

‘[W]here to place a Metaphor’:

Treatises, Tracts, and Poetic Figuration in Seventeenth-Century England

By

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## Abstract

As treatises and tracts overflowed the print marketplace of the English Revolution, figurative expression in polemical and philosophical prose became a site of intense cultural pressure. This dissertation examines the utility and vulnerability of metaphor in English prose writings of the mid-seventeenth century, exploring how debates concerned with religious worship, political interaction, and inquiry into nature were often transacted through figurative reinterpretations. While modern literary criticism has tended to valorize the poetic qualities of prose, early modern argumentation and exposition operated within a more charged discursive economy. Writers in the midcentury conflicts became especially conscious of the tensions between logic, rhetoric, and poetics. With the dissolution of humanist rhetoric, the formation of neo-classical aesthetics, and the rise of Enlightenment philosophy and empirical science, some began to aspire to a plain style of language skeptical of tropes and figures, leaving others to grapple with these suspicions in language that was unavoidably metaphorical. I analyze the prose of writers highly conscious of the poetic nature of metaphor—John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Browne, and Margaret Cavendish—considering how they and their interlocutors sought to exploit or foreclose language’s figurative capacity in the effort to assert alternative visions of truth. Ultimately, I explore the way in which these seventeenth-century struggles with metaphor generated a sense of textuality central to our modern “prose culture.”

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## Introduction

“[T]he whole Church, the whole Kingdome, hath been  
troubled, where to place a Metaphor...”  
– Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, 7 Nov. 1640<sup>1</sup>

Four days after the start of what would become the Long Parliament, Sir Benjamin Rudyerd stood before the House of Commons, reflecting on “what disturbance hath beene brought upon the church, for vain, petty trifles.”<sup>2</sup> England’s legislative bodies had not met for over a decade, and when King Charles was compelled to call them together again, it became an occasion for the parliamentary leadership to voice their concerns about the political and religious excesses of the period of the Personal Rule. Rudyerd, a godly Protestant, was disturbed by the reforms of the Church of England prosecuted under Archbishop William Laud, in particular the movement to relocate and raise the altars of churches across the kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Rudyerd, like other low-church believers, was convinced that this heightened ceremonialism was part of an effort to draw religion “out into solemne, specious Formalities, into obsolete, antiquated ceremonies new furbished up.”<sup>4</sup> When he reminded his parliamentary audience of “[h]ow the whole Church, the

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Benjamin Rudyerd, “An Introduction to the Parliament, Novemb. 7. 1640,” in *Five Speeches in the High and Honourable Court of Parliament* (London, 1641), Duke University Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 8-17, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> On Rudyerd’s role in the development of the English Civil Wars, see David L. Smith, “Sir Benjamin Rudyerd and England’s ‘Wars of Religion,’” in *The Experience of Revolution in Stuart Britain and Ireland*, eds. Michael J. Braddick and David L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp. 52-73. Rudyerd has been acknowledged as a significant observer of the events of the period. See Peter Burke, “The Crisis in the Arts of the Seventeenth Century: A Crisis of Representation?” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40.2 (2009), pp. 239-261, who mentions Rudyerd’s phrase “crisis of parliaments” in his revision of the idea of a crisis in the mid-seventeenth century, (p. 239). On the altar controversy, see Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992), Ch. 6; Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625-1641* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), Ch. 6; and Kenneth Fincham, “The Restoration of Altars in the 1630s,” *The Historical Journal* 44.1 (2001), pp. 919-940.

<sup>4</sup> Rudyerd, p. 9.

whole Kingdome, hath been troubled, where to place a Metaphor, an Altar,” Rudyerd was emphasizing the problematic state of affairs in the English nation, in which the worldly symbols of truth had taken precedence over truth itself.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Reformation, religious conflicts were waged around the question of metaphor and its ability to convey or corrupt truthful expressions. As the early modern period wore on, the political and the philosophical pillars of the English worldview also began to fragment. English men and women living through the tumultuous 1640s, 50s, and 60s were especially aware that they could not afford to take figurative expression for granted. They grappled with conflicting visions, not just for religious worship, but also for political interaction and inquiry into nature, in a textual culture struggling to comprehend and control language’s relationship to truth. I argue that the figurative dimensions of English treatises and tracts across the discourses became a site of intense cultural pressure in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, as writers and readers confronted prose that was simultaneously haunted and invigorated by the idea of metaphor as a poetic device. This dissertation examines the ways in which prose writers ranging from John Milton to Margaret Cavendish managed that pressure, presenting alternative strategies for dealing with the persistent problem of metaphor’s relationship to truth.

The English Revolution was, after all, a revolution in the English language. In the midcentury period, nonfiction prose writings in the form of treatises and tracts overran the print marketplace on a scale that dwarfed textual production in the decades before and in the years thereafter, an escalation enabled by the expansion of print technology and the conflict over control of the press.<sup>6</sup> As Nigel Smith has argued, all of England’s cultural institutions—including

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> On the rate of increase in print production, see Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), pp. 161-172. While it was once believed that the collapse of censorship contributed to the rise in publication frequency, Dagmar Freist, *Governed by Opinion: Politics, Religion, and the*

its textual genres—felt the revolutionary spirit of the times. Writers experimented with poetic and nonfictional forms alike, exploring how “genres, with their capacity for transformation as well as representation, define the parameters of public debate, the nature of change, and the means for comprehending that change.”<sup>7</sup> These transformations occurred within both polemical and philosophical texts.<sup>8</sup> From the Revolution through the subsequent Restoration, England’s prose illustrated Stephen Greenblatt’s assertion that a sign of power within early modern culture was “the ability to impose one’s fictions on the world.”<sup>9</sup> As Ronald Corthell has suggested, this dynamic manifested as “a struggle for control of representation (whose text is fictional, whose nonfictional?).”<sup>10</sup> Figurative language provided the interpretive grounds on which, I contend, this struggle was pursued. Though metaphors are a persistent feature of language in texts of all kinds, writers only tend to highlight that fact when they seek to investigate the layers of meaning within their own expressions, or, more often, to qualify and undermine the claims that others make.

Rudyard, then, acknowledged the charged role of figuration when he performed what is arguably a radical act; he called a metaphor *a metaphor*. While Laudian authorities maintained that the Christian communion table had a literal connection to the Old Testament altar, godly

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*Dynamics of Communication in Stuart London, 1637-1645* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1997), has shown that print regulation was never actually interrupted in the period. Instead, censorship persisted in competing monarchical and parliamentary forms, which “forced the population ‘to choose’ between the rules of the two competitors,” (p. 30). On the practice of censorship in the period, see David Como, “Print, Censorship, and Ideological Escalation in the English Civil War,” *The Journal of British Studies* 51.4 (2012), pp. 820-957.

<sup>7</sup> Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (1994; New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between the Revolution and polemical writing, see Elizabeth Skerpan, *The Rhetoric of Politics in the English Revolution, 1642-1660* (Columbia, MO and London: U of Missouri P, 1992); Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994); Smith, Ch. 1, pp. 23-53; and Raymond, Ch. 6, pp. 202-275. For the connection between the new philosophy and the cultural crisis of the period, see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (1972; London: Penguin, 1991), Ch. 14, pp. 287-305; Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform, 1626-1660* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976); and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Corthell, “The Subject of Nonfictional Prose,” *Prose Studies* 11.2 (1988), pp. 3-9, p. 6.

Protestants, who were skeptical of the placement policy imposed by the church, resisted by emphasizing that the likeness was merely figurative.<sup>11</sup> If that piece of ecclesiastical furniture was simply an altar in a metaphorical sense, then it need not adhere to the strict standards of the ceremonialists. Thus, Rudyerd called the altar a “Metaphor,” a linguistic term of art which Thomas Wilson had defined as “an alteration of a woorde from the proper and naturall meanyng, to that whiche is not proper, and yet agreeth therunto, by some lykenes that appeareth to be in it.”<sup>12</sup> Usually employed to describe a figurative turn of phrase, Rudyerd used “metaphor” to signal the symbolic nature of a physical artifact. He used the terminology associated with linguistic alteration in order to emphasize the liberties his opponents had taken with meaning. In the process, Rudyerd touched upon a central dimension of England’s growing conflict.<sup>13</sup> Revolutionary England was indeed troubled, in the deepest sense, by the question of “where to place a Metaphor.”

By the time of the Restoration, it was clear to many that England’s religious, political,

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<sup>11</sup> The Laudian position on the altar was championed on the polemical battlefield by Peter Heylyn. In *Antidotum Lincolniense, or An Answer to a Booke Entituled, The Holy Table* (London, 1637), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, he disputes the interpretation that argued that “altar” literally meant a raised piece of land, which had, by a trick of language, been figuratively applied to the communion table. To the contrary, he insists, “[t]he proper signification of the word, is *Altar* ... used for a *banke* or *hillock* by a Metaphor onely.... So that to call the Table *ara*, onely because it was a kinde of *rising* above the pavement; and to call banks or risings *aras*, because of that similitude they had to *Altars*: were to runne round *in circulo*, and borrow Metaphors from *metaphors, ad infinitum*,” (p. 61).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (London, 1553), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas May later reproduced Rudyerd’s address in *The History of the Parliament of England* (London, 1647), Library of Congress, *Early English Books Online*, calling it “a perfect exemplar” of “the present state of grievances,” (p. 73). Rudyerd’s speeches had circulated in several publications earlier as the animosity between Parliament and the Court began to intensify in 1641. Before the publication of *Five Speeches in the High and Honourable Court of Parliament*, one of his addresses from the opening session of the Long Parliament appeared as “Another Speech of Sr. Benjamin Rudyerd,” in *The Lord Digbys Speech in the House of Commons* (London, 1641), Newberry Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 15-19. When Rudyerd had it reproduced in *Five Speeches* it was titled “Concerning Bishops.” While the title page of Rudyerd’s *Five Speeches* indicates that those addresses were “[p]rinted according to his owne true Copies, the former being absurdly false,” there are no marked textual differences between the two versions apart from their titles, (n.p.). Rudyerd may have been attempting to disentangle his fortunes from Lord Digby, who, after the Strafford affair, ended up in an unlikely alliance with the king. However, the “former” text cited on the title page of *Five Speeches* might also refer to those addresses by Rudyerd included in *Speeches and Passages of this Great and Happy Parliament: From the Third of November, 1640, to This Instant June, 1641* (London, 1641), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 103-115.



and philosophical turmoil was in part an effect of language. Thomas Sprat made this argument in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), a hasty retrospective on England's still young institution for inquiry into nature, which had only just received royal patronage under Charles II in 1662. Making the case for the experimentalist program and the associated theory of plain style, Sprat reflects on the condition of the language, arguing that from the reign of Henry VIII "down to the beginning of our late *Civil Wars*," English "was still fashioning, and beautifying it self."<sup>14</sup> This development came to a head in the revolutionary years. Sprat suggests that "[i]n the Wars themselves" English "receiv'd many fantastical terms, which were introduc'd by our *Religious Sects*; and many outlandish phrases, which several *Writers*, and *Translators*, in that great hurry, brought in, and made free as they pleas'd."<sup>15</sup> Attributing bad speech to religious zealots and pedantic polyglots, he argues for linguistic reform as a necessary element of natural-philosophical practice, especially in its experimental form. Empirical science was a critical component of the Restoration establishment, which Sprat binds up with a call for a movement toward "mathematical plainness" in prose.<sup>16</sup> This stylistic orientation was part of a larger theory of language signaling a studied wariness toward the "mists and uncertainties" of "specious

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (London, 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113. Sprat adds parenthetically that war "is a time, wherein all Languages use, if ever, to increase by extraordinary degrees; for in such busie, and active times, there arise more new thoughts of men, which must be signifi'd, and varied by new expressions," (p. 42). Generalizing the linguistic flux of the revolutionary period as a set of conditions common to all times of conflict, Sprat's remarks add further evidence against the exceptionalist historiography, which I discuss below, that would have the mid-seventeenth century be the watershed moment between premodern and modern English culture.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113. On the connection between natural philosophy and the political and religious order, see Barbara Shapiro, "Latitudinarianism and Science in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 48 (1968), pp. 16-40; and James R. Jacob and Margaret C. Jacob, "The Anglican Origins of Modern Science: The Metaphysical Foundations of the Whig Constitution," *Isis* 71.2 (1980), pp. 251-267. John Rogers argues that "[t]he widely felt social and political implications of the period's scientific speculation emerged much more directly, I am convinced, from an engagement with the ideologically resonant language constitutive of physical theory itself," (p. x). On the relationship between the plain style and the cultural conditions of the Restoration beyond science, see Roger Pooley, "Language and Loyalty: Plain Style at the Restoration," *Literature and History* 6 (1980), pp. 2-18.

*Tropes and Figures.*”<sup>17</sup> Sprat’s linguistic critiques, I argue, tacitly address the question of metaphor that had preoccupied the conflicts of the midcentury. His linguistic remedy, though, articulated, not an antagonism toward figurative language as such, but a skepticism toward the poetic dimension of meaning associated with it.

Sprat suggested that the problem resided not simply in the use of figurative language but, in particular, in the appeal to a register of discursive meaning specifically understood to be poetic. He bemoans that for too long knowledge had been “vex’d by the imaginations of poets.”<sup>18</sup> The tumultuous events of England’s Revolution and Restoration participated in the waning of humanist rhetoric and the rise of empirical science, Enlightenment rationalism, and neoclassical aesthetics, intellectual movements under which poetic language came to be regarded with strong ambivalence. Though frequently classified as a tool of rhetoric, figurative language was often recognized as fundamentally poetic. The period’s efforts at polemical argumentation and philosophical exposition derived much of their meaning from the risk that a piece of nonfiction prose might be read poetically. As I will demonstrate, this interpretive dynamic, in which the poetics of prose was seen as, not an inevitability, but a possibility, informed much of the textual transactions of the mid-seventeenth century and generated a set of linguistic attitudes that have persisted in our modern “prose culture.”<sup>19</sup>

## Methodology

Throughout this project, I focus especially on metaphor, a trope that uses language

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 416.

<sup>19</sup> I adapt the term “prose culture” from Charles Altieri, “Taking Lyrics Literally: Teaching Poetry in a Prose Culture,” *New Literary History* 32.2 (2001), pp. 259-281. Altieri’s essay does not unpack the term, never directly mentioning it outside of the title. To my mind, a “prose culture” is at once dominated by prose as a particular form of writing and somewhat estranged from poetry as a cultural enterprise.

conventionally applied to one idea to describe another idea, tapping into, in Thomas Wilson's words, "some lykenes that appeareth to be in it."<sup>20</sup> While figuration includes a wide variety of devices, metaphor's transpositions are what most modern language-users have in mind when they describe an expression as "figurative." Metaphorical transference was one of the most emblematic tropological gestures available to early modern readers and writers as well, and the way they managed it as a linguistic resource has much to say about the period's conception of poetic figuration more generally. Early modern theorists were comfortable seeing metaphor as a device that manifested in different forms. For instance, simile—or, in early modern parlance, "similitude"—describes the same process of meaningful transference. Aristotle asserts that a "simile is also a metaphor; for there is little difference," because "they *are* metaphors, differing in the form of expression."<sup>21</sup> Even the term "allegory" was used to name the same basic linguistic operation. As George Puttenham notes, "the figure *allegorie*" is nothing more than "a long and perpetuall Metaphore," usually "extending to whole and large speeches."<sup>22</sup> Though Puttenham's definition hardly accounts for the complex representations found in poetic works like Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, it encapsulates well the persistent metaphors often found in discursive prose. While some writers found distinct applications for one form of metaphor or another, the larger spectrum of linguistic tools that I refer to under the rubric of metaphorical language participated in the same interpretive and expressive struggle that marked the middle decades of the seventeenth century.

This project examines the polemical and philosophical texts of writers especially attuned to the impact of this kind of language. John Milton, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Browne, and

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<sup>20</sup> Wilson, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, 1406b, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 156.

Margaret Cavendish grappled with the religious, political, and philosophical questions of their day with an eye toward the tensions within language and its relationship to truth. Each of these writers produced discursive prose that conscientiously explores language's metaphorical dimensions within the midcentury's charged textual culture. Their writings demonstrate how concerns about figurative dynamics in religious discourse spread rapidly to political and philosophical debates in the English Revolution and Restoration. Struggling with calls for stylistic plainness that remained ambivalent about metaphor's role in prose, Milton, Hobbes, Browne, and Cavendish sought to reconcile, and sometimes to exploit, the poetic potential of figurative expression in a discursive climate that aspired to a "new plain style" that might control language's excesses. Practically speaking, I focus attention on passages within in their texts in which they make explicit use of technical terminology associated with poetics, rhetoric, logic, and figuration, inferring theories of language from this evidence and connecting those theories to examples of metaphor in action. Contextualizing this analysis with reference to other writers engaged in the same textual conversations, I offer arguments for how the figurative turns of texts ranging from Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) to Cavendish's *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) shed light on the course of a given prose writer's career and, more significantly, their engagement with the larger cultural and intellectual movements of this tumultuous period of English history. I have also attempted to put my interpretations into tension with observations generated through digitally aided corpus linguistics, insights from which I have incorporated into the chapters below and presented more fully in a set of appendices at the dissertation's end.

Overall, this project is interested in turns. It closely analyzes the linguistic turns that constitute the figurations of individual texts. It focuses on a historical moment characterized as a

“world turned upside down.”<sup>23</sup> And it does this work in a critical climate that has been characterized as the post-linguistic turn. For nearly a century, scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has been gripped by the notion of language as singularly fundamental to our understanding of the world. We now find ourselves in the midst of a “turn away from the linguistic turn,” as scholars pursue a variety of methodologies that aim to qualify the dynamics and impact of language.<sup>24</sup> What does it mean to attend to language in a moment preoccupied with its limits? This project attempts to address that question. In a qualified sense, we can see the mid-seventeenth century in England as the first “post-linguistic turn,” in which the philological enthusiasms of humanism confronted the pressures of material truth imposed by the new science, the Enlightenment, and neoclassicism. I examine seventeenth-century writers’ struggles to apprehend nonlinguistic truth through thoroughly linguistic tools and artifacts, in the effort to contribute to the current reconsideration of the methods and goals of literary scholarship.

