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# The Poetics of Embodiment in Milton's *Of Reformation*

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In *Of Reformation*, Milton's earliest antiprelatical tract, Milton creates a link between bodily tropes and interpretive authority that situates his speaking subject within an English Reformation that is currently unfinished, but points towards a future time of potential perfectibility. On one level, Milton's strikingly divergent images of the body, ranging from the feminine to the prelatial to the political, suggest how the variability of the treatise's bodily tropes inflects the corporeality of the Miltonic speaking subject and its acts of interpretation. However, on another level, these transforming and transformative bodies fashion a new materialist framework within which these diverse corporealities undergird and inform the temporal trajectory of a Reformation characterized by loss, transformation, and transcendence.

Stephen Fallon traces Milton's intellectual development from the dualism of the early poems to the monist materialism of *Paradise Lost*; John Rogers explores the political ramifications of Milton's monism in relation to the philosophy of vitalism. I, however, would like to redirect recent debates surrounding Milton's theories of matter and embodiment by offering an analysis of bodily tropes and their effects on his conception of time, narrative authority, and Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Although Seth Herbst claims that "traces of Milton's monist materialism were already in evidence as early as 1629," *Of Reformation* remains resolutely dualist, and uses its dualistic point of view to critique past and present versions of prelatial hypocrisy and the carnal forms of interpretation they sponsor (38).<sup>2</sup> But, while Milton's 1641 treatise may not concern itself with the nuances of monism, it does consider bodies and their links to multiple temporal moments and thereby challenges "the fantasy of the self-identical moment or period" (Harris 189). In his theory of conjunctive temporality, Jonathan Gil Harris describes the "multitemporal" qualities of material objects, so that "past matter is allowed to assume a more dialogic relation to the present, suggesting affinity and proximity rather than difference and distance between elements of then and now" (4). Thus, instead of representing past, present, and future as separable moments of time, Milton puts these discrete temporalities in conversation with each other through bodily tropes that enable "unexpected hookups across space and time" and thereby allow "past, present, and future to conjoin and transform each other" (151). The transformative potential inhering in these bodily

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tropes shapes the contours of the Miltonic speaking subject and his temporal alignments; it suggests how the interpretive acts of this embodied authorial self gesture toward the possibility of individual spiritual change, as well as larger social renovations, now and in the future course of Reformation.

By describing the corporeal aspects of Milton's authorial self and the multitemporal materialist framework within which he activates his interpretive strategies, I hope to demonstrate how this speaking subject's embodied mode of interpretation differs from traditional methods of reading and interpreting Milton's early prose treatises and anticipates the bodily tropes of his later prose works such as *Areopagitica*. As one of the most perceptive interpreters of Milton's early prose, Stanley Fish focuses on the "minimalist strategy" of Milton as author in *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*. According to Fish, Milton not only emphasizes the self-sufficiency of scripture, but also its vulnerability to distortion and interpretive violence: "in order to preserve the sacred text it must be protected from being read, protected, that is, from the very condition of being a text, of being at once the object and the product of an act of interpretation" (53). Here, Milton's intense authorial anxiety seeks to preserve the intactness of scripture by preempting interpretive acts of any kind while, simultaneously, laboring to prevent his own text from becoming a supplement that might overwhelm or displace the scriptural text: "Milton's entire enterprise depends on two related attempts to avoid textuality; he labors to prevent his own text from achieving a substance that would make it an addition, a supplement; and he avoids giving a textual substance to the interior Word by averting his eyes from it." (53). However, even as Fish posits a Miltonic reluctance to interpret scripture, I would claim that Milton, through his bodily tropes in *Of Reformation*, gives weight and credibility to his own interpretive practices and insists on the necessity of reading and interpretation. For Milton, the struggle to gain interpretive authority, which emerges out of acts of reading and interpretation, is a necessary part of the process of reformation for self and nation. Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler also attends to Milton's emphasis on the risks of reading and interpretation, but instead of the Fishian emphasis on textual misappropriation, she focuses on the vulnerabilities of self, especially the self that is put in danger through verbal exchange: "The self exists--and must exist--in exercise, but it also exists independently, so that exercise puts the self at risk" (265). Although, according to Skerpan Wheeler, the self risks being compromised through its interaction with opposing voices, it can restore its true form through the process of right reading: "Right reading is reading with the disembodied mind's eye, the eye that, being purely intuitive, is synonymous with spirit. Right reading frees the spirit from the body. Because it is incorporeal, its actions do not alter but restore form" (267). This form of spiritualized

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reading, with its restorative potential, is an appealing one, but it does not capture the corporeal nature of reading and interpreting in *Of Reformation*; it ignores the materialist context that underwrites the embodied speaking subject's interpretive acts.

