

MELTING BODIES: THE DISSOLUTION OF BODILY BOUNDARIES IN MILTON AND SWINBURNE

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Abstract

This paper explores connections between treatments of the body and its boundaries in the poetry of John Milton and Algernon Charles Swinburne. My aim is twofold: first, I wish to assert Milton's direct influence on Swinburne's poetry, rather than as a vague indirect background for Victorian poetry in general. Second, I argue for Swinburne's importance to our understanding of Victorian sexuality and Milton's consequent importance as a significant source for Swinburne's conception of the sexual body.

Swinburne's poetry is immersed in the tense and conflicted discourse surrounding the sexual body in the nineteenth century, represented by medical and cultural writing of the period on the figure of the hermaphrodite, and more widely, by the increasing dissolution of bodily boundaries. Milton directly provides Swinburne with ways of rethinking and presenting these 'melting bodies', making the Swinburnean body, and that of Victorian culture more generally, Miltonic in fundamental ways.

The two poets are related first through their mutual engagement with the figure of the hermaphrodite as the pinnacle of a metaphysics of melting: a pervasive concern with melting bodies and the dissolution of fleshy thresholds. Moving beyond the hermaphroditic, I explore a more omnipresent sense of melting, merging, cleaving-together identifiable in Milton's metaphysics and in the poetic composition of both Milton and Swinburne. Placed in relation to the importance of Sappho and Baudelaire's conception of the sexual body for Swinburne, Milton's influence is significant for what it can offer to supplement and surpass that of these two noteworthy figures.

The Victorian conception of the sexual body simultaneously involves an anxious desire to clearly delineate the sexes, and a sense that such a project might be founded on fallacy. The Victorian sexual body has come to be seen as a site of conflict and tension: in both medical and cultural discourse, the dissolution of bodily boundaries, or what I refer to here as "melting bodies", is central to a Victorian fascination with, and fear of, the sexual body and its mutability. Mid- and late-nineteenth-century anxiety and aesthetics whirl around a notion of bodily "melting". This paper identifies the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne ('first and foremost a poet of the body'¹) as vital for an understanding of this "melting" of the Victorian sexual body, and aims to illuminate the significance of John Milton's poetry in Swinburne's conception of melting bodies. Milton is to be understood as a voice among many for Swinburne, who read and used his reading extensively, but Milton is, I will argue, a

¹ Richard Sieburth, 'Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne', *Comparative Literature*, 36 (1984), pp. 343–353 (p. 351).

particularly important voice for Swinburne. His conceptual influence on Swinburne's imagining of the sexual body both supplements and surpasses that of Sappho and Baudelaire, both considered crucial in Swinburne's poetic development.

Swinburne's poetry questions the stability of sexual difference, which Jill L. Matus identifies as a primary anxiety of the Victorian conception of the sexual body. 'While Victorian theories of sexual differentiation certainly emphasized the great difference between the sexes and the natural complementarity of male and female,' she writes, 'they were also very much concerned with the instability of that difference.'² Upholding the boundaries between the sexes in connection to societal roles as well as sexual activity was 'Victorian cultural imperative', but an analysis of the biomedical discourses of the mid- and late- nineteenth shows uncertainty within this rigidity, rife with belief in mutability.³

Swinburne's poetry can also be considered a primary discourse on nineteenth-century peripheral sexualities, the concern of Foucault. In his argument against the understanding of nineteenth-century sexuality as "repressed", Foucault writes about sex as being as being expressed, assessed and obsessed through engagement in a multitude of discourses: 'sex—be it refined or rustic—had to be put into words.'⁴ The 'discursive explosion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' Foucault writes, resulted in increased discourse on sexual transgressions – it was the 'time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were.' As these 'peripheral sexualities' became the focus of sexual discourse, eyes were drawn to the edges of sexual society.⁵ The way we discuss these 'peripheral sexualities' is bound up with the idea of permeable fleshly boundaries. Foucault goes on to say that 'From the end of the eighteenth century to our own, [peripheral sexualities] circulated through the pores of society'.⁶

Swinburne's 'peripheral' bodies challenge boundaries of sexual difference, cleaving to one another with edges that mingle, a literal "melting" of boundaries that disrupts binary sexual difference. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suggest that Swinburne's poetry is essential for an understanding of fascinated and fearful Victorian thinking about the sexual body. The conception of melting bodily boundaries that can be found in the poetry of Milton is pervasive in Swinburne's poetic representation of the body.

² Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 21.

³ Matus points out, for example, 'the Darwinian notion that humankind's ancestors were hermaphroditic, the late nineteenth-century interest in the "man-woman" and androgyny, and the Freudian concern with bisexuality and a genderless libido', Matus, p. 23.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, [1976] 1998), p. 32.

⁵ Foucault, pp. 38–39.

⁶ Foucault, p. 40.

Extant studies of Swinburne's relationship to Milton are uncommon and elusive: Swinburne's name appears in James Nelson's *Milton and the Victorians* (1963) almost as an afterthought, whose 'devotion' to Milton and the ancients is only 'to some extent' comparable to that of Tennyson, Landor and Arnold.⁷ William Wilson looks at Miltonic influence through Swinburne's critical response to Arnold, claiming that 'to Swinburne, Arnold was disturbingly un-Miltonic.'⁸ This is typical of the way in which Swinburne's relationship to Milton is discussed, as an addendum. More recently, in *Bearing Blindness* (2001), Catherine Maxwell claims Swinburne is central to studies of Milton's influence. However, again, the work of the two poets is connected through a male lyric tradition which places poets such as Shelley, Tennyson, and Browning chronologically and conceptually between Milton and Swinburne.⁹ I argue that these studies erroneously dilute the directly Miltonic aspects of Swinburne's writing. In concentrating this diluted connection I aim to show that the poetry of Milton provides Swinburne with a direct blueprint for his melting bodies, making Milton's bodily metaphysics a vehicle for Victorian tensions concerning the sexual body. The Swinburnean body, and so, that of Victorian culture more generally, is Miltonic in fundamental ways.