The parallel I suggested between the turning of particular metaphors and the larger turns of history is purposeful. Historical changes are often dynamically transacted through the figurative dimensions of language. The attention I pay to figurative language could be characterized as formalist in its concern and might be included within the cluster of conversations associated with “new formalism.” As Stephen Cohen has argued, historically driven criticism that maintains a focus on formal structures aims “to arrest the form-history pendulum by producing a historically and ideologically sensitive formalism, one that neither denies the cultural function of form nor reduces it to a single inherent or inevitable effect,

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<sup>23</sup> For the trope of the “world turned upside down,” see Hill, pp. 12-18.

<sup>24</sup> For a reflection on the post-linguistic turn that attempts to theorize the relationship between close and distant reading, see Julie Orlemanski, “Scales of Reading,” *Exemplaria: Medieval, Early Modern, Theory* 26.2-3 (2014), pp. 215-233.

whether conservative or liberatory.”<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Levinson, while a critic of the movement, helpfully acknowledges two threads within new formalism: one is focused on restoring historicist scholarship’s concern for form, the other is a backlash against the priorities of new historicism altogether, seeking “to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature.”<sup>26</sup> If my project resonates with the first of these threads, it directly opposes the latter. To attend to the figurative features of treatises and tracts—and to recognize those forms as potentially poetic—is to frustrate any hard distinction between history and art or discourse and literature. There are important formal differences between the genres of poetry and nonfiction prose that I aim to highlight, but, as my analysis will show, close attention to the figurative dimensions of nonfiction texts serves to enrich further our sense of the broad spectrum of texts that historicist scholarship has brought into focus within literary studies.

For decades, new historicist literary scholarship has demonstrated the virtues of close linguistic attention to the archive of texts usually studied by historians, philosophers, and others. As a result, specialists outside of literary studies have become more interested in what they see as the rhetorical dimensions of their primary documents. For instance, intellectual historian Quentin Skinner has argued for the primacy of rhetoric within Hobbes’s philosophical project.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as I will show in Chapter 2, such scholarship remains understandably inattentive to the subtle tensions that existed between rhetoric and poetics. Studying prose writings relevant to other disciplines, I hope to show the significance of poetics in relation to nonfiction prose, complicating some of the interdisciplinary conversations about rhetoric already underway within early modern studies. Simultaneously, I hope also to demonstrate the shortcomings of treating all

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Cohen, ed. *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism?,” *PMLA* 122.2 (2007), pp. 558-569, p. 559. For “new formalist” scholarship focused on early modern studies, see Mark David Rasmussen, ed., *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

texts as inevitably poetic exercises, an attitude that sometimes motivates literary attention to discursive prose. It is clear that nonfiction prose writings offer scholars many of the interpretive rewards that we have come to expect from poetry.<sup>28</sup> Yet, treatises and tracts are specifically designed to manage and defer the presumption that all writing is somehow fictional. In a culture quite ambivalent about poetic expression—treating poetry as a domain of deceptive falsehood, fanciful play, or higher meaning—seventeenth-century prose was alive to language’s capacity to spin both fictions and truths. My analysis attempts to explore the poetic potential of these texts without treating the poetics of prose as a *prima facie* assumption.

## Review of Literature

This project aims to intervene primarily in the field of prose studies. Inquiry into prose, particularly in early modern studies, is complicated by the multiple meanings that the term “prose” has in critical conversations. There are at least four definitions for what we mean when we say “prose”: (1) it is a linguistic mode, an arrangement of language that breaks from the tight, regular patterns of verse;<sup>29</sup> (2) it names a broad cluster of genres that employ that mode; (3) it names a more specific category of nonfiction or discursive genres that employ that rhythmic mode, and that serve a variety of practical, narrative, expository, argumentative, or experimental ends; (4) it refers to an underlying semiotics of prose, of language keyed to referential function, a

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<sup>28</sup> Post-structuralist theories of language have, after all, established that all texts consist of poetic substance. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” trans. F. C. T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6.1 (1974), pp. 5-74, argues that language and all of the systems of knowledge that rely upon it are merely metaphors stacked atop metaphors. He cites a passage from Anatole France that helps make this point: “any expression of an abstract idea can only be an analogy.” Philosophers and, for that matter, any writer attempting to articulate truth, are ultimately just a “sorry lot of poets” who “dim the colors of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables,” (p. 11).

<sup>29</sup> For a history of prose’s relationship to poetic verse in the Latin West, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953; Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013), pp. 147-154. Prose as a mode differs most generally from verse in that it is segmented at the level of the sentence or paragraph, rather than the poetic line. For a treatment of the concept of segmentivity, see Brian McHale, “Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry,” *Narrative* 17 (2009), pp. 11-30.

relation signified by the critical idiom “the prose of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Prose fiction, one of the genres included in the second definition of prose, derives much of its meaning from the tension between these differing conceptions of the term.<sup>31</sup> For example, a text like Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) is prosaic in its language and its cultivation of an everyday realism, even as it indulges in the fictive excesses of a self-described “outlandish Chronicler.”<sup>32</sup> Such works of nonfiction prose as Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), on the other hand, rely upon the complementary alignment of these definitions—unshaped by versification, it seeks to articulate truths explicitly, attempting to describe the world as it is. The treatises and tracts discussed in this dissertation are prime examples of prose in this sense.

While studies of prose often glimpse the richness of the multiple meanings concealed within this deceptively singular critical term, they have rarely attempted to pull “prose” apart as a concept to inquire into the network of relationships implied within it. Twentieth-century literary criticism mostly focused on the question of syntactical style as the basic unit of prose form.<sup>33</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose: An Essay in Prosaics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), offer a theoretical treatment of prose as a “signifying practice” in the context of medieval France. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort (1969; Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1981), attributes the critical idiom “prose of the world” to Hegel’s assertion that “the Roman state was the prose of the world,” (p. xiii). See also Michelle Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; London: Psychology P, 2002), Ch. 2, pp. 19-50.

<sup>31</sup> On the development of prose fiction in the early modern period, see Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2006). On the significance of prose form to the novel, a genre with origins in the late seventeenth century, see Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1957; Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001), pp. 28-9; and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (1987; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), pp. 52-4.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, in *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 251-370, p. 370. On the text’s investment in prose, see Stephen Guy-Bray, “How to Turn Prose into Literature: The Case of Thomas Nashe,” in *Early Modern Prose Fiction: The Cultural Politics of Reading*, ed. Naomi Conn Liebler (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 33-45.

<sup>33</sup> For early criticism focused on syntax and rhythm in seventeenth-century prose, see Morris Croll, *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris W. Croll*, ed. J. Max Patrick, Robert O. Evans, et. al. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966); and George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble: A Study in Prose Form from Bacon to Collier* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951). Joan Webber, *The Eloquent “I”: Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1968), develops this syntactical methodology to focus on writerly subjectivity. Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1972), Ch. 8 and Appendix, pp. 374-428, reverses that emphasis to consider style’s interaction with its readership, formulating an “affective stylistics.” Walter R. Davis, “Genre and Non-Fictional Prose,” *Prose Studies* 11.2 (1988), pp. 85-98,



the absence of verse lineation, this level of critical attention promised to make the rhythmic structure of prose aesthetically comprehensible. Since that time, scholars have taken interest in individual genres of prose, exploring the wider variety of textual forms beyond the traditional literary canon.<sup>34</sup> Spurred on by the critical impulses of feminism and historicism, they have developed insights into, for example, life writings, travel narratives, letters, and sermons, though without a sustained consideration of how these genres participate in “prose” as a critical concept.

However, in the late 1980s, some scholars began to note that the study of prose works might present an opportunity to rethink the questions of text and genre at the center of literary studies. Within early modern studies, Anne Imbrie called for the development of “a poetics of nonfiction prose” that would “include a study of its generic forms.”<sup>35</sup> The journal *Prose Studies* was one of the few scholarly venues actively interested in this kind of work. Philip Dodd, the journal’s editor, and Ronald Corthell, who later succeeded him, expressed hope that scholars, especially early modernists, could use discursive prose as a means to reconsider the fundamental assumptions of the discipline.<sup>36</sup> Over two decades later, Corthell was still sounding many of the same notes in an essay for the collection *Teaching Early Modern English Prose* (2010), suggesting that, despite all of the critical industry surrounding prose writings, there remained a

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argues that these approaches to prose style had tended to privilege literary self-consciousness, confining scholarly attention to a familiar set of canonical prose writers, namely Francis Bacon, Robert Burton, and Thomas Browne.

<sup>34</sup> Roger Pooley, *English Prose of the Seventeenth Century, 1590-1700* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), surveys the wide variety of genres and modes of seventeenth-century English prose, synthesizing the developments in prose scholarship over the twentieth century. Neil Rhodes, ed., *English Renaissance Prose: History, Language, and Politics* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), notes that, since the work of Morris Croll, studies of prose have largely moved away from the preoccupation with questions of style. Roland Greene and Elizabeth Fowler, eds. “Introduction: The Project of Prose and Early Modern Literary Studies,” in *The Project of Prose in Early Modern Europe and the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 1-14, follow the theoretical example of Godzich and Kittay, approaching prose in the effort “to witness generic issues in the context of a more-than-literary investigation, and to widen the boundaries around the concept of genre as well,” (p. 6).

<sup>35</sup> Ann E. Imbrie, “Defining Nonfiction Genres,” in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986), pp. 45-69, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> See Philip Dodd, “Literature, Fictiveness, and the Dilemma of Nonfiction,” *Prose Studies* 10.1 (1987), pp. 5-8; and Ronald Corthell, “The Subject of Nonfictional Prose: The Renaissance.”

shortage of interest in what makes these works distinct from their fictional counterparts.<sup>37</sup>

Scholars, of course, instinctively recognize the formal qualities that tend to distinguish nonfiction from poetic genres. However, most of their efforts aim to demonstrate either the imaginative craft of a prose work or the rhetorical engagement of a piece of fiction. Corthell argues that scholarly attention to discursive prose is often justified using criteria generated by modern conceptions of literary form, a strategy he calls the “defence of proesy.”<sup>38</sup> Attending to the possibility of poetics within nonfiction prose, my dissertation aims to address the spirit of Imbrie’s call in light of Corthell’s qualifications.

Another major thread of scholarship on early modern prose has taken a particular interest in figurative expression. At the same time as syntactical criticism was flourishing, there also emerged an account of the history of English prose that sought to explain the apparent difference between the highly metaphorical expressions of the Renaissance and the plain statements of the modern era. Richard Foster Jones famously argued that modern prose as we know it had its origins in the burgeoning scientific movement of the English Restoration.<sup>39</sup> Whereas in earlier decades Jones found prose that featured, among other adornments, “a poetic phraseology of rare beauty,” he contended that the new plain style “eschewed all rhetorical flourishes” and “against metaphor . . . carried on constant and uncompromising warfare.”<sup>40</sup> Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* is the iconic example used to demonstrate this historical argument. Jones suggests that the supposed anti-metaphorical impulse of the Restoration was loosely inspired by Francis

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<sup>37</sup> One exception is Marcus Nevitt’s work on the relationship between newsbooks and poetry. See Nevitt, “Sing Heavenly News: Journalism and Poetic Authority in Samuel Sheppard’s *The Faerie King* (1651),” *Studies in Philology* 109.4 (2012), pp. 496-518; and “Ballads and the Development of the English Newsbook,” in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, eds. Martin Conboy et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp.183-194.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Corthell, “What is Early Modern Nonfictional Prose?” in *Teaching Early Modern English Prose*, eds. Susannah Brietz Monta and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York: MLA, 2010), pp. 19-31, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> See Richard Foster Jones, “Science and English Prose Style, 1650-75,” *PMLA* 45 (1930), pp. 977-1009, rpt. in *Seventeenth-Century Prose: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), pp. 53-89.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, pp. 54, 75.

Bacon, but that it solidified and flourished under the Royal Society of London, influencing the variety of prose discourses beyond the new science. Metaphor, though, is an inevitable feature of language, and Jones's thesis has been challenged on several fronts: Brian Vickers has questioned the relevance of scientific plainness to discourses outside of philosophy, Paul Arakelian has demonstrated the stylistic diversity that persisted in late-seventeenth-century writings, Robert Markley has argued that the Royal Society participated in, not a progressive leap toward a modern discourse, but rather a crisis in representation, and Richard Kroll has shown that the neoclassical turn of the Restoration constituted an embrace of language's materiality, rather than an insistence upon its transparency.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Jones's interpretation has had remarkable durability.<sup>42</sup> As Catherine Gimelli Martin argues, even as this historical narrative has been called into question for offering "a simplistically linear, triumphalist, or 'Whig' version of scientific progress," a "dark version" of this account persists in Michel Foucault's sense of an epistemic break in the seventeenth century, which new historicist scholars have largely embraced.<sup>43</sup> I am presenting an account that I hope frustrates, rather than reiterates, the idea that English might somehow have been simplified or domesticated at the end of the seventeenth century. The theory of language that received a strong articulation in the Restoration—namely the aspiration for words accommodated to a particular perspective on the world—was not precisely new, nor has it ever claimed absolute dominance over the linguistic worldview of any era since. However, the

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Vickers, "Restoration Prose Style: A Reassessment," in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, eds. Nancy Struever and Brian Vickers (Los Angeles: Clark Library, 1985), pp. 3-76; Paul Arakelian, "The Myth of the Restoration Style Shift," *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 20 (1979), pp. 227-45; Robert Markley, *Fallen Languages: Crises of Representation in Newtonian England, 1660-1740* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993); Richard W. F. Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> While many scholars of seventeenth-century prose who accept the basic terms of the Jones thesis do so tacitly, Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2009), acknowledges the critical challenge to the notion of a coherent style crystallizing in the Restoration, countering somewhat persuasively that an alteration occurred on an ontological, rather than a syntactical level.

<sup>43</sup> Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The Ahistoricism of the New Historicism: Knowledge as Power versus Power as Knowledge in Bacon's *New Atlantis*," *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth-Century English Literature*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002), pp. 22-49, p. 25.

sense of prose's close relationship to the world has had continued currency among proponents of truth and science, as well as the champions of vulgar common sense. This project focuses on a moment of crisis that exposes the futility of that ideal, even as it demonstrates the conditions that motivated it.

### **Between Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Poetics: The Figurative Imagination**

In recent decades, literary scholars have tended to emphasize the connections between rhetorical and poetic theories in the effort to demonstrate the expansiveness of the early modern period's figurative imagination. In *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber note that "it can be hard to draw the line between literary and rhetorical theory in the classical and Renaissance periods."<sup>44</sup> That difficulty derives from Renaissance humanism's eagerness to synthesize rhetoric with poetics, discursive modes that it placed in opposition to the systematized logic of scholastic philosophy.<sup>45</sup> While as the early modern period progressed, "rhetoric" as a term came to be denigrated, its effects as a tool for apprehending probable truths flourished in the midst of the period's intellectual instability. Over the course of the seventeenth century, Aristotle's division between knowledge and opinion eroded, giving way to the careful measurement of truth in degrees of likelihood. As Barbara Shapiro has demonstrated, with the standard of complete certainty regarded with greater suspicion, English thinkers in natural science, religion, history, law, and literature turned to

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<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber, eds., Introduction, *Renaissance Figures of Speech* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp. 1-16, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> On humanist rhetoric as the counterpoint to scholastic logic, see Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State UP, 1980); and Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), Chs. 1-2, pp. 3-74.

probability as a more adaptive technique for assessing truth in their respective fields.<sup>46</sup> At times, poetic possibility was recognized as a useful adjunct to rhetorical probability.<sup>47</sup> Cicero's declaration that "the poet, after all, closely resembles the orator" embodies the spirit of the classical synthesis between rhetoric and poetics that some early modern thinkers sought to embrace.<sup>48</sup> However, Cicero's line obscures a contrary thread in the classical tradition that had a meaningful impact on the textual culture of the mid-seventeenth century, particularly its conception of figurative language.

The most conspicuous example of the demarcation between rhetoric and poetics appears in the writings of Aristotle. As Adamson, Alexander, and Ettenhuber note, "Aristotle had given quite separate treatments of poetics and rhetoric, but this was an approach that was not to be repeated until the later Renaissance."<sup>49</sup> The renewed effort to treat rhetoric and poetics separately coincided with mid-seventeenth-century England's intellectual crisis. It is in Aristotle that we can glimpse the theoretical fragmentation that polemical and philosophical texts of the later period sought to exploit. Though he was interested in apprehending constructive relationships between poetry, rhetoric, and philosophical logic, Aristotle recognized the need to address the complex distinctions that persisted within them. A philosopher first and foremost, he worked diligently to discover the integrity of rhetorical and poetic expression, defending them from the criticisms they had suffered in Plato's dialogues.<sup>50</sup> The *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* are texts that

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<sup>46</sup> On the relationship between probabilism and rhetoric, see Walter Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. (1958; Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005); and Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983).

<sup>47</sup> Walter Ong, "The Province of Rhetoric and Poetic," *The Modern Schoolman* 19.2 (1942), pp. 24-7, argues that poetics is often subordinated in the larger perennial conflict between philosophy and rhetoric.

<sup>48</sup> Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 1.70, p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> Adamson, Alexander, and Ettenhuber, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> On Plato's treatment of poetics, especially in the *Republic*, see Dorrit Cohn. "The Poetics of Plato's *Republic*: A Modern Perspective," *Philosophy and Literature* 24.1 (2000), pp. 34-48; and Julia Sushytska, "On the Non-Rivalry

offer alternative standards of meaning beyond logical necessity, showing the value of probable and possible claims to truth and demonstrating how these registers of significance motivate the metaphorical impulse.