Considering *Of Reformation* in relation to Milton's other prose works, it is instructive to analyze how the bodily tropes of this treatise look forward to and lay the foundation for the memorable bodily imagery found in *Areopagitica*. For example, images of the body in *Of Reformation* suggest how the carnal interpretive activities of the prelates trouble the progress and the course of Reformation: "that they might bring the inward acts of the *Spirit* to the outward, and customary ey-service of the body, as if they could make *God* earthly and fleshly, because they could not make themselves *heavenly* and *Spirituall*" (520). *Areopagitica* echoes this indictment of prelatical hypocrisy in its dismembering of Truth "into a thousand pieces" which the "sad friends of Truth" attempt to recover "gathering up limb by still as they could find them" (549). According to David Loewenstein, this passage represents the "thwarted, incomplete process of reformation" and refers to Milton's "worst fears of the English nation failing to fulfill her great promise of historic regeneracy in a revolutionary age" (45). In both instances, the bodily imagery captures a deep authorial anxiety regarding the potential failure of reformation, with *Of Reformation* casting blame at the feet of false prelates for their distortions of spiritual truth and *Areopagitica* rebuking the false harmony of those "troublers" who would create "the forc't and outward union of cold, and neutrall, and inwardly divided minds" (551). In another example, *Of Reformation* puts present and future versions of the body politic in touch with one another to suggest the transformative potential inherent in these conjoined representations. By comparing the present state of England's body politic, "the floting carcass of a crazie, and diseased monarchy," with a future, aspirational one "compact in vertue as in body" (572), Milton suggests the vulnerability and resilience of a body politic that, embedded though it is in a fallen present, also yearns for the possibility of change in a not yet available future. *Areopagitica* also plays with the figure of the body politic which in "casting off the old and wrincl'd skin of corruption" (557) becomes a "noble and puissant nation rousing herself after sleep" (558). As a moment of dynamic transformation, this passage vividly depicts the attendant confusions and hoped-for clarity of political regeneration in its vertiginous configurations of England as Samson, a woman, and also an eagle whose "undazle'd eyes" stare at the sun "purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain it self of heav'nly radiance" (558). Bringing together past, present, and future through these bodily tropes, Milton literally embodies the temporal processes of reformation and thus acknowledges the

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spiritual shortcomings of past and present while pointing toward a future of apocalyptic promise, a time distinguished by its hermeneutic certitude and spiritual fulfillment.

*Of Reformation* centers its poetics of embodiment on Milton's embodied speaking subject whose corporeality is embedded in and defined by a language of gender and sexual difference. This language of gender invokes idealized images of femininity, as well as negative representations of an unruly female body, to determine the contours of the speaking subject's anxious masculinity and reveal the tenuousness of the masculinist order that he attempts to impose upon the text. In addition, these feminized bodily tropes function to locate the speaking subject in a multitemporal context, specifically between the writings of the past, the spiritual losses of the present, and the possibilities of future transformation, while also helping to differentiate between true and false forms of reading. First, in terms of his idealized images of femininity, Milton characterizes "holy *Reformation*" as a patroness who juxtaposes the reading of Scripture, from which "sound Truth" is taken, with the innumerable and unnecessary writings of antiquity and rearticulates and regulates the lines of interpretation separating carnal forms of reading and writing from their more spiritualized counterparts (568). Echoing the figure of holy Reformation, a forlorn and solitary Mother England decries the spiritual confusion caused by the lack of clarity governing the relation between conscience and things indifferent: "in a mourning weed, with ashes upon her head, and teares abundantly flowing from her eyes, to behold so many of her children expos'd at once, and thrust from things of dearest necessity, because their conscience could not assent to things which the Bishops thought *indifferent*" (585). Arthur E. Barker claims that in this passage Milton is "demanding liberty of conscience in indifferent things" but that he does not define "the nature either of that liberty or of indifference" (53). I agree with Barker that Milton at this point is not concerned with defining liberty or indifference; rather he is more focused on condemning the enervating powers of prelacy, a goal that he partially accomplishes through an image of female loss and bereavement. Lastly, as Milton attempts to emphasize the need for the "sharp separation of religious and civil punishment" (608 n. 141) he compares excommunication to a mother: "then as a tender Mother takes her Child and holds it over the pit with scarring words, that it may learne to feare, where danger is, so doth excommunication as deerly, and as freely without money, use her wholesome and saving terrors" (608). On one level, Milton's speaker constructs each of these images of femininity to suggest the necessity for a spiritual and political order detached from the baleful influence of prelates; on another level, he uses them to bolster his speaking voice, a voice that seems to have to constantly reassert its

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authority in the face of prelatical opposition. Therefore, amid the anxiety and confusion of a fallen present, these reassuring female figures not only render visible the textual and political fault lines that need tending and maintenance for the purposes of future reformation, but also reveal the insecurities of a speaker whose interpretive control is never fully articulated and is always in danger of being overturned.

