

PROPHECY AND FICTION: EARLY MODERN THEORIES OF POETIC
INVENTION

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My thesis identifies some of the different ways in which prophetic and fictional poetry could be understood as tools for human empowerment and enlightenment in early modern England. Poetry, whether prophetic or fictional, empowers people because it gives them freedom to explore and experience something beyond the world they know. The difference between understanding poetry as prophecy and understanding it as fiction is in the amount of freedom granted to the human mind to depart from reality and create alternative worlds on its own. Philip Sidney's late sixteenth-century text, *Apology for Poetry*, contains theories for poetry and fiction-making which are valuable for understanding differing conceptions of prophetic and fictional poetic creation in the late seventeenth century. Sidney invests power in poetic creation by comparing it to divine creation, but he distinguishes between prophetic poets who "imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God," and "right poets" who, "having no law but wit, [...] to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be" (102-3). The prophetic poet retrieves divine knowledge from an external source, while the poet of fiction works autonomously.

Sidney's ideas about poetry echo through the poems of John Milton and Thomas Traherne, particularly those which regenerate the lost Christian paradise, a vein of poetry that strongly asserts the power of the poet to prophetically convey or to create new worlds. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Thomas Traherne's *Poems of Felicity* and *Centuries of Meditations* are early modern texts that work to generate the experience of a paradise that is otherwise inaccessible to their readers. Both Milton and Traherne take on this heavy task of recovering paradise through poetry, but while

Milton portrays the poet as someone with prophetic knowledge who can reveal an otherwise inaccessible paradise to his readers, Traherne argues that everyone can come to see the world around them as paradise by exercising their own creativity through experiments with fiction. While Milton and Traherne agree that reading and writing poetry can improve people mentally, emotionally and spiritually, they do not agree on the process by which the poet may conceive a new and ideal world, or the distribution of poetic ability among people.

My project enters the study of poetic theory in Milton and Traherne by way of Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* because this text defends the value and usefulness of both prophetic and fictional poetry as forms of expression that can evoke change in people and their experiences of the world. While there is a long history of claims for the didactic quality of poetry, Sidney's *Apology* does make new claims about the process of human creativity. As the first chapter will reveal, Sidney's text introduces new meaning to the word 'Idea' in the English language, moving it away from its former Platonic meaning as an eternal form, and toward its modern meaning as a product of human thought. "Idea" remains a key term in the writing of Milton and Traherne for conveying both human and divine creativity. While these two poets would agree with the general precepts of Sidney's *Apology*—that poetry teaches people things they can't learn from the world around them and that it impacts people's thoughts and actions in this world—the later poets each take different approaches to identifying the figure of the poet, the nature of poetic conception and the particular effects of poetic creativity. This diversity of approaches to defining poetry shows that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the concept of creative thought and expression as a tool for

improving the human condition was rapidly evolving and was understood in a variety of ways.

In a contemporary frame of thought, the practice of using poetry as a tool for regenerating the lost Christian paradise may not seem widely applicable. However, the belief shared by Sidney, Milton and Traherne that poetry can restore such a lofty ideal points to the fact that people can benefit more generally by reading and writing literature. In a modern world that values interdisciplinarity, it is important for people to be able to explain why literature is as valuable to society as, for example, law and medicine are. This is not a new matter: Sidney's *Apology* attests that in the past, literature has also required this kind of defense more readily than other fields of study. Perhaps some would agree that a defense of literature is just as necessary today as it was in Sidney's time. By analyzing the reverberation of Sidney's *Apology* through the poetic imaginations of Milton and Traherne, my thesis demonstrates some of the various forms of empowerment that arise from the belief that people can use poetry to enact real and positive change in their selves and in the world.

Chapter 2: Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*

In his *Apology*, Sidney defends poetry in general before he distinguishes between different kinds of poets and defends each of their approaches to poetic expression in different ways. I argue that Sidney withholds from distinguishing between prophetic poets and poets of fiction, or "right poets" (102), until after he describes the poetic process in terms applicable to both because he wants to elevate the seriousness and usefulness of fiction in the mind of the reader by encouraging her to

associate fiction-making with prophecy.¹ While Sidney praises prophetic poetry as a “noble” art with authority and long-standing tradition (102), he places more emphasis throughout the *Apology* on the need to defend fiction-making as a form of poetic expression that can teach moral values and improve upon an imperfect world. I will show that Sidney artfully uses the authority and seriousness associated with prophecy to defend the value of fiction by comparing it to prophetic revelation. At the same time, I will argue that Sidney believes fiction-making is more useful than prophecy because it gives the poet greater freedom and power to pursue his own interests.

Sidney describes all poetry equally as an art that presents something through imitation. He defines “imitation” as “a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight” (101). Sidney believes that all poetry points to, or represents, something other than itself, not specifying whether this point of reference be something in the world, in the mind of God, or in the mind of the poet. All poetry by his definition also aims to “teach and delight,” meaning that it is pleasurable and entertaining for the reader and that it provides the reader with a lesson, or reveals something that the reader was not aware of before. This passage describes the way the poetry works, but it does not yet specify whether the act of imitating is different for different kinds of poets.

Just after describing poetry in general as imitation, Sidney divides poets into three groups defined by what those poets imitate: “*vates*,” or prophets, “imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God,” a second group of poets “deal[s] with matters philosophical [...] or natural, [...] or historical,” and “right poets [...] to imitate borrow

¹ Sidney does not use the word “fiction,” but as I will argue, his definition of “right poets” places them in this category.

nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be” (Sidney 101-2). Whereas the first two groups of poets receive the object of their imitation from another source, natural or divine, the third group writes fiction because they “borrow nothing,” but create the subject matter which their poems imitate. Sidney refers to “*vates*” as “the first and most noble sort” while he dismisses poets who imitate history and nature, writing that “because this second sort [...] takes not the course of his own invention, whether they properly be poets or not let grammarians dispute” (102). Here, Sidney expresses his belief here that for a poet to earn his title, he must strive to make something new. The label Sidney applies to the third category, “right poets,” the word “right” indicates that while these poets may not be as noble as prophetic poets, they are in Sidney’s mind most worthy of the title “poet.”

Sidney believes that poets of fiction are more worthy of the title “poet,” than others who claim the same title because, as he observes earlier in the *Apology*, “poet” comes from the Greek “*poiein*,” or “to make” (Sidney 99). Sidney discusses the etymology behind the English word for “poetry” before distinguishing between poets of prophecy, nature and fiction, so that he sees all of these poets as makers to some extent. However, he calls poets of fiction “right poets” to emphasize that they are more poetic, or more like makers than other kinds of poets. After Sidney divides poets into three groups, he uses the word “poet” again, but with greater specificity of meaning to distinguish makers of fiction from prophets: “these third [group of poets] [...] be they that, as the first and most noble sort may justly be termed *vates*, so these are waited on in the excellentest languages and best understandings, with the foredescribed name of poets” (102-3). The title “poet” is flexible in Sidney’s *Apology* because in one sense, it

applies to any writer who partakes in the imitative art of “poesy,” while in another sense it refers only to those writers who are makers, or who create in their minds what they imitate through poetry.

Scholars debate the firmness of Sidney’s division between “*vates*” and “right poets.” Ronald Levao argues that this distinction is central to the *Apology* and that Sidney works to distinguish fiction-making from prophecy to develop “a poetic grounded entirely in the human mind” (224). Roger Moore, in contrast, argues that “Sidney does not distinguish between prophetic and ‘right’ poetry as rigidly as his interpreters might like,” and that both types of poet access their art through divine inspiration, not fiction-making (37). I agree with Levao’s reading because Sidney not only applies the different names, poets and “*vates*,” but he reveals his special interest in “right poets” later in the *Apology* when he defends poetry as fiction, especially when he claims that it “never affirmeth” its truth (Sidney 124). Sidney’s defense of poetry as something that does not need to affirm itself as truth does not apply to prophecy which *does* affirm itself as true because it is a revelation of divine knowledge.

Moore is correct, however, to observe that the distinction Sidney makes between prophets and “right poets” is not entirely clear. In fact, it is purposefully unclear especially in the first five pages of the *Apology*. Sidney does not, as Moore argues, trouble the distinction between prophecy and fiction to show that all poetry is divinely inspired; rather, Sidney defends prophecy as poetry in order to elevate the concept of poetry in general before defending fictional poetry as a morally useful art. After discussing the Latin word for prophet, *vates*, as one of the former names for poets, Sidney retracts: “I fear me I seem to profane that holy name, applying it to Poetry,

which is among us thrown down to so ridiculous an estimation” (99). Then he reasserts that, in fact, this should make the reader think twice about wanting to separate fiction from morality in the first place (99). This is a key point in the *Apology* at which Sidney refers to prophecy as poetry to elevate poetry that is fictional and to make his readers take it seriously. Sidney’s approach implies that it is harder for readers to dismiss and ridicule prophecy than it is for them to do so to fiction.

One challenge to grasping Sidney’s distinction between prophets and makers of fiction in his *Apology* is in determining how his description of the poetic process leading up to his distinction between types of poets can apply differently to each type. I argue that Sidney uses words to describe the poetic process which are flexible enough to mean something different for the prophetic poet than they would mean to the poet who writes fiction. The two key words Sidney uses, which I will show he intends to mean different things for different poets, are “*Idea*” and “invention.” Both of these words can either connote discovery and revelation, as they would when applied to the prophetic poet, or they can point to human intellectual creativity, as they would in the case of the poet who writes fiction.

For Sidney, the “*Idea*” describes the thought process the poet undergoes before writing his poem. In the *Apology*, just after he describes the poet’s ability to discover or imagine things beyond nature, Sidney writes that “the skill of the artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself” (101). Sidney says here that the surest sign of the poet’s talent, or “skill,” is not in the written poem, but in the thoughts behind the poem, in the mind of the poet. Sidney evolves the term “*Idea*” away from its Platonic origin as an eternal form by equating it to “fore-conceit,” or the

plan which the poet conceives in his mind before writing his poem. Sidney writes: “that the poet hath that *Idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he hath imagined them” (Sidney 101). The “excellency,” or value, of the poet’s art is not measured by its comparison to anything in the material world, or to a universal Platonic truth, but rather by comparison to an “*Idea*” that exists in the poet’s imagination. This moves the source of poetry’s value away from the poem and toward the mind of the poet, but it doesn’t specify how the “*Idea*” came to be in the mind of the poet. It remains in question whether the “*Idea*” is placed in the poet’s mind by another source, or if he creates it for himself.

Sidney’s “*Idea*,” which he italicizes to mark as a foreign word, borrows from Platonic uses of the word and adds new meaning so that it can explain both the origin of a prophetic revelation and as the origin of fiction. Erwin Panofsky’s study of the earliest uses of “*Idea*” explains the Platonic meaning from which the word originates. Plato used “*Idea*” to describe an unchanging and universally valid form which epitomized its corresponding objects under a standard of “cognitive truth” (Panofsky 4). For example, while there are many chairs in the world, Plato believed that there would be a single and eternally valid “*Idea*,” or form of a chair allowing everyone to recognize different chairs that exist in the material world and to represent them in art. The Platonic *Idea* doesn’t give agency to the individual mind to create because the *Idea* is believed to precede the human thought by which it is conceived. While Sidney’s use of the term carries Platonic connotations, especially in that the “*Idea*” does not exist in the material world before it is manifested in the poem, he changes its meaning so that it

either originates in the mind of the poet, or comes into the mind of the poet from a divine source beyond the existing world.²

As much as Sidney's use of "*Idea*" differs from Plato's use, Sidney's version of the word preserves part of its Platonic meaning in that it maintains that the "*Idea*" is not only absent from the world of objects, but also that it is ideal, or better than all existing objects. Sidney notifies the reader of the superiority of the poetic "*Idea*" over nature, or the existing material world, when he writes that while nature's "world is brazen, the poets deliver only a golden" (100). The distinction between "brazen" and "golden" worlds comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and illustrates a contrast between a decline into corruption and deception, and a primal "golden" world of perfection (Shepherd 156, 32f.). Sidney associates this "golden" world with the poet's "*Idea*" by describing the two in consecutive paragraphs and writing that the poet can "deliver" both (100-101). Even though Sidney does not use "*Idea*" in a strictly Platonic sense, the Platonic theory that Ideas are more perfect than objects enhances his argument that the poet delivers things that are better than what already exists in the world. Once again, Sidney does not specify here whether the superior nature which the poet expresses is his own creation, or something created for him and transmitted to him as a prophecy.

