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Joseph Abrams

College of the Holy Cross, jabram23@g.holycross.edu

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Tension in the Eye: Milton and Surveillance

Joseph Abrams

College of the Holy Cross

The reach of John Milton's career spans multiple genres and a plethora of existential and philosophical inquiries. His specific choices of topic, which tend to invoke grand religious theater and fantastical allusions, can often overshadow the grounded, yet invaluable personal lessons that litter his poetry. Milton's draw to surveillance, an omnipresent fact of his work as much as it is a source of anxiety and tension, is a fundamental throughline that develops and confounds itself as he gets older. Usually relegated to powerful Greek and Christian deities, divine watch is then contrasted with mortal recognition, the importance of which varies throughout Milton's life. By analyzing the source, and subject, of both divine watch and mortal witness in Milton's most popular poetic works, one can track how his attitude towards these forms of surveillance are informed by, and inform, his pursuit of worldly success and religious obedience. In doing so, Milton's career can be described as a transition from external reliance on mortal fame and a larger than life observing God to internal assurance in his own conviction.

The watchful eye of the divine asserts itself distinctly in *Comus*, where it appears as both the guardian of the Lady and also the ultimate oppressor. The Attendant Spirit perfectly exemplifies the play on sight Milton employs in the poem: the Attendant Spirit is tasked with the "office of his Mountain watch" (78) to look over those "favoured of high Jove" (78), but also that he must "be viewless" (92) in the form of a shepherd. Comus too assumes the latter role, dressing himself as an opposing shepherd to fool the Lady into vice. While this disguise proves successful in the mortal world, he remains visible in his most malignant form to the eyes of the divine. This becomes the Lady's foremost defense against Comus's temptations, as she benefits from the all-seeing God through which Comus is exposed: "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind... while Heav'n sees good" (663-665). Thus, the watch of the divine becomes a tangible weapon, but one with an odd paradox. For the virtuous, divine surveillance is the sign of a benevolent protector, but for the sinful it is a threat. Comus himself describes God's eye with the way it invokes notions of restriction: "the

chains of Erebus" (804) and the "wrath of Jove" (803). However, because the Lady's protection is presented as a reward for her upstanding religious ethic, divine watch becomes both the means and the end: the Lady is virtuous because of the threat that the eye of God imposes, but also relies on it to protect her virtuous nature. Through this lens, the struggle between the Lady's mental fortitude and the temptation of Comus becomes a test: the Lady must prove her faith to those watching in order to prove that God will protect her.

Lycidas then complicates divine watch, adding in the prospect of mortal recognition as it finds the narrator pondering his own legacy at the start of his literary journey. On the surface, the elegy is a final goodbye to a contemporary of Milton's who never got the chance to assume his full potential. Despite this fate, however, the central conflict becomes the lack of legacy that *Lycidas* leaves behind. Having died before establishing a profound impact, the narrator is incessantly worried about "Who would not sing for *Lycidas*?" (10) or how "He must not float upon his watry bear/ Unwept" (12-13). Having witnesses, then, becomes imperative to the significance of one's life and the effectiveness of their presence. Attending eyes are an important facet of the elegy's flashbacks, which find *Lycidas* and the narrator coming of age together. When alive, the boys grew together "Under the opening eye-lids of the morn" (26), yet on his deathbed *Lycidas* will "now no more be seen" (43). The narrator even invokes the flowers to "throw hither all your quaint enameled eyes" (139) as a sign of respect to *Lycidas*, with their visual perception of him an essential facet of proper mourning. Yet this anxiety is qualmed by the witness of the almighty, an act that Phoebus promises will bring true fame and legacy: "*Fame* is no plant that grows on mortal soil... But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes" (78, 81). Through the narrator, then, Milton puts forth his own worries about an unseen life and a legacy without security, with visual perception as the foremost medium of recognition. However, as Phoebus assures him, true remembrance is afforded by the all-watchful God, whose eyes never falter from all mortal activities. *Lycidas*, then, is not only an introduction to the anxiety Milton feels about legacy and the importance of perceiving witnesses, but is the first of many assertions of God's watchful eye.

