition of poetry but misses the semantic distinction within it: ‘Poetry is Poetry, because it is more Passionate and Sensual than Prose’.<sup>7</sup> In his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson quotes the word’s occurrence in *Of Education* but can find no other examples of it than Milton’s.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, although Coleridge in 1814 claims to that have ‘re-introduced’ Milton’s word, he was preceded in his use of it not by any ‘others of our elder writers’ but rather by Wordsworth in the (unpublished) 1805 *Prelude*, Book V of which meditates upon books as repositories of human learning with Milton’s *Of Education* almost certainly in mind: ‘The consecrated works of Bard and Sage, / Sensuous or intellectual’.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hill’s quoting of Milton’s ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’ may seem no more than an allusive and elusive rebuttal of the ‘difficulty’ often associated with his poetry, he has, as Michael Molan writes, ‘gradually applied pressure to Milton’s phrase and it has become an important part of his critical terminology’.<sup>10</sup> Milton’s invention of the word ‘sensuous’ occupies a significant place in Hill’s later poetry and criticism, both for its subsequence and its precedence: in Hill’s reading of it, the word is a linguistic development but one intended to repair imaginatively ‘the ruines of our first parents’. ‘Sensuous’ and its antecedent ‘sensual’ comprise a dichotomy that recurs throughout Hill’s later volumes, which repeatedly situate the word’s coinage in the context of Milton’s prose works of 1643-4: *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, *Of Education* and *Areopagitica*. These tracts engage with the Fall and its aftermath in ways that resonate with what Hill in ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’ (1998) terms the ‘theology of language’, arguably the central concern of both his

creative and critical careers.<sup>11</sup> As Matthew Sperling writes, Hill's poetry can be characterised by 'a mythological sense of language's historical drama', of how 'some traces of its prelapsarian origins can be recovered in the poetic imagination', but that, inevitably, 'language's perfect original state cannot be recovered, for [...] original sin has linguistic consequences'.<sup>12</sup> For Hill, 'sensuous' is an exemplary instance in Milton's writings of how humanity's fallen consciousness might imaginatively reconstruct unfallen linguistic perfection.

In 'Lecture to Trustee Scholars (Boston)', an unpublished paper from 1996, Hill considers Milton's coining of the word 'sensuous' at length, posing the question of what reasons he might have had for introducing a distinction between it and 'sensual':

Why is it Milton who first, so far as we know, senses its inadequacy to the double task, or feels its inadequacy so keenly that he finds he needs two words, while around him and for a century and a half *after* him speakers and writers continue to manage to their satisfaction still with the *one* term 'sensual'?

I suggest that Milton found the use of the one word insupportable precisely because the concentration of his theological, ethical and political thought was fixed for a very great part of his creative life on that narrow, sometimes barely ~~visible~~ perceptible line across which innocent, licit apprehension of the world through the senses shades into use of the senses to enjoy illicit gratification through ~~the senses~~ debauchery.<sup>13</sup>

With the creation of 'sensuous', Hill asserts, 'sensual' ceased to be for Milton a word of 'double task', as its neutral and pejorative senses were divorced into two separate words. The significance which Hill ascribes the term 'sensuous' derives from definition by means of opposition to the term 'sensual': the 'theological, ethical and political' pressure brought to bear on the single word means that another must be invented to deal with the 'barely perceptible' semantic 'inadequacy' of its antecedent.

The 'barely perceptible line' Hill draws is crossed by a change in suffix but he goes on to expand this 'line' into a broader consideration of Milton's major poetic works, and to fallen and unfallen thought within them: 'This, we may say (I'm sure Milton intends us to

draw this conclusion) is the line crossed by Adam and Eve in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. Although Hill does not quote from *Paradise Lost*, the word ‘sensual’ is present at the exact metaphoric ‘line’ he draws, when Adam and Eve’s ‘inward state of mind’ is irreparably transformed after the Fall. It is the only time it is used in the entire poem:

both in subjection now  
To sensual appetite, who from beneath  
Usurping over sovereign reason claimed  
Superior sway<sup>14</sup>

Hill posits the etymological break between ‘sensuous’ and ‘sensual’ as a synecdoche for humanity’s fall from grace, the loss of Eden concentrated into a precise semantic distinction. Once the Fall has taken place in *Paradise Lost* and Hill’s ‘barely perceptible line’ has been crossed, it is logical that the term ‘sensual’ then appears in the poem in its full pejorative context.