However, these consoling images of femininity associated with order and stability are challenged by images of the female body as disorderly and unruly that threaten to overwhelm the boundaries established by the Miltonic speaker. For instance, in the middle of his discussion distinguishing true from false prelates, Milton's speaker characterizes Rome as the "womb and center of Apostacy" (547). While this characterization of Rome may be conventional, it also carries a special force for Milton intimating, as it does, the complete reversal of the spiritual categories of his day, where a true bishop is "reviled, and ruff'd" by an "insulting" prelate, or the "people of *God*" are considered to be no better than "lay dogs" (547). It also initiates a series of bodily tropes that associate the female body with false religion, misappropriation of scripture, and the destabilizing of the English polity and the progress of reformation. Gina Hausknecht claims that femininity is not a problematic category for Milton. To her, it is "only femininity in actual women that Milton finds dangerous and corrupting and only when it slips from women into men" (23). She further states that "effeminacy, the manifestation of such contagion, is associated (in the few places that Milton invokes it) with lack of discipline, with poor management, and especially with having too much power or undeserved authority" (23). The ideas of effeminacy and contagion on the surface seem to be linked to false prelatical authority, both political and textual, and construct a masculinist version of the Miltonic speaker who must police institutional and textual boundaries that are being corrupted and violated by effeminizing prelates. For instance, according to Milton's speaker, the "plaine and homespun verity of *Christs Gospel*" does not interest prelates unless they dress "this poor threadbare Matron" in better clothes: "her chaste and modest vaile surrounded with celestiall beames they overlaid with wanton *treses*, and in a flaring tire bespeckld her with all the gaudy allurements of a Whore" (557). This passage debases what Kranidas, citing *Animadversions*, calls the trope of the "common Mother" and refigures the chastity of the gospel in terms of sexual promiscuity (25). In so doing, the Miltonic speaker underlines the negative consequences of an uncontrolled prelatical interpretive authority and suggests how the violation of textual boundaries, manifested as a lack of sexual and linguistic discipline, results in the biblical text being distorted beyond recognition. Contrasted with these prelatical acts of misinterpretation is an idealized form of reading scripture

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again attached to a bodily trope that encourages spiritual seeking by a Spirit able to discern what is good from “false glistenings”: “If we will but purge with sovraín eyesalve that intellectual ray which *God* hath planted in us, then we would believe the Scriptures protesting their own plainnes, and perspicuity . . .” (566). Purging the “film of ignorance” from our understanding, this true form of reading actually furthers reformation and strengthens the English nation as it foretells “an extraordinary effusion of *Gods* Spirit upon every age, and sexe, attributing to all men, and requiring from them the ability of searching, trying, examining all things” (566). However, although the Miltonic speaker asserts the absolute division between the true and false modes of reading and interpretation, just as prelates so easily corrupt the gospel with “gaudy allurements,” so the true mode of reading might lapse into the false one. To ensure the security of these interpretive boundaries and to minimize the possibility of contagion from effeminizing prelates, the speaker must maintain an anxious vigilance which calls into being a masculinist rhetoric that defends against the slippages between different orders of reading and attempts to suppress a disruptive effeminacy.

But the Miltonic speaking subject’s insistent move towards a masculinist language when faced with an effeminizing prelacy suggests that ostensible difference may conceal potential sameness, and that the “discourse of manliness” that defines the speaker in these moments is not as stable as it first seems (Hausknecht 32). In effect, the speaker’s masculinist language glosses over the idea that his interpretive authority, like that of the prelates, might be undeserved, and attempts to displace that anxiety onto iterations of the female body that may be demonized and thereby controlled. In this context, even as Milton’s poetics of embodiment tries to maintain masculine and feminine as discrete categories, it also signals the porous nature of these categories, how the effeminizing actions of prelates become a form of contagion that enervates the English people and brings about a loss of masculinity, rendering England susceptible to “Forreigne Invasion or Domestick oppression” (588). It seems as if the discourse of manliness intensifies the more the nation or speaker appears to be vulnerable to the excesses of prelatical power. Just as the actions of the prelates have “unpeopl’d the Kingdome” of many thousands, so have they caused a corresponding depletion of masculinity in those who have remained at home: “so have they hamstrung the valour of the Subject by seeking to effeminate us all at home” (588). Immediately after this moment of feminization, the Miltonic speaker invokes masculine liberty and the sexual discipline associated with marriage to counter it: “Well knows every wise Nation that their Liberty consists in manly and honest labors, in sobriety and rigorous honour to the Marriage Bed” (588). Finally, the speaker warns the English nation not to

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“slacken, and fall to loosenes, and riot” and uses Herodotus’s story of Cyrus spiritually corrupting the Lydians “with *Stems*, dancing, feasting, & dicing” to highlight how susceptible present-day English subjects are to spiritual breakdown due to effeminizing prelates who “despoile us both of *manhood* and *grace* at once” (588, 588 n. 56). What is striking about these passages is how the fear of excess associated with prelates and femininity generates a masculinist discourse that, while it articulates a stabilizing patriarchal logic of manly liberty, is also invested in the same excess it intends to control. Because, although feminizing prelates may engender spiritual losses in the present, and diminish the prospect of future spiritual transcendence, they are also implicated in the construction of the Miltonic speaker as the masculine defender of the English people. Thus, anxiety and displacement define the Miltonic speaker as he tries to unequivocally distance himself from prelates and the feminine but finds that his interpretive authority is contingent upon the very things that he condemns.