The rhetorical games that Milton plays with the importance of a divine witness and the conditions for such a relationship point toward a very anxious early career. *Lycidas* and *Comus*, when placed in conjunction with each other, set very high consequences for the lack of a true witness. *Lycidas* is all too concerned with the lack of

remembrance the poem's namesake will receive in the mortal world, and despite Phoebus' assertion that true fame comes from the omniscient God, the focus on a satisfying mortal legacy continues. As such, even though the narrator now has a divine answer to his concerns about legacy, he is described as an "uncouth swain" (186) who quickly moves on to "pastures anew" (193). In separating the narrator from Milton himself, the reader sees how a simple man may find reassurance in a divine witness (and only a divine witness) while Milton himself still harps on these points. As his career begins to take flight, it can be implied through *Lycidas*' principal concerns that Milton's most pressing anxieties centered around his earthly legacy. The lack of proof of *Lycidas*' potential, catalyzed by his early death and enforced by an absence of witnesses, is then placed within the context of a test of virtue in *Comus*. The lady, whilst being steadfast and certain of her own chastity and faith, finds herself in a spectated match against temptation. This too appears as a burgeoning worry for the young writer, who, not having suffered the same fate as *Lycidas*, must prove himself to be the talent that he knows he is. Stray too far away from his studies, or fall victim to external temptations, however, and God will be watching.

Paradise Lost, on the other hand, dramatizes these tensions in epic form. Despite the numerous assertions of God's omnipotence in Milton's epic, the Eden in *Paradise Lost* is often characterized by the active surveillance it endures. This takes center stage in Vanita Neelakanta's "Paradise Lost Under Heaven: Milton's Surveillance Society", an article that likens God's watch system to a surveillance panopticon. Neelakanta largely anchors her argument, and her interpretation of Eden's day to day, in the logic of *theatrum mundi*, a specific sect of Christian analysis that sees life as "a play or agonistic struggle performed for a deity who was at once audience and author of the action" (Neelakanta 2022). This way of interpreting Eden is an extension of the previous analysis seen in *Comus*, and the positioning of Eve within a spectated game parallels *Comus*' lady quite compellingly. Neelakanta draws this connection herself in her work, though *Paradise Lost*'s panopticon appears, for her, as a much more oppressive stage (Neelakanta 2022). Neelakanta attributes this to the seemingly unnecessary positioning of God's angels, who are employed to watch Eden by a God who sees, and knows, everything (Neelakanta 2022). The effects of this strict though implausible watch are mental, and Neelakanta argues that "Milton's insertion of a celestial spy network into the overarching schema of *theatrum mundi* reveals... Its capacity to produce anxiety" (Neelakanta 2022). For Neelakanta, this anxiety, one that changes the character's actions "no less than our awareness of hidden cameras shapes

our conception and presentation of selfhood” (Neelakanta 2022), contradicts the free will flavor of faith Adam and Eve enjoy. For example, Neekalanta argues that Adam and Eve’s work in Eden is less concerned with free will, and is instead a transaction for God’s approval (Neelakanta 2022). She specifically cites Adam’s dialogue in Book 4, in which he relinquishes that “Man hath his daily work of body or mind/ Appointed, which declares his Dignity,/ And the regard of Heav’n on all his ways” (4.618-20). While Adam and Eve find this transactional relationship to be a “privilege” (Neelakanta 2022), according to Neelakanta, the fall exposes them to the inherent oppressiveness of surveillance.

Neekalanta’s foundational arguments— that God uses surveillance to provoke anxiety in the reader and enforce Adam and Eve’s participation— is compelling, though the execution of this argument falters as her focus shifts between points. In essence, Neekalanta provides an angle to work off of— she herself doesn’t make any larger claims about the implications of *theatrical mundi* on *Paradise Lost*’s peripheral characters or Milton himself. In collaboration with her specific lens, I argue that in *Paradise Lost*, especially through anomaly characters like Satan, Milton critiques his own career and places himself within the falling arms of the first couple. Where Neekalanta points to Eve’s true sin being the desire for “growing up to godhead” (9.877) and assuming divine knowledge, I differ and argue that much of original sin circles around temperance and timing. Milton scholar Maggie Kilgour, in her piece *The Pleasures of Milton*, recontextualizes knowledge as one of Eden’s most powerful pleasures, not its biggest threat. A bold claim in itself, but only strengthened in Milton’s *Areopagitica*: “he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye” (240). However, in pursuit of a rational and independent race, God endowed humans with “temperance” (245) to form modest habits when it comes to pleasures like reading. For example, Kilgour writes that “Satan offers Eve an alternative, faster way of knowing [that] leads to the loss of this ideal world” (Kilgour 2022), specifically using “faster” (Kilgour 2022) to indicate that knowledge was an inevitable acquisition. Still, this acquisition is one Kilgour marks as distinctly different from the fall, though she doesn’t explain the claim further after that. Thus, it is through *Areopagitica* and Milton’s emphasis on temperance that Eve’s hastiness can be described through an impatient mind, and the Fall’s lack of pleasure as a type of “weariness” (247).