To invoke Milton’s linguistic treatment of the Fall in *Paradise Lost* draws on a strand of thought for which there is an important precedent. It is one of the best-known assertions of twentieth century Milton criticism that, as Christopher Ricks writes in *Milton’s Grand Style* (1963), ‘with the Fall of Man, language falls too’, and that the reason that Milton in *Paradise Lost* uses “‘words in their proper and primary signification” (Newton) is because he can thereby recreate something of the pre-lapsarian state of language’.<sup>15</sup> Milton’s use of the word ‘error’ to mean ‘wandering’ rather than ‘mistaken’, for instance, acts as

a reminder of the Fall, in that it takes us back to a time when there were no infected words because there were no infected actions [...] is Milton reaching back to an earlier purity – which we are to contrast with what has happened to the word, and the world, since?<sup>16</sup>

By distinguishing between neutral and pejorative meanings of ‘sensual’ that were both current in seventeenth century usage, Milton’s coining of the word ‘sensuous’ can be read as correlative to the etymological wordplay described by Ricks, ‘reaching back to an earlier purity’ in order to define a form of sense perception distinct from lewder, fallen connotations

of 'sensual'. Developing Ricks's insight, John Leonard writes of how Milton's etymologies in *Paradise Lost* create 'something imaginatively analogous' to prelapsarian language.<sup>17</sup> Hill's reading of 'sensuous' identifies a similar impulse in the word's creation. In 'The Eloquence of Sober Truth' (1999), he briefly considers Milton's prose works of the 1640s in similar terms:

even for the Milton of *Areopagitica* and the *Tractate of Education*, it is not a question of progress so much as of 'resuscitation' (as C. A. Patrides discerned with characteristic acumen): 'The end then of Learning is to *repair* the ruines of our first Parents by *regaining* to know God aright' (my italics). (CCW, p. 347)

Hill's quotation from C. A. Patrides is somewhat untrue to the original context: Patrides uses the word 'resuscitation' in his edition of Milton's *Selected Prose* (1974) in relation to Isocrates' *Areopagiticus*, rather than in direct reference to Milton himself.<sup>18</sup> If anything, though, that makes Hill's selection of the word even more telling in its implications. Like the words from *Of Education* that he italicises ('*repair*' and '*regaining*') 'resuscitation' emphasises a sense of what Ricks terms 'reaching back', and finds a language for this impulse in that same treatise in which Milton's definition of poetry as 'simple, sensuous and passionate' appears.

In naming *Areopagitica* alongside *Of Education* here, Hill tacitly invokes a central passage from Milton's treatise on censorship, in which the capacity of licensors to determine what is fit for publication develops into a broader consideration of the pursuit of truth in a fallen world:

Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt. (CPW II. 514-15)

'Involv'd', 'interwoven', and 'intermixt', Milton's 'good and evill' are binary forces that nevertheless resist separation, particularly linguistic separation, after the Fall. Just as Hill's distinction between 'sensuous' and 'sensual' in his 1996 paper rests on a 'narrow, sometimes

barely perceptible line', so too does Milton represent humanity's capacity to separate 'good' from 'evill' as a choice between two almost indiscernible forces. In the next sentence of *Areopagitica*, the word 'cleaving' enacts this argument semantically, bearing forth these oppositional qualities:

It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill.

'Cleave' according to the *OED* can mean both 'to part or divide by a cutting blow' and 'to stick fast or adhere, as by a glutinous substance, to'.<sup>19</sup> Milton's description of 'good and evill' as 'two twins cleaving together' brings to bear these antagonistic meanings of 'cleave' in order to manifest the paradoxical nature of his argument: because they are 'involv'd and interwoven' in a fallen world, we can only cleave them apart from one another ('knowing good and evill') through cleaving them together ('knowing good by evill'). It is echoed in a description of the Fall from *Paradise Lost*: 'Knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill' (IV. 222).