Sidney is not the first person to revise Plato's version of the Idea. Erwin Panofsky begins his analysis of the evolution of the Idea into the sixteenth century with Plato's contemporaries (16-18). Plato did not associate the Idea with artistic creation; rather he believed that imitation of sensible objects further removed people from ideal

² For an analysis of Plato's influence on Sidney that does *not* mention Sidney's use of the word "*Idea*," see F. Michael Krouse, "Plato and Sidney's Defense of Poesie," *Comparative Literature*, 6.2 (1954): 138-147.

forms, and that copying ideal forms did not qualify the artist as a creator because those forms preceded him and were unchanging (Panofsky 4-5). Aristotle, rather, saw the Idea as a creative notion which could enter the world through the mind of the artist (Panofsky 16-17). Panofsky writes that Cicero uses the Idea to describe a notion of perfection that is not bound to imitate reality, or to follow rigid norms of truth (13). Thus, Plato's Idea quickly changes from a concept alien to the notion of intellectual creativity, to something that elevates intellectual and artistic creations above the existing world. Still, in none of these examples is "Idea" used in the modern sense of an original thought.

In addition to the long and complex history of meanings Panofsky finds attached to the word "Idea" in Greek and Latin, the *OED* reveals that Sidney's use of "*Idea*" in the *Apology* brings new meaning to the word as part of the English language. In the entry for "idea," under the category of "[s]enses relating to or derived from the Platonic concept," the *OED* distinguishes between "an abstract or eternally existing pattern or archetype of any kind of thing" (idea, 1.a), and "a conception of what is desirable or ought to be [...] the plan or design according to which something is created or constructed" (idea, 2). Sidney's use of "*Idea*" in the *Apology* is the first cited use of the second meaning, which, unlike former uses in English, equates Idea to conception (idea, 2). Sidney is the first recorded writer in English who does not use the word to describe an eternally valid abstraction, but to describe thoughts which lead to artistic creations. This new use of the word places all of the focus of the poetic process within the poet's mind, but it does not explicitly say whether the poet makes his own "plan or design," or if he rather conveys the previously hidden design of another creator.

The flexibility of “*Idea*” allows Sidney to use the term to describe the process behind poetic creation before distinguishing fiction from prophecy so that it may apply variously to both. The effect of using “*Idea*,” rather than a word like “thought,” allows Sidney to elevate the poetic process and assert that the concepts formed in the mind of the poet can achieve the quality of Platonic Ideas in their perfection and elevation above the world of existing objects. The Platonic elevation of Idea over object provides precedent for Sidney’s association of the poet’s “*Idea*” with the primal “golden” world which exists separately from the “brazen world” he believes people live in (100).

Any analysis of Sidney’s “*Idea*” must account for the fact that Sidney applies it both to “*vates*” and to “right poets,” to whom he does not apply the same kind of creativity. Ronald Levao fails to do this when cites Sidney’s use of “*Idea*” as evidence for his argument that Sidney’s idea of poetry seeks freedom from the need for divine inspiration (Levao 224). Levao also refers to the part of the *Apology* in which Sidney writes that the poet is “lifted up by the vigor of his own invention” (Levao 224, Sidney 100). However, Sidney uses both “*Idea*” and “invention” before he distinguishes between “*vates*” and “right poets” and the word “invention” is as ambiguous as “*Idea*” in its ability to apply to both kinds of poetry. The *OED* reveals that in Sidney’s time, “invention” could mean either “the action of coming upon or finding” (1.a), or “the action of devising, contriving or making up” (2). The first use of the word applies to prophetic poetry in which the poet can find out formerly hidden divine truths, while the second use of the word applies to fictional poetry in which the poet creates new things. Levao’s analysis of Sidney’s theory for poetry is useful for understanding the creative power of “right poets” (Sidney 102), but he fails to acknowledge that both “*Idea*” and

“invention” are flexible enough to take on different meanings when applied to “*vates*” and to “right poets,” a distinction Sidney does not make until after he uses the terms “*Idea*” and “invention” to describe the process behind poetry.

Sidney distinguishes between prophetic poets and “right poets” after he uses the terms “*Idea*” and “invention,” suggesting that these words are not necessarily indicative of human creativity. The question remains of whether the “*Idea*” is placed in the mind of the poet by a heavenly agent, such as Milton’s muse for example, or formed within the mind by the poet. The “*Idea*” applies to “the most noble sort [who] may be justly termed *vates*” and who “imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God,” as well as “right poets [...] having no law but wit” (Sidney 101-2). “*Idea*” denotes the particular plan in the mind of the poet that precedes his expression in a poem, but Sidney’s use of the word does not specify whether it is a product of the poet’s own creation, or something that the poet receives from God.

One critic who argues that Sidney attaches divine inspiration to all kinds of poetic creation is Moore. He argues that Sidney defends all fiction as divinely inspired prophecy, writing that “[a]lthough Sidney occasionally gets lost in flights of fancy, he never wavers in his basic conviction of the importance of divine inspiration to poetry [...] For Sidney, prophetic inspiration is a feature not only of divine poetry but also of ‘right’ poetry” (37-8). Moore argues, as I do, that the distinction Sidney makes between prophets and “right poets” is not clearly set (37). But he also argues that Sidney sees all poetic creation as divinely inspired prophecy (Moore 37). To defend this claim, Moore refers to the passage where Sidney writes that the poet delivers his art “with the force of a divine breath” (Sidney 101); but Moore reads this passage too literally. Sidney does

not say that the poet speaks with divine breath, but “with *the force of* a divine breath,” (emphasis mine) so that this passage is a metaphor which uses the power of divine creativity to describe the power of poetry. When Sidney writes that poets speak “with the force of a divine breath,” he does not mean that they are inspired by God or possessed by an extrinsic divine force, but that they resemble God in their own ability to create (101). This allows Sidney to associate fiction-making with the same divine nobility that comes with prophecy. While Moore argues that Sidney’s connection of fiction to prophecy insists that all poetry is divinely inspired, I argue that Sidney associates the two to show that while not all poetry is divinely inspired, poetry that does not claim divine authority is as capable as prophecy is of revealing truth and teaching morality to readers.

The title “maker” is ambiguous because it implies a variety of levels of creative power and ingenuity. “Maker” was a flexible word in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which could be used to refer to a person who builds something out of matter (*OED* maker, 1.a), or to denote God (*OED* maker, 2.a). Sidney writes that the name of the poet, “cometh of this word *poiein*, which is ‘to make’: wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him ‘a maker’ [...] how high and incomparable a title it is” (99). When Sidney first defines “*vates*” and “*poiein*,” he presents them as two etymological roots to a single English idea of poetry (99). Later, however, when Sidney writes that there are different kinds of poets, he uses the words “*vates*” and “*poiein*” to distinguish between prophets and fiction-makers.

Another way that Sidney magnifies the creativity expressed through the poet's title as "maker" is by using the same title to refer to both God and nature. This isn't to say that Sidney believes the poet is the same as God or nature, but that all three can create something meaningful where nothing was apparent before. Sidney refers to both God and nature as "maker" only five paragraphs after applying this title to the poet: "[n]either let it be deemed to saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honor to the Heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature" (101). It is easy to read the latter "maker" in "the Maker of that maker" as the poet because Sidney explains just before this that the poet is a maker. But Geoffrey Shepherd notes that this other "maker" is not the poet, but "that second nature" because Sidney believes that "God produces nature, which in turn has this secondary creative power [...] but man with his intellect works in the same way (although on an infinitely reduced scale) as God worked in the first creation" (Shepherd 158-9, n.16). Shepherd's reading here is also applicable to other parts of Sidney's text, particularly where Sidney describes nature and the poet as performing the same creative act: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done" (100). The poet and nature are both makers made by God and the creations of the poet compete with the creations of nature. Sidney applies this, once again, to both prophets and "right poets."

Sidney believes that the poet imitates God because, like God, the poet does not need to rely on existing objects to create. Furthermore, the poet performs like God because God made him able to do so: "having made man to His own likeness, [God] set

him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry” (Sidney 101). Sidney draws on Genesis and the idea that God created man in his image; but here he uses the allusion to say that the poet expresses more likeness to God than other people do. Still, Sidney keeps poetic power below divine power by saying that the poet is not above nature, but rather that he “goeth hand in hand with Nature” (100). Sidney elevates the poet above his readers as a godlike creator who can give them new things, but he also affirms that the poet is a creature of God even if he can perform a small-scale imitation of God’s divine creation. The poet has divine power to create a world “surpassing” nature (Sidney 101); but because his creative power is not equal to God’s, he will always be subject to the experience of “that second nature” made by the Nature God provides for him (Sidney 101). When Sidney compares the poet to God, he compares both the poet of fiction and the prophet. By doing so, Sidney does not “profane” divinity (99), but elevates fiction-making to a higher spiritual level because he is trying to convince them to take poetry more seriously as an art that can teach and strengthen morals.

I argue that Sidney makes effort to liken poetic creation to divine creation in order to emphasize the autonomy exercised by the human mind in fiction-making, but not all critics would agree with my reading. E. N. Tigerstedt discusses the history of the idea that the poet is like a divine creator, focusing on the works of late sixteenth-century Neoplatonists (455). Tigerstedt doesn’t discuss Sidney in the body of his article, but in a footnote he excuses Sidney’s absence by writing that “[i]n his *Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney does not directly call the poet ‘creator’” (477, n.5). While it is true that Sidney does not use the word “creator,” I have shown in the previous example that

Sidney cites the human ability to make poetry as a sign that man was made in God's image, or "likeness" (101).

In another example of the divine creative power Sidney attaches to poetic making, which appears after Sidney distinguishes "right poets" from prophets, he writes that "the poet bringeth only his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit" (120). According to Sidney, the poet doesn't plan his poems after the world that already exists, but makes a new world from which to draw the plan, or conceit, of his poem. Sidney does not use the verb "maketh" lightly here, but to describe the conception and expression of things which extend solely from the poet's mind. Even if Sidney doesn't use the word "creator," he still works to elevate poetic making by comparing it to divine creation.

There are other places in the *Apology* where Sidney relates poetic and divine creativity, not to say that God is literally operating through the poet, but to establish a metaphorical relation between God's creative power and the creative power of the poet. For example, Sidney writes that "right poets [...] range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be" (102). He does not say that fiction-making literally makes the poet divine, but that the poet's ability to see beyond what already exists and into "what may be and should be" is comparable to God's (and the prophet's) ability to do the same. That the "right poet," or fiction-maker Sidney describes here needs to learn his own discretion as he partakes in the art of poesy, is further evidence of his autonomy as a creator. This poet needs to exercise discretion to know what "should be" precisely because he is not receiving guidance from a divine source as he performs his creative act.