While rhetoric often has recourse to figuration, classical writers suspected that there was something poetic about the possibilities unleashed by a metaphorical turn.<sup>51</sup> They could see that metaphors and similitudes were powerful tools for discursive endeavors of all kinds, but it was clear that figuration tapped into a radical source of meaning that might belong more properly to poetics. Aristotle's writings suggest that metaphor is fundamentally poetic, even when it serves the higher order consequences of rhetoric or philosophical logic.<sup>52</sup> In the *Poetics*, Aristotle celebrates the genius of the poet, who is uniquely equipped to use metaphor well. Metaphorical insight, after all, constitutes the "the perception of similarities," or (in a more felicitous and figurative translation) the poet has "an eye for resemblances."<sup>53</sup> Figurative language is indispensable to the work of rhetoric, and yet classical commentators advised caution in its employment within rhetorical circumstances: Aristotle warns in the *Rhetoric* that persuasive speeches should avoid the overuse of similitudes, on the grounds that they are "poetic."<sup>54</sup> Quintilian similarly advised that "poets are not to be imitated by the orator in every respect—not, for instance, in freedom of language, or unrestrained use of figures."<sup>55</sup> The probable grounds of

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Between Poetry and Philosophy: Plato's *Republic*, Reconsidered," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 45.1 (2012), pp. 55-70.

<sup>51</sup> For an account of the relationship between the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* concerned with Aristotle's theory of metaphor, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (1977; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 1, pp. 8-48.

<sup>52</sup> John T. Kirby, "Aristotle on Metaphor," *The American Journal of Philology* 118.4 (1997), pp. 517-554, suggests that "metaphor epitomizes or recapitulates in itself all of language—that mysterious, miraculous means by which we mirror the whole world around us," p. 547.

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1987), p. 57. The latter translation comes from *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*.

<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, 1406b, *On Rhetoric*, p. 229.

<sup>55</sup> Quintilian, *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Instiutio oratoria*, 10.1.28, trans. James Murphy (Carbondale and Edwardville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987), p. 131.

rhetorical eloquence could, it appears, be disrupted by poetic expression's indulgence in ungoverned possibility.

Classical writers were even more emphatic about the impropriety of poetic figuration within philosophy. In the *Topics*, Aristotle warns that “a metaphorical expression is always obscure.”<sup>56</sup> That obscurity impedes the process of systematic logic, hence Hobbes's later suggestion that metaphors are the “*ignes fatui*” of reasoning.<sup>57</sup> Metaphors, because of their poetic foundation, entail a wide variety of possible meanings, disrupting the strictures of logical definition. Yet, when he considered the larger dynamics of language in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle recognized a surprising affinity between the figurative impulse and the enterprise of philosophy. Insisting that figuration be based upon meaningful resemblances, Aristotle suggested that metaphors “should be transferred from things that are related but not obviously so, as in philosophy, too, it is characteristic of a well-directed mind to observe the likeness even in things very different.”<sup>58</sup> He demonstrates that the guided insights of the poetic eye might also serve the philosopher's ends. This was the complicated predicament that figurative language found itself in—constitutive of expression itself and yet simultaneously a risky manipulation of it.

The anxiety surrounding figurative language in the seventeenth century reflects this ambivalence, as writers and readers were forced to reconsider the application of language to questions of truth. Philosophers and polemicists tacitly recognized the generative power that Aristotle saw in poetic figuration, yet they feared the interpretive instabilities that a poetic approach to their arguments could elicit. This set of conditions put a finer point on the question lurking over early modern prose—“whose text is fictional, whose nonfictional?” Most often,

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<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, 139b, *Topics*, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), pp. 381-617, p. 526.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, 1412a, *On Rhetoric*, p. 250.

rival writers wielded the acknowledgement of language's poetic capacity as a weapon against their interlocutors. Poetic figures could be dismissed as fictive or deceptive. However, when that poetic dimension went unremarked (albeit understood), figurative gestures could be read felicitously. Despite fears about the metaphorical destabilization of discourse, figurative language, as Harold Skulsky notes, generally "requires a tacit social contract."<sup>59</sup> The implicit recognition of the poetics of figuration also facilitates the charitable interpretation of metaphors in ways that further the connection between writer and reader and deepen the conception of the ideas under discussion. As Skulsky asserts, "[f]igurativeness is an opportunity to renew the *sense* of language as an instrument of collective purpose."<sup>60</sup> It is in this sense that figuration's poetic character is so significant. Rhetoric, in Aristotle's formulation, is an inquiry into "the available means of persuasion."<sup>61</sup> Rhetorical probability tends to appeal to received opinions, conventional perceptions of the world founded on cultural custom. Poetics, though, allows for language and its users to grasp at what might seem *unavailable*. Though he championed poetry on largely rhetorical grounds, Sir Philip Sidney's exceptionalist claims for poetic representation largely rested on its ability to construct a "second nature," beyond the prevailing theories of the world as it was understood.<sup>62</sup> Sidney extrapolates from the Aristotelian theory of poetics the notion that something more than *what we think we know* can be conjured forth poetically. In the tumultuous back and forth of mid-seventeenth-century philosophy and polemic, writers and readers also clashed over how to use the resources of language to bring forth or forestall a second nature. As I will demonstrate, some in the period attempted to use metaphors and similitudes to spin a

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<sup>59</sup> Harold Skulsky, *Language Recreated: Seventeenth-Century Metaphorists and the Act of Metaphor* (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, 1355b, *On Rhetoric*, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy* (1595) in *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9.



“golden” world out of a “world turned upside down.”<sup>63</sup>

## Chapter Outlines

My first two chapters address the role of figurative expression in the religious and political debates of the English Revolution. In Chapter 1, “[T]he cool element of prose’: Milton, Metaphor, and Polemical Engagement,” I argue that reformers and revolutionaries in the 1640s tapped into figuration’s poetic impulse in order to inflame what Milton called “the cool element of prose,” a standard of discursive temperance that preserved customary truths.<sup>64</sup> By challenging the master tropes of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, puritan writers in the anti-prelatical controversy exacerbated a crisis in textual authority, bating such defenders of episcopacy as Bishop Joseph Hall into intractable polemical repartee that undermined the credibility of all involved. Milton participated in and even heightened this cycle of mutually assured derision in tracts like *Of Reformation* (1641), but in *Reason of Church Government* (1642) and *Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642), he sought to construct an alternative source of authority—the prophetic poet.

Transforming the metaphorical tactics of unsavory vituperative debate into an ethical virtue of poetic insight, Milton endeavored to expose the poetic nature of prosaic discourse, undoing any clear distinctions between these forms of expression in the effort to articulate a more revolutionary sense of truth. In *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton unleashed this figurative strategy with poetic metaphors that conveyed true meaning as beyond verbalization. Yet, a tradition of critical misinterpretations of that tract suggests the point at which Milton’s poeticizing might have undermined his rhetorical purpose. In *Eikonoklastes* (1649), he came to exploit this very dynamic in his attack on the royalist publication, *Eikon Basilike* (1649), pointing out a series of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> John Milton, *Reason of Church-Government*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), 1.808.

figurative expressions in the King's Book to suggest that it "might perhaps be intended a peece of Poetrie," destabilizing the text's claims to affirmative truth.<sup>65</sup> Milton moved from casting himself as a maker of images to being a breaker of images, and in his later prose works, such as *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659), he ultimately embraced the role of the plain stylist.

In Chapter 2, "*Leviathan* and the Bagpipe: Thomas Hobbes and the Matter of Poetic Figuration," I demonstrate Hobbes's effort to contain the controversy playing out in the revolutionary print marketplace, which Milton had sought to invigorate. Hobbes is infamous for his apparent denunciations of metaphorical expression. His writings of the early 1640s, like *The Elements of Law* (1640) and his critique of Thomas White's *De Mundo* (1642) did indeed attempt to extricate logical demonstration from rhetorical and poetic forms. However, by the end of the decade, he came to recognize the necessity and inextricability of those modes of expression. I argue that Hobbes recognized the fundamentally poetic foundations of language, harnessing them in his effort to build a coherent state of peace through political absolutism. In the *Leviathan* (1651), he refashioned the traditional figure of organic social unity—the body politic—into the conspicuously artificial structure of the biblical sea-creature. Unlike royalists in the period who often insisted upon the proper truth of tropes associated with the established order, Hobbes embraced the metaphoricity of such figures. He developed this line of thought in his literary-critical exchange with William Davenant. In his "Answer to Davenant" (1650), which responded to the preface of the poet's unfinished epic *Gondibert* (1650), Hobbes celebrated poetry as the adjunct to philosophy, articulating a representational standard of "the conceived possibility of nature."<sup>66</sup> Challenging the invocation to a muse as a convention that effectively transforms a poet into an empty bagpipe, he put forth a theory of the collective power

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., *Eikonoklastes*, 3.406.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir Will. D'Avenant's Preface Before Gondibert" (1650), in *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 45-55, p. 51.

of poetic expression that rejected the chaos and solipsism of individual inspiration.

As Hobbes's considerations of nature suggest, the period's religious and political tensions paralleled, and were later absorbed into, the discourse of natural philosophy, which the second half of my project addresses. One of the tenets of the Restoration settlement was a call for linguistic reform in philosophy that reacted against the discursive upheavals of the earlier conflicts. Chapter 3, "'[T]o cast a wary eye': Rhetoric, Poetics, and Interpretation in the Prose of Thomas Browne," argues that Browne pioneered latitudinarianism as the philosopher's response to the upheavals of the Revolution, anticipating the Restoration effort to contain religious controversy. In his *Religio Medici* (1643), this approach manifested as a "soft and flexible" revision of rhetoric that draws upon poetic resources to create an anti-persuasive form of expression, one capable of searching out possibilities afforded by figurativeness, including even the chance to discover "reall truth therein."<sup>67</sup> In his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Browne revised his approach to figurative expression, hunting out the mistaken conceptions of nature proliferated by the imaginings of poets. His catalogue of errors advised the exercise of a "wary eye" toward traditional figurations of nature in order to construct a more persistent epistemological order, recognizing, I argue, the metaphoricity of natural tropes while developing a surprising skepticism toward poetic representation.<sup>68</sup>

In Chapter 4, "'Like and the Same is not all one thing': Scientific 'Similizing' and Poetic Possibility in the Work of Margaret Cavendish," I trace Cavendish's response to the empirical turn in natural philosophy with its associated call for "mathematical plainness" in language. Like Browne, Cavendish had a complicated orientation toward the scientific methods of the Royal

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Penquin, 1977), pp. 57-162, p. 103.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 34.

Society, especially its discursive program. Far from banishing the conceptions of poets from natural speculation, Cavendish saw poetry as an apt vehicle for scientific inquiry, using her *Poems, and Fancies* (1653) as a means to encroach tentatively upon a traditionally masculine pursuit. Cavendish's reliance upon poetic resources in philosophy persisted over the course of the 1650s as she produced a series of natural-philosophical treatises, *Philosophical Fancies* (1653) and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1655), that frequently described natural phenomena through a figurative process that Cavendish called "similizing."<sup>69</sup> Yet, in the 1660s, she began to adhere to a discursive plainness of her own, challenging the false poetic figures of rival philosophers in her *Philosophical Letters* (1664) and ultimately adopting a style of abstract conceptualization in lieu of metaphorical similizing. Yet, Cavendish did not turn away from the imaginative resources of poetry. Her publication of the fictional romance *The Blazing World* (1666) alongside *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) demonstrated her revision of the Restoration settlement's insistence upon reason's governance of fancy, preserving a uniquely poetic outlet for the imaginative dimensions of philosophical speculation.

Overall, my project demonstrates that poetic figuration within discursive prose writing operates as a site of intense epistemological pressure from conflicting ideologies. The tension of these prosaic turns proves to be, not only an indelible feature of prose culture, but also the very engine whereby that sense of textuality was produced in mid-seventeenth-century England.

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<sup>69</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Fancies* (London: 1653), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 12.

## Chapter 1

### “[T]he cool element of prose”: Milton, Metaphor, and Polemical Engagement

As Sir Benjamin Rudyerd’s remarks before the House of Commons suggested, it was often in the interest of members of the parliamentary faction and critics of the established church to highlight the metaphorical character of society’s master tropes. Victoria Kahn has argued that the political order underwent changes motivated by a “metaphorical power to transform existing relations or to create new relations ex nihilo.”<sup>1</sup> However, few revolutionary writers were open about the figurative character of their own preferred icons and idioms. This was inadvisable in the upheaval of the period’s prose wars. The goal of a polemical tract was to obtain assent to a given position or to undermine a competing argument, making it unlikely that any pamphleteer would be eager to highlight the interpretive scope and flexibility that existed within his or her own assertions. It was even more rare for such a writer to acknowledge even that his or her appeals might indulge in the resources of poetic artistry. John Milton was the exception.

Establishing his position as a prophetic poet, the Milton of *Paradise Lost* invoked his “Heav’nly Muse” in order to attempt an ambitious aim—that he might “assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men.”<sup>2</sup> James Grantham Turner has argued that “assertion” is “a key word in Milton’s self-presentation, a bridging concept that suppresses the formal distinction of prose and verse.”<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the impressions of a critical tradition eager to celebrate his poetic accomplishments at the expense of his polemical activity, Milton exploited

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004), p. 123. Kahn attends to covenants and contracts as the source of this metaphorical power, but her study acknowledges the role of figuration as the engine of the period’s political changes.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *Complete Poetry and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), pp. 211-469, 1.6, 25-6.

<sup>3</sup> James Grantham Turner, “The Poetics of Engagement,” in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose*, eds. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), pp. 257-275, p. 266.

textual forms of all kinds in the effort to *assert* a truly revolutionary vision. His work played an active role in the English Revolution, striving among the proliferation of prose in the print marketplace of the 1640s to exacerbate a crisis in textual authority.<sup>4</sup> For radical pamphleteers like Milton, the upheaval in the institutions of discourse presented an opportunity to remake the foundation of early modern society and the language it rested upon. Thus, his radical arguments often tapped into the tension surrounding poetic expression. While other writers were content to put forth competing accounts of truth, Milton sought to engender in his readers an approach to language alive to its possibilities and limitations. His prose writings of the 1640s demonstrate a form of polemical engagement that is invigorated by poetic figuration.

Milton studies have long grappled with the question of how to evaluate the relationship between Milton's poetry and prose. Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross's *Achievements of the Left Hand* (1974) takes its title from Milton's suggestion that he had only the use of his "left hand" in his polemical efforts, even though the articles in that collection suggest the artistry and power of his prose.<sup>5</sup> Turner and David Loewenstein's *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose* (1990) has challenged the "separatist doctrine" that divided Milton's poetry from the prose.<sup>6</sup> Since that publication, Milton studies have successfully reconciled "the poet" with "the statesman," and abolished "the dichotomy of poetry and rhetoric, performance and

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<sup>4</sup> On the crisis in textual authority in the English Revolution, see Elizabeth Skerpan, *The Rhetoric of Politics in the English Revolution, 1642-1660* (Columbia, MO and London: U of Missouri P, 1992); Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994); Nigel Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1994), Ch. 1, pp. 23-53; and Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), Ch. 6, pp. 202-275.

<sup>5</sup> Milton, *Reason of Church-Government*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), 1:808. All citations of Milton's prose will be cited parenthetically hereafter; Michael Lieb and John T. Shawcross, eds., *Achievements of the Left Hand* (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> David Loewenstein and James Gantham Turner, eds. *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 1.

prophecy.”<sup>7</sup> That critical achievement was largely accomplished by exploring the poetic craftsmanship of Milton’s prose. Many Renaissance thinkers were convinced of the close proximity between poetics and rhetoric, understanding poetry to be, as O. B. Hardison suggested, “a higher form of oratory.”<sup>8</sup> Of all of the English polemicists of the 1640s, Milton was perhaps the most convinced of the significance of that connection. James Egan argues that “Milton’s poetical rhetoric represents a signature internalization and adaptation of the close relationship of rhetoric and poetic he would have encountered in classical texts.”<sup>9</sup> I argue, however, that Milton was distinctive in that he sought a strong synthesis between those arts during a cultural moment of growing skepticism toward both.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, as Milton’s career as a polemicist developed, he began to trace out the fault lines in the relationship between rhetoric and poetics, demonstrating greater diffidence toward the use of figuration in prose and largely abandoning the ethos of a poeticizing pamphleteer. Thomas Corns has argued that Milton’s plainer aesthetic in his later prose writings resulted “from changes in his own stylistic preferences rather than from any mere conformity with the practices of his contemporaries.”<sup>11</sup> I want to suggest that Milton’s “stylistic preferences” emerged from his growing understanding of the vexed relationship

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

<sup>8</sup> O. B. Hardison, “The Orator and the Poet: The Dilemma of Humanist Literature,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1 (1971), pp. 33-44, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> James Egan, “Rhetoric and Poetic in Milton’s Polemics of 1659-60,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13.1 (2013), pp. 73-110, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> On Milton and plain style, see Thomas N. Corns, *The Development of Milton’s Prose Style* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) and “Milton’s Prose,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 84-97; James Egan, “Milton’s Aesthetic of Plainness, 1659-1673,” *The Seventeenth Century* 12.1 (1997), pp. 57-80; and Ryan J. Stark, “Cold Styles: On Milton’s Critiques of Frigid Rhetoric in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 37.1 (2003), pp. 21-30. For the Restoration plain style movement, see R.F. Jones, “Science and English Prose Style in the Third-Quarter of the Seventeenth Century,” *PMLA* 45 (1930), pp. 992-1009; and Roger Pooley, “Language and Loyalty: Plain Style at the Restoration,” *Literature and History* 6 (1980), pp. 2-18. Brian Vickers, “Restoration Prose Style: A Reassessment,” in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, eds. Nancy Struever and Brian Vickers (Los Angeles: Clark Library, 1985), pp. 3-76; and Paul Arakelian, “The Myth of a Restoration Style Shift,” *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 20 (1979), pp. 227-45, have challenged the notion of a consistent syntactical realignment in the 1660s. Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2009), contends that the discursive change in the period was felt on the level of linguistic theory, if not sentence-level phenomena.

<sup>11</sup> Corns, “Milton’s Prose,” p. 92.

between rhetoric and poetics. In his later tracts, Milton had to acknowledge and, in his own way, adapt to the discursive conditions of the waning Revolution and coming Restoration, motivating his more austere, less conspicuously poetic rhetoric.