The unresolved tension between loss and transformation, as well as the dialogic relation between past, present and future, inform Milton’s poetics of embodiment and generate a powerful sense of in-betweenness that structures and defines the materialist underpinnings of the treatise. For instance, Milton juxtaposes tropes of the body with what Lana Cable calls his “rational, historical argument” and locates his speaking self in the space where these two forms of discourse intersect. Cable identifies two discontinuous levels of rhetoric in *Of Reformation*: a rational, historical, temporal level of rhetoric and an affective, sensuous, metaphorical level of rhetoric whose effect is to “obscure and ultimately overwhelm the argument rather than enhance it” (55). Cable describes how the affective, metaphorical level of meaning has no connection to, and actually undercuts, the rational, historical argument: “Instead of using affective language to convey the moral import of a rational argument, Milton actually draws us away from a rational argument which has no apparent moral dimension, only to involve us in a supposedly moral world which has no perceivable rational foundation” (64). However, instead of this radical discontinuity between the rational and affective, I would like to suggest how tropes of the body, even though they possess an affective charge, supplement and complete Milton’s rational arguments. In effect, these tropes depict a speaking self emerging from and subject to a temporal process situated in a present moment characterized by prelatical corruption and interpretive uncertainty while invoking the future, and sometimes the past, as potential exemplars of spiritual purity and epistemological certitude. For example, in the time of Cyprian: “then did the Spirit of unity and meeknesse inspire, and animate every joynt, and sinew of the mysticall body” but now in the present, “the obscene, and surfeited

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Priest scruples not to paw, and mammock the sacramental bread, as familiarly as his Tavern Bisket” (547-48). This reduction of the spiritual unity of the mystical body to a tavern biscuit pawed by obscene priests evokes a distant spiritualized past to generate a powerful sense of loss in the present. It is a movement from the spiritual to the carnal that corresponds to a similar reduction in the English people’s desire for divine knowledge and virtue: “thus the people vilif’d and rejected by them, give over the earnest study of vertue, and godlinesse as a thing of greater purity then they need, and the search of divine knowledge as a mystery to high for their capacity’s” (548). The passage accuses the prelates of leading the people back to “Popish blindness” and then ends with a grotesque bodily image of a corrupt prelate: “what a plump endowment to the many-benefice-gaping mouth of a Prelate, what a relish it would give to his canary-sucking, and swan-eating palat” (549). In these instances, the bodily imagery reinforces the argument being made and foregrounds a multitemporal textual moment in which the exigencies of the fallen present highlight, by contrast, the spiritual virtues of the primitive church and raise the specter of a transformative future that may never occur. For at this point in the treatise, the Miltonic speaking subject is unable to extricate himself from a corrupt and carnally inflected present so that, instead of the possibility of spiritual renovation, he articulates the fear that his voice may not possess the altering power necessary for the completion of reformation. Therefore, instead of a differentially constituted present and future, the speaker implies that the future may be a mere repetition of a present tainted by spiritual apathy and dominated by the destructive influence of prelates.

Milton begins and ends the opening book of his treatise with extended meditations on the nature and consequences of reading and interpretation, specifically in relation to a backsliding England that, while once a beacon of reformation, is now last among nations in terms of reforming the church. Referring to the practices of priests, and by implication of prelates and the Anglican Church, the Miltonic speaker tells how the soul “her pineons now broken, and flagging, shifted off from her selfe, the labour of high soaring any more, forgot her heavenly flight” (522). Here, the descent and breaking down of the soul emerges from carnal forms of worship and causes a chain reaction of spiritual error, with the scanning of “the *Scriptures*, by the Letter” instead of by “the quickning power of the *Spirit*” (522). This externally oriented sort of reading and worship contributes to a prelatical hypocrisy that conceals spiritual misdeeds beneath words like “humility” and “decency” and therefore diminishes the understanding of “*God’s* behests” and hinders the process of reformation. In these passages, the Miltonic speaker uses bodily images to represent the degradation of the spirit (what he calls the



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“over-bodying” of the soul) and foregrounds the need for the idealized reader of scripture who appears at the end of the book: “a plain upright man that all his dayes hath been diligently reading the holy Scriptures” (568). He contrasts this figure with the adversaries of reformation who prefer the writings of antiquity to the “plain field of the Scriptures” and who if “they feel themselves strook in the transparent streams of divine Truth, they would plunge, and tumble, and thinke to ly hid in the foul weeds, and muddy waters” (569). For these adversaries he questions whether or not the Gospel should be held: “ever in their faces like a mirror of Diamond, till it dazzle, and pierce their misty ey balls? maintaining it the honor of its absolute sufficiency, and supremacy inviolable” (568-69). Here the images of bodies, tumbling in weeds and muddy water and running away from divine truth, suggest a depth of spiritual confusion that only scripture can cure; it is the transformative power of Scripture, the ability to pierce misty eyeballs and reform souls that Milton’s speaker is emphasizing. While the self-sufficient and inviolable nature of scripture reassures the reader of the possibility of reform, both personally and nationally, there is also a sense of urgency that permeates these passages that suggests the serious effects of prelatical corruption in the present and the necessity of reforming scriptural reading practices in order to galvanize spiritual change in the near future.