Dichotomies are a prominent feature of Milton's style. As Colin Burrow notes, Milton 'habitually represents a valued idea or emotion through an opposite with which it is kin'.<sup>20</sup> But the convergence of one such binary opposition in the single word 'cleaving' in *Areopagitica* also reflects what David-Antoine Williams has speculated is Hill's view: that 'all literature that truly attends to language displays within itself a self-opposition which is reflective of a basic antagonism at the heart of all language'.<sup>21</sup> In 'Our Word is Our Bond' (1983) Hill describes how words which house antagonistic meanings exist on 'a double nature within the etymological stratum', containing senses 'at once opposed to [...] and yet inextricably tied to' one another (CCW, p. 160). Although not mentioned in 'Our Word Is Our Bond', the word 'cleaving' in Milton's *Areopagitica* is 'double nature[d]' in precisely this way, its contradictory meanings reinforcing the ambiguous impulse at the heart of the

pamphlet's argument. In *Areopagitica*, any attempt to repair the limitations of fallen consciousness can only come from a dialectic process of 'knowing good by evil': 'that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary' (CPW II. 515).

Echoing the 'double nature within the etymological stratum' that he describes in 'Our Word Is Our Bond', Hill argues in 'Lecture to Trustee Scholars (Boston)' that the word 'sensual' performed a 'double task' prior to Milton inventing the word 'sensuous'. Subsequent to the later word's coinage, 'sensuous' and 'sensual' are figured by Hill in an image of linguistic fracturing that palpably recalls that of 'good and evil' in *Areopagitica*: one 'finds itself facing its erstwhile accommodating sibling across the line of demarcation, a line of confrontation'.<sup>22</sup> Like 'two twins cleaving together', 'sensuous' and 'sensual' become a sibling pair locked in internecine linguistic conflict. In Hill's poetry collections composed in the years immediately following his writings on 'sensuous' this dichotomy is repeatedly present, the words juxtaposed and opposed across the poetic line. In *Speech! Speech!* (2000):

Dissever sensual  
from sensuous, licence from freedom; choose  
between real status and real authority.<sup>23</sup>

We are impelled to 'dissever', to separate by definition the pairings 'sensuous' and 'sensual', 'licence' and 'freedom', 'status' and 'authority'. In Hill's notebooks, the lines first appear in the following form, in the fourth draft of what will become this stanza:

Distinguish sensual  
from sensuous, licence from liberty,  
In what way are they different NOW?<sup>24</sup>

'Distinguish' conveys a similar sense of semantic division to 'dissever' but the latter occurs in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* – the first of Milton's tracts to argue for divorce on the grounds of mutual incompatibility – in which he posits that it is wrong to maintain the outward union of marriage when a couple are not privately happy:

it would perhaps be lesse scandal to divorce a natural disparity, then to link violently together an unchristian dissention, committing two ensnared souls inevitably to kindle



one another, not with the fire of love, but with a hatred *inconcilable*, who were they dissever'd would be straight friends in any other relation. (CPW II. 280)

Imagery of antagonistic pairings and the need to divorce them recurs throughout this tract, as Milton underlines the need to 'dissever' unions that are inwardly divided in order to rebuild them into satisfactory wholes. Similarly, the outward union of the term 'sensual', prior to the coining of the word 'sensuous', should not divert the discerning reader from the antagonistic meanings contained within it.

Moreover, Milton's divorce tracts utilise the theological precedent of Edenic married love as a central strand of their argument. As in *Of Education* and *Areopagitica*, Milton is drawn here towards the question of how human institutions can best resemble Adam and Eve's unfallen precedent: in this instance, how marriage can correspond 'as much as may be, to that serene and blisfull condition it was in at the beginning' (CPW II. 240). This can only be achieved, Milton argues, by permitting divorce by mutual consent. For if divorce were made legal on those grounds, James Grantham Turner writes, 'English legislators would paradoxically revive God's original conception of marriage, since spiritual compatibility would then be once again the primary factor'.<sup>25</sup> Milton's paradox, Turner explains, lies in the recognition that divorce would 'lead us back to the Paradisal happiness by pushing to its logical conclusion the fact that it is beyond our strength ever to return there'. Even the world's creation is provocatively figured in the language of marital dissolution, positing divorce as a microcosm of the divine fiat: 'when by his divorcing command the world first rose out of Chaos, nor can be renew'd again out of confusion but by the separating of unmeet consorts' (CPW II. 273). *Speech! Speech!* represents the semantic divorce of 'sensual' and 'sensuous' as an attempt to recover 'that serene and blisfull condition' through a similar separation of 'unmeet' definitions.