The ability of the poet to create fictions without relying on external sources of guidance and inspiration is a strong statement for the power and freedom of the human mind, but Sidney does not believe this ability is afforded to everyone. Even though Sidney rejects the idea that all poetic creation is the result of immediate divine inspiration, he does believe that God directed the poet's creative power by making it part of his natural inclination. Sidney writes that "a poet no industry can make, if his own genius be not carried unto it; and therefore it is an old proverb *orator fit, poeta nascitur*" (132), which means, "Orators are made, poets are born." Sidney says here that regardless of effort, no one will become a poet if they were not given a special inclination toward poetry at birth. Sidney's "right poet" resembles the prophet in that he is distinguished from his peers by a calling which he doesn't choose for himself. However, as I have already argued, Sidney attributes all aspects of the creative process behind the "right poet" to the human mind (102).

The poet operates through a creative faculty that is inherent to his human nature, but the unequal distribution of his faculty elevates him above his peers so that he must take on the task of moving readers. Sidney writes that poets should "delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved" (103). Poetry can both "delight" and "teach" because it is both fanciful and it serves a practical purpose. Sidney argues that, although imagined, the world performed by the poet has a substantial effect on the reader by enacting positive change in the character and moral stature of that reader (both of which are implied by "goodness").

My analysis of the creative process Sidney attaches to poetry reveals that the poet of fiction exercises complete freedom of conception and expression. At the other end of this process, the poet does not have the power to determine the reception of his creations by readers. Sidney argues that the poet fulfills the end of his art in moving the reader “to take that goodness in hand” which the poet makes and expresses (103). The metaphorical gesture of acceptance conveyed here indicates that the lesson of the fiction can only be learned by a reader willing to accept it. As much as Sidney empowers his poet with divine inventions and the art of perfect expression, he cannot be certain that the reader will “take” what the poet offers.

Sidney mentions both prophetic poets and poets who make fiction in his *Apology*, but it is only the second group which he really needs to defend against the accusations that poetry promotes inactivity, that it deceives readers, and that it corrupts their morals. He believes that fiction is just as helpful as prophecy for making the world a better place by teaching and strengthening morals and helping people experience any divine perfection that is absent in an imperfect world. Sidney shows people the goodness of fictional poetry by showing them the ways in which it is comparable to prophecy, suggesting that he expected people not to dismiss the divine authority behind prophecy as quickly as they would dismiss fiction. Sidney turns this around, however, when he uses divine creation to describe the power of people to make fiction. The authority of prophecy becomes comparable to the authority Sidney invests in fiction. The parallels Sidney draws between divine creation and poetic creation encompass every step of the creative process from the conception of the poetic “*Idea*”

and the making of that “*Idea*” in verbal expression, to the reception of the poetic creation by readers.

Chapter 3: John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

Paradise Lost, first published in twelve books in 1674, offers a detailed narrative of the conflict between Heaven and Hell, Genesis, life in Eden, and the temptation and Fall of Mankind. Much like Sidney uses the poetic qualities of prophecy to elevate and defend fictional poetry in his *Apology*, Milton uses a prophetic formula in *Paradise Lost* so that his highly creative fiction may be received more seriously and carefully by its readers. Recall how Sidney writes his *Apology* with the awareness that some people believe holy and prophetic matters are profaned when they are associated with the art of fiction-making: “I fear me I seem to profane that holy name [*vates*], applying it to Poetry, which is among us is thrown down to so ridiculous an estimation” (99). The speaker of *Paradise Lost*, who is a literary representation of Milton, emphasizes that the epic is prophecy, suggesting that Milton is concerned about tying the religious subject matter of the poem too closely to his own fiction-making. Early readers of *Paradise Lost* received the poem as a work of fiction and Milton did not necessarily intend for them to do otherwise.³ However, the relationship between the speaker and the muse within the text conveys the epic as a prophecy, elevating the mood of the epic by conveying it as a work of divine authority.

³ For an article on the reception of *Paradise Lost* by some of Milton’s contemporary readers, see William Poole, “Two Early Readers of Milton: John Beale and Abraham Hill,” *Milton Quarterly* 38.2 (2004): 76-99.

Summoning the Muse: the Uneasy Creativity of Milton's Speaker

Milton's speaker presents *Paradise Lost* as prophecy, not fiction, identifying himself as a retriever of knowledge, not as a creator. In the three prologues during which he calls upon the muse, Milton's speaker reduces his own agency as a creator and elevates the religious authority of what he says by claiming that it comes from a muse who is directly connected to God. Milton's speaker doesn't let himself slip into the category of poets Sidney would call "right poets," but presents himself as a poet rather like the "*vates*," or prophets who "imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God" (Sidney 102). Even though most readers would approach *Paradise Lost* as a work of fiction, the speaker Milton places in the epic masks the fictitiousness of his accounts with the effect of elevating the tone and giving the epic the appearance of divine authority.

The speaker most emphasizes the supposed divine authority of the epic when he summons the muse throughout the epic. Following the conventions of the epic form, the speaker first evokes the muse at the beginning of Book 1:

[i]nstruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present [...]
Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view
Nor that deep tract of Hell, say first what cause
Moved our grand parents in that happy state,
Favored of Heav'n so highly, to fall off" (1.19-28).

According to these lines, the account the epic presents of the Fall of Mankind is not being created by a poet, but received from Heaven. The muse the speaker consults here already knows what the epic poem will reveal because she has already experienced it ("thou from the first / Wast present"). From the beginning of the first book, the speaker

frames the poem almost as a historical account retrieved from a first-hand source, not as a work of fiction.

This passage, in which the speaker first summons the muse, also draws attention to the presence of the muse's voice behind the epic when the speaker repeats commands that the muse "say first" (1.25-6). When the speaker transitions from his evocation of the muse to the beginning of his narration, the muse's response to the evocation is channeled through the speaker: "Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? / Th' infernal Serpent; he it was" (1.33-4). The speaker's question flows seamlessly into what would be the muse's response, but the absence of quotations or other punctuation indicating a change of speaker suggests that the voice of the muse is joined with the voice of Milton's speaker. This prologue allows the speaker to assert his presence behind the narrative of the epic while he negates his own creation of the epic by showing that a higher source, more divine and more knowledgeable than himself, is speaking through him.

The second time Milton's speaker calls upon his muse, he reveals that the muse not only communicates to him by speaking, but also by illuminating truths hidden within the speaker's mind. The process by which the speaker conceives the contents of the epic is located within his mind, but it is framed as a process of discovery, not of creation. Milton writes of the speaker, who now addresses the muse as "celestial Light":

[...] thou celestial Light
 Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
 Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
 Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
 Of things invisible to mortal sight. (3.51-5)

To conceive the epic, the speaker must look within himself and see things which, although they don't exist in the world around him, have always been hidden in his mind. Inner illumination doesn't allow the poem's speaker to create anything, but to perceive things more clearly and to convey them as he sees them ("that I may see and tell"). The speaker could not do this without the participation of the muse who must "shine inward," "irradiate," "plant eyes," and "purge and disperse," all so that the speaker may simply observe and imitate, much like Sidney writes that prophetic poets "imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God" (101). As in the evocation of the muse in Book 1, the speaker presents himself here as a passive figure who needs to be acted upon by the muse, and one who claims to receive and repeat the contents of the poem, but not to make them.

Another scholar who reads these evocations of the muse as windows into the mental process behind the expression of Milton's poem is Martha Lifson. She also sees the muse as necessary to the poet's self-transformation (45). Lifson argues that the muse is a mediator "between the inspiration which is behind a work of poetry and the more mechanical talents necessary to bring it into being" (60, n.15). More specifically, the muse mediates between God, who is the source of the poet's inspiration, and the poet who, because of his fallen condition, cannot see these divine truths clearly enough to convey them. The contents of the poem are "invisible to mortal sight" (3.55), or they are invisible to even the poet unless the muse makes it possible for the poet to see them. Reading the muse as a mediator, as Lifson does, puts the muse at the center of the process, linking divine knowledge to the mind of the poet. Lifson's reading affirms my

argument that Milton's speaker does not create what he conveys, but receives it from a higher source.

The first two evocations of the muse illustrate how Milton's poetic speaker is not one of what Sidney would call the "right poets" who operate under "no law but wit," but is one of the "*vates*" who "imitates the inconceivable excellencies of God" (Sidney 98). Recall that Sidney defines "right poets" as poets who imitate their own ideas instead of things God has already created because these poets have "no law but wit" (101-2). Milton's speaker does not claim to operate under the law of his own wit, but to depend upon the muse for guidance: "govern thou my song, / Urania" (7.30-1). That Urania should guide or "govern" the poet's song indicates that the speaker is guided by the divine law of a nature which he did not create for himself, but recovered from the muse's memory of a lost state of being, or paradise.

Milton's speaker not only presents himself as a prophet by using the muse as a source of mediation between himself and God, but also identifies his work as prophecy by comparing himself to ancient prophets such as Homer. This allusion is not only an attempt to engage classical traditions, but also another opportunity for Milton's speaker to reveal the mental mechanics behind his poetic expression. Milton's speaker addresses the reader here, asking her to regard him among the ancient prophets:

[...] nor sometimes forget
 Those other two equaled with me in fate,
 So were I equal with them in renown,
 Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,
 And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old:
 Then [I] feed on thoughts, that voluntary move
 Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
 Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
 Tunes her nocturnal note. (3.32-40)

When the speaker writes that Thamyras and Maeonides, or Homer, equal him in fate, he refers to their common blindness. The speaker uses the subjunctive mood in line 35 to express that he does not have the fame, or “renown,” of these prophets, but that he might gain it through the reader’s association of *Paradise Lost* with Classical works. In line 37, the speaker transitions from his brief discussion of prophets into the description of his own action and the mental process that precedes his delivery of prophecy through poetry. He “feed[s] on thoughts,” so that instead of creating thoughts, he is consuming thoughts which he either receives from the muse or discovers in himself with the aid of the muse. The thoughts “voluntary move / Harmonious numbers,” meaning that they are transformed into the measured and musical verses of Milton’s poem naturally, without any imposed artifice. The last three lines of this passage present a metaphor in which prophecies move through the speaker as naturally as music moves through the nightingale. This metaphor works to distance the speaker from the status of an artist and ‘maker’ and to present his account of the events in the epic as something natural, instinctive and unplanned, unlike a contrived work of fiction. For the speaker to reveal the poem as naturally and artlessly as the nightingale sings suggests that he is doing nothing more than conveying prophetic truth as he receives it. Every time Milton asserts his voice as the speaker of the poem, he distances himself from the creation and artistry that might be associated with the literary work so that he appears not to be creating fiction, but to be revealing the truth of prophecy.

Kent Lehnhof argues that the speaker in *Paradise Lost* revokes his authority by calling on the muse because the monist doctrine Milton adheres to dictates that no creature of God can create like God without injuring God’s authority. Lehnhof writes

that “[t]he epic’s underlying impulse to limit creation to God the Father further manifests itself in Milton’s ambivalent approach to his role as author. Although Milton yearns to call attention to himself as the poetic maker of *Paradise Lost*, this position threatens to place him in an adversarial relationship to God” (33). Lehnhof goes on to compare the danger in taking a bold stance toward authorship of the epic to Satan’s aspirations of equaling God (34-5). But earlier in his essay, he also notes that Milton was the first English author to claim authority over his work through contracts with his printers (Lehnhof 17). This reading assumes that there is a religious conflict in Milton as an author who claims creative authority over his literature while promoting a theology in which it is blasphemous to do so. Lehnhof’s reading accurately assesses the manner in which Milton’s speaker evades the status of a creator, but there may be a more simple explanation for his apparent need to do so.