Primarily, Swinburne uses Milton to access a model of melting bodies and boundaries that surpasses the Sapphic model. Milton offers a system in which the fluidity of sexuality and desire is unlimited by postlapsarian human biology. Swinburne also finds in Milton's system of bodily metaphysics the prelapsarian potential for combining the aesthetic and the abject in a way that surpasses the similar potential offered by Baudelaire. Where Baudelaire mixes the aesthetic and the abject, there is conflict between the two; Milton's aetiological world contains the abject in no conflict with the aesthetic.

In *Paradise Lost*,¹⁰ the gendered, biological boundaries of the body dissolve in three primary ways. The first is seen in the hermaphrodite: a concentrated representation of the collapse of the boundary between male and female that haunts

⁷ 'Tennyson, as we have seen, anticipated Hopkins and Bridges in his simultaneous devotion to both the ancient Greek and Roman poets and Milton. But he was not alone in this. Walter Savage Landor and Matthew Arnold, as well as Swinburne to some extent, exhibit the same devotion.' See James G. Nelson, *The Sublime Puritan: Milton and the Victorians* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 142.

⁸ William Wilson, 'Algernon Agonistes: "Thalassius," Visionary Strength, and Swinburne's Critique of Arnold's "Sweetness and Light"', *Victorian Poetry*, 19 (1981), pp. 381–395 (p. 382).

⁹ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 37.

¹⁰ All citations from the poetry of John Milton are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. by William Kerrigan, John Peter Rumrich & Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007). Book and line references are indicated in the text.

Victorian visions of the sexual body.¹¹ Early in the epic, Milton describes the Holy Spirit in hermaphroditic terms as masculine in its impregnation of the earth, and feminine in its act of ‘brooding’ on the world ‘Dove-like’, as if incubating an egg:

Instruct me, for thou know’st; thou from the first
Wast pregnant, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad’st it pregnant (I. 19-22)¹²

Maxwell briefly discusses this passage, in which ‘the Spirit combines brooding (a female quality) with insemination (a male quality)’, writing that ‘if Milton’s powers do shade into each other, it is with a predominance of female characterisation [...] The Spirit then might be more female than androgynous, annexing the capabilities of the male.’¹³ Interestingly, however, though the idea of incubating eggs is primarily maternal, doves are a species that *share* incubation duties: the male and female parents take turns ‘brooding’. Mourning doves will not approach their nest ‘if they see a person anywhere near’ and so the switching occurs in secrecy, giving the impression to anyone studying the nest that the pair are a single bird; male and female blend together.¹⁴ Milton’s Holy Spirit (perhaps unintentionally) is then doubly hermaphroditic, in fact more androgynous than female.

The Holy Spirit is not the only hermaphroditic being in *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s angels are also sexually indeterminate figures, ‘desiring beings’ that ‘are ideal inhabitants of Milton’s self-generating ambisexual cosmos’.¹⁵ Though Milton’s angels are ‘spirits masculine’ (X. 890), they have the ability to take on female form, or mixed form, ‘For spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both; so soft / And uncompounded is their essence pure’ (I. 423-425).¹⁶ Milton’s angels engage

¹¹ The nineteenth-century conception of hermaphroditism demands that we think of gender and sexuality as overlapping: in the late nineteenth century, as Foucault reminds us, homosexuality was *invented* – it came to be understood in terms of collective identity rather than singular action, ‘a species’ as opposed to ‘the sodomite’ (‘a temporary aberration’). He writes that ‘Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a *hermaphroditism of the soul*.’ Foucault, p. 43, my emphasis.

¹² I am indebted to Christoph Singer for first highlighting for me the hermaphroditic nature of this passage in a conference paper titled ‘Heretics in the Truth’ – John Milton in Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition*, presented at ‘Dante and Milton: National Visionaries and Visionary Nationalists’ at Senate House in November 2013.

¹³ Maxwell, *Bearing Blindness*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ See Margaret Morse Nice, ‘A Study of the Nesting of Mourning Doves’, *The Auk*, 39 (1922), pp. 457–474 (p. 465).

¹⁵ Karma deGruy, ‘Desiring Angels: The Angelic Body in *Paradise Lost*’, *Criticism*, 54 (2012), pp. 117–149 (p. 129).