Also, in the first book of the treatise, the Miltonic speaker, now poised between the present and the past, but always with an eye towards the future, reflects on a bygone time of Protestant Martyrs, and reconsiders the status of the Bishops Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer. It is through these martyred bodies that Milton’s speaker raises up a heroic Protestant past, renders it legible, and then refashions it to reaffirm his own interpretive authority while denigrating that of the prelates. In her examination of how history and literary form intersect in the martyrological genre, Alice Dailey states that “rather than the static, embalmed genre produced by readings that bracket literary form, martyrology emerges in this study as deeply nuanced and subtly responsive to historical circumstance” (9). Milton’s refashioned martyrs embody this sensitivity to history and the mediations of literary form as his speaker tries to convert the burnt bodies of past Protestant martyrs into textual bodies that may be interpreted in the context of reformation and from the viewpoint of scripture, especially Saint Paul. Instead of merely canceling out the signifying power of martyred bodies, traditionally used to underwrite the authority of prelates in the present, Milton’s speaker creates an interpretive space where these bodies may signify differently. The following passage illustrates the process by which Milton redirects the significance of those martyred bodies away from the legitimization of prelates and towards the authentication of his own speaker’s voice:

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But it will be said, These men were *Martyrs*: What then? Though every true Christian will be a *Martyr* when he is called to it; not presently does it follow that every one suffering for Religion, is without exception. Saint *Paul* writes that *A man may give his Body to be burnt, (meaning for Religion) and yet not have Charitie*: He is not therefore above all possibility of erring, because hee burnes for some Points of Truth. (533)

With the question “What then?,” the Miltonic speaker summons up and dismisses the legitimacy of the martyrological tradition and opens up new possibilities for the interpretation of the burnt bodies of Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer by positioning them next to a quote from Corinthians 13.3 (533 n. 63). Within the context of these lines from St. Paul, Milton’s speaker seems to be placing the Protestant martyrs and the gospel in direct opposition to each other, suggesting that the martyrs, because of their lack of charity, contradict the gospel and are not truly martyrs. In addition, while Milton aligns his speaker with the gospel, he positions him between two rhetorical poles, judgement and charity. Kranidas states that Milton calls attention to “the dangers of self-righteousness and pompous judgmentalism” but that he ultimately, for the sake of winning an argument, opts for a harsh rhetoric of zeal that is underpinned by a “sense of rectitude” and “severe judgment” (62-63). However, even as Milton gives voice to a stylistic vehemence, he never entirely eschews charity and indeed tries to temper the harshness of his judgement against false prelates through his demonstrations of charity, at various moments of the treatise, towards the sufferings of the English people. As a result of his mediations between judgment and charity, Milton develops a self-consciousness that enables him to realize that the “possibility of erring” does not only refer to the bodies of past martyrs and their prelatial descendants, but also, self-referentially, to his own prose style that, when it engages in judgmental invective against the prelates, can veer too far away from the gospel imperative to be charitable.

This moment of self-reflection does not undercut the interpretive authority of Milton’s speaker, but rather enhances it, since he, unlike the prelates, tries to adhere carefully to gospel precepts. By accepting the possibility of error, he accentuates the need for moral vigilance and a careful weighing of words that will support a poetics of embodiment and help move forward a reformation that is dependent on judicious acts of reading and interpretation for its transformative power. Following his assessment of the Protestant martyrological tradition, Milton’s speaker energetically justifies his inveighing “against Error and Superstition with vehement Expressions” saying that “I have done it, neither out of malice, nor list to speak evil, nor any vaine-glory; but of mere necessity, to vindicate the spotlesse *Truthe*

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from an ignominious bondage” (535). Milton states that his “vehement expressions” are necessary to reveal the “native worth” of “spotlesse *Truthe*,” especially when that truth is confronted with a rhetoric of hypocrisy wielded by prelates who would conceal their own “faults and blemishes” with false, yet fair-seeming language. He also uses the image of a grotesque prelatical body to foreground the idea of corruption on the level of language when he asks: “But what doe wee suffer mis-shapen and enormous *Prelatisme*, as we do, thus to blanch and varnish her deformities with the faire colours, as before of *Martyrdome*, so now of *Episcopacie*?” (537).<sup>3</sup> In these lines, Milton’s speaker implicitly contrasts his truth-seeking language with the false and manipulative language of prelates who self-servingly invoke the rhetoric and images associated with the Protestant martyrs of the past in order to make themselves seem virtuous and authoritative. Milton shows how these appeals to tradition and the past by the prelates are disingenuous and misleading and suggests how his own prose style needs to be vigorous and aggressive in defending against the corrupt language of prelates. This attention to style is important to Milton because, as Joan Webber indicates, “good style is a sign of grace” whereas “bad style characterizes the unregenerate” (210). Milton’s justification of his prose style leads to one of the most startling bodily images in his treatise when he compares the prelates to “a seething pot set coole” with a “skinny congealment of ease and sloth at the top” and states: “but their *devotion* most commonly comes to that queazy temper of luke-warmnesse, that gives a Vomit to God himself” (536-37). While this image of God physically retching due to the “grosse corruption” of the prelates is familiar in the sense that it deliberately recalls Revelations 3:16, the intense physicality of the image is intended to shock (537 n. 73). Through this image, the Miltonic speaker indicates how degraded and unregenerate the prelates have become and suggests how their reduction of the spiritual to carnal also debases God to such a degree that His disgust with them can only be conceived of in grotesque, bodily terms. Consequently, the extreme nature of Milton’s language, along with its materialist emphasis, emerges out of a moral necessity to counter the extremity of the prelate’s degeneracy and expose the hidden depths of their spiritual depravity.