Milton’s speaker uses the muse to repeatedly emphasize his lack of creative authority because, like Sidney, Milton is sensitive to the tendency of some people to see fiction as something incompatible with truth and divinity. Milton’s conflation of truth and fiction in the epic actually shows that he does think human and divine creativity are compatible. Like Sidney, Milton uses prophecy as a precedent to elevate fictional poetry and make it seem more serious so that it is harder for the reader to dismiss the poem without fully considering its contents. The fact that Milton is making things up about Heaven, Hell and the creation of the world is undeniable, but to openly present these things as fiction would not allow the poem to make the claims that it does to divine authority.

Milton avoids identifying his speaker with creative power, but he presents God as a poetic figure by showing that all of his creations extend from his words. Milton's God, especially during his creation of the world in Book 7, comes closer to resembling Sidney's conception of the "right poet" than the speaker of the poem does. This becomes clear through comparison of the speaker's brief description of the mental process behind his poetry in the prologue to Book 3 to the description of God's creation in Book 7. The speaker says that "thoughts" precede his poetic expression: "thoughts, that voluntary move / Harmonious numbers" (3.37-8). In a later passage describing Genesis, the speaker refers to God's "Idea" behind the creation of the world:

[t]hence to behold His new-created world
 Th'addition of His empire, how it showed
 In prospect from His throne, how good, how fair,
 Answering his great Idea. (7.554-7)

Whereas "thought" applies to any mental state or process and has no immediate connection to creativity, "Idea," as an English word, becomes directly associated with poetic creativity through Sidney's *Apology* (*OED*, idea, 2.b). The difference in meaning between these two words points to the distinction Milton's speaker makes between God as a creator and himself as a prophet, or a recipient of information who does not create, but discovers what he describes. Like Sidney's version of the same word, "Idea" has Platonic undertones in this passage, but it also departs from the Platonic concept of the term in order to accommodate divine creation. God's creation brings form to his "Idea," but the created world is more than a shadow or diminished copy of God's "Idea." The physical creation of the world is "[a]nswering" the "Idea," meaning that it complements and fulfills the "Idea." Much like the plan that comes before a poem,

God's "Idea" is part of his creative process that isn't completed until it is answered by its expression or creation.

Milton's God resembles Sidney's poet, as Sidney writes in his *Apology* that the poet's "*Idea*" is his mental plan for poetic expression (101). Sidney's *Apology* attributes the creative "*Idea*" to the poet and uses "divine breath" as a metaphor to describe the power of poetic creation (101). The word "Idea" is associated only with God in Milton's epic, and not the speaker, following Milton's tendency within the epic to mask fiction with prophecy. Applying different terms to the thought processes of the poet and God prevents the narration of the epic from resembling an act of divine creation. But as the next section reveals, Milton also draws strong correlations between the divine and the poetic through the idea of generative language and of the reception and interpretation of creations by others. The work ultimately shows itself to be fiction so that the effort of the speaker to revoke his authority over the contents of the epic is actually a performance that does not reflect the human creativity that is truly happening in the production of the poem.

Poetic Creation as Divine Creation

Even though the poem's speaker conveys the epic as a prophecy rather than a fiction and avoids describing himself as a creator, the epic *is* a work of fiction and there are parallels between God's generative use of language and the poetic creation performed by the language of the poem. Furthermore, there is a close parallel between the freedom of people to interpret, accept, or reject God's creations, and the freedom Milton knows his readers have in receiving his poem to disagree with the political and

theological arguments he conveys. Milton's speaker is more divinely creative than he is willing to reveal in the poem. He is more than one kind of poet: he accesses both the nobility Sidney associates with prophetic poets, and the free range of the poet who makes fiction.

God is like a poet in *Paradise Lost* because all of his creative power is in his ability to create things with words. When God shares his plans for creation through prophesy in Book 3, he not only perceives things and describes them as they are, but his language also brings new things forth by describing them as he makes them. The first characterization Milton provides of God is set in Heaven, as God and the Son discuss Satan's rebellion and prepare a response to Heaven's loss of a third of its angels to Hell (3.80-265). When God first speaks, ending with a declaration of the role he will play through his Son, the poet reiterates what he says in the third person, demonstrating that God's words are visibly manifested in the space around him. Milton writes of God speaking and the response his words evoke in his environment:

[...] in mercy and justice both,
 Through Heav'n and earth, so shall my glory excel,
 But mercy first and last shall brightest shine."
 Thus while God spake, ambrosial fragrance filled
 All Heav'n, and in the blessed Spirits elect
 Sense of new joy ineffable diffused:
 Beyond compare the Son of God was seen
 Most glorious, in him all his Father shone
 Substantially expressed, and in his face
 Divine compassion visibly appeared. (3.132-41)

In this passage, God's words assume a physical and sensible (fragrant) presence in Heaven and the intentions his words convey are manifested in the Son and the listening angels. The poet conveys this manifestation by echoing God's speech with a descriptive interpretation of the scene in Heaven. The words "glory" (3.133) and

“mercy” (3.134) at the end of God’s speech are reflected in “glorious” (3.139) and “compassion” (3.141) in the poet’s following description of the Son. As God says that he will be glorious and merciful, the Son, who will perform his intentions, “was seen” glorious and “visibly appeared” compassionate (3.138-41). All of God’s language generates reality in his passage because it is physically manifested in the world around him as he speaks.

Stanley Fish approaches God’s prophetic language from a different angle, noting that Milton gives God a simple-seeming speech in which “metaphorical and affective language are rejected in favor of the objective style of Baconian empiricism” (61). Fish sees God’s language as objective and empirical because it is not rhetorical or persuasive, but seems to do nothing more than describe things as they are. This comparison works for describing the style of God’s language, but it does not apply to what God’s language is doing in the physical space of the poem. God does not withhold himself to observe his environment and describe it as it is. The response of the poet’s narration to his speech in Book 3 shows that God extends himself into his environment and generates new things as he applies words to them.

God uses words to make new worlds much like the poet uses words to construct the world of the poem. While the poetic speaker’s account of the scene in Book 3 describes the way God’s environment responds to his prophetic voice, the ability of God’s language to perform what he says is more explicit in the description of Genesis in Book 7. When Raphael visits Eden, he provides an account of the six-day Genesis to Adam. To create the world, Raphael recounts that God sends the Son out as the embodiment of his “Word” to convey his intentions to Chaos. Milton takes language

almost directly from the Bible when he lists each of God's verbal commands followed by a description of the physical creation that follows: "Let there be light,' said God, and forthwith light / Ethereal, first of things, quintessence pure / Sprung from the deep" (7.243-4). Just like God's prophetic speech in Book 3, in which the poet's narration of the scene in heaven immediately echoes God's words, his words command immediate material response from Chaos in this passage. Raphael says that God instructs the Son as the embodiment of his words: "thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee / This I perform, speak thou, and be it done" (7.163-4). God performs creation through his words and the difference between the expression of God's language and the creative act his language points to is indiscernible.

The generative power of God's speech here is a perfect example of what J.L. Austin has called "performative language." A performative statement does not describe anything that exists, nor it is false, but rather it performs an action which cannot exist apart from the verbal expression itself (Austin 5). Some familiar examples are the statement "I promise" and the declaration "I do" in a marriage ceremony (Austin 7). While performatives do not describe reality, they actually generate it. There is a special category for performative speech because not all of our language can be performative. However, during Raphael's account of Genesis, when God embodies his "Word" in the Son, all of his language is performative. Speaking and doing are simultaneous: "speak thou, and be it done" (7.164). God uses language in Genesis in a way that truly unites word and action.

The heightened performativity of God's language in this passage seems to distinguish the power of his speech from any kind of generative power that could be

performed through human speech. However, everything the reader learns in this passage is conveyed through the language of Milton's poem. Just like all of God's language in Genesis generates the world, all of the poet's language generates the world of the poem in the reader's mind. God and the poet are both essentially makers of worlds, and Milton brings this connection to the reader's attention by emphasizing that God's Genesis is performed entirely through language. Even though the poem's speaker presents himself as a prophet and never says that he 'makes' anything as a poet, a comparison of the generative quality of God's language in Genesis to the way in which the language of the poem generates a world in the reader's mind suggests that the poet behind *Paradise Lost* is more godlike in his creativity than the prophetic stance he takes in the poem allows him to appear.

To further reveal the creative power which the poem's speaker conceals, note that his blindness, which he brings to the reader's attention in Book 7, requires him to imitate no other object but what appears in his own thoughts. The poet's blindness not only allows him to draw on the authority of other prophetic writers, but it also helps to explain the process by which he either creates or offers readers knowledge they can't find in nature. The speaker describes his blindness the second time he summons the muse:

[...] ever-during dark
 Surrounds me from the cheerful ways of men
 Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
 Presented with a universal blank
 Of nature's works to me expunged and razed. (3.45-9)

The metaphor comparing the speaker's knowledge to an empty book expresses the internalization of the outward "book of knowledge" that follows blindness. This points

to how the contents of the epic are being drawn from no outward object, but from within the mind of the speaker before he expresses them. The question remains of whether the speaker is filling his newly emptied book of knowledge with creative fictions, or if another mind, such as that of the muse or even God, is actually conveying it to him.

Joanna Picciotto writes that while the speaker's blindness cuts him off from the book of nature, he finds power in writing a new one: "as he draws the reader's eye from one divine text to another—from creation to the poem she is holding in her hand—lamentation fluctuates into self-assertion" (47-8). In this reading, the blindness of Milton's poet makes him godlike because it forces him to rewrite nature within his mind instead of reading it through the metaphorical book of visible creation. Insofar as "self-assertion" implies a claim to authority, Picciotto's statement is true of Milton as an author, but does not accurately describe the stance Milton's speaker outwardly assumes in this passage. Rather, he asks the muse to give him a new set of eyes so he can see a new nature within: "[s]hine inward / [...] there plant eyes" (3.51-2). The speaker always emphasizes the role of the muse as one who reveals to him what the reader might otherwise assume he creates as fiction. Milton the author might, as Picciotto observes, see his ability to be inwardly inspired through blindness to write the poem as an opportunity to assert authority, but the speaker passes all authority up to the muse.

There are more opportunities for the reader to draw parallels between Milton's speaker and God by looking closely at the content of the poem. David Quint points out an important connection between the speaker's flight, aided by the muse, and the Son's flight in Genesis, aided by God. Quint observes that while Milton connects the

Classical stories of the failed flights of Icarus and Phaeton to Satan in his ambition to equal God, Milton rewrites these stories as flights of success when he applies the same allusions to both the poem's speaker and the Son of God (847). Icarus flew toward the sun when the wax holding his wings together melted and he fell to his death, while Phaeton attempted to pull the sun through the sky by chariot and drove it off course. Both of these disasters are attributed to excessive ambition and both involve beings flying too close to the sun. These myths work to describe the creative works of the poet and the Son because they both approach Godhead in their creativity and Milton defines God as a light as unapproachable as the sun: "God is light, / And never but in unapproached light / Dwelt from eternity" (3.3-5). Arguing, as I do, that Milton draws subtle connections between divine creation and the poetic creation of the poem, Quint writes that "Milton juxtaposes the mythical figures in a similar way to promise himself the godlike exaltation of poetry" (875). By drawing a connection between the figure of the poet and the Son of God through allusions in the epic, Milton subtly reveals that the poem's speaker is more godlike, or more creative, in his role as a poet than he outwardly presents himself to be.