Critics celebrating the affinity between rhetoric and poetry sometimes overlook the subtle tensions between them, which emerged as a potent anxiety in mid-seventeenth-century England. Far from being a departure from classical precedent, Milton's confrontation with the limits of figurative language derived from an intimate acquaintance with the discursive theories of ancient thinkers. While, as I noted in the Introduction, Cicero asserted that "the poet, after all, closely resembles the orator" in that they have "an almost equal share in many of the devices of style," Aristotle warned against the overuse of figurative comparisons on the grounds that they are too "poetic," and Quintilian similarly cautioned that "poets are not to be imitated by the orator in every respect—not, for instance, in freedom of language, or unrestrained use of figures."<sup>12</sup> As I will demonstrate, conspicuously figurative language became a problem as Milton and his contemporaries began to question the tropological foundations of early modern English society, sifting through the metaphors and similitudes used to communicate its ideological tenets. The very figurativeness of tropes became a means whereby revolutionaries could take control of discourse and manipulate it to challenge, rather than affirm, the status quo. As I will discuss, Milton engaged in this strategy in his anti-prelatical tracts, developing a thoroughly figurative approach to argumentation in his first pamphlet *Of Reformation* (1641) and explicitly highlighting the poetic impulse behind his discursive liveliness in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1641) and *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642). In *Areopagitica* (1644), though, he

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<sup>12</sup> Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 1.70, p. 74; Aristotle, 1406b, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 229; Quintilian, *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Instiutio oratoria*, 10.1.28, trans. James Murphy (Carbondale and Edwardville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987), p. 131.



soon confronted the limitations of casting himself as a poet in prose. For Milton, the connection between a markedly poetic strategy of figuration and the conditions of rhetorical engagement unraveled over the course of the 1640s, coming to a head in *Eikonoklastes* (1649), in which Milton cast himself not as a maker of images, but as a breaker of them, leading to his participation in a movement toward discursive plainness in his later tracts, such as *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659).

This chapter pursues a significant question: What is the relationship between poetic figuration and polemical engagement? Keith Stavely, in one of the first book-length studies of Milton's prose, followed Milton's own dichotomized presentation of textual forms to suggest that his figurative sensibility undermined his capacity to engage in effective political argumentation. He argues that "an exalted 'poetic' texture limits the political effectiveness of Milton's prose instead of extending and enriching it."<sup>13</sup> Stavely bases this on the dubious rationale that "[t]he literary 'coherence' of the individual pamphlet interferes with its 'correspondence' to political and social life."<sup>14</sup> However, as Turner has argued, Milton celebrates the virtue of the "text-in-the-world, the committed and end-directed text in whatever form."<sup>15</sup> For Milton and other early modern English writers, aesthetics were not opposed to politics. In fact, particular forms of poetic insight could invigorate the process of engagement. Though Milton confronts the point at which poetic expression might impede rhetorical engagement, he does so only in the process of championing poetic figuration as the primary tool in the rigorous pursuit of truth. As Harold Skulsky argues, figurativeness offers "an opportunity to renew the sense of

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<sup>13</sup> Keith Stavely, *The Politics of Milton's Prose Style* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Turner, p. 263.

language as an instrument of collective purpose.”<sup>16</sup> In wielding what Aristotle called the poet’s “eye for resemblances,” a writer deploys tropes that encourage readers to participate in a shared vision of the world—one patterned out, likeness by likeness, to constitute and reconstitute society’s conceptual order.<sup>17</sup> Many seventeenth-century polemicists were reluctant to acknowledge the poetic character of this figurative process, preferring to cast their work as a plain discovery of the truths that have been obscured by the deceptions of the powerful and the credulousness of the ignorant.<sup>18</sup> Milton, though, was not content to let one reductive discourse replace another. He put forth a form of polemical engagement alive to its own poeticness, spending the years of the English Revolution processing what it meant to be a poet in prose.

### **Authority and Polemic: Metaphor in Textual Controversy**

In January of 1641, Bishop Joseph Hall issued his *Humble Remonstrance to the High Court of Parliament, by a Dutiful Sonne of the Church*. This dutiful son of Anglicanism was appealing for the preservation of the episcopal system of church government. His published appeal was made to what would come to be known as the Long Parliament, an institution that had recently received the Root and Branch Petition calling for the abolition of the hierarchy of bishops. In a climate of increasing ideological division, the print marketplace had begun to open up to a wider variety of voices. To Hall and other defenders of the established order, this was not

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<sup>16</sup> Harold Skulsky, *Language Recreated: Seventeenth-Century Metaphorists and the Act of Metaphor* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1992), pp. 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *Poetics* in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*.

<sup>18</sup> In the Restoration, Thomas Sprat gives the most pronounced articulation of the anti-metaphorical position in his *History of the Royal Society* (London, 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, decrying the “mists and uncertainties” of “specious Tropes and Figures” (p. 112). The Royal Society’s plain style movement was a reaction to the problems that poetic figuration posed to discourse during the earlier period of ideological upheaval that Milton and his contemporaries weathered.

a positive development.<sup>19</sup> From the start, the *Humble Remonstrance* attempted to vindicate itself as a rare example of truth-telling in a textual environment overrun by a rabble of falsehoods. “LEST the world should think the Presse had of late forgot to speake any language other then Libellous,” Hall wrote, “this honest paper hath broken through the throng, and prostrates it selfe before you.”<sup>20</sup> Hall’s pessimism must only have grown as England’s institutions of print churned out an unprecedented explosion of material, especially in the genres of prose argument. He himself soon encountered direct polemical confrontations from both a collective of godly ministers writing under the pseudonym Smectymnuus and from the “Church-outed” John Milton (1:823). Hall found his *Humble Remonstrance* transformed into the occasion for the so-called anti-prelatical controversy of 1641-2, in which writers sympathetic to a presbyterian form of church government criticized the hierarchical religious order of the prelates and their rote liturgical structures. These argumentative engagements presented Hall and others with a challenge as relevant to the particular question at hand as it was to the form of polemical controversy in general—who has the authority to speak truly and from where does that authority derive?

Despite his effort to build a moderate consensus, Hall became a significant focal point in the English tradition of polemic. Born in 1572, he arrived in the midst of the Elizabethan religious settlement, which had promised to resolve any questions about proper ecclesiastical authority. Over the course of his eight decades, though, Hall watched this settlement unravel. Even before the eruptions of the 1640s, he witnessed an earlier controversy that would prove to

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<sup>19</sup> Hall was far from an arch-Laudian, but his moderate defense of episcopacy made him a useful foil for anti-prelatical pamphleteers. For an account of Hall as one who presented a “viable, though rejected, alternative to the confrontation and conflict that dominated the kingdom during the later years of his career,” see Dan Steere, “‘For the Peace of Both, For the Humour of Neither’: Bishop Joseph Hall Defends the *Via Media* in an Age of Extremes, 1601-1656,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27.3 (1996), pp. 749-65, p. 750.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Hall, *Humble Remonstrance to the High Court of Parliament, by a Dutiful Sonne of the Church* (London, 1641), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 1-2.

be an ominous foreshadowing of the textual debate and all-out war of the English Revolution. Like the conflict between Hall, the Smectymnuans, and Milton, the polemical engagement of 1588-9 between Martin Marprelate and his opponents centered on the question of episcopal or presbyterian church government. Influential in its impact on this particular point of ecclesiastical order, the Marprelate controversy had an even greater impact on early modern notions of style and argument.<sup>21</sup> The pseudonymous Martin made the puritan case using a satirical mode of engagement distinguished by his colloquial and familiar tone and his vituperative and *ad hominem* attacks on his targets. This Martinist style was answered in kind by a cadre of hired pens, who deployed scathing satire in defense of the established church. Though Elizabethan authorities ultimately choked off Martin's access to the print marketplace and the presbyterian cause was effectively marginalized for decades thereafter, Martin's style of what one of his critics called "vaine prose" persisted as an effective rhetorical instrument in the future polemical controversies of the seventeenth century, albeit an instrument that carried with it a critical vulnerability.<sup>22</sup>

Martinist satire demonstrates the intimate relationship between polemical discourse and language's figurative capacity.<sup>23</sup> Though the original tracts of the Marprelate controversy did not

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<sup>21</sup> See Raymond A. Anselment, "*Betwixt Jest and Earnest*": *Marprelate, Milton, Marvell, Swift and the Decorum of Religious Ridicule* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1979), Ch. 1, pp. 8-61; Christopher Hill, "From Marprelate to the Levellers," in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England*, vol. 1 (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1985), pp. 75-95; Joseph Black, "The Rhetoric of Reaction: The Martin Marprelate Tracts (1588-89), Anti-Martinist, and the Uses of Print in Early Modern England," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 28.3 (1997), pp. 707-725; Jesse M. Lander, *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), Ch. 2, pp. 80-109; and Raymond, Ch. 2, pp. 27-52.

<sup>22</sup> Anon., *Marre Mar-Martin: or Marre-Martins Medling* (London, 1589), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>23</sup> Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr., *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1963) distinguishes between polemic and satire on the grounds that "satire involves, to some extent, a *departure from literal truth* and, in place of literal truth, a reliance upon what may be called a *satiric fiction*" (p. 17). Eric D. Vivier, "John Bridges, Martin Marprelate, and the Rhetoric of Satire," *English Literary Renaissance* 44.1 (2014), pp. 3-35, recognizes this distinction, but acknowledges the close relationship between the modes by classifying satire as "a specialized form of polemic" (p. 33). In this sense, satire is polemic at its most figuratively intense.

make frequent recourse to conspicuous figurative images, the Martinist style was empowered by Aristotle's notion of the poetic "eye for resemblances."<sup>24</sup> Martin and his allies set out to expose the true nature of things, an operation enabled by the expression of likenesses that are not immediately perceptible. Martin asserts, "I am plaine / I must neede call a Spade a Spade / a Pope a Pope."<sup>25</sup> To call "a Pope a Pope," though, Martin had to reveal the papistical character of the English episcopacy by calling *a bishop* a pope. He reveals that "Euery Archbishop is a petty Pope / so is euery Lord bishop."<sup>26</sup> This is essentially a figurative move that bends the customary meanings of words to expose their true meaning; that is, the perspective that the Marprelate tracts encourage their readers to share. While Martin's "eye for resemblances" demonstrates the poetic intelligence that drives satirical exposure, he nonetheless maintains that what he offers is plain expression.

Godly Protestants throughout the early modern period often framed their criticisms as plain and proper truth-telling leveled at the unnecessary linguistic elaborations of the Anglican establishment. Peter Aukxi has shown that invocations of plainness tap into "a privative sense of excrescences removed, excesses trimmed, needless complexity rendered accessible, artifice reduced, and ornament denied."<sup>27</sup> This meant, not the elimination of figures, but the deployment of felicitous tropes crafted to dispel deceitful opinions. Despite their artfully designed satirical turns, the Marprelate tracts downplayed their own poetic character. When the Martinist tradition was resurrected in the 1640s with a series of reprints of the original tracts and the Leveller Richard Overton's own experiments with the form, the claim to plainness persisted, even as

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<sup>24</sup> On the 1640s increase in satirical imagery, see James Egan, "Milton and the Marprelate Tradition," *Milton Studies* 8 (1975), pp. 103-22, p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Marprelate, *Oh Read Ouer D. Iohn Bridges, for it is Worthy Worke: or An Epitome...* (London, 1588), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Peter Aukxi, *Christian Plain Style: The Evolution of a Spiritual Ideal* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1995), p. 7.

Overton exploited an even more evocative pattern of figurative imagery.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Overton's *The Araignment of Mr. Persecution* (1645) ridicules his opponents with an allegorical depiction of the fleeing Mr. Persecution:

disguis'd with a Sylogisticall pair of Britches (saving your presence) in *Bocardo*, and snatching a Rhetoricall Cassok he girt up his loynes with a Sophisticall Girdle, and ran into the wilderness of *Tropes*, and *Figures*, and there they had lost him, had it not been for the *Spirits Teaching*, by whose direction they trac'd him through the various winding; subtile by-Pathes, secret tracts, and cunning Meanders the evening wolves, wild Boares and Beasts of the Forrest in the briery thickets of Rhetoricall Glosses, Sophistications, and scholastick Interpretations had made.<sup>29</sup>

This is quite the elaborate allegorical portrait. Overton's ornate narration shows just how subjective claims to plain and proper truth could be. He presents a set of allegorical figurations that resonate with the interpretive standards of his particular audience, challenging the perceived discursive indulgences of his opponents. Following in the Martinist tradition, Overton invokes plainness in the effort to highlight the apparent excesses of others' language, while minimizing or ignoring the inevitable tricks of his own. Thus, polemical engagement pits figure against figure, turn against turn, undermining any clear sense of a discursive high ground. Benjamin Griffin has called this problem one of "treacherous likeness," the anxiety that engagement might render interlocutors indistinguishable from one another. The fear of discursive convergence

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<sup>28</sup> For considerations of Leveller style, see Nigel Smith, "Richard Overton's Marpriest Tracts: Towards a History of Leveller Style," *Prose Studies* 9 (1986), pp. 39-66; and Rachel Foxley, "'The wilderness of Tropes and Figures': Figuring Rhetoric in Leveller Pamphlets," *The Seventeenth Century* 21.2 (2006), pp. 270-86. On Overton's contribution to the conversation on heresy and toleration, see David Loewenstein, *Treacherous Faith: The Specter of Heresy in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 256-265.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Overton, *The Araignment of Mr. Persecution: Presented to the Consideration of the House of Commons* (London, 1645), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 1-2.

inflected the prose wars of the 1640s, as it had in the Marprelate controversy before.<sup>30</sup>

Satirical polemic could undermine a competing rhetorical viewpoint, but it did not vindicate the satirist's own cause as one worthy of reverence. This concern was raised by Sir Francis Bacon, who in his "Advertisement Touching on the Controversies of the Church," circulated in manuscript around 1589, criticized his fellow defenders of the established church who had recourse to vituperative polemic. Bacon's "Advertisement" was brought into print for the first time in 1641 as *A Wise and Moderate Discourse, Concerning Church-Affaires*, suggesting its renewed significance to the revolutionary debates. Bacon insists that "it is more then time that an end were made of this unmodest and deformed kinde of writing lately entertained, whereby matters of religion are handled in the stile of the stage."<sup>31</sup> If the rites and decorum of the Anglican Church were to receive the defense they deserved, it could not come in the form of drama's poetic presentations. The scornful fictions of Martinist satire ultimately undermined the truth-claims of an ecclesiastical order governed by bishops and devoted to a *Book of Common Prayer*. This was no proper instrument to champion the religious establishment. Bacon acknowledges the impulse motivating these impassioned responses to the scurrility of the Martinists, granting that "bitter and earnest writing must not hastily be condemned; for men cannot contend coldly and without affection about things which they hold dear and pretious."<sup>32</sup> But while "a feeling Christian will express in his words a character either of zeal or love," Bacon pushes for the latter as "being more fit for the times, yet is the former warranted also by great examples."<sup>33</sup> Despite his concession, he recognizes that there is a danger

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Griffin, "Marring and Mending: Treacherous Likeness in Two Renaissance Controversies," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 60.4 (1997), pp. 363-80.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Bacon, *A Wise and Moderate Discourse, Concerning Church-Affaires* (London, 1641), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

in destabilizing authoritative expressions of truth through the use of poetically ironic language:

But to leave all reverend and religious compassion toward evils, or indignation toward faults, to turne religion into a Comedy or Satyr, to search and rip up wounds with a laughing countenance, to intermix Scripture and Scurrility sometime in one sentence, is a thing farre from the devout reverence of a Christian, and scant beseeming the honest regard of a sober man. *Non est major confusio, quam serii & joci*: there is no greater confusion then the confounding of jest and earnest.<sup>34</sup>

As new pamphlets employed the polemical strategies of the Martinist style and the original tracts of Martin Marprelate were republished, Bacon's words of caution seemed even more relevant, suggesting the vulnerability of authority and truth at a time when language was being subjected to the pressures of contention and the uncertainties of irony. It is, after all, in the meaningful space between "jest and earnest" that metaphors and similitudes freely play, and it is in that space that the rhetorical conflicts of the Revolution would ultimately have to be decided.

By making it impossible to affirm any sort of argumentative high ground over an opponent, the "vaine prose" of polemic, especially in its more figuratively provocative forms, contributed to the larger discursive crisis of authority in the early 1640s, a situation that Milton was enthusiastic to exploit. After all, treatises and tracts that appealed earnestly to the truths maintained by the prelatical establishment could rely upon a self-substantiating logic. Ronald Corthell's assertion that textual debate is "a struggle for control of representation (whose text is fictional, whose nonfictional?)" suggests the interpretive pressure placed upon expressions that might or might not be figurative.<sup>35</sup> Writers who treat language with gravity and unironic sincerity are working within a symbolic system that largely affirms the cultural status quo. It was in the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>35</sup> Ronald Corthell, "The Subject of Nonfictional Prose: The Renaissance," *Prose Studies* 11.2 (1988), p. 6.



interest of the ecclesiastical order to maintain the discursive boundaries of what Milton would later call “the cool element of prose,” untouched by the enthusiasms of zeal or the excesses of radical figuration (let alone the soaring of poetic song). The critics of episcopal hierarchy could not afford to accept the discursive values championed by the prelates and by a society invested in their authority. Thus, Milton appealed even more extensively to the figurative capacity of language—and insisted on the explicitly poetic character of that language—to ensure that he and his readership did not take the prelates’ claims to divine and linguistic authority for granted.