The second pairing we are asked to 'dissever' in *Speech! Speech!*, 'licence from freedom', echoes and modifies Milton's 'Sonnet XII', which derives its scenario out of the

hostile reception accorded his divorce tracts in the 1640s. Drawing a distinction between licentiousness and Christian liberty, the poem accuses its imagined audience of desiring the former while they ostensibly argue for the latter:

That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,  
And still revolt when truth would set them free.  
Licence they mean when they cry liberty.<sup>26</sup>

In a lecture on Milton delivered at the British Academy in 2008, Hill praised ‘Sonnet XII’ for metrically holding ‘licence’ and ‘liberty’ in tension:

The difference between liberty and licence, or the selling of licence under the name of liberty, seems to me irreducible to paraphrase. That is, it seems to me that the point has to be enacted within the semantics of the line itself. That the one word should shout across the line to the other.<sup>27</sup>

It is this technique that Hill’s own lines enact with their own antagonisms. In the passage’s final pairing, ‘real status’ and ‘real authority’, ‘real’ in this fine semantic dichotomy moves from the actual to the intrinsic: it distinguishes outward ‘status’ from inner ‘authority’. These divergent meanings of ‘real’ – essential truth as opposed to outward appearance – are juxtaposed by Hill another unpublished paper, ‘Noetics and Poetics’ (1996), in which the relation between them is compared to Milton’s statement in *Areopagitica*: ‘that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary’. Milton’s phrase, Hill writes, impels in the reader ‘a sense of obligation: to submit idea – and ideal – to trial by actuality’;<sup>28</sup> his own juxtaposition of ‘sensuous’ and ‘sensual’ seems to enact precisely this.

In Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) – the collection which immediately followed *Speech! Speech!* – ‘sensuous’ and ‘sensual’ are again juxtaposed:

Sensuous is not sensual, but such knowledge  
increases with sensuality  
(BH, p. 407)

‘Sensuous is not sensual’ seems an obvious statement but at this point the line abruptly turns on itself as ‘such knowledge’ refers us back to the previous clause. A recognition that ‘sensuous is not sensual’, is one that can in fact come *only* through ‘knowledge’:

‘Knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill’ as Milton writes in *Paradise Lost* (IV. 222). Here ‘the line crossed’ is structurally played out in the poem’s enjambment, for as ‘knowledge / increases’ so too does the word ‘sensual’ expand into ‘sensuality’, with the line break itself enacting a fall from grace. Yet other words in these lines themselves take on sexual meanings as well as their primary ones: ‘knowledge’ as sexual intercourse,<sup>29</sup> and ‘increase’ as sexual propagation.<sup>30</sup> It is not simply ‘knowledge’ that increases with ‘sensuality’, but sensual meanings of these words themselves.

There are two other moments where ‘sensuous’ and ‘sensual’ are juxtaposed in Hill’s poetry. In *Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti* (2012), he speaks of Benjamin Britten’s oboe composition *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* (1951) as being ‘sensuous oboe touched by sensual Ovid’ (BH, p. 930): here the pure sensory experience of music meets and mingles with the sensuality of Ovid’s language, the palpable eroticism of ‘touched’ enacting a seduction of ‘sensuous’ music by ‘sensual’ words. But the most complex deployment of the twinned terms comes in *Scenes from Comus* (2005), where they are placed at the conclusion of a stanza that dwells on the context of Milton’s position after the Restoration in the 1660s:

I doubt Marvell bought out Milton’s fouled life.  
 But bring on music, sonorous, releasing.  
 What we have becomes their reticence  
 within the radius of a storm’s hollow  
 like honey in a tree. Bayed Milton reticent?  
 Or that wit-bibber from Hull? I say self-being  
 goes the last word with both, that it goes proud  
 in its own passion – mystical couvade  
 with sensual dying, sensuous rebirth.  
(BH, p. 434)