¹⁶ All citations from the poetry of John Milton are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Essential*

with gender fluidly: assuming ‘both’ sexes, if ‘they please’. In *Paradise Lost*, then, the hermaphrodite is associated with both the creation of the earthly world and the divine beings that populate Heaven (and Hell). As deGruy comments. ‘Creation contains the active elements it needs to generate itself; gender and sex are as mutable and circumstantial as the angelic body.’¹⁷

The hermaphrodite is therefore central to Milton’s epic, and is the ideal point from which to begin comparison with Swinburne’s melting bodies. As Lindsay Smith writes, ‘the hermaphrodite was central to Swinburne’s poetic project’,¹⁸ which forms part of a broader ‘preoccupation with bodily indeterminacy.’¹⁹ Swinburne’s poem ‘Hermaphroditus’, a clear example of the centrality of the figure in his ‘poetic project’, takes inspiration from a statue, ‘the Roman copy of a Greek original’, he had visited in the Louvre in 1863.²⁰ The figure lies upon a couch, and from one side appears unequivocally female, but from the other is seen to have male genitalia. Swinburne’s ‘Hermaphroditus’ represents this dual incarnation of the sexes through a concern for liminality and pairing of opposed concepts; he writes of ‘some brief space’ that lies ‘between sleep and life’ (15).²¹ Smith notes the ‘series of perfect deferred doublings: ‘love/sleep’; ‘shadow/light’ that exist ‘in that barely imaginable space between “eyelids” and “eyes”’.²² Swinburne also speaks directly of ‘melting’ in ‘Hermaphroditus’ when he writes ‘Thy moist limbs melted’ (53). We will return to this moment below.

The hermaphrodite stands as a basic link connecting the bodily in Milton and Swinburne. Beyond the hermaphroditic, a more clandestine interest in permeable bodily boundaries builds a relation of conceptual influence between the two poets. ‘Melting’ penetrates the basic biological construction of Milton’s beings. This takes us to the second form of boundary dissolution in *Paradise Lost*: Miltonic excretion. Consider the start of Book Five:

Now Morn her rosy steps in th’ eastern clime
Advancing, sowed the earth with orient pearl,
When Adam waked, so customed, for his sleep

Prose of John Milton, ed. by William Kerrigan, John Peter Rumrich & Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007). Book and line references are indicated in the text.

¹⁷ deGruy, p. 129.

¹⁸ Lindsay Smith, *Pre-Raphaelitism: Poetry and Painting* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2013), p. 64.

¹⁹ Smith, p. 82.

²⁰ Smith, p. 86.

²¹ All citations from the work of A. C. Swinburne are taken from *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin Books, 2000). Line references are indicated in the text.

²² Smith, p. 88.

Was airy light, from pure digestion bred,
 And temperate vapours bland, which th' only sound
 Of leaves and fuming rills, Aurora's fan,
 Lightly dispersed, and the shrill matin song
 Of birds on every bough; so much the more
 His wonder was to find unwakened Eve
 With tresses discomposed, and glowing cheek,
 As through unquiet rest (V. 1-11)

Adam awakens to find Eve beside him 'with tresses discomposed, and glowing cheek, / As through unquiet rest.' (V. 10-11). This unusually unquiet rest was provoked by Satan whispering to Eve in her sleep, as he attempted to 'raise / At least distempered, discontented thoughts, / Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires' (IV. 806-808). Eve's disturbed sleep is all the more alarming when juxtaposed with Adam's 'airy light' slumber, 'from pure digestion bred, / And temperate vapours bland' (V. 4-5). Gordon Teskey suggests that these 'vapours bland' are a 'discreet answer to the perennial question of Edenic excretion'; Adam's slumber was 'airy light' because of the efficiency of 'Edenic excretion'. Teskey suggests that 'nothing is left over as waste except mild vapors emitted through the pores' which the goddess of dawn 'disperses with her fan.'²³ In Teskey's description of excretion through the pores, the edges of the prelapsarian human body are permeable.

Angelic excretion also occurs by way of perspiration. Describing the moment that Raphael sits down to eat with Adam and Eve in paradise, Milton writes:

So down they sat,
 And to their viands fell, nor seemingly
 The angel, nor in mist, the common gloss
 Of theologians, but with keen dispatch
 Of real hunger, and concoctive heat
 To transubstantiate; what redounds, transpires
 Through spirits with ease (V. 433-439).

The *OED* states the use of 'Transpires' as meaning 'To emit or cause to pass in the state of vapour through the walls or surface of a body' since at least the sixteenth century.²⁴ Teskey's reading of the 'vapours bland' as excretion through the pores, as similar in kind to angelic transpiration, then aligns neatly Miltonic monism, offering

²³ Gordon Teskey ed., note from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 106.

²⁴ 'Transpire, V.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press)
 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204994>> [accessed 22 November 2013].

further evidence that the hermaphroditic is central to Milton's epic. The following excerpt from Book Five forms an explanation of Milton's heavenly monism, in which the single universal substance comes from (and consists of) God:

O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom
 All things proceed, and up to him return,
 If not depraved from good, created all
 Such to perfection, one first matter all,
 Endued with various forms, various degrees
 Of substance' (V. 469-474)

In Milton's aetiology, God creates the universe from himself (*creatio ex deo*) as opposed to from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). 'One first matter' proceeds from God and is used in all beings in 'various forms' and with 'various degrees / Of substance,' with the aim that they will then 'up to him return'. The key here is the notion of 'degrees', which represents angels and humans as part of a monistic *hierarchy* of substance; angels are made of the same substance as humans, but being superior are significantly lighter. Stephen Fallon writes that 'Milton's materialist monism treats spirit and matter as manifestations, differing in degree and not qualitatively, of the one corporeal substance'.²⁵ This monistic notion of *creatio ex deo* theoretically aligns with the form of the hermaphroditic considered above in the impregnation and incubation of the world, where the creating force contains the materials for all of creation. Milton's holy hermaphrodite is not rendered infertile by the conjoining of two sexes, but instead is given *more* reproductive power, capable of reproducing asexually.