For radicals such as Milton, who were agitating to build a discursive space in which their revolutionary ideas might be heard, Hall’s defense of the established order became a target. Milton’s presbyterian allies were familiar with the problem of speaking truth to a power that challenged their right to speak in the first place. Stephen Marshall, Edmund Calamy, Thomas Young, Matthew Newcomen, and William Spurstow were the learned puritan clergymen behind the pseudonym Smectymnuus. In their *An Answer to a Booke entitled, An Humble Remonstrance* (1641), they took issue with Hall’s assertion of prelatical authority over what constituted orthodoxy. The Smectymnuans write that, by this standard, “to speak a word, or think a thought against Episcopacy, were no lesse Heresie, then it was in former time to speake against the Popes supremacy, or the monkes fat Belly.”<sup>36</sup> Associating the defense of the episcopal order with the censoriousness of Catholic tyranny, they subtly challenge the discursive monopoly that the divines had claimed. Cautiously leaving the question of proper church discipline in the hands of Parliament, Smectymnuus notes that “we leave to your Honours to Judge, upon the numerous Informations that flow in unto you from the severall parts of this Kingdome.”<sup>37</sup> As they defer to parliamentary, over prelatical, authority, the Smectymnuans emphasize also the numerous and

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<sup>36</sup> Smectymnuus, *An Answer to a Booke Entitvled An Hymble Remonstrance in which the Originall of Liturgy, Episcopacy is Discussed* (London, 1641), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

geographically diverse voices that have the legislature's ear. In this fashion, they lay the groundwork for a model of true speaking that encompasses more than just the high offices of episcopacy.

Milton, who anonymously composed a postscript to Smectymnuus' *Answer*, had much to gain from this expanded sense of authority to speak on matters of church government.<sup>38</sup> He recognized that, as the model of the Marprelate controversy suggests, a knack for poetic figuration in prose argument could go a long way toward disrupting establishment claims to discursive authority. Milton indulges this insight in the first argumentative tract that he wrote on his own, *Of Reformation*, which, though not directly engaging with Bishop Hall, appeared not long after the *Humble Remonstrance* and the Smectymnuans' response to it. *Of Reformation* demonstrates Milton's commitment to vividly metaphorical language as the mainstay of his prosaic repertoire. In one evocative passage, he laments that the Gospel has been dragged

so downwards, as to backslide one way into the Jewish beggary of old cast rudiments, and stumble forward another way into the new-vomited Paganisme of sensuall Idolatry, attributing purity, or impurity, to things indifferent, that they might bring the inward acts of the *Spirit* to the outward, and customary ey-Service of the body, as if they could make *God* earthly, and fleshly, because they could not make themselves *heavenly*, and *Spirituell*. (1.520)

In Milton's hands, the Martinist capacity to "call a Spade a Spade" is extended to his ability to see the prelatical corruption of religion for what it is. And what it is, in part, is the prelates' failure to see—or, more properly, their mistaking of bodily perception for true spiritual insight.

The imagery of the passage illustrates the flawed interpretations of the prelates, who, incapable

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<sup>38</sup> For further evidence of the Miltonic authorship of the postscript, see David L. Hoover and Thomas N. Corns, "The Authorship of the Postscript to *An Answer to a Booke Entitled, An Humble Remonstrance*," *Milton Quarterly* 38.2 (2004), pp. 59-75.

of understanding the spiritual significance of the Gospel in its own right, reduce it to fleshly resemblances—resemblances, he suggests, that they fail to regard as figurative in nature. Thus, England’s episcopal order seized upon both the “rudiments” of the ancient Hebrew priesthood and the “sensuall Idolatry” of pagan innovations, a creative operation that Milton depicts as spewing forth in a grossly corporeal act of revulsion. With these materials, the prelates conform inner spiritual truths to the “outward, and customary ey-Service of the body.” In contrast with his own vivid talent for conjuring poetic figures in the midst of argumentative prose, the grave utterances of truth that his episcopal opponents offer up in their treatises and tracts are revealed to be idolatrous literalisms that accommodate themselves to the senses and to the cultural customs of a society fashioned to swallow their fictions without recognizing them as such.

The influence of the Martinist tradition of satirical polemic manifests quite clearly in Milton’s direct intervention in the debate between Hall and the Smectymnuans with his *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence* (1641), in which he, with ample scorn and invective, refutes Hall statement-by-statement. However, Milton soon developed his own innovative approach to the problem of discursive authority, a strategy he enacted in *The Reason of Church Government*, the first of his contributions to the anti-prelatical controversy to bear his name.<sup>39</sup> Milton’s earliest tracts demonstrate two related points: first, that the incisive turns of polemical engagement were in part enabled by a figurative intelligence, one unwilling to accept the explicit terms of an opponent’s argument; and, second, that these particular opponents had built their assertions, not simply on an arbitrary scheme of interpretation, but on a purposefully *unfigurative* approach to the articulation of truth, one that reduces its meaning to the worldly terms in which it is uttered. While Milton could continue to play the able pamphleteer, answering his opponents’ arguments and thereby entangling them in the destabilizing rope-a-dope of

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<sup>39</sup> *Of Reformation, Of Prelatical Episcopacy* (1641), and *Animadversions* were each published anonymously.

polemical deflation, he sought more than just to discredit prelacy.

**“[L]eave to soare a while as the Poets use”: Milton as a Poet in Prose**

Milton wanted to make a positive case for his position on church government and for his own authority. The key to this effort was establishing his rhetorical ethos.<sup>40</sup> Where Milton distinguished himself from other pamphleteers in the period was in asserting his identity as a poet. Halfway through *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton strategically digresses into an autobiographical discussion of his poetic ambitions. His self-description, though seemingly an apology for his happenstance diversion into matters of prose controversy, also suggests his own fitness for the task at hand. Much of the first book of his treatise lays out the foibles of the prelates, suggesting those qualities that they lack, which make them unsuited to the task of building and maintaining a proper religious discipline. Reflecting on the work of governing a church, Milton writes that,

if it be at all the worke of man, it must be of such a one as is a true knower of himselfe, and himselfe in whom contemplation and practice, wit, prudence, fortitude, and eloquence must be rarely met, both to comprehend the hidden causes of things, and span in his thoughts all the various effects that passion or complexion can worke in mans nature. (1.753)

Milton catalogs a list of virtues that parallel the talents of a true poet, one who has the epistemic and expressive power born of self-knowledge. As a poet sidetracked by the labor of prose-writing, Milton embodies these very virtues. The prelates, on the other hand, lack an honest sense of self, impairing both their ability to administer a church and their effort to defend that

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<sup>40</sup> On the significance of Milton’s ethos in his prose writings, see Joan Webber, *The Eloquent ‘I’: Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1968), Ch. 7, pp. 184-218; and Reuben Sanchez, Jr., *Persona and Decorum in Milton’s Prose* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997).

system in print. Milton argues that “these wretched projectors of ours that bescaull their Pamflets every day with new formes of government for our Church” fundamentally lack a sense of spiritual discernment, making them as ill-suited to church leadership as they are to rhetorically defending it (1.753).

More than anything, the divines lack what Milton calls the “spirituall eye” (1.753). They are bereft of the insight that allows them to determine true likenesses from false ones. This is, of course, an impairment of the figurative sensibility. Milton undermines the efforts of the bishops to find scriptural warrant through typological readings that attempt, through a chain of resemblances, to connect the primitive church of Christ to the Levitical church of the Old Testament Hebrews. However, true resemblances must be “grounded in nature” and not “in ceremony or type” (1.764). Milton accuses the prelates of engaging in acts of figurative misreading, of disfiguring scripture. In contrast, he insists that “the Gospell, as stands with her dignity most, lectures to us from her own authentick hand-writing, and command, not copies out from the borrow’d manuscript of a subservient scrawl, by way of imitating” (1.764). Preoccupied as they are with a slavish obedience to custom, Milton’s prelatical opponents rely upon a deceptive web of likenesses that obscures more than it reveals, draping the church in “the fals visard of worldly authority” (1.833). Milton and other godly reformers, though, focus on the labor of self-discovery, of finding and revering “the dignity of Gods image upon him” (1.842). Once they restore the church’s faithful resemblance to God, only then “would the congregation of the Lord soone recover the true likenesse and visage of what she is indeed, a holy generation, a royall Priesthood, a Sainly communion, the houshold and City of God” (1.842). In this sense, religious salvation and reformation relied upon the community of believers’ ability to understand figures.

England's ecclesiastical hierarchy, though, had fostered an idolatrous figurative illiteracy. Milton alleges that the prelates, along with other learned men trained at the universities, lack the interpretive insight to handle figurative impressions with any dexterity. This problem of interpretation is entangled in the larger predicament of language in the seventeenth century. Many of the alternative religious and philosophical positions emerging in the period challenged the vocabulary of scholastic intellectual culture. Milton, who would in a few years publish his program for a humanist reform of education, sees the epistemic corruptions of the Anglican hierarchy as rooted in the linguistic foibles of scholasticism. At the schools, men

unfortunately fed with nothing else, but the scragged and thorny lectures of monkish and miserable sophistry, were sent home again with such a scholastical burre in their throats, as hath stopt and hinderd all true and generous philosophy from entring, crackt their voices for ever with metaphysical gargarisms, and hath made them admire a sort of formal outside men prelatically addicted, whose unchast'nd and unwrought minds never yet initiated or subdu'd under the true lore of religion or moral vertue. (1.854)

Milton was confronting a linguistic culture that Thomas Hobbes, as I will show in Chapter 2, aptly dubbed the “canting of schoolmen.”<sup>41</sup> The intellectual hegemony of scholasticism put a profound pressure on the language and, thereby, the thought of Englishmen and others throughout the Latin West. Thus, it was incumbent upon new philosophers and godly reformers alike to challenge the discursive foundations of scholastic intellectual culture in order to refigure the metaphysical, theological, and political structures of European society.<sup>42</sup> For Milton, though, it would not be enough simply to impose another more rectified set of blind metaphors on the

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), pp. 25.

<sup>42</sup> On the relationship between the new science and radical reform in the revolutionary period, see Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1984), Ch. 14, pp. 287-305.

world. Instead, he sought to create a new community alive to language in ways that philosophers and prelates overlooked, an approach to language empowered by the poet's "eye for resemblances."

In the preface to the second book of *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton offers an alternative position of authority identified both with the subtle dynamics of textuality and with a faithful connection to godly truth—the prophetic poet. Thomas Kranidas argues that the preface "is synecdoche for the whole tract; it considers, passionately, the vocation of the prophet poet within the framework of Milton's personal terror of the parable of the talents."<sup>43</sup> Like the prophets of scripture, Milton displays much reluctance in taking on a role apparently thrust upon him. He shoulders the "burden" of "divine inspiration," an expression that strategically conveys the privilege and challenge of having some form of access to true insight (1.802-3). Though Milton suggests that this gift was the motivating force behind his poetic vocation, it becomes clear that it also informs the imperative to shift into polemical prose. His God-given insight has made it impossible to stay quiet. Milton insists that "neither envy nor gall hath entered me upon this controversy, but the enforcement of conscience only, and a preventive fear least the omitting of this duty should be against me" (1.806). Disinclined as he wishes to seem toward worldly engagement with arguments of the moment, Milton lets it be known that he is nonetheless capable of the task. "I complain not," he qualifies, "of any insufficiency to the matter in hand" (1.807). Yet, his autobiographical digression focuses primarily on his plan to compose a poem that will be "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation" (1.815). As he surveys potential genres suited to this aim, Milton demonstrates also his fitness for the present polemical task from which he only seems to have digressed. Distinguishing his work from the "writings and interludes of libidinous and ignorant Poetasters," Milton casts a "true poem" as morally affective in its impact

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Kranidas, *Milton and the Rhetoric of Zeal* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2006), p. 181.

upon readers, offering “such delight to those especially of soft and delicious temper who will not so much as look upon Truth herselfe, unlesse they see her elegantly drest” (1.817-8). Unlike the prelates with their “fals visard of worldly authority,” a divine poet can figure forth truth in a fashion that reveals rather than conceals it. Milton does not flatter the delicate sensibilities of a dangerously naïve readership; he seeks to empower his audience so that it too might perceive with a more “spirituall eye” (1.753). In essence, Milton subtly makes the case for the power of language’s poetic capacity in the midst of the instability and ambiguity of worldly conflict.

Even as Milton seems implicitly to make the case for the power of poetic expression within the linguistic transactions of the world, he marks a sharp distinction between prose composition and poetry, one that has so often vexed critical understandings of the two major modes of his work. In the apologetic tone that characterizes this autobiographical digression, Milton expresses discomfort at being compelled “to venture and divulge unusual things of my selfe” within his argumentative prose treatise (1.808). Self-expression, like the poet’s essential self-knowledge, is more properly the matter for a poem. Milton describes his state of mind as “knowing my self inferior to my self, led by the genial power of nature to another task” (1.808). It from this perspective that he makes his infamous declaration, “I have the use, as I may account it, but of my left hand” (1.808). Milton’s professed left-handedness in the genres of prose argument helped to convince generations of critics of the artistic inferiority of the tracts and treatises he wrote alongside his poetry. However, in his historical moment, this strategy helped Milton to differentiate himself and to assert the privileged form of authority critical to his larger rhetorical intervention. His provocatively figurative rendering of prose and poetry at first seems to cement the impression of a hard and fast division between them. While Milton offers that “a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him might



without apology speak more of himself than I mean to do,” he finds himself left “sitting here below in the cool element of prose, a mortall thing among many readers of no Emphyreal conceit” (1.808). Milton builds an authoritative position for the poet in the present conflict, emphasizing his expressive song and epistemic soaring as capacities that outdo the pedestrian statements of prose assertion. Finding himself engaged with readers in a discursive community without the ambition of “Emphyreal conceit,” Milton at first seems to humble himself in the present rhetorical situation, but only insofar as it emphasizes the vast scope of his imaginative intelligence. The logic of this passage implicitly builds upon the argument Milton had been making in the first book of *The Reason of Church Government* and throughout his contributions to the anti-prelatical controversy. The prelates, preoccupied as they are with “the outward, and customary ey-Service of the body” lack the vision necessary to be the religious authorities that they so fervently claim they are. Intertwining the figure of the prophet of scripture with the poetic *vates* of classical culture, Milton offers up the poet as the answer to the questions of authority raised by prose discourse.<sup>44</sup>

However, Milton’s use of the commonplace of poetic soaring is somewhat misleading. The image might make it seem that he is championing a form of poetic disengagement, pulling away from prose precisely because it has proven to be a vehicle for aggressive polemical argumentation. As Turner has argued, though, engagement in the pressing problems of the world persistently drives Milton’s prose and poetry alike. Milton is hardly recusing himself from rhetorical conflict. He is registering his disdain for genres of prose argument as they have been used by indolent thinkers like the prelates. Milton’s interest in a vigorous and lively sense of textuality is dampened by the traditionalist pabulum of religious writers who delve only

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<sup>44</sup> On poetic inspiration and prophetic insight, see Jennifer Britnel, “Poetic Fury and Prophetic Fury,” *Renaissance Studies* 3.2 (1989), pp. 106-14.

into the dim reflexion of hollow antiquities sold by the seeming bulk, and there be fain to club quotations with men whose learning and beleif [*sic*] lies in marginal stuffings, who, when they have like good sumpters laid ye down their hors load of citations and fathers at your dore, with a rapsody of who and who were bishops here or there, ye may take off their packsaddles, their days work is don, and episcopacy, as they think, stoutly vindicated. (1.822)

The languishing industry of prelatical scholarship and self-justification flounders because of its superficial investment in vacant custom. Milton describes scholasticism's empty form of intellectual labor, in which the gross loading and unloading of ancient authorities suffices as critical thought and expression. This *disengaged* kind of argument fails to confront honestly any intellectual challenges and thus it derives its integrity from a pose of detached rationality. In describing the argumentative approach of his rivals, Milton enacts that very difference. He offers a vivid portrait of religious writers as little more than beasts of burden, building this unflattering critique word by word in a manner that vindicates his own polemical artistry as something far more sophisticated and effective. This is the source of Milton's complaint against prose as a "cool element," connecting the mode to a thermoceptive sensation dissociated from the heat of passionate engagement. Although *The Reason of Church Government* is, relatively speaking, one of Milton's less vehement rhetorical performances, his uneasiness with prosaic expression is motivated by the rejection of the discursive ideals of the established order.

Bishop Hall's tracts in response to the Smectymnuans speak to, if not embody, the ideal of "cool" prose. By the time he wrote his *A Short Answer to the Tedious Vindication of Smectymnuus* (1641), Hall looked back at the previous rounds of the polemical controversy with dismay. Addressing his readers, he remains perplexed that his "meek and peacable

Remonstrance,” which engaged only in “humbly pleading” could have inspired such “A long and bitter Answer.”<sup>45</sup> He had yet to taste the unmitigated scorn of Milton’s *Animadversions*. He speaks of the Smectymnuans’ *An Answer to . . . a Humble Remonstrance*, their original response to Hall, as though it were “unprovoked.”<sup>46</sup> Hall’s language seems to try to extricate his writings from their engagement in controversy. After all, he insists, “My labour was all for peace,” but “even this is made the ground of quarrel.”<sup>47</sup> Hall, it seems, thought his *Humble Remonstrance* might stand as an incontrovertible statement. Yet, for all of its gestures at humility and temperance, he sees his opponents “enraged with a moderate opposition.”<sup>48</sup> Hall’s rhetorical values are informed by the Anglican *via media*, a virtue of religious temperance that avoided extremes at all costs. Godly reformers, Milton especially, thought such moderacy was a false idol of “lukewarmness,” derided in Revelation as a quality worthy of ejection from the kingdom of God.<sup>49</sup> For Hall and other defenders of the Anglican establishment, though, this cool temperament was a sign of rationality and truth. Hence, Hall declares that in response to his faithful meekness, his rivals “heat their furnace seven times more, and break forth into a not more voluminous, then vehement Invective.”<sup>50</sup> He feels the heat of their passionate zeal. This sensation stands in opposition to the prosaic coolness he attempts to cultivate in the midst of the sparks of polemical opposition. At one point in the *Short Answer*, Hall tries to dismantle puritan arguments regarding liturgical idolatry, suggesting that just because some “make an Idol of preaching” does not mean the practice should be ended. He appeals, “Even, in coole blood the

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Hall, *A Short Answer to the Tedious Vindication of Smectymnvs by the Avthor of the Humble Remonstrance* (London, 1641), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> On the problem of “lukewarmness,” see Kranidas, Ch. 1, pp. 1-48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

argument holds firme, without equalizing one with the other.”<sup>51</sup> The test of a claim’s veracity is if it “holds firme” in the dispassionate state of “coole bloud.” It is in this sense that Milton cast prose as a “cool element,” a linguistic mode untouched by the emotive and imaginative possibilities of poetry. To Hall and others invested in the religious and political establishment, it was imperative to treat language as a symbolic system that properly and fundamentally affirmed their values. This supposedly unsubjective viewpoint would defuse any efforts to subvert their ideology linguistically. Such subversive challenges come in the form of poetic turns that operate by “equalizing one with the other,” that is, finding out serendipitous resemblances between concepts that upset the imposed plain-sense order of things. It is for this reason that Milton, the poet, attempts to exploit the passionate and imaginative dynamics lurking within prose.