The speaker of *Paradise Lost* reveals his own creative power through subtle reference at least once in the epic. In a description of Eden, the speaker brings poetic creativity to the surface of the poem and reminds the reader that she is experiencing a fictional world. The speaker reflects on the difficulty of using the art to describe something as natural and artless as the true Eden:

[b]ut rather to tell how, if art could tell,
 How from that sapphire fount the crispèd brooks,
 Rolling on orient pearl and sands of gold,
 With mazy error under pendent shades

Ran nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
 Flow'rs worthy of Paradise which not nice art
 In beds and curious knots, but nature boon
 Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain. (4.236-43)

There is an analogy developed in this passage in which artful poetic expression is comparable to the contrived nature of a manmade garden while a purer form of expression is comparable to the nature of Eden. The speaker expresses concern at the beginning of the passage that his human art will not be able to accurately “tell how” God’s Eden appeared. This anxiety appeals to accuracy, suggesting that the speaker is aiming for an artless representation of truth, which applies to the act of conveying prophecy. However, the descriptive language used in this passage is very artful and, arguably, one of the most aesthetically pleasing passages in the entire poem. It is detailed and sensuous which suits the idea of Eden as a place of perfection and pleasure. Art and nature seem irreconcilable, but they are inseparable here because the perfection of Eden cannot be accessed without art, just as Sidney writes that the poet brings a golden world to the brazen one by “freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit” (100). The Classical golden world is not the same as the Christian paradise, but in both of these examples, creativity helps people access an ideal state that is impossible to experience in the real world.

Moving from the generative power of language to the susceptibility of language to interpretation, the speaker of *Paradise Lost* continues to resemble Milton’s God. Even though God uses language to generate worlds that perfectly reflect his intentions, his extension of free will to all created beings allows people to interpret and react to his creations in varying ways, and even to turn against him as Satan does. God’s willingness to let his creatures freely react to his creations parallels the poet’s

powerlessness over readers' varying interpretations of his work. Milton's speaker does not present himself as a godlike creator, but a closer look at the vulnerability of his creation to unfit readers shows that his role as the deliverer of the poem resembles God's role as creator of the world.

The argument the speaker asserts at the beginning of Book 1 demonstrates the freedom people have to interpret God's creations as they please. Milton's speaker reveals his intentions in conveying the epic: "[t]hat to the height of this great argument / I may assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men" (1.24-6). The speaker needs to "justify the ways of God to men" because God allows people to think freely and some choose to see him as unjust.

Satan and his followers are the first example of God's creatures rebelling against him in spite of his role as omnipotent creator. God delivers a speech in Heaven in which he expresses his favor for his Son and while everyone seems to receive the speech with joy, Satan receives it with envy. The Angel Raphael recounts God's speech to Adam and Eve, then says, "[s]o spake th'Omnipotent, and with his words / All seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all" (5.616-17). When God performs his "Word" through the figure of his Son during Genesis, there is no room for interpretation. Here, however, God delivers a speech in which his words mean different things to different listeners.

Not all of God's language can be performative like it is in Genesis because this would exclude the possibility of free will. In Book 3, God explains to his Son that Adam and Eve will fall for the same reason that Satan and his followers fell from Heaven:

I made him [Adam] just and right,
 Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
 Such I created all th'ethereal Powers
 And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
 Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell. (Milton 3.98-102)

God believes that for his creatures to have free will, they must have the freedom to interpret his creations and his role as a creator however they please. It is important to God that his creatures are not forced to submit to him, but that they make the choice to accept his authority. This is the same approach that Milton takes toward his readers.

Milton was aware that he was writing a poem that would be interpreted differently by different people and this becomes apparent in the epic when he expresses anxiety about angry readers through the poem's speaker. The speaker of Milton's poem anticipates a rebellion similar to that Satan carried against God, but rather a rebellion against his literary creations. The poet has godlike power to use language to generate a world, and he faces the same vulnerability to interpretation that God chooses to face in the interest of preserving free will. In a Classical allusion to the murder of the poet Orpheus, Milton's speaker seeks protection from the muse against the wrath of angry readers:

Still govern thou my song,
 Urania, and fit audience find though few.
 But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
 Of Bacchus and his revelers, the race
 Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
 In Rhodope, there woods and rocks had ears
 To rapture, till the savage clamor drowned
 Both harp and voice. (7.30-7)

The speaker feels that only a few of his readers will interpret his text as he intends them to, so he asks Urania to find him "fit audience though few" (7.31). In the same way that he passes his creative authority on to the muse in earlier passages, he also gives her

credit here for the transmission of his text among readers. The following allusion to Orpheus conveys that Milton's speaker fears some readers will not only misread his work, but will also rebel against him and seek to destroy him and his poetry, just as the Bacchantes destroyed "[b]oth harp and voice" when they murdered Orpheus (7.37).⁴ The potentially destructive reaction of readers to the epic poem parallels the rebellion of Satan and his followers against God. However, unlike the poet, God does not feel threatened by Satan's rebellion because he is omnipotent.

Many critics have discussed the different ways in which Milton enlists the participation of his readers by confronting them with moral and interpretive decisions throughout the epic. Fish argues that Milton intends for there to be a disconnection between the reader's reaction to Satan's seductive speeches in Books 1 and 2 and the evaluation of those speeches by the epic voice so that the reader will be invited to make the choice of correcting her reactions (4-6). This is almost exactly like the correcting voice God offers to fallen mankind: "[t]he rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned / Their sinful state" (Milton 3.185-6). More recent critics agree that Milton actively engages the reader's interpretive process, but they place more emphasis on the reader's interpretive freedom. Andrew Mattison argues that "Milton's poetics does not constitute a direct bridge between intent and interpretation but rather creates a world of diverse meanings through which interpretation is given no more than the vaguest direction" (11-2). This accurately describes instances of indeterminacy throughout the poem, in which Milton seems to purposefully give his readers multiple interpretive

⁴ For a brief description of the myth alluded to in this passage, see George M. Logan, Stephen Greenblatt, Barbara K. Lewalski, and Katharine Eisaman Maus. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume B*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006. 1947, n.7. Print.

possibilities to choose from.⁵ Picciotto, like Mattison, argues that the reader, not the narrator, guides the discovery of meaning in the poem: “the epic requires a reader willing to invest care in making truth visible” (47). God chooses to give free will to his creatures, whereas Milton knows, as any other writer does, that he cannot take away the reader’s will to form her own interpretation of his work. To the contrary, Milton is interested in augmenting the reader’s free will by giving her more control over the meaning of the poem.

Even though Milton’s speaker tries to remove himself from the role of creator, a closer analysis of the ways in which God’s language and the speaker’s language are working in the poem reveals that the poem’s speaker is more Godlike and more creative than he claims to be. The final section of this chapter shows that while Milton wants his reader’s to participate in constructing the poem’s meaning, the speaker of the poem does not think that any reader could fill his position as the narrator of the epic.

From *Paradise Lost* to ‘Paradise Within’

Much like Sidney’s idea of the poet, Milton’s poet exercises a unique talent in conveying the poem. There is a connection between divine election and the speaker’s ability to convey the epic that resembles Sidney’s belief in the “old proverb, *orator fit, poeta nascitur*” (Sidney 132), or “orators are made, poets are born.” The next chapter will reveal that Traherne is very different, but both Sidney and Milton see poetic expression as a divinely elected vocation that people cannot pursue by choice. Milton’s

⁵ For example, see the discussion between Adam and Raphael around the structure of the solar system (7.5-158). Milton leaves his reader to choose between the Ptolemaic model proposed by Adam and Copernican model that Raphael’s response suggests.

God graces Adam, Eve and their descendants with the ability to achieve paradise after death through faith and good works, but he does not give everyone the ability to see and regenerate the lost Eden in the same way that Milton's speaker does.

At the end of the last book of Milton's epic, the Angel Michael tells Adam and Eve that they will be able to survive their tragic loss of Eden because they will now have a "paradise within." He tells the couple what they must do to achieve this:

[...] only add
 Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add faith,
 Add virtue, temperance, add love,
 By name to come called charity, the soul
 Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
 To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
 A paradise within thee, happier far. (12.581-7)⁶

This is another part of the epic where the reader is invited to question the nature of the poetic creativity behind the poem because it provokes the question of whether the poem's speaker was able to reveal lost Eden because he, like Adam and Eve, has a "paradise within." However, I argue that this passage refers to two different concepts of paradise. The two different pronouns introducing them announces this grammatically: Eden, which is the place the poet describes, is "this" Paradise because there is only one of them, whereas the inward paradise is "a" paradise because there is one inside every person who seeks it. The reader also knows the two versions of paradise are different because Michael contrasts them, saying that the paradise within is "happier far" (12.587). The mental and spiritual labor Adam and Eve must perform in order to have paradise within is also not the same as the labor which the speaker performs, with the

⁶ Contrary to the edition printed in the *Norton Anthology*, which I quote from in this passage, the original print capitalized "Paradise" in both line 586 and line 587. See John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, London: 1668, *EEBO*, M2138.

aid of the muse, to convey the contents of the epic. Adam and Eve must demonstrate “faith,” “virtue” and “love,” so that having paradise within is the same as securing salvation and paradise after death. Nothing about this suggests creativity, or even the prophetic inspiration which Milton’s speaker more openly lays claim to.

An alternative reading of this passage is held by Louis Martz who argues that “paradise within” refers to the same paradise which Milton’s speaker portrays in the epic. Martz writes that “the promised redemption consists in the renewal of man’s inner powers: those powers of the soul by which the bard has just pursued his triumphant journey of the mind toward Paradise” (166). According to Martz, Milton believes that anyone could access and convey the same divine knowledge that is conveyed with the aid of the muse throughout the epic. As I have just shown, this is not the case. God does not give everyone the ability to journey to Heaven, Hell and Eden as Milton’s speaker does—a feat which he attributes to his blindness and the aid of the muse.

There is evidence of this elsewhere in the epic. Milton rejects the Calvinist doctrine that all people are predestined for salvation or damnation (Logan 1875, n.6). Still, God states in his prophetic speech on creation of the human race, that he chooses to give some people a special ability to interpret the divine intentions behind his creation so that they can be more inclined to live without sin. Milton’s speaker tells of God declaring in Heaven:

Some I have chosen of peculiar grace
Elect above the rest; so is my will:
The rest shall hear me call, and oft be warned
Their sinful state. (3.183-6)

The word “peculiar” suggests that God chooses only a few people to be predisposed toward this kind of grace. Everyone else hears God call and can “oft be warned”

(3.185). But they still live in sin because they are not receptive, or not able to properly read God's warnings. In the same way, Milton's speaker expresses concern that some people will be unfit to properly interpret the epic even if they can read it. It is possible that Milton sees his position as a poet as a sign of his own "peculiar grace" (3.183).

Paradise Lost seeks to "justify the ways of God to men" (1.26), but in doing so it also warns readers through the examples of Satan, Adam and Eve about the consequences of sin. The speaker of Milton's epic is "[e]lect above the rest" because he is able to convey knowledge "unattempted" (1.16), and which readers can only access through his poem.

To conclude, the things Milton's speaker discusses are framed as biblical events, which would not be seen by Milton and his readers as topics for fiction; but at the same time, the epic is very original and goes far beyond biblical precedent. The convention of inspiration offered by the muse in the epic tradition allows the work to possess both the nobility of prophecy and the free range of fiction. Milton clearly believes, as Sidney does, that people can learn valuable moral lessons from fiction. However, Milton is hesitant to convey this belief explicitly within the poem because of the elevated religious subject matter of his poem. As the next chapter reveals, Traherne differs from Milton in his readiness to teach moral lessons and regenerate lost paradise through fiction while openly treating fiction as such.