Milton's construction of angelic digestion runs parallel to his explanation of angelic sexuality and expression of love: the third primary form of boundary dissolution. In the eighth book, Adam asks Raphael 'Love not the Heav'nly spirits, and how their love / Express they, by looks only, or do they mix / Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?' (VIII. 615-617) Raphael responds:

Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st
 (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy
 In eminence, and obstacle find none
 Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars:
 Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace,
 Total they mix, union of pure with pure
 Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need

²⁵ Stephen M. Fallon, 'The Substance of Epic Angels', *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 102.

As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul. (VIII. 622-629)

The sexuality of Milton's angels is, as Fallon writes, 'neither the conjunction of gross animal bodies nor a disembodied meeting of minds or souls.'²⁶ It stands on the boundary between the two. Material angelic bodies find no 'exclusive bars' or 'obstacle' in expression of love, and a 'spirits embrace' (which seems close enough to 'angelic sex') is associated with ease and absolute amalgamation: mixture is 'easier than air with air', a 'total' 'union of pure with pure'. This last phrase, 'union of pure with pure' highlights again Milton's monism. The *OED* has for 'pure' 'not mixed with any other substance or material', suggesting that a 'union' of 'pure' substances is in fact an oxymoron, but in Milton's early universe there is no conceptual conflict between 'mixture' and 'pure' because angels consist of the same single divine substance. This relates to the passage from Book Six quoted above (VI. 344-353). deGruy comments that 'In this state of being, desire is not constrained by body; rather, body is actually shaped by desire, becoming "all heart" or "all head" according to individual will.'²⁷

Angelic expressions of love, then, dissolve bodily boundaries. Angelic beings are still considered individuals (with names, and freedom) but in expressions of love they find no 'obstacle' or 'membrane'. As deGruy writes, 'erotic activity is privileged by being granted to angels whose undivided natures allow them an unproblematic satisfaction of embodied appetite.'²⁸ This boundary-less merging of spirits finds itself distorted in Adam's passionate cry after Eve informs him of her disobedience:

no no, I feel

The link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh,
Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (IX. 913-916)

And, later:

So forcible within my heart I feel
The bond of nature draw me to my own,
My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;
Our state cannot be severed, we are one,
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself. (IX. 955-959)

Adam's claim that 'from thy state / Mine never shall be parted' follows directly from

²⁶ Fallon, p. 144.

²⁷ deGruy, p. 125.

²⁸ deGruy, p. 123.

the ‘link of nature’ he feels with Eve; that she is (in Biblical language) ‘bone of my bone’ and ‘flesh of flesh’. He goes on to speak of their identification and their resistance to separation (‘Our state cannot be severed, we are one’). Although there is clearly a difference between Raphael’s angelic incorporeal ‘union of pure with pure’ and Adam’s ‘One flesh’ (an image which lends itself more to the connotations of ‘assimilation’ than ‘union’) they both demand a denial of separation and a participation in ‘oneness’ (or, forms of monism). In Milton’s hierarchy, then, those closer to God are more easily conceived as hermaphroditic, but the melting of bodies is present in all stages of creation. The figure of the hermaphrodite becomes part of a monist system in which lower, denser beings yearn to mix with one another, and higher beings are able to mix with one another ‘easier than air with air’, whilst also representing the *ultimate* state of mixing, the hermaphroditic holy spirit, containing two mixed sexes in one form. In the Miltonic system, the ‘rigid distinction between male and female’, which is widely assumed to be the ‘Victorian cultural imperative’,²⁹ is repeatedly disrupted and its opposite, the mutability of the sexual body, pervasive in nineteenth-century medical and cultural discourse, is held to be the biological peak.

Bodily boundaries are permeable in sexual and scatological acts in *Paradise Lost*: how then is this material melting, beyond the hermaphrodite, expressed by Swinburne? ‘Les Noyades’ is one poem in which he deals explicitly with merging and the nature of desire. He describes a form of execution performed during the Reign of Terror, a ‘marriage’, where men and women were stripped naked and then tied to one another before they were drowned. Swinburne writes that these victims were ‘Bound and drowned, slaying two by two, / Maidens and young men, naked and wed.’ (11-12) Two figures are to be bound and killed as a pair: ‘One rough with labour and red with fight, / And a lady noble by name and face, / Faultless, a maiden, wonderful, white.’ (14-16) Whereas the ‘lady noble’ is distraught, the ‘one rough with labour’ is overjoyed: it is revealed that he has loved this lady from afar his ‘whole life long’ (45). The labourer cries in delight ‘And I should have held you, and you held me, / As flesh holds flesh, and the soul the soul.’ (71-72) Here again is a doubling, which forms a chain ending in the dissolution of dividing boundaries: one repetition lies within the first line and two within the second. There is a quickening of pace as the spaces between the repeated words reduce. The repeated ‘held’ is separated by three words, though ‘you’ stands either side of ‘and’ (which both divides and joins each ‘held’); ‘flesh’ is only kept apart from ‘flesh’ by ‘holds’; finally, there is nothing to separate the ‘the soul’ from ‘the soul’. The labourer’s joy at the prospect of being bound to the noblewoman in death is also expressed in a desire for a specifically material melting, recalling Adam’s fevered cries of ‘Our state cannot be severed’. Swinburne writes: ‘I shall drown with her, laughing for love; and she / Mix with me,

²⁹ Matus, p. 23.

touching me, lips and eyes' (55-56).