Milton’s use of bodily imagery tries to displace the interpretive authority of the prelates, highlighting, as it does, their substitution of the carnal for the spiritual along with what Kristen Poole describes as their reliance on false patristic genealogies for self-authorization. Poole suggests how Milton uses the rhetoric of genealogy to question the historically based authority of prelates and their misrepresentations of the spiritual past: “In refuting historical precedent as a basis for authority, Milton not only turns the anti-sectarian rhetoric against the bishops, but argues, like the sects

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themselves, for an ecclesiastical culture grounded upon the interpretive position of each individual conscience and each godly reader” (127). Thus, rather than focus on a past riddled with spiritual and textual errors, Milton offers the superior hermeneutic authority of a speaking self who is capable of transforming a corrupt present, bringing about a godly reformation, and cultivating readerly subjects who base their readings on Scripture and not the distorting and self-serving accumulations of prelatical interpretive activity. However, this readerly subject is not the Fishian one who surrenders completely to the scriptural text for fear of perpetrating interpretive violence upon it, but rather an informed, educated reader who, in relying upon his conscience, is able to discern the true meaning of the Word. In addition to the false claims of historical genealogies, Poole also cites the following passage as an example of the monstrous genealogies that prelates bring forth in the present and future: “The sour Levin of humane Traditions mixt in one putrifi’d Masse with the poisonous dregs of hypocrisie in the hearts of the *Prelates* that lye basking in the Sunny warmth of Wealth, and Promotion, is the Serpents Egg that will hatch an *Antichrist* wheresoever” (590). Although this passage refers to the grotesque transmission of spiritual error from a hypocritical present to a corrupt future overseen by Antichrist, it also links this squalid, physicalized genealogy to a “*spirituall* Babel” in which the reproduction of linguistic error leads to an interpretive impasse and a spiritual confusion that hinders reformation. Again, the overcoming of this kind of linguistic error and interpretive failure requires a godly reader who can circumvent prelatical hypocrisy. It also demands a spiritual guide like Milton’s reformist speaker who can identify and displace the linguistic and spiritual errors of the prelates with an interpretive authority grounded in divine inspiration and a deep knowledge of scripture. In this instance, bodily imagery, specifically that of a perverse form of procreative activity, serves to dramatize the susceptibility of the textual body and the body politic to the destabilizing influence of a prelatical materialism, through which “a Masse of Money is drawne from the Veines into the Ulcers of the Kindome” (590-91). The diseased nature of the commonwealth literally bodies forth the spiritual decay of prelates and suggests how their carnal reading of signs may contribute to the destruction of the body politic. In demonstrating how the carnal and material may undermine both the order of political communities and the stability of sacred texts, Milton’s speaking subject asserts his own claims to interpretive authority as he creates a space for a forward-looking reformist speaker like himself to fill the present-day spiritual vacuum.

Milton plays out the political implications of his bodily tropes in his representations of a vulnerable body politic that is subject to the historical vagaries of his day. Milton begins the second book of his treatise with a

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discussion of the noble virtues required to govern a Christian commonwealth: “but to govern a Nation piously, and justly, which only is to say happily, is for a spirit of the greatest size and divinest mettle” (571). But, instead of training up “a Nation in true wisdom and virtue,” instead of moving the nation towards “regeneration, and happiest end, likenes to God,” modern politicians “mould the sufferance and subjection of people to the length of that foot that is to tread on their necks” and “break a nationall spirit, and courage by count’nancing upon riot, luxury, and ignorance” (571-72). As before, the reformist speaking self is caught between the temporal and the transcendent, loss and transformation, here political optimism intersects with the prospect of political decline.<sup>4</sup> Both Thomas Kranidas and David Loewenstein see Milton the writer as an active participant in the process of reformation, but their divergent attitudes towards that historical process and its outcome—one viewing Milton as more hopeful; the other more anxious towards the political future—express the difficulties the Miltonic speaker encounters as he engages with the arduous task of reforming a Christian commonwealth. Milton’s speaking subject seems to give into the more pessimistic strain of political thought when he describes the current state of the political body of England as, “the floting carcas of a crazie, and diseased monarchy” (572). However, a few lines further on, he describes a more optimistic and aspirational form of the body politic: “a Commonwealth ought to be but as one huge Christian personage, one mighty growth, and stature of an honest man, as big, and compact in vertue as in body” (572). In these bodily images, Milton further articulates an embodied poetics of loss and transformation, as he mingles together pessimistic and optimistic accounts of the commonwealth, simultaneously asserting the present challenges facing reformation while gesturing toward a healthy and happy state in the future. This complicated mingling of pessimism and optimism informs a speaking self whose agency is thwarted by the turbulence and conflict of history, but who is also able to energize the reformation process and look forward to a time of “godliness” and the “true flourishing of a Land” (571).