To this purpose, *The Reason of Church Government* with its ethical proof of Milton’s poetic authority invigorates the underlying function of prose polemic. Religious authorities could not be allowed to maintain their discursive monopoly on rational expression. The Martinist campaign aimed to solve this rhetorical problem by provoking scurrilous responses from those defending the establishment. As Bacon and others feared, this “immodest and deformed manner of writing” could ultimately create an authoritative vacuum, in which no position could be vindicated as plainly and properly true. In the ideological crisis of the 1640s, Milton took up this strategy of mutually assured derision. However, his intervention in *The Reason* managed to home in on the poetic intelligence behind vehement ridicule, elevating an authoritative position in the midst of the rubble of destructive polemic. While this might have been the capstone of his involvement in the controversy, Milton found himself pulled back into the conflict by an attack on his *Animadversions. A Modest Confutation of a Slanderous and Scurrilous Libell* (1642), which Milton believed to have been written by Hall and one of his sons, uneasily walks the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

rhetorical tight-rope, shifting awkwardly between sharp condescension and feigned humbleness.<sup>52</sup> The Confuter, as Milton refers to him, is scandalized by the insulting and caustic tone of the *Animadversions*, insisting that “[s]uch language you should scarce hear from the mouths of canting beggars, at an heathen altar; much lesse was it looked for in a treatise of controversall Theologie, as yours might have been thought, had you not thus prevented it.”<sup>53</sup> He accuses Milton of having violated the decorous standards of discourse, thereby undermining the claim his text has to being a legitimate theological treatise. Milton, though, has purposefully upended the linguistic standards of religious prose, submitting his arguments to rough polemical conflict because of his confidence in truth, “whose force is best seene against the ablest resistance” (1.869). Milton has an agonistic sense of truth, a conception that he will develop in his later tracts and treatises. This spirit of fruitful intellectual combat motivates his efforts to defend not just his argument but himself. As a polemicist, his identity is bound up with the appeals that he makes, and so he justifies his defensive responses by asserting his consubstantiality with the truth. “I conceav'd my selfe,” he writes, “to be now not as mine own person, but as a member incorporate into that truth whereof I was perswaded, and whereof I had declar'd openly to be a partaker” (1.871). This intimate identification with the truth-seeking project is bound up with Milton’s sense of a poet’s proper relationship to his writing. Rather than whimsically spinning fictions, Milton sees the writer of poetry as even more closely enmeshed with the process of pursuing truth. He explains the proper orientation for a morally guided poet, arguing that

he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought

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<sup>52</sup> Don M. Wolfe, Introduction, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. 1, p. 203, suggests that Bishop Hall may have been assisted by his oldest son Robert Hall. In the *Apology*, Milton seems to waver between identifying the Confuter with Hall and a third person.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Hall, *A Modest Confutation of a Slanderous and Scurrilous Libell, entitvled, Animadversions vpon the Remonstrants Defense against Smecymnuus* (London, 1642), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 2.

him selfe to be a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men, or famous Cities, unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy. (1.890)

Through his poetic ethos, Milton insists upon a revision of the establishment's discursive standards *and* upon an invigoration of the subversive approach of the vehement polemicist, building a morally sanctioned authority derived from poetry but suited to prose argument.

Much of the conflict between Milton and the Halls focuses on the proper standards for expression. This thread of the debate underscores especially the poetic and dramatic associations of the writers in question. Milton had already in the *Animadversions* excoriated Bishop Hall's career as a verse satirist.<sup>54</sup> The Confuter answers this line of criticism by calling Milton's satirical tract itself "a scurrilous *Mime*" that has been "thrust forth upon the Stage" to fill out the theatrical gaps in the conflict between "the *Prelates* and *Smectymnuans*."<sup>55</sup> These dramaturgical insinuations resemble Bacon's concern about polemical vituperation in which "matters of religion are handled in the style of the stage." Milton insists that Hall wrote bad poetry in the past. Hall and his collaborator argue that Milton is writing bad poetry right now. Milton, of course, takes issue with this purposeful generic mischaracterization. However, in defending the integrity of a tract that happily invites scornful ridicule—Milton's "Ha, ha, ha" being the most manifest example (1.716)—he launches a larger defense of zealous expression, a rhetorical mode that he enacts and defends as poetic in its nature. Where Bacon begrudgingly acknowledged occasion for such vehemence, Milton seizes on his own moment as such a time.<sup>56</sup> The radical

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<sup>54</sup> On Hall's satirical poetry, see Ronald J. Corthell, "Beginning as a Satirist: Joseph Hall's *Virgidemiarum Sixe Bookes*," *SEL* 23.1 (1983), pp. 47-60.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>56</sup> In the *Apology*, Milton explicitly counters Bacon's argument against zeal, (1.903).

reform of the 1640s required a different kind of language. Milton cites scriptural examples “in Deuteronomy and three of the Prophets,” moments in which “God denouncing bitterly the punishments of Idolaters, tels them in a terme immodest to be utter'd in coole blood” (1.902). There is a necessary form of speaking that *cannot* be uttered with a dispassionate temperament. There are, Milton suggests, registers of meaning that must exceed the bounds of the “cool element of prose.” God himself requires the warmth and heat of the full range of rhetoric. Milton, far from reluctantly taking up prose in a left-handed manner, enlivens it and exposes its capacity to exceed the detached discursive standards that the powerful have imposed upon it. Milton finds occasion for prose to serve even as a devotional vehicle. After the Confuter criticizes the highly poetic prayer in the *Animadversions*, Milton defends it as a “hymne in prose,” demonstrating his confidence in the mode as a vehicle for imaginative and emotive ranges of meaning (1.930). Those linguistic registers are required in extreme moments, which Milton describes as “times of opposition.” In such moments, “either against new heresies arising, or old corruptions to be reform'd this coole unpassionate mildnesse of positive wisdome is not enough to damp and astonish the proud resistance of carnall, and false Doctors” (1.900). Cool prose is of no use in combating idolatrous religious authorities precisely because it is the device they use to maintain their discursive edge. Milton seeks to remake prose using the faculties of poetry so that it might excel “this coole unpassionate mildnesse of positive wisdom” and serve as an instrument of fierce intellectual engagement.

The fervency of that engagement is achieved, of course, through poetic figuration. Far from enabling an escape from polemical strife, poetic language in Milton’s hands is the engine of zeal, the extreme drive toward truth that resists the decorous obstacles of moderacy. Milton ennobles polemical ridicule by elevating the figurative intelligence behind it and associating it

with the moral discernment of the zealous Christian. He transforms Aristotle's "eye for resemblances" into the "spirituall eye" of Christianity, demonstrating how the marshaling of likenesses drives the agonistic process of seeking and speaking truth. Nowhere is this dynamic more explicit than with Milton's deployment of the chariot of Zeal. His discussion of the scriptural warrants for zealous expression reaches a crescendo with a highly allusive, allegorical image that enacts the impulse just as it describes it. Milton conspicuously initiates the passage with a parenthetical appeal to his readers to grant him "leave to soare a while as the Poets use" (1.900). Then he unveils an image of sheer forcefulness:

then Zeale whose substance is ethereal, arming in compleat diamond ascends his fiery Chariot drawn with two blazing Meteors figur'd like beasts, but of a higher breed then any the Zodiack yeilds, resembling two of those four which *Ezechiel* and *S. John* saw, the one visag'd like a Lion to expresse power, high authority and indignation, the other of count'nance like a man to cast derision and scorne upon perverse and fraudulent seducers; with these the invincible warrior Zeale shaking loosely the slack reins drives over the heads of Scarlet Prelats, and such as are insolent to maintaine traditions, brusing their stiffe necks under his flaming wheels. (1.900)

The passionate impulse of zeal is personified as a hero of celestial proportions. His power and aggression are pulled forth by stars likened to beasts that excel the breeds marked in the constellations of the sky, resembling rather the apocalyptic creatures of scriptural prophecy. Zeal's astral steeds represent Milton's own synthesis of the seemingly irreconcilable tools of polemical engagement: the lion-like beast symbolizes "power, high authority and indignation"; the man-like one effects "derision and scorne" (1.900). Milton's prophetic invigoration of the poet's figurative insight allows him to maintain both the instruments of authority and ridicule. Such



chariot-driven force is required to oppose rivals like the stiff-necked prelates who cling to tradition over truth. The image of this powerful bruising embodies precisely the kind of meaningful motion of which poetic figuration is capable. Milton would later return to this image in Book 6 of *Paradise Lost*, rendering the “Chariot of Paternal Deitie” in similar poetic terms but on a more epic scale.<sup>57</sup> Here in the *Apology*, Milton shows how radically figurative language allows a writer to breathe life into otherwise un compelling notions uttered in humble, proper prose. Zeal itself cannot be discovered within the discursive limits of “coole unpassionate mildnesse.” It requires passion and imagination to alter the terms of a given debate, to turn a symbolic system and gain access to the radical ideas afforded by radical articulations.

By the end of the anti-prelatical controversy, Milton had formulated an acute sense of language’s limitations, while unveiling in the process an understanding of poetic figuration’s unique power within ideologically constrained conversations. He discovered that the most powerful weapon in the episcopacy’s arsenal was inert, dispassionate prose. At the precise moment that he articulated the absolute prosaicness of treatises and tracts, Milton actually broke down any higher-order sense of a difference between poetry and prose argument. He recognized the need for poetic artistry within prose form so that it might no longer serve his opponents’ cause, revealing the eye for resemblances as a source of discursive authority in itself. Where, for Aristotle, poetic articulation had value because it offered a form of philosophical discernment, for Milton it became clear that philosophical—and theological—judgments could only have integrity if they recognized their own slippery linguistic nature. Milton, more than any of his contemporaries, emphasized the poeticizing principle behind polemical assertion, explicitly showcasing engagement as a function of discovering likenesses.

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<sup>57</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 6.750.

**“[A]s far as the likeness holds”: *Areopagitica* and the Limits of Poetic Figuration**

By 1643, Archbishop Laud was imprisoned in the Tower of London and the presbyterian-dominated Westminster Assembly of Divines was debating the terms of England’s continuing Reformation. The conditions that had precipitated the anti-prelatical controversy had run their course, and episcopacy in England had, for the time being, all but reached its end. Yet, for Milton and some godly Protestants, the emerging new order fell short of their revolutionary ambitions. This presented a problem for Milton not only politically and religiously, but also in terms of his discursive project. Unleashing the poetic power lurking within polemical argumentation, he had managed to disarm his episcopal opponents while maintaining a claim to textual authority. Milton’s strategy, though, was not as effective in dealing with his sometime allies, the presbyterians. His radical views on marriage in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643) had already offended more conservative members of the Assembly. Henry Palmer, a divine who supported the presbyterian system, preached a sermon before Parliament that challenged Milton’s “wicked book,” asking his legislative audience, “will you grant a toleration for all *this*?”<sup>58</sup> The question of toleration had emerged as a critical one in the Assembly’s debates as dissenters from presbyterianism pushed for greater acceptance of alternative doctrines and practices.<sup>59</sup> To put his argument for divorce into print, Milton had had to violate the newly imposed Licensing Order of 1643, a system of prior restraint censorship that required books to have state approval for publication. *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was printed without the licenser’s imprimatur. Print licensing, which was designed, in the words of the ordinance, to aid in the difficult process of “suppressing the great late abuses and frequent

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<sup>58</sup> Herbert Palmer, *The Glasse of Gods Providence towards his Faithfull Ones* (London, 1644), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> On Milton and the toleration question, see Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Milton and Toleration* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007); and Elizabeth Sauer, *Milton, Toleration, and Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

disorders in Printing many false forged, scandalous, seditious, libelous, and unlicensed Papers, Pamphlets, and Books to the great defamation, of Religion and government,” became intimately bound up with the larger issue of religious toleration (2.797).<sup>60</sup> Milton, enthusiastic about exploring the political and religious possibilities that the Civil Wars had opened up, was forced to confront a new order that was skeptical of his aspirations. In writing *Areopagitica*, Milton hoped to direct his poetic power against a new establishment, championing freedom of conscience with a language liberated from discursive restraint. However, as I will show, his linguistic experimentation came at the expense of his rhetorical purpose. Within the tolerationist controversy of 1643-5, *Areopagitica* seems to have had a negligible impact, with Milton’s figurative explorations subverting his more immediate aims.

Though he does not explicitly characterize *Areopagitica* as poetic in nature, Milton quite frequently takes “leave to soare a while as the Poets use.” *Areopagitica* is the most evocatively figurative tract of Milton’s prose.<sup>61</sup> Its imagery outshines the other tolerationist pamphlets. James Egan has argued that while the other tracts of the controversy “with their overwhelming literality, did not qualify as poetic,” Milton was able to distinguish *Areopagitica* “by accentuating its aesthetic traits.”<sup>62</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the text has become a celebrated monument to freedom of the press. Even as recent scholarship has disputed just how extensive Milton’s challenge to prior restraint licensing actually was, it is clear that *Areopagitica*

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<sup>60</sup> On the relationship between early modern writings and censorship, see Annabell Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984); Christopher Hill, “Censorship and English Literature,” in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill: Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England*, vol. 1 (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1985), pp. 32-71; and Debora Shuger, *Censorship and Cultural Sensibility: The Regulation of Language in Tudor-Stuart England* (Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 2007).

<sup>61</sup> Corns, *The Development of Milton’s Prose Style*, pp. 45, 83, using digitally aided analysis to calculate the incidence of imagery of Milton’s prose on a scale of “number of images (vehicles) per thousand words of texts,” demonstrates that *Areopagitica* is among the most figuratively dense, behind only *Of Reformation* and *Animadversions*. Turner observes that the “‘poetic’ status of *Areopagitica* is universally acknowledged, particularly by those most eager to prove the separatist position,” (p. 272).

<sup>62</sup> James Egan, “*Areopagitica* and the Tolerationist Rhetorics of the 1640s,” *Milton Studies* 46 (2007), pp. 165-90, p. 178.

has had a marked impact on debates about censorship in the decades and centuries following its publication.<sup>63</sup> The only context in which its influence seems to have been insignificant was its original moment. While the other entries into the tolerationist controversy inspired impassioned responses, *Areopagitica* does not seem to have had a measurable impact in the 1640s. Beyond a few tolerationist writers adopting Milton's narrative history of censorship or his reversal of the charge of schism against the presbyterians, *Areopagitica* was received with silence.<sup>64</sup> Part of this may simply be the practicality of the argument; writers were able to navigate around the institutions of discursive control without launching a theoretical attack on the philosophy behind censorship.<sup>65</sup> Another factor was Milton's treatment of conscience. As Lana Cable argues, while the other tolerationists handled the question of conscience as the central point of debate, Milton regards such freedom as a settled premise, using it to leverage his argument against print licensing.<sup>66</sup> He powerfully demands "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" (2.560). Cable demonstrates that "the Separatists and their

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<sup>63</sup> On the limits of *Areopagitica* as a statement on the freedom of the press, see Stanley Fish, "Driving from the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in Milton's *Areopagitica*," rpt. in *Re-Membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, eds. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 234-54. James Rovira, "Gathering the Scattered Body of Milton's *Areopagitica*," *Renascence* 57.2 (2005), pp. 87-102, argues, contra Fish, that Milton is invested in liberty of expression. Thomas Fulton, "*Areopagitica* and the Roots of Liberal Epistemology," *ELR* 34.1 (2004), pp. 42-82, addresses the impasse between modern liberal celebrations of *Areopagitica* and historicizing revisionist readings of it. For an account of *Areopagitica*'s impact on later censorship debates, see Ernest Sirluck, "*Areopagitica* and a Forgotten Licensing Controversy," *The Review of English Studies* n.s. 11.43 (1960), pp. 260-74.

<sup>64</sup> *Areopagitica*'s censorship genealogy (2.495-530) was first adopted by Hezekiah Woodward, *Inquiries into the Causes of our Miseries* (London, 1644), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 1. Other examples of the genealogy's influence include John Lilburne, *A Copie of A Letter . . . to Mr. William Prinne Esq.* (London, 1645), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 2-3; and Richard Overton, *The Aaignement of Mr. Persecution*, pp. 1-2. Milton's "They are the troublers, they are the dividers of unity" (2.550-1) is the first instance in which the reversal of the schism argument, often used against the prelates, had been leveled against the presbyterians. Walwyn's revision of *The Compassionate Samaritane* (London, 1645), pp. 49-50, adopts this assertion from *Areopagitica*. Not until 1649 is there any other evidence of *Areopagitica*'s impact, and these are only potential traces of influence in John Hall, *An Humble Motion to the Parliament of England concerning the Advancement of Learning: and Reformation of the Universities* (London, 1649), pp. 25-26; and the periodical reports of the licenser Gilbert Mabbott's speech to parliament on 29 May, recorded in *The Kingdome's Faithfull and Impartial Scout*, no. 18, (London, 25 May-1 June 1649), p. 143; and *A Perfect Diurnal of Some Passages in Parliament*, no. 304, (London, 21-28 May 1649), p. 2531.

<sup>65</sup> See Don Wolfe, *Milton in the Puritan Revolution* (1941; Humanities Press, 1963), p. 121.