It might be argued from the line 'Thy moist limbs melted' in Swinburne's 'Hermaphroditus' that Swinburne's preoccupation with melting takes its basis entirely in Sapphic notions of Eros, and does not refer back (even unknowingly) to Milton's melting. As Anne Carson writes, 'in Greek the act of love is a mingling [...] and desire melts the limbs'³⁰. The first line of Sappho's fragment 130 has been translated variously by Carson as 'Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me'³¹ and 'Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me'³²: both suggest disorientation and bodily disruption that align with the melting considered above. Where this Greek conception of love is undoubtedly a source for Milton, and a major source for Swinburne, some support for reading Swinburne's use of Greek love as additionally and significantly *Miltonic* can be identified elsewhere in 'Hermaphroditus'. In the poem, Swinburne figures the hermaphrodite as 'a pleasure-house' that 'Love made himself of flesh', which Love in fact 'would not enter in', because 'on the one side sat a man like death' and 'on the other a woman sat like sin' (23-26).³³ Of course, Death and Sin are Satan's offspring in *Paradise Lost*. At Hell's gates, we are told the genealogy of Death and Sin: Sin, like Athena from Zeus, erupted from a gash in Satan's head. Satan then impregnated her, and so she gave birth to Death. Death, overcome with lust, raped Sin and made her pregnant, this time with demonic canine creatures (II. 746-809). If Swinburne is making reference to these children of Satan, as I believe he is, it complicates their embodiment of opposing halves of the hermaphrodite. The implication would be that these two "halves" are particularly difficult to categorize and divide. Milton's Sin is mother, lover, and sibling to Death, and so the complex nature of two genders being joined together in one body is expressed via Miltonic beings whose relation to one another is equally complex. Furthermore, Milton's Sin herself is only half woman: 'The one seemed woman to the waist, and fair, / But ended foul in many a scaly fold' (II. 650-651), so that Satan demands to know 'What thing thou art, thus double-formed' (II. 741). In answer, Sin replies that it was the birth of Death that deformed and divided her: 'Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew / Transformed' (II. 784-785). So that the act that makes her 'double formed' is the very act that assigns her the twofold role of both sexual partner and mother.

These various births and sexual acts tend towards a violent and sudden

³⁰ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 7.

³¹ Sappho, *If not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. by Anne Carson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: Random House, 2002), p. 265.

³² Sappho, trans. by Carson, *Eros*, p. 3.

³³ Maxwell touches on these lines in her discussion of chiasmus in the poem but omits the relation to Milton, in fact discussing the structure of the lines whilst removing the relevant words: 'Alternatively, a slightly weaker form of the figure [of chiasmus] occurs in sonnet 2, lines 11-12, ('sat . . . man / . . . woman sat') where a simple visual contrast or antithesis is involved.' Maxwell, *Bearing Blindness*, p. 205.

breaking of boundaries, in contrast to gentle transpiration. Sin ‘sprung’ from the side of Satan’s head ‘op’ning wide’, causing him ‘sudden miserable pain’ (II. 752-758). Likewise, Death’s birth is described as particularly painful, as ‘breaking violent way’ he ‘[t]ore through’ Sin’s ‘entrails’ (II. 782-783). When Sin next gives birth it is to the children of Death, who return to the womb to ‘howl and gnaw’ her bowels, ‘then bursting forth’ enact the birth repeatedly (II. 799-800). These expulsions, ‘breaking’ and ‘bursting’, all involve an unwanted tearing of flesh.

These ruptures return reconfigured as the target of desire in Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’, in which he speaks as Sappho, expressing extreme frustration in her desire to consume or assimilate the object of her love, Anactoria:

O

that I

Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,
Die of thy pain and my delight, and be
Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee! (129-132)

What Swinburne’s Sappho yearns for in ‘Anactoria’ (to be ‘molten into thee’) is exactly what Milton’s angels enjoy (and what Satan’s children cannot enjoy): his angels are ‘in possession of a fluidity that could make tasting an act of lovemaking and lovemaking an act of listening, this body has the potential to utterly dissolve boundaries in a moment of mutual interpenetration.’³⁴ Swinburne’s dissolution of boundaries is often figured as an *act of eating*: of consumption and digestion of the beloved other, as for angels, with their bodies ‘all tongue’ the act of eating is ‘an act of lovemaking’. In ‘Anactoria’ consumption, digestion and eroticism intersect, merging Miltonic and Biblical images:

‘That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey! That from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!’ (111-114)

Maxwell writes on this passage that Sappho’s desire to consume and entomb Anactoria is ‘a cannibalistic act of enclosure which also reminds one of a perverse maternity, as if Sappho might give birth to Anactoria.’³⁵ This brings us back to the image of Milton’s Sin as simultaneously mother, lover and victim of Death. Sections of ‘Anactoria’ connote Eve’s act of eating the forbidden fruit: ‘I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat, / And no mouth but some serpent’s found thee sweet.’ (25-26)

³⁴ deGruy, p. 130.

³⁵ Maxwell, *Bearing Blindness*, p. 39.

Serpents reappear several times in the poem, here linked to the act of eating from a tree: 'Her spring of leaves is barren, and her fruit / Ashes [...] underneath / Serpents have gnawn it through with tortuous teeth' (237-240). Sappho's frustrated and violent expressions of desire for a sexual act that involves consuming her lover, leading inevitably to her lover's destruction, places her closer to the suffering of Sin, as she is still distanced from (and desirous of) the state described by Adam in his fleshly Biblical expressions of love mentioned above: 'Our state cannot be severed, we are one, / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself' (IX. 958-959). Sappho desires to be 'One flesh' with Anactoria, but the bodily boundaries that restrict her expressions of love mean that this is only possible through a digestion or assimilation, which equates with destruction: again, in contrast with the ideal 'union of pure with pure' that Milton's angelic beings enjoy.