Using both Neelakanta's surveillance and Kilgour's pleasure, a reflection of Milton himself appears within Eden. Both themes largely grow to represent perhaps the most important facets of Milton's personal life: omnipotent surveillance as made requisite by his complete blindness, and pleasure as his political ambition. While writing *Paradise Lost*, Milton himself was completely blind and his dreams of an English republic had long been rejected. The quite violent and rushed attempt at government reformation undoubtedly had its impact on him, and, knowing the potential of English rule, he likely believed it was simply the wrong time for his progressive ideas. In this way, Milton builds a very complex analogy: one in which he, and the reformationist ideas he advocated for, assume the role of the couple. For Neelakanta, Satan is the only human or divine character that is unaware of his place within the *theatrum mundi*, or God's drama, and his inability to recognize his role within the game allows him to hold undue ambition (Neelakanta 2022). Furthermore, Satan doubts the omnipotence of the divine, or that "secret monitoring is only necessary because there are spaces outside ordinary visual scope" (Neelakanta 2022), and supposes that mere existence of surveillance presumes the ability to be hidden. Such an agenda is reminiscent of the introduction to *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which finds Milton vehemently criticizing the seemingly "good patriots" (274) that "side with the better cause" (247) and fight against their tyrant only to "lay the stain of disloyalty" (247) and take advantage of the movement for their own gain. Like Satan with surveillance, these corrupt politicians interpret overreaching authority only as it pertains to their own sins and convince the virtuous to turn only for their own interests.

Yet Milton himself doesn't place himself within the role of God, and his focus on surveillance aligns himself, and his early career, with that of Adam and Eve. If Adam and Eve's failure can be deduced to not gaining knowledge at the right time, then Milton too blames his own failed political ventures on an England not yet ready for a political change and further staggered by advantageous deceit. Where *Comus* and *Lycidas* see Milton desperate for benevolent eyes and a chance for the virtuous to prove themselves, the watchful eyes of *Paradise Lost*, on the contrary, appear as misleading and threatening. Here, these eyes don't represent God's protection but signal his control, and, as Neelakanta states, "the benign surveillance of *Comus*—the source of the protagonist's strength—here morphs into something authoritarian and coercive" (Neelakanta 2022). Therefore, where mortal watch in *Lycidas* promised recognition and divine watch in *Comus* formed a weapon, Milton now sees these eyes as shallow

and unnecessary. Having dealt with his fair share of political and physical setbacks, *Paradise Lost* sees a Milton who is much less concerned with public opinion and understanding that it's likely in vain anyway. Eve then becomes Milton's substitute in Edenic *theatrum mundi*— Eve is tempted with transcendent knowledge and “growing up to Godhead” (4.877) just as Milton's ambition had pushed him away from the religious satisfaction of *Lycidas*.

Thus, when it comes to Milton's final published works, proof and divine watch are presented as unnecessary, and even distracting, facets of life. *Paradise Regained*, for example, acts as a contradiction to the *theatrum mundi* theory, being that it is Satan who seems to seek the proof, or reasoning, behind Jesus's potential: “In what degree or meaning thou art call'd/ The Son of God” (4.516-517). This potential, however, can only be proved by inaction and the purposeful act of not doing anything, which Jesus does to redeem mankind. Satan remarks that Jesus' motivation to not act is one not cohesive to the fame and publicity his word requires, informing him, quite compellingly, that: “all thy heart is set on high designs,/ High actions. But wherewith to be achieved?/ Great acts require great means of enterprise” (4.412-414). *Paradise Regained*, then, is far more concerned with Jesus, and Satan's, inherent and predetermined characteristics as they play out in an arena without spectators.