Following these conflicting narratives of the political state, Milton adapts the well-known fable of the Belly and locates this materialist fable within a multitemporal framework that recalls and alters older versions of the story while also foreshadowing the future well-being of the body politic. Traditional critical readings of the Belly fable have recognized the oppositional political impulses—one being hierarchical and conservative, the other subversive—that simultaneously inhabit the story.<sup>5</sup> However, though Milton inserts his revised versions of the Belly fable into a political discussion of how the “gaudy rottennesse of Prelatry” (583) debases a monarchy that should rest on the “foundations of Justice, and Heroick vertue” (582), he

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is more concerned with establishing the authority of his speaking subject than determining the political valence of the fable. In Milton's version of the fable, a monstrous wen or tumor is adjacent to the head of the body politic, signifying the prelates and their destructive relationship to the monarchy. A Philosopher rebukes and questions the Wen, which seeks "dignities and rich indowments," asking why the Wen deserves such honors: "Wilt thou (quoth he) that art but a bottle of vitious and harden'd excrements, contend with the lawfull and free-borne members. . .?" (584). The Wen, responding to a question of what good it has done for the Commonwealth, claims that it provides a quiet retreat for the Head, but the Philosopher then emphatically condemns the Wen saying that "thou containest no good thing in thee, but a heape of hard, and loathsome uncleanness, and art to the head a foul disfigurement and burden" (584). From a political perspective, Milton's speaking subject once again affirms his in-between status, as he acknowledges but never fully subscribes to the contending political viewpoints staked out by the Head, the Wen, and the Philosopher in prior readings of the fable. The ideological uncertainty of the fable of the Belly, its ability to accommodate opposing political perspectives, suggests how Milton's use of bodily tropes in this context underscores the intricacies of the reading process, as well as the complicated nature of interpretive authority. The fable does not call for authoritative interpretive pronouncements, but rather for a Miltonic speaking self who is sensitive to contemporary political configurations and who, at the same time, is able to transcend those configurations as he pursues the prospect of reformation in an imperfect present. In addition, the fact that the belly is sidelined in the Miltonic version of the fable is significant since as Michael Schoenfeldt, stressing the central role of the stomach in early modern conceptions of digestive and ethical processes, states: "The stomach, moreover, supervises the necessary discrimination of edible from inedible matter, a discrimination that is ethical as well as physiological" (31). Thus, Milton, by eliminating the mediatory role of the belly, might be calling attention to the lack of a present-day ethical interpretive agent, one who is able to adjudicate the verbal standoff between Philosopher and Wen, reveal the false nature of prelatival authority, and differentiate true from false forms of reading and interpretation. By highlighting the absence of principled discernment in mid-seventeenth-century England, Milton underlines the necessity of his reformist speaking subject and his ability to make ethical discriminations that contribute to and help guide the nation towards a genuine reformation.

Near the end of the treatise, Milton's speaking subject articulates the frustrations inherent in his embodied poetics of loss and transformation when he seems to surrender all hope of navigating his own political moment

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and calls on God to direct his course:

O Sir, I doe now feele my selfe in wrapt on the sodaine into those mazes and *Labyrinths* of dreadfull and hideous thoughts, that which way to get out, or which way to end I know not, unlesse I turne mine eyes, and with your help lift up my hands to that Eternall and Propitious *Throne*, where nothing is readier then *grace* and *refuge* to the distresses of mortall Suppliants. . . . (613)