This obvious enjoyment of merging demonstrates Milton both supplements and surpasses Sapphic desire. Anne Carson writes that 'In experiencing and articulating the melting threat of eros, the Greek poets are presumably also learning something about their own bounded selves through the effort to resist dissolution of those bounds in erotic emotion.'³⁶ According to Carson, the Greeks perceive Eros as a 'melting *threat*' that provokes resistance. This seems in direct conflict with the Miltonic representation of divine beings as *enjoying* boundary dissolution, and the tortured attitude of Swinburne's Sappho, whose ultimate desire is for this divine (but unachievable) dissolution. As Carson explains it, the threat of Eros for the Greeks comes from the notion that boundary dissolution involves destruction of the self, 'Union would be annihilating.'³⁷ In Swinburne's 'Anactoria', this destruction of self and other through melting is exactly what Sappho covets. Swinburne's Sappho does not 'resist dissolution': she craves it. In Milton's monist universe the divine beings need not fear self-destruction in dissolution, as the boundaries they break were made to be broken. The Miltonic preoccupation with sexual melting is then differentiated from Eros and *goes beyond it*. In Swinburne's embrace of this melting beyond the Sapphic, he disavows any adherence to a Victorian doctrine of fear of mutability.

This is related to Milton's provision of a system which, again, 'goes beyond' the conflict between abject and aesthetic that Swinburne finds so captivating in Baudelaire. Of Baudelaire, Swinburne wrote that 'even of the loathsome bodily putrescence and decay, he can make some noble use; pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty, in a certain way, from actual carrion'.³⁸ Jonathan Cullers suggests that what Baudelaire offers (and what is particularly modern about this offering) is illuminating 'poetry's ability to bring into verse the banal [or] the

³⁶ Carson, *Eros*, p. 40.

³⁷ Carson, p. 62.

³⁸ Swinburne, 'Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*', reprinted in *Swinburne as Critic*, ed. by Clyde K. Hyder (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) p. 30.

disgusting [...] and give it a poetic function.’³⁹ Where Baudelaire offers an example of how to find ‘beauty’ in ‘carrion’, or nobility in ‘the loathsome bodily putrescence’ (in Baudelaire’s own words, ‘*Aux objets répugnants nous trouvons des appas*’⁴⁰) Milton offers more, something aetiological rather than modern: we are confronted with what is ‘banal’ or ‘disgusting’ to the modern mind, but in a world without these points of reference. Milton’s monistic world involves a prelapsarian state of humanity, and goes so far as to involve the scatological and sexual functions of angels, acts which we would consider ‘bodily putrescence’ in another form. Milton conceives a state of being for angels and prelapsarian humans in which excretion and sexuality, acts of disorder and boundary dissolution are presented but are *not obscene*. Miltonic angels and prelapsarian humans partake in both erotic acts and excretion via disruption or dissolution of the boundaries of their bodies and far from ‘loathsome’ it is delightful.

In the second half of *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s bodies begin to be clouded with the disgust that comes to be aligned with beauty by the likes of Baudelaire.⁴¹ In contrast to prelapsarian humans, deGruy writes that angels enjoy ‘a material existence that is not subject to a hierarchy of bodily configuration’.⁴² For postlapsarian humanity this ‘hierarchy of bodily configuration’ becomes even more pronounced; there is a sense in which excretion and the erotic are suddenly a point of shame and are simultaneously pushed downwards, or hidden. Digestion is no longer easy; as Lehnhof notes, ‘Adam’s postlapsarian sinfulness is obscenely figured in the “unkindly fumes” of gastric distress that disturb him after he eats the forbidden fruit (IX. 1050).’⁴³ The postlapsarian transformation of the human body is one that moves away from the divine and toward the comprehensively utilitarian. We become less spiritually ‘vital’ and more ‘organic’. The metamorphosis is a retreat from unity, an intensification of fleshliness, density, and divided organic organization. This is precisely the reversal of God’s original plan for humanity (prior to Satan’s escape from Hell) for humanity to slowly earn their ascension to heaven and become less dense, light as angels. Instead, after the fall, we have to toil and shit and piss. Mary

³⁹ Cullers, ‘Introduction’, *Fleurs du Mal*, pxxv.

⁴⁰ ‘In most repugnant objects we find charms’, ‘To The Reader’, pp. 4–5.

⁴¹ Baudelaire himself draws our attention to this contrast between ancient and modern aesthetics when he writes ‘*Nous avons, il est vrai, nations corrompues, / Aux peuples anciens des beautés inconnues: / Des visages rongés par les chancres du cœur, / Et comme qui dirait des beautés de langueur;*’, or ‘It’s true, we have in our corrupted states / Beauties unknown to ancient people’s tastes: / Visages gnawed by sores of syphilis, / And one might say, beauties of listlessness’. ‘I love the thought...’, Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil [Les Fleurs du Mal]*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 18–21.

⁴² McGowan, p. 126.

⁴³ Kent R. Lehnhof, ‘Scatology and the Sacred in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*’, *English Literary Renaissance* 37 (2007), pp. 429–449 (p. 439).