Milton was arrested and briefly imprisoned in 1660 following the Restoration of Charles II, with influential friends including Marvell – a Member of Parliament for Hull and a notorious drunkard or ‘wit-bibber’ – possibly involved in securing his release.<sup>31</sup> At first literally ‘bayed’ in the Tower of London and subsequently surrounded by enemies, Milton was politically isolated and fearing for his life. ‘Reticence’ is a consequence of this political

context, with Milton's precarious position – blind, briefly imprisoned and forced into retirement – leading to his being reluctant to speak out freely. Yet such 'reticence' was by no means Milton's 'last word' in 1660, with the later poems *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* (1671) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671) still to be written.

The lines allude to a major argument in Milton studies, one side of which is put across by Blair Worden when he writes that Milton after the Restoration 'withdraws from politics into faith', choosing 'eternal verities' over 'temporal politics'.<sup>32</sup> Christopher Hill was an early advocate of this position, writing in his influential biography *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977) of how 'Milton still hoped on' when writing *Paradise Lost* but only for 'the happier Paradise within'.<sup>33</sup> Others have challenged this view, such as David Norbrook, who counters that 'the more we try to imagine our way beyond post-Restoration hindsight, the harder it becomes to square a blandly apolitical or defeatist reading of the epic with its author's values'.<sup>34</sup> Hill's lines draw upon this critical debate, picturing Milton withdrawing in on himself to find comfort, as one would find 'honey in a tree', yet, as the question mark following 'reticent' suggests, do not necessarily agree with it. 'What we have' – Marvell's and Milton's poetry, in particular *Paradise Lost* – 'becomes their reticence' in two senses: it either accords with 'their reticence', confirming it, or comes to be 'their reticence', wrongly seen as such in the minds of contemporary readers. The stanza seems to leave this ambiguous.

Yet while the poem does not offer a 'last word' on Milton's Restoration writings, Hill himself did more recently. In his eleventh lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2014, he spoke of Milton's later work as 'the private recreations, the poems of his post-Restoration seclusion', in which 'he set himself the task, albeit in fable not fact, of vindicating the unachieved harvest and accounting for its ruin'.<sup>35</sup> The move posited here from the 'fact' of Milton's political writings to the 'fable' of his later poetry seems more aligned with

Christopher Hill's or Worden's side of the debate than Norbrook's. But the word 'fable' is also a highly significant one for Hill. As Kenneth Haynes has written, 'fable' has provided Hill's work with an 'essential ambiguity', suggesting narratives that may not be factual truth but still contain some intrinsic or metaphysical value.<sup>36</sup> Haynes comments that 'fable' suggests how 'language can in some way be true and untrue at the same time', how 'it has fallen but retains some power'. David-Antoine Williams, developing Haynes's insight, notes how 'any etymology is, at some level, a fable of origin, however much it lays claim to historical accuracy'.<sup>37</sup> These insights suggest one way of thinking about how Hill interprets Milton's invention of the word 'sensuous': as an etymological fable. A change in suffix metaphorically encapsulates the Fall in *Paradise Lost*.

The idea is enacted in the final lines of that stanza from *Scenes from Comus*: a 'mystical couvade / with sensual dying, sensuous rebirth'. 'Couvade' is defined in the *OED* as 'a series of customs according to which, on the birth of a child, the father performs acts or simulates states natural or proper to the mother, or abstains for a time from certain foods or actions, as if he were physically affected by the birth'.<sup>38</sup> Combined with 'mystical' the phrase suggests the act of creation, poetic or otherwise, given significance by virtue of a connection or union with God. The phrase straddles the terms 'sensual' and 'sensuous' as it straddles male and female procreation, recalling a 'mystical couvade' at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*:

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer  
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,  
Instruct me, for thou knowst; thou from the first  
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss  
And mad'st it pregnant.