Chapter 4: Thomas Traherne's *Poems of Felicity* and *Centuries of Meditations*

Traherne both embraces fiction-making as a positive sign of divinity in the human mind, and sees it as a negative sign of the inability of people to recognize the perfection of earthly paradise. Unlike Sidney, who believes that people live in an imperfect or “brazen” world (100), or Milton who believes that paradise is “within” after the Fall (12.587), Traherne believes that the outward world is “far better than Paradise had men eyes to see its glories and their advantages” (*Centuries* 4.21). Traherne uses fiction to guide the reader toward a more accurate vision of the world around her as paradise.

Traherne's approach to recovering paradise differs from Milton's approach by openly engaging poetry as fiction-making and by expanding the art from a high calling to an activity all of his readers should perform for their own happiness and salvation. For Traherne, the creativity that defines poetry is something everyone must perform to exercise God-given divinity for, as he writes in *Centuries of Meditations*, “all are like deities” (1.74). Traherne believes that everyone can be like God because everyone can create worlds like God does, but in the scaled-down space of creative thought and poetry.

Traherne was writing his last work, *Centuries of Meditations*, only a few years after Milton first published *Paradise Lost*. Most of Traherne's work remained lost in manuscript until it was rediscovered and published in his name almost two centuries after his death (Dobell vii). This chapter will look at selections from two such works: *Poems of Felicity* and *Centuries of Meditations*. *Poems* is a collection of spiritually oriented lyrics and *Centuries* is a prose work of short meditations divided into five

centuries, or groups of 100. Partly due to the brevity of his literary career and partly due to the belated publication of his work, Traherne is much less well-studied than Milton and Sidney. Still, this chapter shows that he engaged some of the same questions the former two poets were interested in surrounding the nature of human creativity and the usefulness of fiction.

The Creative Reader in *Centuries of Meditations*

Traherne believes that everyone should be creative, like he is as a poet, so he encourages the reader of *Centuries* to co-author the book by writing her own thoughts into it. The dedicatory poem that Traherne places at the beginning of *Centuries* tells the reader, to whom it was presumably given, that the book is something she can use as a tool for self-transformation. The reader should be spiritually improved by both reading the book and writing her own thoughts in it. The poem appears at the beginning of the manuscript, just before the first meditation:

This book unto the friend of my best friend
As of the wisest mark of love I send,
That she may write my Maker's prais therein
And make herself therby a Cherubin. (Traherne 1)

Traherne speaks directly to the primary reader of *Centuries*, revealing that he sends her the book as a gift. This poem expresses that by writing her own praise of God, rather than only reading Traherne's praise, the reader will be elevated to a higher spiritual state: that of a Cherubin, or angel. It may be that the reader becomes like an angel figuratively during life, or that she guarantees her salvation and literal transformation into an angel after death, or both. The key is that Traherne conceives a correlation

between writing and self-fashioning such that the words the reader chooses to put on the page have a real impact on her identity and her experience of the world.

Just after telling the reader that she can “make herself” by writing in the book she has in her hands, Traherne compares the blank pages of the book (which are no longer blank) to a human soul: “[a]n empty book is like an infant’s soul, in which anything may be written. It is capable of all things, but containeth nothing. I have a mind to fill this with profitable wonders” (1.1). The reader is holding a book already full of wonders, but this meditation places her alongside Traherne as a witness to the book’s conception. This passage uses the theory of the blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, in which a person is developed through their experiences, but specifically to say that reading and writing are potential ways of gaining new experience. By reading Traherne’s writing, especially the autobiographical section in the “Third Century,” the reader profits from the experiences of Traherne and the lessons he has learned from those experiences. The reader may write in the book to transform herself into a “Cherubin,” so that physical transformation of the book is analogous to the transformation of the reader’s soul. The sense of collaboration in these opening passages is closely related to the primary objective of *Centuries*, which is to help the reader see the world she lives in as a paradise, or for her to have felicity. Referring to himself in the third person, as he does throughout the “Fourth Century,” Traherne writes that “whosoever would enjoy the happiness of Paradise must put on the charity of Paradise. And that nothing was his Felicity but his duty” (4.22). The reader, like Traherne, owes felicity to God. The enjoyment of the world as paradise requires “the charity of Paradise,” which Traherne equates to felicity. Charity is the love and

fellowship that connects human beings, so that felicity requires the subject to create paradise not through withdrawal or inward reflection, but through community and collaboration with fellow Christians. Unlike the participation Milton requires from his readers to construct meaning in *Paradise Lost*, Traherne's version of reader participation is more collaborative and more democratic because it elevates the reader to the same level of creativity he enjoys as author. Throughout the book, as my readings of later passages will make clear, Traherne enlists the reader's participation such that she makes the book alongside Traherne as she reads it.

Traherne invites his reader to join him in authoring *Centuries* because he believes that creative thought and writing are not signs of his own special talent, but could be performed by anyone. Attesting to this reading of Traherne's universal approach to creative writing, James Balakier defines Traherne's felicity, or the enlightenment which *Centuries* tries to bring to the reader, as "a transforming experience that Traherne adamantly believes is within everyone's reach and is completely consistent with the laws governing mind and body" (206). This is correct, but to elaborate further, this transforming experience is the ability of every person to reap mental and spiritual benefits by creating fictions, then looking out at the real world and writing or expressing praise of it. Traherne writes in the opening quatrain that the reader will be transformed by writing praise of God (1). This does not mean that the reader praises God through fiction, but it becomes clear in the "Second Century" that for the reader to properly conceive the joy of God's creation and his worthiness of praise, she must be able to depart from God's creation into her own fictional creations to return again with new eyes.

Balakier argues that Traherne is an objectivist and that he seeks an empirical scientific approach to understanding nature (213-15). To be objective is to distinguish between outward truths which are evident in nature and the interpretive impulses which the subject projects onto nature, while to be empirical is to seek truth through sensory experience. I agree that Traherne ultimately wants his reader and he to have a shared experience of the world of existing objects, but to narrowly define Traherne as an objectivist overlooks his equally meaningful insistence that subjectivity and the individual exercise of creative thought is a necessary step to achieving a shared, outward vision of the world.

Ideas, Thoughts and Things

Traherne works in several places throughout his writing to define the limits of ideas, thoughts and things, and to explain the ways in which the three act on each other to form human consciousness. The amount of energy Traherne invests in explaining these terms indicates that they are central to the balance his philosophy reveals between inward creative thought and the outward acquisition of a shared understanding of the natural world as paradise. Just as the word “Idea” plays a key role in the ways Sidney and Milton understand and convey human creativity, Traherne’s own use of the word reveals that he sees creative thought as a universally accessible and beneficial process.

Traherne’s use of the word at the end of the “Second Century” shows us that while Traherne sees “idea” as nothing more than an instance of “thought,” he elevates

thought above the world as a link between God and the human subject.⁷ I will also show that “Dreams,” a poem from Traherne’s *Poems of Felicity*, complements this meditation in the “Second Century” by arguing that thoughts are more powerful than things because they more readily transform the subject’s experience by changing his or her emotions. Because fiction is a construct of thought, Traherne holds that it can have a transformative impact on the human experience.

Traherne believes that ideas are better than things because ideas connect people both to God and to the world. Meditation 2.90 is one of the longer, and certainly one of the most rich and dense meditations in the *Centuries*. In this meditation Traherne explains how human perception can both redefine the nature of a thing created by God and please God in doing so. Traherne argues in this meditation that ideas and thoughts are more valuable to God than things are because ideas and thoughts create the experience of things in the human mind:

We could easily show that the idea of Heaven and Earth in the Soul of Man is more precious with God than the things themselves and more excellent in nature. [...] The thought of the World wherby it is enjoyed is better than the World [...] The world within you is an offering returned [...] A Thought of the World, or the World in a Thought, is more excellent than the world, because it is spiritual and nearer unto God. (2.90)

What does Traherne mean by this? How does he define “idea”? Sidney uses the word to denote the conceptual precursor to the creative act of the poet (101), while Milton uses the word to describe the entire plan behind God’s creation of the world (7.557). Traherne doesn’t use the word to distinguish himself as a poet, or to distinguish the mental power of God, but to describe the creative thought of the reader and all other

⁷ Dobell’s edition of *Centuries* preserves the spelling and capitalization of words from the manuscript, but Traherne, unlike Sidney and Milton, does not capitalize the word “idea.” In modern usage, the word is capitalized when it is used in a Platonic sense.

people and the extent to which it allows them to make a “world within.” Traherne says here that ideas are better, or “more excellent in nature” than things because they are essential to our ability to experience and enjoy things in the world (“the thought of the world wherby it is enjoyed”). Traherne distances himself from the Platonic “Idea” by understanding “idea” as a product of subjective thought that is unique to the individual mind. The idea of the world or the “world within” each subject is “nearer unto God” because it is an “offering returned,” or the medium by which every subject completes the circular process of creation and reception.

Traherne stresses enjoyment here because he believes that God created the world for the purpose of its reception and contemplation by other minds. The “idea” Traherne writes of is not only the medium by which the subject experiences things, but it is also formed by her experiences. God created the world so that people could think about it: “as the end is better than the means, the thought of the World whereby it is enjoyed is better than the World [...] it being the end of the World, without which Heaven and Earth would be in vain” (2.90). Traherne does not associate “idea” with the plan or intention behind creation, but with the “end,” or the thought by which people perceive creation and recreate it in their own minds. Traherne doesn’t describe the “idea” as a divine or Platonic blueprint from which the objects in the world are formed, but as the interpretation of creation after it is experienced and enjoyed by people.

The circularity that joins the experience of the individual subject to God in Traherne’s theology does not exclude the importance of finding a unifying reality that transcends the individual mind. Robert N. Watson looks only at one side of Traherne’s portrayal of human creativity when he reads Meditation 2.90 and writes that in

Traherne's philosophy "[w]e do not, or at least we need not, misconstrue this universe, because it does not meaningfully exist outside our nearly divine consciousness of it" (322). But Traherne *does* think people can misconstrue the universe because the motive behind his emphasis on creative thought, which he expresses early in the *Centuries*, is the reconstruction and correction of errant human perception: "the world is both a Paradise and a Prison to different persons. [...] [W]e need nothing but open eyes, to be ravished like the Cheribims. Well we may bear the greatness of the World, since it is our storehouse and treasury" (1.36-7). People see the world differently, but if everyone had correct vision, or "open eyes," everyone would see that the world is a perfect paradise. Traherne aims to unify people under a single conception of the world, but he believes that the ability of individuals to create their own fictitious versions of the world is what allows them to gain a more pure vision of the real world as the paradise that Traherne believes it is.

Traherne also reveals that his ultimate goal is to turn human vision back outward when he writes in Meditation 2.90 that even though the reader is able to create her own worlds in her mind, she should choose to look outward and envision the real world instead. Traherne addresses the reader: "[h]ow deformed would you be should all the World stand about you and you be idle: Were you able to create other worlds, God had rather you should think on this. For thereby you are united unto Him. [...] For God hath made you able to create worlds in your own mind which are more precious unto Him than those which he created" (2.90). Traherne writes that even if the reader could create alternative worlds, God would rather that she focused on the real world. Note that Traherne uses the counterfactual "were" in this sentence because he is making up a

hypothetical world in which the reader can create other worlds. Traherne performs through this sentence the same thing which he exhorts his reader to imagine herself doing. However, Traherne also says that God would rather that the reader thought on “this” world, or the real world around her, so that she can be united to God and his creation. When Traherne returns to affirm that the reader really can make worlds in her mind, he assumes that the reader would make an inward reflection of the world that God created around her. This idea or thought would satisfy God as a precious gift resembling his own creation or, in Traherne’s words, as “an offering returned” (2.90).