Douglas writes that ‘dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.’⁴⁴ Like evil, then, dirt and the associated shame of excretion arrive alongside *knowledge*. The postlapsarian body attempts to deal with this corporeal dirt and disorder, ‘matter out of place,’ by imposing order, by assigning specific tasks to specific areas of the body.⁴⁵ Douglas writes that ‘ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating [...] have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.’⁴⁶ After the fall, tasks of excretion and erotic sensation are tidied up, relegated to a spot where they can be shamefully hidden. What is important here, though, is that Milton also presents us, and Swinburne, with an image of these biological functions *before* shame and knowledge, in his conception of the prelapsarian world in which a lack of disorder or knowledge of disorder rendered ‘dirt’ nonexistent.⁴⁷

So far I have been largely concerned with Milton’s metaphysics on a biological level: I now consider more briefly the importance of Milton’s poetic language as a vehicle for bodily melting. Boundary dissolution is built into several levels of Milton’s poetry, strengthening the sense that “melting” is a particularly Miltonic effect. It appears in forms ranging from the interaction between single letters and syllables to the structure of the entirety of *Paradise Lost*. Joined by its sequel, *Paradise Regained*, it is part of a pairing that melts: Elbert N. S. Thompson writes that ‘from the beginning of the epic the two [central stories] are joined. [The] two stories are woven indissolubly together, and a real artistic unity is made possible’.⁴⁸

Dealing with the smaller of these, John Leonard refers to Peck’s claim that ‘Milton can glide two vowels together without annihilating either one.’ He writes:

⁴⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.

⁴⁵ Douglas, p. 36.

⁴⁶ Douglas, p. 4.

⁴⁷ Richard Sieburth links Mary Douglas’ anthropology of dirty with Swinburne and Baudelaire in another interesting way. He points out that ‘the critical vocabulary deployed against both Swinburne and Baudelaire seems to make one thing clear: in the eyes of many of their contemporaries, their poetry was simply *dirt*’ (p. 344). For Sieburth, the dirtiness at the source of criticisms of their poetry was a dirt of disorder which refused to be bounded, a disorder borne out of a refusal ‘to observe the segregation of high and low, pure and impure, sacred and obscene’ which ‘culminates in [a] hermaphroditic epiphany’ (pp. 345 and 348). ‘The scandal of their poetry is the scandal of dirt: to be neither here nor there, but always somewhere else, always in between’ (p. 353). See Sieburth, Richard, ‘Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne’, *Comparative Literature*, 36 (1984), pp. 343–353.

⁴⁸ Elbert N. S. Thompson, *Essays on Milton* (1914) as cited by Leonard, p. 293. Effectively this is an attempt to solve the problem of who the hero of *Paradise Lost* is; if it can be read as a weaving together (‘indissolubly’) of ‘two stories’, we escape the theological issue of prioritising Satan’s fall over that of mankind.

This practice, known as synaloepha (the Greek word means ‘melting together’) should not be confused with elision, where one of the vowels is omitted (literally ‘crushed out’, Latin *elido*) in pronunciation. [...] Peck does not use the term ‘synaloepha’, but he does talk of Milton’s ‘melting of syllables’: ‘As to his elisions, melting of syllables, & using something like an English dactyl foot: he generally cuts off the letter y in the word many, when the next word begins with a vowel (which yet seems not to be cut off, but rather to remain) whereby he gives a particular softness to the foot, & makes it read like an English dactyl’ (112). Johnson will think statements of this kind an intolerable contradiction. How can syllables ‘remain’ when they have been ‘cut off’? But Peck is right. ‘Melting’ syllables do ‘remain’ even when they yield to the decasyllabic norm.⁴⁹

Leonard is referring here to phrases such as ‘so over many a tract’ (VI. 76-77) in which ‘many a’ becomes ‘man(y)a’. Here the limits of words, as objects, can be compared to the limits of heavenly bodies: the two can contract, or mix, without being annihilated. It is, perhaps, the boundary itself that is ‘cut off’, whilst both in entirety ‘remain’. To extend this line of inquiry, we might look at a form of ambiguous language that denies limitation, that Milton uses often in *Paradise Lost*, and to which Swinburne has been said to be ‘addicted’: the pun.⁵⁰ Carson writes that ‘Like eros, puns flout the edges of things.’⁵¹ She suggests that the pun first conveys the possibility of the dissolution of edges and consequently reveals this as a painful *impossibility*, as we are confronted with the troubling reality that ‘Words have edges. So do you.’⁵² This highlights an interesting distinction between the effect of written and verbal effects of poetry: Milton’s use of synaloepha, experienced verbally, seems an effective way of ridding words of their edges (which removes Carson’s painful reminder that melting together is not possible for human lovers) and yet the visual experience of the words on the page confirms their presence. Carson does later add, however, that ‘a god’s word has no beginning or end. Only a god’s desire can reach without lack.’⁵³ A playful suggestion: perhaps, then, it might be the case that in a poem depicting a monist universe in which all substance involves God in different degrees, the beginning and end of words is less unyielding.

⁴⁹ John Leonard, *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 41.

⁵⁰ ‘Swinburne’s poetics of absence, his metonymic dissociation of effect from cause, his addiction to verbal doublings and puns, and his suspension of grammatic and semantic closure...’, Sieburth, p. 352.

⁵¹ Carson, p. 35.

⁵² Carson, p. 35.

⁵³ Carson, p. 76.