(I. 17-22)

The Holy Spirit is both 'brooding', sitting on eggs as so hatch them like a hen, and impregnating 'the vast abyss': in Milton's image of the world's creation, his 'heavenly Muse'

embodies both male and female reproduction. Remarking on this and similar images throughout *Paradise Lost*, John Rumrich writes that ‘hermaphroditism is pervasive’ in the poem, ‘a sign of Milton’s yearning for transcendence of limitations imposed by gender’.<sup>39</sup> In *Scenes from Comus*, Hill’s ‘mystical couvade’ draws on this strand of Miltonic imagery in order to poetically gesture towards a transcendence of all limitations in God’s original speech act.

An original unity of language is inevitably a language that *Scenes from Comus* cannot offer. ‘Sensual’ and ‘sensuous’ remain obdurately distinct, reciprocally implicated in a cycle of death and rebirth, yet whereas they were indistinguishably housed in the single antithetical term ‘sensual’, now they stand apart like ‘two twins cleaving together’ through Milton’s act of verbal scrupulousness. Hill’s lines should logically lead to *Paradise Lost*, given that they place the reader in the context of Milton in the 1660s. Yet their presentation of Milton’s semantic divorce recalls also his earlier image of the world’s creation from the 1640s: ‘when by his divorcing command the world first rose out of Chaos, nor can be renew’d again out of confusion but by the separating of unmeet consorts’. By separating an existing word’s ‘unmeet consorts’ and hence offering a choice between two distinct moral values, Milton’s neologism metaphorically ‘renew[s] again’ a state of linguistic innocence.

At the level of ‘fable’ this reading of Milton’s coinage seems persuasive; however, Milton’s use of the term as a matter of ‘fact’ deserves due scrutiny too.<sup>40</sup> ‘Sensual’ and its cognates occur five times in Milton’s poetry and six in his prose, all in heavily pejorative contexts.<sup>41</sup> Their earliest appearance is, unsurprisingly, in Milton’s masque about chastity, ‘A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634’: ‘to roll with pleasure in a sensual sty’, ‘carnal sensuality’, ‘sensual folly, and intemperance’ (ll. 77, 474, 975). In Milton’s later works, ‘sensual’ appears in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* (as has already been noted) and in *Paradise Regained*, where Belial is described as the ‘sensualest’ of the fallen angels (II. 151). Milton

never uses 'sensual' in its neutral application but rather only to suggest vicious appetites, implying some inherent distrust of the word's capacity to render neutral sense perception, and he uses it in this way consistently in verse and prose published over almost forty years.

However, as has already been mentioned, the word 'sensuous' occurs twice in Milton's writings. Both uses are in his prose, in *Of Reformation* and *Of Education* in 1641 and 1644, and the word is curiously absent from his work after these early usages. The most obvious absence is from *Paradise Lost*, where 'sensuous' should surely take its place in Eden as a fit word for prelapsarian sexuality – one that would be clearly distinct from Adam and Eve's fallen 'sensual appetite'. Of its two occurrences in Milton's prose, one – defining poetry as more 'simple, sensuous and passionate' than logic or rhetoric – is well known. The other occurrence, in *Of Reformation* (1641), however, is less widely remarked upon and situates the word 'sensuous' in a far more ambiguous context:

the Soule by this means of over-bodying her selfe, given up justly to fleshly delights, bated her wing apace downward: and finding the ease she had from her visible, and sensuous colleague the body in performance of *Religious* duties [...] shifted off from her selfe, the labour of high soaring any more, forgot her heavenly flight, and left the dull, and droyling carcass to plod on in the old rode, and drudging Trade of outward conformity. (CPW I. 522)

Appearing towards the beginning of the tract, this passage describes a decline in religious practice from inner devotion to outward displays of religiosity. Milton's *Of Reformation* uses the body as a metaphor for the situation of the seventeenth century Church, hoping that through religious reform it might be 'purifi'd by the affections of the regenerat Soule, and nothing left impure, but sinne' (CPW I. 519). By describing the body as the 'sensuous colleague' of the soul, Milton associates it with corporeality in a markedly distrustful way. Giving itself up to 'fleshly delights' and preferring 'ease' to the 'labour of high soaring', the soul is corrupted into the mere 'performance of *Religious* duties': 'performance' implies not action but rather the pretence of action, 'outward conformity' rather than inward virtue.