However, Janel Mueller offers a different reading of this passage, citing it as an example of “vatic transport,” a moment in which the ecclesiastical body prepares itself for the Second Coming and the rejoining of the Church with its divine head, Christ (33). I would assert that both readings have merit, since the speaking subject is again caught between the temporal and transcendent, the fallen present with its distressed mortal suppliants, and an imminent apocalypse offering grace and refuge. But even as the speaking subject laments the spiritual state of the present where he is prey to “importunate *Wolves*, that wait and thinke long till they devoure thy tender *Flocke*” (614), he not only tries escape the rapaciousness of false prelates by looking to future consolations, but also refers back to a past that buoys him up with memories of “former Deliverances” from the “unjust and Tyrannous Claime of thy Foes” (615). Thus, the speaking subject brings past, present, and future into conversation with each other, a blurring of temporal boundaries that has potential implications for the bodies ecclesiastic and politic. For the consequence of this temporal proximity is that the reformist impulse and the call for political and religious change is not deferred until a future time, or sequestered in an almost forgotten past, but is transported to a present desperately in need of spiritual renovation. By emphasizing the role of human agency in bringing about the Second Coming, Mueller further accentuates the possibility of political and religious change in the present: “*Of Reformation* enlarges the role of godly activism in preparing for the Second Coming from the clergy to the laity, the church in all its members” (33). This joining together of the bodies ecclesiastic and politic in a vision of a unified, reforming nation that is moving towards the Second Coming, suggests the transformative potential of godly activism, the necessity and power of human agency to effect change in the present as it prepares the English people for the return of Christ in the future.

The last bodies treated in *Of Reformation* are those of the transformed and elevated Miltonic speaking self and the prelates who are “thrown downe eternally into the *darkest* and *deepest Gulfe* of *Hell*” (616-17). The potency of human agency, and particularly the political efficacy of his early prose treatises, is underwritten by the body of Milton’s speaking self and the prophetic song he sings: “Then amidst the *Hymns*, and *Halleluiahs* of

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*Saints* some one may perhaps bee heard offering at high *strains* in new and lofty *Measures* to sing and celebrate the *divine Mercies*, and *marvelous Judgements* in this Land throughout all Ages” (616). According to a thesis put forward by Fish, this passage crystallizes a dilemma for Milton, as it posits a tension between an ego that would like “to join a heavenly choir in which no single voice is heard and one’s identity (exactly the wrong word) is relational, conferred by the community (of saints) that defines the shape of action” (66), and an ego that resists such dissolution as it seeks attention and acclaim for the singularity of its voice. Nevertheless, I think in *Of Reformation* there is no such tension, as the speaking subject sings itself into prophetic being and claims for itself a power to transform the English nation into a zealous Christian community in anticipation of the Second Coming:

whereby this great and Warlike Nation instructed and inur’d to the fervent and continuall practice of *Truth* and *Righteousnesse*, and casting farre from her the *rags* of her old *vices* may presse on hard to that *high* and *happy* emulation to be found the *soberest*, *wisest*, and *most Christian People* at that day when thou the Eternal and shortly-expected King shalt open the Clouds to judge the severall Kingdomes of the World.” (616)

In this final apocalyptic utterance, the Miltonic speaking subject claims interpretive authority for itself not only in its vision of a righteous English nation, but also in its powerful condemnation of the prelates to hell, where they will become “*the donne-trodden Vassals of Perdition*” (617). This final image of damned prelatial bodies contrasts with the visionary body of the Miltonic speaker and suggests how the pernicious and insidious interpretive practices of the prelates have been displaced by and subordinated to the hermeneutic authority of his speaking subject. In a sense, the vision of reformation achieved at the end of the treatise brings into focus the dynamism of Milton’s bodily imagery, how it defines the complexities of the Miltonic speaking subject, forges new bonds between that subject and its readers, and evokes the possibilities of the reformist impulse in the present and future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Although Stephen Fallon claims that Milton’s “changing metaphysical assumptions” may be glimpsed in his prose works, he states that Milton in *Of Reformation* “zealously guards the Platonist division between matter and spirit that he will abandon later” (83-84). John Rogers explores the effects of mid-century vitalism on *Paradise Lost* and suggests how the vitalist movement “pushed Milton to a new conception not only of material bodies but of the body politic” (104).

<sup>2</sup>In their introduction, Donovan and Festa assert that “no corner of Milton’s thought was untouched by his mature commitment to heretical



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materialist monism, and this has affected the reception of his major works down to the present day” (10). I am not trying to diminish the importance of materialist monism for Milton’s thought but rather suggesting that there might be other approaches to understanding Milton’s theories of matter and embodiment.

<sup>3</sup>Situating *Of Reformation* in a tradition of antiprelatical satire, John King outlines how “grotesque humour concerning body odour, festering disease, gluttony, vomiting, excretion and sexual transgression is firmly grounded in the cultural practices of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant polemics and their predecessors in medieval anticlerical satire” (188).

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Kranidas views the “optimism” of Milton’s treatise in the context of a reform in progress and claims that Milton’s writing “is a part of that reform” (58-59). David Loewenstein assumes a darker, more pessimistic perspective when he describes Milton’s “troubled historical consciousness” and points out how Milton responds “with astonishing rage and scorn to the frustrations and ambiguities of the historical process” (20).

<sup>5</sup>In her discussion of the various renditions of the Belly fable in the renaissance, Annabel Patterson remarks on the ideological ambivalence of the fable (128). Patterson states that the fable articulates competing political viewpoints, one that affirms the supremacy of the Head, and the other that foreshadows the body politic losing its head with the execution of Charles I (130-31). Michael Lieb explains how in North’s Plutarch the Belly’s “usefulness” quiets the rebelling bodily members and affirms political hierarchy (65).

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