In contrast to the visual examples of deceit and surveillance in *Paradise Lost*, Satan spends little time disguising himself, and instead he and Jesus occupy the poem in their most grounded identities. Satan approaches Jesus only because he already knows that he is the son of God, and Satan's first introduction is met with immediate recognition: “Why dost thou then suggest to me distrust,/ Knowing who I am, as I know who thou art?” (355-356). Jesus even designates himself the “inward Oracle/ To all truth requisite for men to know” (463-464), emphasizing that his inner character requires no external proof. It is no surprise, then, that the text itself is interested in the absence of eyes, and though God reminds his angels that “this day by proof thou shalt behold” (1.130) Jesus' triumph, the surveillance panopticon retreats for the rest of the poem. Mortal eyes too, which unlike the omnipotent God remain unaware of Jesus' status or fate, are virtually excluded from his exercise of virtue: “The way he came not having mark'd, return/ Was difficult, by humane steps untrod” (297-298). Mortal ambition, of which we see much of in texts like *Lycidas* and condemned in *Paradise Lost*, is completely rejected by Jesus too as he refuses everything from food, a basic necessity, to glory and power, a natural designation for the Son of the most holy.

Instead, Jesus blasts these mortal desires as not only futile, but a hindrance to his true potential: “And what/ in me seems wanting, but that I/ May also in this poverty as soon/ Accomplish what they did, perhaps and more?” (450-452). Once again, Milton asserts that Jesus’ inherent virtue and faith are what drive him and grant his success, not any form of human celebrity or glory.

In doing so, *Paradise Regained* marks the end of a mental and literary journey that Milton started in *Comus* and *Lycidas*. If Milton was like the Lady in *Comus*, someone eager to prove their faith in the eyes of God, and like the anxious and attention-seeking narrator in *Lycidas*, then *Paradise Regained* exudes a Milton who’s disinterested in public approval and recognition. Jesus, then, seems to be a medium for Milton to figuratively redo his career, as much of *Paradise Regained* sees Jesus struggling with how he must exercise his fate among the world: “And now by some strong motion I am led/ Into this Wilderness, to what intent/ I learn not yet” (1.290-293). This iteration of Milton through Jesus, however, is less concerned with being the first, loudest, or best regarded voice— “For what is glory but the blaze of fame, The peoples praise, if always praise unmixt?” (3.47-48) —and instead moves humbly as he awaits his destiny. Consequently, the anxiety and tension of eyes is substituted in *Paradise Regained* for a much more satisfying and strong sense of intimacy. Because there are no prying eyes and Jesus seldom falters in his faith, there is no apprehension between the characters, or in the mind of the reader, that Satan will somehow win again. In fact, it is because there is no peering eye beholding them that Jesus’s success is so concrete: temptation and deceit only flourish in the forest of *Comus* or the shrubbery of *Eden* where a watching eye emphasizes privacy and sleuth. Such is the case directly after the fall where, as Neelakanta points out, the first sinners search for a “shady bank,/ Thick overhead with verdant roof imbowl’d” (9.1037-38). Instead, there is no rhetorical or physical protection from surveillance in *Paradise Regained*, as surveillance is a non-issue, and thus there appears nowhere for deceit to take place. Like Adam and Eve, Milton’s political reaches were impatient and unaware, and because of that he was forced to watch as his foes reclaimed an undeserved hold over the English. However, through Jesus, Milton can envision a world in which internal humility and self-assuredness are enough to carry one person, not to mention a whole society, into a more idealized state.

The respective endings of *Comus* and *Paradise Regained*, both depicting the victory of the faithful, spell out Milton’s existential journey perfectly. *Comus*, being a

poem entirely contextualized and catalyzed by the existence of divine watch and the motivation it instills, must have a uniform ending. The power of divine intervention, now encapsulated by Sabrina, thus becomes something outside of the Lady—something transcendental that exists outside of mortal capabilities: “Come Lady while Heaven lends us grace, Let us fly this cursed place” (938-939). *Paradise Regained*, on the other hand, despite the very grand and glorious nature of its subject matter, sees Jesus not celebrating his victory but retiring “unobserved” (4.638) and “private” (4.639). In tracking those observers, how they come to watch and what purpose there is in observing, Milton constructs a history of the hierarchy of power in his own life: delineating who is watching, who he wants to be watching, and how they influence him. Milton’s literal and metaphorical watchers place the writer within his own characters, himself acting to play the role he believes he must. Thus, between the grand *theatrum mundi* sequence of *Comus* and the very understated and unnoticed contents of *Paradise Regained*, Milton’s journey from people pleaser and compensator is compacted and directed inward, finally understanding that himself, and God, know more than they look for.

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