The phrase ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’ is widely quoted, but the earlier occurrence of ‘sensuous’ often goes unnoticed. Hill, it must be admitted, is guilty of this in his own thinking about the word: despite both occurrences being included in the *OED*, his silence on this passage from *Of Reformation* may very well derive from the uncertainties it raises over ‘sensuous’ in Milton’s writings. Yet the ambivalence present in the earlier usage should perhaps qualify our understanding of Milton’s description of poetry as ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’. In Milton’s writings, as Stephen Fallon observes, ‘the reward reserved for the one devoted to learning, poetry, and chaste virtue will be rapt flight, an image traceable throughout Milton’s career’.<sup>42</sup> It is present in one of his two Latin prose letters to Charles Diodati from 1637, in which Milton describes his early poetic training as ‘growing my wings and practising flight’ (*CPW* I. 327). Similarly in the famous autobiographical aside in *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), Milton depicts the poet as ‘soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him’ (*CPW* I. 808). Yet the phrase ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’, contrastingly, associates poetry with the earthly as it recalls Milton’s description of the soul abandoning ‘the labour of high soaring’ in preference for the ‘ease’ of its ‘sensuous colleague the body’. The word does not necessarily carry the carnal impulse of ‘sensual’ but it is still highly ambivalent.

Why might it be that the *OED* itself, despite noting both occurrences of ‘sensuous’ in Milton’s writings, offers no distinction between their respective contexts? The answer may lie in the dictionary’s historical origins. Surveying the *OED*’s composition, James C. McKusick remarks upon the ‘pervasive influence’ of Coleridge’s philology on its lexicographical practices, which is borne out by his ‘ubiquitous presence’ in the first published edition (1884-1928).<sup>43</sup> When claiming to have ‘re-introduced’ the word ‘sensuous’ in 1814, Coleridge refers only to Milton’s ‘exquisite definition of poetry, as “simple, sensuous, passionate”’ rather than to the neologism’s more obscure appearance in *Of*



*Reformation*. If this limitation affected his reading of ‘sensuous’, that reading was apparently inherited without modification by the first editors of the *OED* despite their awareness of the word’s other occurrence in Milton’s prose. By including Coleridge’s remarks in the editorial note attached to the dictionary’s entry for ‘sensuous’, the editors acknowledge their lexical debt without pursuing the divergent implications that the word’s other context might offer. But this further context should not be ignored: it restores an ambiguity to Milton’s neologism. The phrase ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’ may have represented for Hill an ‘ideal in writing poetry’; but the etymological fable that lies behind that ideal, however compelling, is not simply borne out across the full range of Milton’s writings.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Hill, interview with Eunice de Souza, ‘Trends in English Poetry: A Return to the European Heritage?’, *The Times of India* (29 February 1976), 13. John Milton, ‘Of Education’ (1644), in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven, CT, 1953-82), II. 403; hereafter *CPW*.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’ (1978), in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (1984), 1-18: 1. This passage is not included in the revised version of the essay that appears in Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings*.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, interview with Blake Morrison, ‘Under Judgment’, *New Statesman* (8 February 1980), 212-14: 212; interview with John Haffenden, in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (1981), 76-99: 80; interview with Carl Phillips, ‘The Art of Poetry LXXX’, *Paris Review* 154 (2000), 272-99: 277.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Fallon, *Milton’s Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> ‘sensuous, *adj.*’, *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/176027>>. This and all other websites referenced in this article were last visited on 7 March 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism’ (1814), in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (Princeton, NJ, 1969-2002), XI. i. 368.

<sup>7</sup> John Dennis, ‘The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry’ (1701), in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward N. Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD, 1939-43), I. 215.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (1755; 1825), II. 596.

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), eds. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, revised second edition (Oxford, 1959), V. 41-2. The word ‘sensuous’ also occurs at XI. 169.

Given that the 1805 *Prelude* was not published until 1926, it would not have been available to the editors of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1884-1928).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Molan, 'Milton and Eliot in the Work of Geoffrey Hill', in Matthew Sperling and Piers Pennington (eds.), *Geoffrey Hill and his Contexts* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 81-105: 86.