<sup>66</sup> Lana Cable, "What They Were Reading (And Why They Were Reading It) Instead of *Areopagitica*," *Prose Studies* 23.1 (2000), pp. 81-100.

sympathizers treat liberty of conscience as a complicated, compelling, yet elusive ideal for which they continue to suffer.”<sup>67</sup> Milton, on the other hand, works from a position of “privileged reading” that has appealed to modern liberals, but which was out of step with the state of the conversation at the time of the text’s inception.<sup>68</sup> While Cable has also explored the poetics of Milton’s metaphorical strategy in *Areopagitica*, she does not connect the question of the text’s reception with its style.<sup>69</sup> I suggest that *Areopagitica*’s figurative exuberance and complexity played a part in the silence with which the text was originally met. As I have argued, Milton’s poeticizing impulse operated as a motivating force for his engagement in the anti-prelatical controversy. However, *Areopagitica*, a tract that champions the “dust and heat” of debate, ironically remained above or outside of the fray (2.515). Unable to stir up a response in the frantic revolutionary marketplace of ideas, Milton exposes the limitations of a polemical argument so reliant upon figurative enthusiasm, revealing the illusive fault line that persisted between rhetoric and poetics.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton significantly cast himself as a rhetor presenting his case before the august Areopagus of England’s Parliament. The title describes the tract as a “Speech,” projecting itself as a transcription of an oral event. This approach allows Milton to shape his argument as a classical oration, from *exordium* to *peroratio*.<sup>70</sup> *Areopagitica*’s oratorical pretense does seem to signal the preeminence of the text’s rhetorical function. Christopher Kendrick has argued, though, that the pamphlet’s “fairly well-defined argumentative structure” functions as a “strategic ethos” distinguishable from Milton’s “self-validating ethos,” which also operates

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<sup>67</sup> Cable, “What They Were Reading,” p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric: Milton’s Iconoclasm and the Poetics of Desire* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995), Ch. 4, pp. 117-43.

<sup>70</sup> On *Areopagitica*’s investment in the structures of classical rhetoric, see Paul M. Dowling, *Polite Wisdom: Heathen Rhetoric in Milton’s Areopagitica* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); and Eunmi Park, “*Areopagitica* in the Licensing Controversy: Milton’s Rhetorical Strategies and Modes,” *Journal of British and American Studies* 10 (2004), pp. 113-135.

within the text. While the former persona enables Milton to claim the mantle of rhetorical authority, the latter constitutes the foundation of Milton's poetic identity, a presence he had explored in the anti-prelatical tracts and one that he maintains in *Areopagitica* through "a network of figuration."<sup>71</sup> Despite his oratorical posture, Milton presents himself and his thinking through poetic modes of expression. Celebrating "our sage and serious poet" Edmund Spenser for the pedagogical efficacy of his work, Milton dares to declare him "a better teacher than *Scotus* or *Aquinas*, describing true temperance under the person of *Guion*," and bringing him "in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bowr of earthly blisse that he might see and know, and yet abstain" (2.516). One distinction that Milton marks with this comparison is a confessional and nationalistic one—he is eager to celebrate the work of an English Protestant over two Continental theologians of the old religion.<sup>72</sup> More to the point, though, Milton is elevating the mimetic work of a poet over the sententious prose of religious authorities. Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus relied upon a theological discourse conditioned by philosophical demonstration, an Aristotelian form that coolly reasons out certain conclusions in the effort to apprehend and convey religious truths.<sup>73</sup> Spenser, preoccupied as he was with spiritual virtue, nonetheless was explicit in his declaration of the superiority of poetic representation over doctrinal precept. He counters those who would "rather have good discipline delivered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, then thus clowdily enwrapped in allegoricall devises," arguing that "so much more profitable and gracious is doctrine by ensample, then by

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<sup>71</sup> Christopher Kendrick, *Milton: A Study in Ideology and Form* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 23, 29.

<sup>72</sup> On Milton's complex relationship to English nationhood, see David Loewenstein, "Milton's Nationalism and the English Revolution: Strains and Contradictions," in *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*, eds. David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008), pp. 25-50.

<sup>73</sup> On the medieval tradition of the language arts, see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1974).

rule.”<sup>74</sup> Milton, always a poet first, was convinced of the power of illustrative images, those figurative representations that Sidney called “speaking pictures.”<sup>75</sup> Milton brought this insight to bear not only in his epic vocation, but also in his infusion of prose with metaphorical exuberance.

The distinction between the making of images and the marshaling of sentences was a familiar one in the tradition of Renaissance poetics. Milton would have encountered it, not just in Spenser, but also in Torquato Tasso’s *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594). Milton recommends Tasso as an authority on literary theory in the pedagogical curriculum that he outlines in *Of Education* (1644).<sup>76</sup> Tasso, with whose patron Milton had formed a relationship during his time in Italy, defended poetry against accusations of sophistry by arguing that the poet “is like the divine theologian who forms images and commands them to be.”<sup>77</sup> Tasso vindicates the poet by aligning his art with a particular thread of philosophical thought—mystical, rather than scholastic, theology. He makes clear that the image-making of poets and mystics excels the demonstrative explanations of schoolmen: “Now to lead to the contemplation of divine things and thus to awaken the mind with images, as the mystical theologian and the poet do, is a far nobler work than to instruct by demonstration, the function of the scholastic theologian.”<sup>78</sup> As this dissertation explores, over the course of the Renaissance, the philosophical grounds of demonstrative logic began to be transposed with rhetoric. By the mid-seventeenth century, even as rhetoric became a by-word for deception and ambiguity, its probabilistic epistemology had

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<sup>74</sup> Edmund Spenser, “Letter to Raleigh,” in *The Faerie Queene*, eds. A. C. Hamilton, et. al. (Harlow, Eng: Longman, 2007), pp. 713-18, p. 716.

<sup>75</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy* (1595) in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Milton cites Tasso alongside Ludovico Castelvetro and Giacomo Mazzoni as theorists whose commentaries teach “what the laws are of a true *Epic* poem” (2.404-5). On the relationship between Tasso and Milton’s poetics, see Judith A. Kates, *Tasso and Milton: The Problem of Christian Epic* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1983).

<sup>77</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Discourses of the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (London: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 31. On Milton’s relationship with Giovanni Battista Manso, see Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, rev. edn. (2003; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 97-99, 111-4.

<sup>78</sup> Tasso, p. 32.

become the primary means through which assertions of truth would be made.<sup>79</sup> Milton, more than anyone, understood scholastic demonstration to be largely a rhetorical enterprise. In *Of Education*, he prescribes “so much as is useful” of the study of logic “untill it be time to open her contracted palm into a gracefull and ornate Rhetorick” (2.402). In this curriculum, Milton is uncertain about whether poetry “be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent” to rhetoric, an ambivalence that suggests its significance (2.403). Ought a well-trained humanist be equipped with the tools of poetic thought as a gateway to the discursive arts or as the means to their perfection? Either way, Milton is certain that poetic expression is “less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous, and passionate” than rhetoric (2.403). The insights that Milton gleaned from Spenser and Tasso before him did not have to wait until his epic project came to fruition with the publication of *Paradise Lost* in the Restoration. Rather, Milton utilized the poet’s capacity to fashion images in the endeavor of polemical engagement, investing *Areopagitica* with more than its share of poetic resources.

From Milton’s perspective, the figurative exuberance that had served him well in his anti-prelatical tracts should have been just as effective in the pamphlet debate on religious toleration. *Areopagitica*, though, was largely out of place in the period’s conversation on tolerance. As the coalition of Protestant reformers began to fragment, presbyterian authorities had aimed to shore up their power in ways that, their low-church opponents were quick to suggest, resembled the tactics of the bishops. These circumstances occasioned the toleration controversy of 1643-5. The opening salvo of this debate came when disputes that might have been contained within the Assembly of Divines were voiced instead to Parliament and the print marketplace. In *An*

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<sup>79</sup> On the changing theorization of rhetoric in the period, see Walter Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958). For an account of the shift toward probabilistic epistemology, see Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).



*Apologeticall Narration, Humbly Submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament* (1643), five ministers—Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs, and William Bridge—made the case, not for full toleration, but for a more moderate accommodation. They championed a congregationalist system that would permit greater liberty among individual church communities than the centralized power of presbyterianism would allow. The temperance of their position was attested to by the presbyterian Charles Herle, who licensed the tract, commending it in his statement of approval for its “peaceableness, modesty, and candour.”<sup>80</sup> Herle asserted that the *Apologeticall Narration* was “at this time so seasonably needful” when “the Protestant party” confronted so many divisions within itself. Herle suggested that, far from exacerbating that crisis, the mode of engagement of these independent ministers spoke “towards the vindication of the Protestant party in generall, from the aspersions of Incommunicableness within it selfe, and Incompatibleness with Magistracy.”<sup>81</sup> Herle licensed the tract for publication, while reserving his own position on the matter at hand: “That however for mine own part I have appeared on, and doe still encline to the Presbyteriall way of Church Government, yet doe I think it every way fit for the Presse.”<sup>82</sup> Bearing the imprimatur of the emergent order, the *Apologeticall Narration* managed to articulate a nuanced dissent by tapping into a rhetoric of “peaceableness, modesty, and candour” that would have been at home in the “the cool element of prose” that Milton associated with the previous religious establishment.

By raising only the most nuanced challenge to presbyterian dominion, the so-called Apologists managed to limit the radicalism of their appeal. This disappointed later entrants into the controversy like William Walwyn, a minister associated with the Leveller movement, who in

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Goodwin, et. al., *An Apologeticall Narration, Humbly Submitted to the Honourable Houses of Parliament* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

his *Compassionate Shepherd* (1644) describes how he encountered the *Apologeticall Narration* and “did with gladnesse of heart undertake the reading thereof, expecting therein to find such generall reasons for justification of themselves, to the world, as would have justified all the Separation.”<sup>83</sup> Rather than discovering an argument to defend the breakaway sects from disrepute, he found that the Apologists’ had confirmed “the peoples disesteem of Separatists ... as if there were amongst the Separatists some dangerous bypathes or opinions, which they warily shund.”<sup>84</sup> Walwyn’s remarks indicate another fault line in the coalition of reformers, between those who hoped for greater independence within the English Church and those who sought to worship autonomously. At the heart of this tension was an argument about the nature of truth and the process of making it public. The Apologists express a great deal of reluctance about bringing their case to such a wide audience. They testify,

we call God and men to witnes our constant forbearance, either to publish our opinions by preaching (although we had the Pulpits free) or to print any thing of our owne or others for the vindication of our selves (although the Presses were more free then the Pulpits) or to act for our selves or way.<sup>85</sup>

Far from zealously seizing on the opportunity to make the truths they have witnessed public, the Apologists ensure that they couch their argument in humility and hesitation. Even in the face of very public denigration, the Apologists make clear that they felt a responsibility to the Reformation to ensure that it was not undermined at such a critical time, even as other godly reformers slandered them. The Apologists knew “that it was the *second blow that makes the*

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<sup>83</sup> William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane, Unbinding the Conscience* (London, 1644), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 2. For Walwyn’s contribution to the conversation on heresy and toleration, see Loewenstein, *Treacherous Faith*, pp. 244-256.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

*quarrell*, and that the *beginning of strife* would have been as the *breaking in of waters*.”<sup>86</sup> They were aware of the problem of polemical engagement and, like others before them, sought to defuse that tension through a temperate tone and a moderate message. The fear of controversy loomed over those who wished to join the established order as much as those who wished to maintain it.

*The Apologeticall Narration*, though, occasioned a set of tracts that adopted a more radically tolerationist position, defending freedom of conscience as a source of truths that must be heard. Unlicensed and less careful than the Apologists, these writers were far from timid in the articulation of their public aims. Henry Robinson, for instance, argues in his *Liberty of Conscience* (1643) that “a conscientious Christian” should not suffer death or punishment for his beliefs nor for spreading those beliefs to others, which “he thinks to be the right, and himselfe no lesse obliged to publish it, then *Peter and John*, who when they were commanded by the Magistrate not to speake or teach in the name of *Jesus*, answered, *We cannot but speake the things which we have seen and heard*.”<sup>87</sup> The obligation to speak informs the movement toward religious independency, and the writers of these particular tracts clearly felt this spur to voice their conscience publically, much as Milton described his prophetic impulse in the *Reason of Church-Government*.

Even as the presbyterian establishment began to manipulate tools like the Licensing Act

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. I cannot find a source for the italicized phrase “it was the *second blow that makes the quarrel*.” *The Apologeticall Narration* seems to be the first printed instance of this aphorism, at least in this formulation. Apart from direct responses to the Apologists, which quote the line, it finds its way into Herbert Thorndike, *Just Weights and Measures that is, the Present State of Religion Weighed in the Balance, and Measured by the Standard of the Sanctuary* (London, 1662), Union Theological Seminary Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 21, and Matthew Henry, *A Discourse Concerning Meekness and Quietness of Spirit* (London, 1699), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> Henry Robinson, *Liberty of Conscience: or The Sole Means to Obtaine Peace and Truth* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 8.

to impede access to the institutions of discourse, the independents forged onward.<sup>88</sup> Walwyn notes that these “Masters of the Preste” (sic) aim to ensure that “nothing may come to the Worlds view but what they please, unlesse men will runne the hazard of imprisonment, (as I now doe) so that in publike they may speake what they will, write what they wil, they may abuse whom they will, and nothing can be said against them.”<sup>89</sup> Walwyn recognized the way that those in power monopolized the means of publication, presbyters like the priests before them. He, and other tolerationists like Milton, objected to this structure not simply because it silences and marginalizes their particular views, but because of the way that it, more generally, stifles meaning and the quest for truth. As the Assembly of Divines waged a cloistered debate on the nature of England’s Reformation, they relied largely on a narrow selection of mostly presbyterian perspectives. Walwyn challenges this elitist approach to knowledge, contending that

it is but reasonable that they should publish to the world whatsoever is in debate amongst them, and invite every man to give them their best light and information, that so they may heare all voyces, and not conclude ought against mens judgments before it be heard what they can say for themselves: This might peradventure be a meanes to find out all truth, and settle things so as that every man might be satisfied.<sup>90</sup>

For Walwyn, like Milton, conscience has a public function that purposefully disrupts the institutional accumulation of power, engaging, sometimes agonistically, in the process of knowing truth together. The episcopal hierarchy, the presbyterian order, and even the moderate congregationalists were content to preserve or refashion a cultural establishment that would impede the epistemic searching that conscience demands. They all were at ease in the “cool

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<sup>88</sup> On the Licensing Act’s development from an uncontested piece of legislation to a bludgeon against independents, see David Como, “Print, Censorship, and Ideological Escalation in the English Civil War,” *The Journal of British Studies* 51.4 (2012), pp. 820-957, pp. 823-826.

<sup>89</sup> Walwyn, pp. 39-40.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

element of prose” that Milton’s own writing works so hard to resist.

Surrounded on all sides by discourse convinced of its own transparent groundedness, Milton used poetic figuration to remain mindful of the way that language can hinder the search for truth. While he shares his radicalism with fervent independents like Robinson and Walwyn, Milton is unique in directing that energy at the structures of language itself. *Areopagitica*’s figurative vehemence is crafted in a way that demands attention, not credulity, from readers. Throughout the tract, as Michael Wilding has suggested, “[i]mage after image embodies its own necessary rethinking, its own resituation.”<sup>91</sup> Having showcased textual agon as a means toward apprehending truth in the antiprelatical controversy, Milton intensifies that commitment in *Areopagitica*, showing that even those truths that seem to have been vindicated through the trial of polemical debate should not be left to stand in any given articulation. The central epistemology that Milton lays out in his tract is the notion that “that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary” (2.515). Only a “blank virtue” remains uncontested or, thereby, *uncontrasted*. Milton alludes figuratively to the story of Psyche, who was forced by Venus to do the impossible task of sorting grains, to convey the epistemic challenge that humanity faces. To judge and distinguish truly is the ultimate test, because “the knowledge of good is so involv’d and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned” (2.514). As Aristotle reminds us, though, it is the poet who wields the “eye for resemblances.” At times, the poetic impulse to discover likenesses seems to be little more than the fanciful enthusiasm to build connections that would otherwise not exist. Milton’s “spirituall eye,” though, aims to discover true reflections by building and discarding figurative comparisons in an unceasing quest for a true vision of the universe (1.753). Rigorous understanding is driven by a metaphorical process. Hence Milton claims to have learned this lesson from the poetic

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<sup>91</sup> Michael Wilding, “Milton’s *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects,” *Prose Studies* 9.2 (1986), pp. 7-38, p. 35.

representations of Spenser. Blank virtue, like cool prose, remains senseless because it is undistinguished and untouched by the “dust and heat” of trial. Milton does not merely explain this process in *Areopagitica*; he enacts it. As I will show, so many of the figures in the tract test the limits of resemblance, eschewing the rhetorical expedience often demanded of prose metaphors in a relentless drive of articulation and rearticulation toward truth.

Many seventeenth-century readers were able to discern the gap between truth and articulation, at least when they saw it in the writings of their opponents. Charles Herle, who licensed the *Apologeticall Narration*, was such a reader. At the same time that Herle was working as what Milton called an “unleasur'd licencer,” he was also an active participant in a polemical debate in which he put his acute eye for figuration into practice (2.532). The royalist divine Doctor Henry Ferne had proclaimed his case for monarchy and the impropriety of the parliamentary rebellion in his *Conscience Satisfied, That There is no Warrant for the Armes Taken up by Subjects* (1643). Challenging the claims to conscience made by supporters of the parliamentary government in London, Ferne deployed age-old conceptualizations of monarchy, arguing that “the power of Kings was as of Fathers.”<sup>92</sup> Surveying the history of governmental systems in the Old Testament, he contends that monarchy was the first and God-given political structure, with the people’s prerogative to “chuse themselves Rulers” only emerging at chaotic times like that which ensued among them “that departed from the building of *Babel* in severall companies, according to your severall languages.”<sup>93</sup> Royalists often associated the present crisis of the Civil Wars with the confusion of Babel, aligning linguistic with political disorder.<sup>94</sup> Herle responded to Ferne in his *An Answer to Doctor Fernes Reply, Entitled Conscience Satisfied*

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<sup>92</sup> Henry Ferne, *Conscience Satisfied, That There is no Warrant for the Armes Taken up by Subjects* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> For the royalist preoccupation with the Fall of Babel story during the English Revolution, see Achinstein, Ch. 2, pp. 71-101.