Traherne’s poem “Dreams,” from *Poems of Felicity*, sheds more light on Traherne’s understanding of the terms “idea” and “thought.” The main argument of this poem is that thoughts are like things because they can have the same potency of emotional effect on the subject who entertains them. This argument arises from Traherne’s realization that dreams move him as effectively as if they were waking experiences, even though they occur nowhere beyond his mind. The poem challenges distinctions both between sleep and wakefulness, and between thought and matter, emphasizing that all human experience can be defined as much by inwardness as by outward circumstance. Traherne does not see this as an epistemological problem, or as a source of anxiety, but as an empowering realization of how much he can determine the pleasure and suffering of his own life.

“Dreams” begins with the speaker in awe of the world he recently encountered in his dream. He is in disbelief that nature, including people and animals, could appear as if to his waking senses (*PF* 115). The speaker expresses his amazement through the inquiring tone of the first three stanzas, all of which end with questions. In the first two

stanzas, Traherne measures the reality of the things in his dreams against his waking experiences:

The reall Sun, *that* hev'nly Ey!
 Can closed Eys ev'n in the darkest Night
 See throu their lids, & be inform'd with Sight?

The People were to me
 As tru as those by day I see. (*Poems* 114-5)

Traherne is fascinated by his realization that an objective reality could easily be replaced or supplemented by thought. The words “reall,” “inform’d” and “tru” which Traherne uses to describe his dreams are all words which are associated with the certainty of knowledge—something that is not typically associated with dreams. Traherne’s tone is inquiring at the beginning of the poem, but he does not express any anxiety about his uncertainty in discerning between dream and reality. This uncertainty is, for Traherne, a source of curiosity: “What sacred Secret’s this, / Which seems to intimat my Bliss?” (*Poems* 115). Traherne’s experience of dreams leads into his further investigation of the distinction between thoughts and things.

Traherne determines that thoughts are not easy to discern from things because they determine the ways in which people experience things. Much like Sidney argues that poetic fiction can “move” the reader more effectively than rhetorical persuasion (103), Traherne determines that thoughts move the subject to emotional experiences which cannot extend from objects in the world. Traherne writes:

Thought! Surely *Thoughts* are tru;
 They please as much as Things can do:
 Nay Things are dead,
 And in themselves are severed
 From Souls; nor can they fill the Head
 Without our Thoughts. Thoughts are the Reall Things
 From whence all Joy, from whence all Sorrow springs. (*Poems* 116)

Traherne doesn't measure the truth of thought by its ability to be experienced by more than one person or to be physically proven, but by its effect or its ability to move the thinking subject to an emotional experience. Just as Traherne writes in *Centuries* that the world is enjoyed by means of thought (2.90), he writes here that thoughts are a necessary medium by which objects are applied to the mind. Traherne understands human conception such that no experience of the world is possible without subjective thought, which creates a unique version of the world within each individual.

Traherne instructs the reader to move away from her errant perception of the world as a prison, to a new vision of the world as paradise by transforming herself and her vision through creative writing, thought experiment and other methods of manipulating her thoughts and emotions. The counterfactual phrase, “[w]ere you able to create other worlds,” in Meditation 2.90 points to the process by which Traherne helps his reader correct her vision of the world. The reader can only change her vision of the world by changing herself and her expectations through experiments with fiction. The next section looks at the thought experiments Traherne leads his reader through in *Centuries* in order to make her see the real world differently, as well as a thought experiment he constructs in *Poems of Felicity* which works toward the same goal.

Thought Experiments

For Traherne, thought has more authority than things do to generate and transform human experience. Traherne uses thought to create fictions which, unlike the prophetically framed *Paradise Lost*, the reader should experience as such. By gaining new experiences through thought experiment, the reader should become transformed

and therefore see the world differently. She should not only see it differently, but see it as paradise because she ought to realize that in spite of the human power to create attractive fictions and fantasies in the mind, nothing that the author or reader can create surpasses the beauty, completeness and usefulness of God's creation.

Traherne leads his reader through a series of thought experiments at the beginning of the "Second Century" with the expressed intention of effecting real change in the way the reader sees the outward world. The lesson Traherne extends to his reader is that no matter how much she pursues her desires through her imagination, she will always find that God's world is more worthy of her thoughts. Traherne ultimately directs the reader's praise back to the outward world, but he emphasizes that creative thought and the expression of poetry and fiction are necessary for improving the subject's perception of reality.

For example, to teach the reader that the sun in the sky is perfect, Traherne asks her to create worlds in her mind in which the sun is either absent or altered. Traherne doesn't describe the world he wants his reader to imagine in detail, but rather compels her to participate by imagining it for herself. This recalls the invitation at the beginning of *Centuries* for the reader to transform herself by writing in the book as well as reading it. Traherne sees the reader's creativity as central to fulfilling the book's purpose. Rather than using detailed description in his thought experiments, Traherne uses language that makes the reader aware of the interpretive and creative role she plays as the author of her own imagination.

The first thought experiment is explicitly directed at improving the reader's enjoyment of the world. The fiction doesn't replace the world, but effects a real change

in the subject's own experience of the world, helping her enjoy it more. Traherne instructs his reader: "[i]f you desire directions how to enjoy [the world], place yourself in it as if no one were created besides yourself, and consider all the services it doth unto you alone" (*Centuries* 2.2). Traherne doesn't describe what a newly unpopulated world would feel like, or the "services" it might perform, which could refer to anything from the abundance of vital resources, to the beauty of natural landscapes. Rather he commands the reader to do this work with the words "place yourself" and "consider." Traherne isn't as interested in presenting altered versions of the world as he is in making the reader be creative and to alter her thoughts in ways that are challenging because they require her to negate her preconceptions about the world which she has always experienced as a populated place.

The experiments Traherne creates around the sun follow the same pattern. Traherne uses fiction to uncover truths which are otherwise concealed from the human mind, which he believes is impaired by the imperfection of fallen existence. Fiction works in the case of the sun to de-familiarize the reader from the world she is accustomed to, letting her return to reality with new eyes. Traherne believes that happiness is achieved by changing the self, not by trying to change the world.

In constructing thought experiments around the sun, Traherne doesn't illustrate what he wants his reader to imagine, but tells her how he wants her to go about imagining it for herself. Traherne commands the reader to undertake her own development of an idea, just as he does in the previous experiment with solitude: "[s]uppose the sun were absent, and conceive the world to be a dungeon of darkness and death about you: you will then find his beams more delightful" (*CM* 2.7). The most

emphatic words in this passage are not those describing the world or the sun's beams, but the words "suppose," "conceive" and "find." Unlike Milton, Traherne doesn't paint a vivid picture that leads the readers by her senses into another world that is at least mostly created for her. Rather, Traherne wants the reader to perform this creative labor herself and to conceive a new world on her own. These three key words, "suppose," "conceive" and "find" also outline the process of poetic creation which begins with a supposition, or what Sidney would call an "*Idea* or fore-conceit" (101). Then the poet can "conceive" the idea in the detailed development of a fictional world or through poetic expression. Finally the poem leads to a discovery in the real world, or to the reader "find[ing]" out a new truth that was previously unknown.

Traherne continues through the beginning of the "Second Century" in developing thought experiments around the sun, shifting from the imperative mood seen in the last two examples, to the subjunctive mood. This mood is like the imperative in that its concluding clause enlists the active participation of the reader. When Traherne writes: "[w]ere you able to create worlds" (2.90), he asserts both that the reader cannot do so, and that she could fictitiously imagine herself doing so. Traherne unites content to what is happening in the mind of the reader as she reads the text when he uses the subjunctive mood to provoke creative thought in the reader. Whether or not she chooses to write her own praise in the book, the reader will become aware of her own creative abilities by reading what Traherne writes for her.

When Traherne employs the subjunctive mood to construct fictional experiences of the sun, he prompts the creative participation of the reader in a similar way. Traherne writes: "[w]ere there two suns [...] they would absume and dry up all the

moisture on the earth” (2.10). Then he writes: “[h]ad the sun been one infinite flame, it had been worse than it is” (2.11). Traherne describes these experimental worlds in more conclusive detail, but he begins each description with a counterfactual, spurring the creativity of the reader as she constructs the conditions of the imaginary world in her own mind.

Traherne thinks through, along with his reader, each of these hypotheticals and deems all of them inferior to the nature of the real sun in the real, outward world. Constant daylight would rob people of the “sweetness of Repose” and a larger sun would dry up the earth (2.10-11). Neither the reader’s creations, nor Traherne’s creations could ever surpass God’s creations. In fact, they are not intended to. However, these fictional creations do help people surpass their prior understanding of the world by helping them enjoy the sun as it is. Traherne advises his reader: “[l]earn to enjoy what you have first, and covet more if you can afterwards” (2.12). The thought experiments around the sun all imagine an augmented or multiplied sun. This indicates that the reader creates fictions because she covets more, but when she discovers through a prosthetic experience that she does not really want what she thought she coveted, she is able to enjoy what she has. Traherne doesn’t condemn the reader’s desire, but encourages it by telling her to pursue her desire through fiction. Denise Inge picks up on the importance of desire in Traherne’s theology when she writes that for Traherne, desire and insatiability are virtues insofar as they are signs of divinity in the human mind. The clearest example of this in *Centuries* is when Traherne tells his reader: “[y]ou must want like a God that you may be satisfied like a God” (1.44). In the passage concluding his series of thought experiments, Traherne tells the reader to covet

more “if [she] can” (1.44), challenging her to pursue her desire with more creativity rather than warning her against it because he knows that her desire will always be dispelled by greater satisfaction with reality.

Moving from *Centuries* to *Poems*, “On Leaping over the Moon” begins with the speaker seeing the sun reflected in the water and imagining that another world is below. In the first stanza, he links this experience to a story his brother told him about leaping over the moon. The brother wants to leap over the moon in the sky, but chooses not to do so with the help of a “feigned horse” (*PF* 105), like Phaeton, nor to be “deceived by *Icarian* wings” (*PF* 105). He will not mimic the classical models which ended in disaster, but will surpass them with the power of his wit. The man chooses to “bold the Danger overcome” as he runs and leaps over the reflection, then later tells his brother, the poem’s speaker, how he leapt over the moon and gazed down at a distant earth (*PF* 106).

The association of Icarus’ flight to the sun with a flight to the moon seems unusual, but it is not unique to Traherne. Francis Hicks wrote in *Certain Select Dialogues of Lucian, Together with his True History* (1634) of a character named Mennipus who outdoes Icarus by successfully flying to the moon (Cressy 966). This appears in the midst of what Cressy dubs England’s “lunar moment,” or a heightened interest in moon travel and the possibility of life on the moon (967). Fictional works about moon travel, such as that by Hicks, were criticized by some as “ridiculous” and “idle fancies” (Cressy 975). Traherne’s poem “On Leaping over the Moon” proves that fictions of moon travel are not merely “idle fancies,” but creations which carry moral lessons that can substantially change people’s lives on earth for the better. This is much

like Sidney's *Apology* which, less than a century earlier, defends fiction in general against the same kind of criticism.