<sup>11</sup> Hill, 'Language, Suffering, and Silence' (1998), in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2008), p. 405; hereafter CCW.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Sperling, *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words* (Oxford, 2014), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hill, 'Lecture to Trustee Scholars (Boston)' (1996), Literary Papers and Correspondence of Geoffrey Hill, University of Leeds Brotherton Collection, MS 20c Hill/4/21. I am grateful to Geoffrey Hill for permission to quote from his unpublished papers in this article.

<sup>14</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1674), ed. Alastair Fowler, revised second edition (Harlow, 2007), IX. 1125-31; all further citations from *Paradise Lost* are from this edition and given in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 109-10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford, 1990), p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> 'Later still, probably about 355 B.C., the Athenian orator Isocrates pleaded for a resuscitation of the tribunal in his *Areopagiticus*'. C. A. Patrides, in Milton, *Selected Prose*, ed. Patrides (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> 'cleave, v.1, and v.2', *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34105>> and <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34106>>.

<sup>20</sup> Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford, 1993), p. 277.

<sup>21</sup> David-Antoine Williams, 'Poetic Antagonisms', *The Comparatist* 37 (2013), 169-85: 182. My thinking about the word 'cleaving' in Milton's *Areopagitica* also derives in part from this article.

<sup>22</sup> Hill, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/4/21.

<sup>23</sup> Hill, *Speech! Speech!* (2000), in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2013), p. 348; hereafter BH.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, 'Notebook 52: Speech! Speech! / The Orchards of Syon' (1999), Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/2/1/52.

<sup>25</sup> James Grantham Turner, *One Flesh: Paradisal Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton* (Oxford, 1987), p. 193.

<sup>26</sup> Milton, 'Sonnet XII. On the Detraction which followed upon my Writing Certain Treatises' (c.1646), in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, revised second edition (Harlow, 2007), ll. 9-11; all further citations from Milton's shorter poems are from this edition and given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Hill, 'Poetry Reading: John Milton Quatercentenary Symposium', lecture at the British Academy (6 December 2008) available online at <<http://www.britac.ac.uk/templates/asset-relay.cfm?frmAssetFileID=9523>>.

<sup>28</sup> Hill, 'Noetics and Poetics: Drafts' (1996), Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/4/17/2.

<sup>29</sup> 'Sexual intercourse; (occas. more generally) sexual intimacy'. 'knowledge, n.3b'. *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/104170>>.

<sup>30</sup> 'To grow in numbers, become more numerous or frequent, to multiply; esp. by propagation'. 'increase, v.2'. *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/94031>>.

<sup>31</sup> On this see Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 403-4.

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- <sup>32</sup> Blair Worden, 'Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 225-46: 244.
- <sup>33</sup> Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977), p. 360.
- <sup>34</sup> David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 433.
- <sup>35</sup> Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', eleventh Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture (11 March 2014), available online at <[http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/general/2014-04-17\\_hill\\_lecture.mp3](http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/general/2014-04-17_hill_lecture.mp3)>.
- <sup>36</sup> Kenneth Haynes, 'Introduction: "Faith" and "Fable" in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill', *Christianity and Literature* 60:3 (2011), 398-401: 400.
- <sup>37</sup> David-Antoine Williams, 'All Corruptible Things: Geoffrey Hill's Etymological Crux', *Modern Philology* 112:3 (2015), 522-53: 524.
- <sup>38</sup> 'couvade, n.' *OED Online*. December 2015. Oxford University Press <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43300>>.
- <sup>39</sup> John Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 102.
- <sup>40</sup> I am particularly grateful to Zoe Hawkins (University of Southampton) for her advice towards these final points in my argument.
- <sup>41</sup> This information is taken from William Ingram and Kathleen Swaim (eds.), *A Concordance to Milton's English Poetry* (Oxford, 1972), and Laurence Sterne and Harold H. Kollmeier (eds.), *A Concordance to the English Prose of John Milton*, (Binghamton, NY, 1985).
- <sup>42</sup> Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, p. 52.
- <sup>43</sup> James C. McKusick, "'Living Words": Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Genesis of the "OED"', *Modern Philology* 90:1 (1992), 1-45: 17, 19.