On a larger scale, Milton's companion poems *Il Penseroso* and *L'Allegro* are two separate but indivisible texts, the boundaries of which dissolve and are constantly in dialogue with each other. This dialogue is cyclical; each begins with an address to, or critique of, the other. If the introductory lines can be read as a "looking-back" to the partner poem, the pair must be read in a cycle; because they both begin with this looking-back, neither can claim to be the *first* of the two (the publication dates of the poems are at best hazy). This cyclical motion also complicates identification of the start and end of each poem: as the beginning of *L'Allegro* is concerned directly with *Il Penseroso*, and vice versa, a clear line cannot be cut between the last lines of the "first" and the title of the "second". Eric C. Brown writes that 'the repeated dissolution of these borders creates a sense of instability between the poems' and this, among other factors, contributes 'to the constant flux in which one poem *melts* into the other.'⁵⁴ Here, again, we find melting, which Brown figures in terms of desire: 'what each companion dreams, what each desires, will always be the other', and it is 'this desire for the other that makes it impossible for us ever to read either poem absolutely in isolation or to read them simultaneously.'⁵⁵

We might compare the way in which the edges of Milton's poems shade into one another with the way in which Swinburne speaks of the questionable boundaries of poetry. In commentary on Swinburne's verse Maxwell writes:

Because of the way Swinburne's verse has particular designs on the sensibility of readers, their bodies and minds, there can arise a sense that they are not quite sure what belongs to the poem and what to themselves, a sense of not being quite sure where their identities and those of the poems begin and end.⁵⁶

Here, then, is another way in which Swinburne can be understood as a primary poet of the Victorian sexual body, in the effect of his poetry on the bodies of his audience, which as Maxwell suggests, become in some way indistinguishable from his texts. The physiological effects of Swinburne's poetry, from Gosse's statement that when Swinburne read 'Dolores' to a Pre-Raphaelite audience, 'a number of [the] ladies' were sent 'into an unmistakable state of arousal', to Ruskin's that 'Faustine' 'made me all hot'⁵⁷ indicate not only his importance as a writer of the Victorian sexual body inscribed in his poetry, but also on the Victorian bodies that experienced it.

Both Milton and Swinburne flout the poetry's edges significantly: Milton's

⁵⁴ Brown, Eric C., "'The Melting Voice Through Mazes Running': The Dissolution of Borders in *L'allegro* and *Il Penseroso*", *Milton Studies* 40 (2001), pp. 1–18 (p. 1). My emphasis.

⁵⁵ Brown, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Catherine Maxwell, *Swinburne* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2006), p. 24.

⁵⁷ Sieburth, p. 351.

poems melt into each other, Swinburne's melt into their audience, and their poetic practices melt into each other. They are connected by their understanding of the body as mutable and permeable, and by the poetic devices and language that they use to conceptually explore this dissolution of bodily boundaries. The last phrase of Milton's metaphor in *Areopagitica*, 'It was from out of the rind of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evil as *two twins cleaving together* leapt forth into the world.'⁵⁸, might easily be taken for a line from Swinburne. The image of 'two twins cleaving together' recalls that of the men and woman bound and drowned in 'Les Noyades' and directs us from similarities in Milton and Swinburne's poetic towards similarities in words themselves, particularly toward Swinburne's uses of the word 'cleave': 'the flesh that cleaves' ('Anactoria', 9); 'thy lover that must cleave to thee' ('Laus Veneris', 138); 'choose of two loves and cleave unto the best' ('Hermaphroditus', 6); 'the flowers cleave apart' ('A Ballad of Death', 87); 'let not this woman wail and cleave to me' ('Phaedra', 41). This is not to suggest that Swinburne's repeated use of this word is a direct reference to Milton's *Areopagitica* (as 'cleaves' is also used in some translations of Genesis 2:24) but instead that the two are connected by their preoccupation with melting even at a semantic level. The use of 'cleave' itself may be read as an expression of this preoccupation, as it contains antithetical meanings: defined by the *OED* first as 'to part or divide'⁵⁹ and second as 'to stick fast or adhere'⁶⁰. Indeed, Freud chooses 'cleave' as an example in his essay 'The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words'.⁶¹ Milton's words themselves convey a concern for melting: it is not just the spaces between words, but multiple meanings that melt within words themselves. These opposing meanings of 'cleave' are themselves 'as two [*unidentical*] twins cleaving together.'

The concept of melting (merging, assimilation, unification, 'cleaving together') is 'woven indissolubly' into Milton's words, structures, theology and metaphysics, and is consequently pervasive in Swinburne's poetry. Swinburne's expression of his preoccupation with "melting" is aided by particularly Miltonic images such as the sensual act of eating forbidden fruit, and the complex figures of Death and Sin. DeGruy writes that 'Milton's angelic body offers access to an unsexed, or

⁵⁸ John Milton, 'Areopagitica', in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. by William Kerrigan, John Peter Rumrich & Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 939.

⁵⁹ 'Cleave, V.1', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press)
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34105>> [accessed 21 November 2013].

⁶⁰ 'Cleave, V.2', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press).
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/34106>> [accessed 21 November 2013].

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*, ed. by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey & Alan Tyson (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 159.

indifferently sexed, state of being, to a dizzying array of bodily configurations in which absolutely nothing is forbidden'.⁶² This is both the state that Swinburne's Sappho desires, and that his 'Hermaphroditus' embodies. Milton offers a vision of a potential relation between aesthetic and abject which goes beyond that offered by Baudelaire, and which denies a postlapsarian system of 'ordering' and rigidity of boundaries that an anthropological understanding of 'dirt' demands. In Milton's universe boundaries are permeable and mutable in a way that would have attracted Swinburne and fed into his poetic representation of the sexual body. Swinburne's use of a particularly *Miltonic* form of bodily melting demonstrates Milton's previously underestimated importance for Swinburne, Swinburne's sexual bodies, some of the most interesting Victorian poetry has to offer, make clear that mutability and instability of boundaries are vital concepts for an understanding of Victorian sexuality.

⁶² deGruy, p. 128.

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