Traherne's leaping man performs poetically, not only because he creates a witty idea in his mind, but because he gains a place in the poem by narrating the action of leaping as he perceived himself performing it. Traherne writes that, "as he leapt, with Joy related soon / How *happy* he o'r-leapt the Moon" (*PF* 106). The words "related soon" are pivotal because the leaping man's own account determines the poem's portrayal of the event. Traherne describes the subjective nature of the leaping man's experience when he describes the man's certainty in his perception of himself: "[a]s much as others thought themselves to ly / Beneath the moon, so much more high / He thought himself to fly" (*PF* 106). The man is just as certain that he flies as anyone else is certain that they stand on the earth. Note that the title of the poem doesn't describe the man's action objectively or it would be called "On Leaping over a Reflection of the Moon." Rather, the poem frames the event subjectively, as the leaping man experiences it. Traherne doesn't see this subjectivity as a problem, but as an opportunity for the leaping man to make himself happier through the expression of his own divine nature. This poem is more playful than the thought experiments Traherne uses in *Centuries*, but it adopts the same principle, which Traherne takes very seriously, that the pursuit of desire through fiction dispels desire by evoking greater clarity of perception and satisfaction with the real world, which Traherne believes everyone should enjoy as much as they imagine they could enjoy Eden.

This fantasy of flight doesn't result in an obsession with pretending to leap over the moon, but in a greater reverence for the regular experience of seeing the moon

distant in the sky. The poem ends with the speaker telling of how his brother is thereafter enthralled to see that as he goes from town to town, the moon follows to shine on him in all places (*PF* 107). This satisfaction seems like a great lowering of expectations following the man's previous desire to leap over the moon. Easy contentment suddenly replaces great ambition. This shows that Traherne doesn't blame imperfection in the world for sparking human dissatisfaction as much as a flaw in human estimation of the world. Extending the joy he shares with his imaginative brother, Traherne's speaker asserts that, "every single Person hath such Store, / 'Tis want of Sense that makes us poor" (*PF* 108). What Traherne refers to as "sense" ultimately lies in perceiving the world as it exists objectively; however, the poem shows that this perception cannot be achieved without prior use of fiction to correct the human gaze. Traherne shows that creating other worlds through thought experiment is not an end in itself, but a means by which the reader may better appreciate the world as it naturally exists.

Poetry and the Fallen World

As previous examples show, Traherne does not use creativity with the goal of changing the world, but to transform the reader and her perception of the world. Above, I've discussed how Traherne defines intellectual creativity and how he thinks such creativity might change peoples' lives. This section shows that Traherne believes creativity is imperative for the reader because of her fallen condition. Similarly, Sidney believes that the necessity of fiction is proof of the Fall of Mankind because it implies that people are not satisfied with the world as it is: "with no small argument to the

incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam: since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it” (Sidney 101). Unlike Sidney, however, Traherne believes that perfection is what people find in reality after looking through fiction, not something fiction can actually capture.

The thought experiments discussed in the previous section are one way in which Traherne shows the reader that he wants her to transform herself through creative thought that transforms the world as she conceives it in her mind. Another way Traherne instructs the reader to transform herself is by telling her to become her own mental chemist so she can manipulate and master her thoughts and emotions just as the chemist or experimentalist would master the elements and objects of nature. Traherne compares the creative thought of the reader to both the chemical transformation of matter and to God’s creation of the world in Genesis:

This world was far better than Paradise had men eyes to see its glories and their advantages. For the very miseries and sins and offences that are in it are the materials of his joy and triumph and glory. So that he is to learn a diviner art that will now be happy, and that is like a royal chemist to reign among poisons, to turn scorpions into fishes, weeds into flowers, bruises into ornaments, poisons into cordials [...] a man must, like a God, bring Light out of Darkness and order out of confusion. (*CM* 4.21)

The simile Traherne employs between chemistry and creative thought compares objects to ideas to show that thoughts build experience in the same way that things do, and that thoughts are as subject as things are to mastery and manipulation. To break down the correspondences formed through the elongated simile in this passage, note that “miseries and sins and offences” are like the weeds, bruises and poisons the chemist works with, while “joy and triumph and glory” are like the flowers, ornaments and cordials that are the product of the chemist’s transformative work. Traherne uses

material transformation to describe the “diviner art” of mental and spiritual transformation that makes the reader’s experience of the world more pleasant and helps her see it as it truly is.

This passage not only compares the creative reader to the chemist, but it also compares her to God by saying that she can improve her experience of the world by bringing “Light out of Darkness and order out of confusion” (4.20). Just like God’s directs transformation at the improvement of Chaos, the reader improves herself. The clarity of seeing the world as the paradise that Traherne believes that it truly is, brings light and order to the darkness and confusion of perceiving the world as a fallen place of “miseries and sins and offences” (4.20). Sidney connects poetic creation to divine creation and Traherne creates a simile to compare the creative thought of every individual to divine creation, giving every reader the potential to become a poet.

While the transformations described in this passage occur inwardly, they have a real impact on the subject’s experience of the outward world. The inwardness and individuality of the transformation Traherne instructs the reader to undergo in this passage is balanced by the goal of moving back outward to the “the world” and “its glories,” which Traherne believes can and should be perceived in the same way by everyone. The end of the inward creation of “joy and triumph and glory” is to feel joy in finally being able to see these positive things present in the outward world of God’s creation.

Traherne’s insistence here that paradise is in the outward world complicates Louis Martz’s reading of *Centuries of Meditations* as a book which pursues the Augustinian vision of inward paradise. Martz compares *Paradise Lost* and *Centuries of*

Meditations to the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine and concludes that “Traherne and Milton share the Augustinian vision of a Paradise within” (35). The process of inward illumination and divine revelation that Martz associates with Augustine relates more closely to Milton than it does to Traherne. Traherne does not find paradise in the mind or in fictions that extend from the mind, but writes that “this world” could be paradise if people would see it correctly. This is different from Milton, who ends *Paradise Lost* with the consolation of “paradise within” (12.587).

Milton believes that the human condition is imperfect on account of the Fall of Mankind, but that people can escape this imperfection by creating better worlds through fiction. Sidney also asserts this in the *Apology*, but rather than paradise, he associates poetry with the perfection of Ovid’s “golden world” (100). This meditation from the “Fourth Century” reveals that Traherne sees the world as paradise, but believes that people need fiction in order to see it correctly because the Fall of Mankind has clouded human judgment. These poets have different ideas about whether the Fall has more negative impact on the world or on the people in it, but they all see fiction as a productive response that can improve the human experience. Traherne affirms that he associates the need for fiction with the Fall when he reveals that after death or at the time of Final Judgment, people will no longer need to distort their visions of the world in order to see it correctly.

Traherne writes in the poem “Consummation” that when earth and Heaven trade places, people will no longer need to invent things after their desire. The beginning of the poem describes how, in the fallen world, peoples’ thoughts encompass more than the material world that they can perceive around them. Traherne writes:

[t]he Thoughts of Men appear
 Freely to mov within a Sphere [...]
 The Ground on which they acted be
 Is unobserv'd Infinity. (*Poems* 126)

Thoughts contain infinite possibility and are not limited to what people can observe around them. Even though Traherne writes that thoughts move freely, he also notes that they are substantial, or real insofar as they are “acted” upon “Ground,” or come to exist beyond the mind of the thinking subject as they influence his or her state of being in the world. The infinite extension of human thought in a finite world necessitates creativity:

Wherin because we no
 Object distinctly find or know;
 We sundry Things invent,
 That may our Fancy giv content. (*Poems* 127)

Traherne writes here that when people desire things they cannot find in the world, they can explore these things through inventive thought. The subject receives contentment from the creations of his or her fancy, but this is not the same as the contentment Traherne ultimately wants people to find in God’s creations.

The true contentedness doesn’t come in this poem, however, until people leave the temporal world either in death or at the day of Final Judgment. Traherne believes people will no longer find disparity between their thoughts and desires and the things they can find in the world around them. Traherne writes that “at last [...] in a glorious Day”:

Nor shall we then invent
 Nor alter Things; but with content
 All in their places see,
 As doth the Glorious Deity. (*Poems* 128)

Traherne believes that desire and discontentment are necessary in life on earth, which also necessitates invention and alteration, or creativity. The need for creativity comes

from our inability to see and know everything, or “[a]ll in their places see.” Traherne’s approach to creativity is complex because he simultaneously pursues the opposites of desire and satisfaction. This is why Traherne writes in *Centuries* that “[y]ou must want like a God that you may be satisfied like a God” (1.44). Denise Inge’s reading of Traherne’s approach to desire is helpful here: “[desire] is good for two reasons: first, because it leads the desiring human to seek and keep on seeking; and second because it is a divine quality” (64). Only rather than “seeking,” it would be appropriate to say that desire, for Traherne, leads the human to keep creating and altering things like a God. Traherne does not condemn fiction-making and other forms of creativity as signs of human dissatisfaction, but he sees creativity as a link that connects desire and satisfaction as contrary sides of both the human condition and of the divine condition.

Traherne believes that fiction-making is necessary for correcting the desire inherent in human vision and allowing people to see and be satisfied with the world as it truly is. Traherne doesn’t believe that people should replace reality with fantasy, but he also complicates the distinction between the two because he focuses on an exchange between reality and fantasy, or between thoughts and things. Much like Sidney, Traherne shows that fiction becomes reality when it moves or transforms human experience. For Traherne, awareness of the real world as paradise requires creative thought and expression because it requires the reader to transform herself, thereby transforming her experience of the outer world.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Sidney, Milton and Traherne would all agree that fiction is a necessary form of human thought and expression because it is powerful enough to completely transform the human experience by actualizing ideals in a world which is, or at least seems to be, imperfect. However, the different approaches they take to portraying fiction reveal that fiction was not always taken seriously, and was sometimes criticized by readers as a violation of truth. Sidney's *Apology* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* use prophecy as a shield for fiction because fiction is vulnerable to attack, especially when it lays claim to things people perceive as divine and cosmic truths, as it does in Milton's epic. Were the speaker of Milton's epic to present himself as a poet of fiction, his creation of the epic would appear to be an imitation of divine creation. While I have shown that this is what the poem does to some extent, the prophetic formula the speaker employs works to mask this connection so that the speaker of the poem does not seem, from the way he presents himself in the prologues, to imitate God by creating the world of the poem.

Traherne embraces fiction more openly than the other two poets and he is explicit in telling his reader that she should see herself as godlike in her creativity, bringing "Light out of Darkness and order out of confusion" (4.22). He uses fiction to approach the same theological problem of alienation from paradise that *Paradise Lost* engages, but he also shows that manmade fiction does not profane divine truth by departing from it. Sidney and Milton believe that fallen world is imperfect and that fiction is a way out of the known world and into another world of greater perfection. Traherne, on the other hand, believes that earth is a paradise better than Eden. For this reason, he uses fiction to break through the illusions of the human mind and to enter

into the known world with a new perspective. Traherne establishes harmony between truth and fiction because rather than presenting fiction as a way to depart from or change the world, he presents it as a way to change people and to help them see the world as it truly exists.

One thing to consider in measuring the different approaches these poets take to fiction-making is the kind of audience each poet was considering while writing his respective works. Sidney and Milton were prominent figures who would have expected many people with a wide range of opinions to read their texts. Traherne, on the other hand, was writing with a single reader in mind. This may have allowed him to express himself more sincerely, without having to guard himself against popular criticisms of fiction. The marginality of Traherne's work allows him to utilize and express his belief in the usefulness of fiction with great clarity. In contrast, the popularity of Sidney and Milton may have forced them to demonstrate their celebrations of fiction more indirectly, in order to deflect some of the criticisms of fiction these poets were sensitive to when they wrote their texts.

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