(1643) with a challenge to, not just his message, but his means of expressing it.<sup>95</sup> Rejecting the figurative similarity that Ferne asserted between kingship and fatherhood, Herle contends that “*Alegoryes* are no good *arguments*, they onely illustrate as farre as the likenesse holds.”<sup>96</sup> His retort constitutes a powerful insight into the operation of metaphorical turns in polemical prose. The assertion of similarity that undergirds every figure of speech, and that lurks within even the most innocuous linguistic articulations, exists within the uncertain space of degrees of likeness. Most writers, like Herle, were content to point out where they saw their rivals taking liberties with such resemblances. Few turned that skepticism on their own writing in the effort to expose the complicated interaction between language and truth.

Milton does precisely that in the rich proliferation of metaphors that makes up *Areopagitica*. However, if he had hoped to engage a readership invigorated by his linguistic insights, his project, at least in its original moment, missed its mark. Scholarship on *Areopagitica* has grappled with how to describe and conceptualize Milton’s figurative strategy, especially in light of its competing metaphysical implications. In his argument questioning the text’s convictions against print censorship, Stanley Fish suggests that Milton engages in a continuous “driving from the letter.”<sup>97</sup> Fish contends that *Areopagitica*’s particular images and statements are merely provocations designed to train readers to search beyond the superficial levels of meaning. Cable complicates this view by aligning the figurative exuberance of the text with Milton’s iconoclastic skepticism toward deceptive idols. She argues that Milton constructs images that burn themselves out, preventing his readership from resting at the literal level and

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<sup>95</sup> On the dispute between Herle and Ferne, see Richard Lewis Braverman, *Plots and Counterplots: Sexual Politics and the Body Politic in English Literature, 1660-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp. 23-31.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Herle, *An Answer to Doctor Fernes Reply, Entitled Conscience Satisfied* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> Stanley Fish, “Driving from the Letter,” p. 234.

forcing interpreters to experience the gap between articulation and comprehension.<sup>98</sup> James Rovira has challenged these readings, contending that, in light of Milton's monism, there are moments in which language brings forth images of materialized spirit that do not need to be obliterated for the sake of the reader's edification.<sup>99</sup> The tension in this critical debate is often focused on the way that Milton metaphorizes books. He famously declares that books "are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are" (2.492). Spinning this vitalized image of textuality further, Milton goes as far as to assert that the destruction of a book constitutes the murder of "the Image of God, as it were in the eye" (2.492). This figurative process, in Cable's view, reveals that what the censors of print sought to control "was never to be found *there* (neither in bodies nor in books) in the first place."<sup>100</sup> Rovira, on the other hand, sees Milton suggesting that "[a]s in the human body, so in a human book, ideas and objects are indivisible parts of a single whole."<sup>101</sup> The main limitation of Cable's argument is that it fails to account for the presence of monist metaphysics in Milton's thinking, but Rovira overstates the case for that philosophy as a frame for understanding the language of *Areopagitica*. I want to suggest that the potential for a monist reading of Milton's metaphorical strategy in the text only invigorates the kind of skeptical reading that Cable describes. Floating the possibility that language might really be able to figure forth connections that are ontologically true, *Areopagitica*'s metaphorical turns dramatize the full

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<sup>98</sup> Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric*, pp. 117-43.

<sup>99</sup> James Rovira, "Gathering the Scattered Body of Milton's *Areopagitica*," *Renascence* 57.2 (2005), pp. 87-102. On Milton's monism, see Stephen Fallon, *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991). For a counterargument to the view of Milton as monist, see N. K. Sugimura, "*Matter of Glorious Trial*": *Spiritual and Material Substance in Paradise Lost* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009).

<sup>100</sup> Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric*, p. 127.

<sup>101</sup> Rovira, p. 96.



spectrum of significance within the notion of likeness.<sup>102</sup> Milton gives his figures a valence of meaning that exceeds the more conventional, if sometimes inventive, metaphors that appear in other tracts of the period. It is as though with each turn, he demands his readers ask, “How far *does* the likeness hold?”

Where Herle and others saw rhetorical weakness, Milton saw meaningful possibility. He tests himself and his readership with nearly every significant metaphor in *Areopagitica*. Loewenstein has argued that the figurative dimensions of the tract allow Milton “to rethink the idea of religious unity and escape from dualisms when it comes to conceptualizing religious differences.”<sup>103</sup> Milton, after all, predicates his argument against censorship on an epistemology that refuses to take resemblances for granted; he uses likeness as a vehicle for poetic exploration, enabling the relentless pursuit of truth in spite of the limitations of circumstance. Milton manages to fuse two contradictory impulses—the recognition of the limits of human understanding and the relentless ambition to know. *Areopagitica* clearly outdoes the humble curiosity demonstrated in the *Apologeticall Narration*. The Apologists note that for all matters without a clear foundation in scripture, they reserve their judgments “untill God should give us further light, not daring to eeke out what was defective in our light in matters Divine with humane prudence, (the fatall error to Reformation) lest by *sowing any piece of the old garment unto the new*, we should make the *rent worse*.”<sup>104</sup> They use a tailor’s metaphor to conceptualize the fragmentation of truth. Renaissance thinkers concerned about the narrow capacity of the human mind in contrast with the infinity of higher truth sometimes made recourse to figures of

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<sup>102</sup> Stephen Hequembourg, “Monism and Metaphor in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* 52 (2011), pp. 139-67, shows how Milton’s convergent monistic figures relate to his asymmetrical similes in the poetics of *Paradise Lost*. I am suggesting that *Areopagitica*’s figures enact this process on a smaller scale.

<sup>103</sup> Loewenstein, *Treacherous Faith*, p. 279.

<sup>104</sup> Goodwin, et. al., p. 10.

*sparagmos*, or dismemberment, to explore this disparity.<sup>105</sup> The Apologists insist that hesitation is the best tactic for confronting this state of epistemological fragmentation for fear that in the work of Reformation they might further the damage done to the true church rather than mend it. They see truth-seeking as a passive hesitation “that *in thus doing the will of God we should know more.*”<sup>106</sup> Milton, on the contrary, sees the dismemberment of truth as a motivating impulse to act. Associating “Truth” with the rise of Christ, Milton describes how afterward “arose a wicked race of deceivers” following the pattern of Egyptian mythology, which he seems to have drawn from Plutarch, to show how these malefactors

dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them.  
(2.549)

Milton suddenly returns to the tract's immediate rhetorical circumstance, framing his historical moment within the cosmic scope of Christian time. He addresses Parliament directly: “We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second coming; he shall bring together every joynt and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of lovelines and perfection” (2.549). With an eye toward greater salvation, Milton nonetheless calls for practical, worldly performance, demanding that his legislative audience “[s]uffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyr'd Saint” (2.549-550). With divine intervention looming, the Apologists advise caution and deferral.

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<sup>105</sup> On Milton's approach to *sparagmos*, see Michael Lieb, *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994).

<sup>106</sup> Goodwin, et. al., p. 10.

Milton insists on radical action in order to participate in impending salvation. Advising vigorous bodily healing over sartorial passivity, Milton's imagery and his overall epistemic orientation are uniquely tuned to resist inertia.

Continuing to accumulate figurative illustrations of pieces made whole, Milton also offers an architectural metaphor. He defends the independents, called "schismatics and sectaries" by their rivals, against the charge that they represent a disruption of the greater community of believers (2.555). Milton constructs a counterfactual comparison between revolutionary reform and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, insisting that it is, "as if, while the temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrational men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built" (2.555).<sup>107</sup> Milton renders the concerns of anti-tolerationists absurd, likening them to the nonsensical attitude of one who views the process of cutting and shaping the building materials for the construction of the Temple of God to be distasteful. Instead, Milton asks that we be "more considerate builders," recognizing that

when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world; neither can every piece of the building be of one form; nay rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderate varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportional, arises the goodly and graceful symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure (2.555).

This is an elegant metaphor for tolerationism, and Milton's insight can be extended to his theory of language as well. The only way that truth is attainable linguistically is not by lining up

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<sup>107</sup> On the significance of the Jewish Temple to the tolerationist debates, see Achsah Guibbory, *Christian Identity, Jews, and Israel in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), pp. 114-120.

ontologically correspondent likenesses, but by piecing together a more haphazard collection of “brotherly dissimilitudes” which “can but be contiguous in this world” (2.555). *Areopagitica* reveals that Milton’s poetic vision is predicated on the dissimilitude that pervades existence and the obligation to seek, if never attain, meaningful order therein. Milton engages poetically to avoid trapping his beliefs, his audience, and himself in a petrified language that prematurely forecloses the drive toward truth.

However, Milton’s belief in freedom of conscience as a manifest virtue and his concomitant enthusiasm for the epistemic power of poetic figuration seem to have overshot the immediate aims of polemical engagement. In the 1640s, he was alone in his commitment to use figuration to test the poetic limits of argument. It would be nearly thirty years until *Areopagitica* received an engaged, and appropriately vituperative, response. Samuel Parker, in his *A Reproof to the Rehearsal Transposed* (1673), cites one of Milton’s vividly extended figures on the “kinde of homicide” that constitutes the censorship of a book.<sup>108</sup> Parker, looking back through the screen of Restoration skepticism at the revolutionary period’s linguistic excesses, wryly observes of Milton’s writing, “[s]uch fustian bumbast as this past for stately wit and sence in that Age of politeness and reformation.”<sup>109</sup> Opposed to the question of toleration, Parker objected, not just to Milton’s message, but also his mode of expression. The keen insight into language’s epistemological dimensions that Milton hoped his figurative strategy would expose was instead uncharitably deemed a set of infelicitous articulations worthy of being discarded with the rest of

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<sup>108</sup> In light of his assertion that censorship imperils “that season’d Life of Man preserv’d and stor’d up in Books,” Milton suggests that “we see a kinde of homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdome, and if it extend to the whole impression, a kinde of massacre, whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elementall life, but strikes at that ethereall and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe, slaies an immortality rather then a life,” (2.493). Samuel Parker, *A Reproof to the Rehearsal Transposed* (London, 1673), Union Theological Seminary Library, *Early English Books Online*, paraphrases this figurative passage as “the suppression of a good Libel is *no less than Martyrdom, and if it extend to the whole Impression a kind of Massacre, whereof the Execution ends not in the slaying of an Elemental Life, but strikes at that ethereal and fifth essence, the breath of Reason it self, slays an Immortality rather than a Life,*” (p. 191).

<sup>109</sup> Parker, p. 191.

the dangerous dross of the 1640s. Though Milton may have taken pause and reevaluated his approach to the language of polemic, that hardly means that *Areopagitica* was a failure.

*Areopagitica* used its unique poetic power to speak forth, fully enacting the liberty of conscience to which other tolerationists aspired. The figurative vehemence of the tract amplified what Henry Robinson understood about writing as a tool for the conscientious believer. While the Apostles advised that Christians must preach by word of mouth, the work of speaking conscience ought to proceed through textual extension as well. Though without the “presence” of oral performance, expressions of truth “by writing” are able to be “better dispersed, and more freely enjoyed at all times, places and opportunities, besides, that controversies and businesses of intricacie, are far better and more methodically stated and explained in writing or in Print, then can possibly be delivered by word of mouth.”<sup>110</sup> Milton’s “Speech” to Parliament may have gone unheard in its immediate circumstances, but its poetic metaphors have resounded across the centuries.

Milton’s experimentation with metaphor in *Areopagitica* revealed the tension that persisted in the relationship between rhetoric and poetics. His early tracts had demonstrated the polemical power that could be unleashed by a self-characterized poet in prose, but he confronted the limit of that approach in *Areopagitica*. Attempting to expose the likelihood that truth always excels the circumstances of language, Milton, perhaps inevitably, overshot his own historical circumstances. While, for the English tradition, it remains a monument to figurative vehemence in argument, for Milton, *Areopagitica* served as a warning of the rhetorical limitations of poetic soaring.

### **“Justice executed by a Metaphor”: From Iconoclasm to Plainness in Milton’s Later Prose**

The conflict between moderate presbyterians and more radical independents came to a

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<sup>110</sup> Robinson, p. 17.

head in 1648 when Colonel Thomas Pride and his regiment arrested and excluded members of the House of Commons that the revolutionary Army saw as the obstacle to their agenda. Pride's Purge rid England's legislative body of the once-dominant presbyterian faction. The remaining Rump Parliament then provided a rubber stamp for the Army's plans, trying and executing the King and making way for Cromwell's eventual rise as Lord Protector. Milton played a significant role in these events, offering justification for the regicide in his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1648) and becoming Cromwell's Latin secretary. The expulsion of the presbyterians, though, did not unleash the new-found freedom that Milton had imagined in *Areopagitica*, which cast parliamentarian-controlled London as "the mansion house of liberty" (2.553-4). The new government ignored Milton's argument against print censorship and, in an ironic turn, Milton himself would serve as a licenser for the Cromwellian regime. Amidst the rapidly changing conditions of the English Revolution, Milton's idealism seems to have been tempered by a growing pragmatism or an accommodation of his values to the constraining work of nation-building.<sup>111</sup> Just as he moved away from the maximalist liberty articulated in *Areopagitica*, Milton also seems to have reconsidered his approach to figurative language in polemical prose. Perhaps in part because of the silent reception that *Areopagitica* received, Milton's enthusiastic self-presentation as a poetic pamphleteer changed. This alteration is most apparent in *Eikonoklastes*, in which Milton casts himself, not as a maker of images, but as breaker of them.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Lewalski notes that as "an officer in the new government he had to come to terms with the compromises attendant upon power and to accept some pragmatic modifications of his tolerationist and republican ideals," (p. 237). See Ch. 8, pp. 236-77. David Loewenstein, "Milton's Nationalism and the English Republic," asserts that there was "an element of political realism to Milton's position in early 1649," (p. 35).

<sup>112</sup> We can also see Milton's changing approach to polemical figuration in *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. Blaine Greteman, "Exactest Proportion': The Iconoclastic and Constitutive Powers of Metaphor in Milton's Prose Tracts," *ELH* 76.2 (2009), pp. 399-417, argues that Milton's prose figures do not only highlight the gap between sign and signified "that testifies to the incommensurability of human and divine understanding, they often work to limit that gap," (p. 399).

Much of Milton scholarship has accepted that the writer of *Paradise Lost* is deserving of the title that David Loewenstein gave him—“Milton Iconoclastes.”<sup>113</sup> After all, Milton’s poetics throughout his oeuvre is highly conscious of the impact of images and of the dangers of idolatry. In *Eikonoklastes*, he gave his readers a frame for understanding his approach to language and figuration, granting the tract the epithet given to Greek emperors who “in thir zeal to the command of God ... took courage, and broke all superstitious Images to peeces” (3.343). The title communicates the fervency and conviction behind Milton’s animadversions on *Eikon Basilike*, a book published after Charles’ execution purporting to be an autobiographical reflection on his last days.<sup>114</sup> In working to dismantle this monarchical idol, Milton characterizes himself not as a poet, but as an iconoclast. This distinction has been somewhat obscured by the designation of Milton’s “iconoclastic poetics.”<sup>115</sup> There is a purposeful irony in this critical term, which seeks to address the coexistence in Milton of a skepticism toward imagery and an enthusiasm for the poetic imagination. Daniel Shore has recently challenged the idea that Milton might have been an image-breaker at all, arguing that Milton “engages in criticism and then disguises it as iconoclasm.”<sup>116</sup> Shore makes the case that Milton is not an iconoclast on the grounds that, strictly speaking, textual iconoclasm is impossible. The linguistic articulation of an idol, even in the effort to reject it, only perpetuates its presence. Actual iconoclasts simply and violently destroy idols eliminating them from the view of would-be image-worshippers. While that may be the case, Milton himself—at least by the time of *Eikonoklastes*—was eager to conceptualize the critical work he was doing as iconoclastic, and Loewenstein, Cable, and other

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<sup>113</sup> David Loewenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> On the question of *Eikon Basilike*’s authorship, see Francis F. Madan, *A New Bibliography of the Eikon Basilike of King Charles I* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, n.s. 3, 1949), pp. 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> See Cable, *Carnal Rhetoric*, p. 88.

<sup>116</sup> Daniel Shore, *Milton and the Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), p. 90.

scholars have persuasively demonstrated that Milton's approach to potentially deceptive images is deserving of the "iconoclastic" descriptor. As I will show, even Milton's contemporary interlocutors accepted it as such. What is important about the "iconoclastic" label is that it differs from Milton's earlier efforts to soar "as the poets use." Even if, stylistically, Milton had maintained a similar approach to figurative resources, the way that he conceptualized that formal pattern had a significant influence on its impact.

Less metaphorically vehement than *Areopagitica*, *Eikonoklastes* differs most substantially in its regard for figurative language as it finds it in Milton's opponents. While Egan suggests a continuity in Milton's style and ethos throughout the 1640s, the pattern that he refers to as "Milton's signature as a political pamphleteer"—his "distinctive conflation of the rhetorical and the poetic"—was, I argue, coming apart.<sup>117</sup> Despite Milton's dynamic synthesis, the rifts in the marriage between rhetoric and poetics had been exposed over the course of the decade, and Milton faced significant questions about how he ought to engage in the further controversies of the day. While the ethos of the poet had offered him a unifying presence and highlighted his discerning eye for figurative turns, the Milton of *Eikonoklastes* adopted the pose of one who was antagonistic to the problems of poetic expression. He infamously admonishes the king for uttering a prayer quoted from "the vain amatorious Poem of S<sup>r</sup> Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*" (3.362). Though Milton qualifies that Sidney's prose romance is "a Book in that kind full of worth and witt," he insists that it is "among religious thoughts, and duties not worthy to be nam'd" (3.362). Whereas in *Areopagitica*, he praised Spenser's Faerie-land fictions, the rustic pagans of Sidney's *Arcadia* fall below Milton's standard for poetry put to edifying use. The poeticizing that Milton had so conspicuously cultivated in his earlier tracts became a sign of suspicion in his animadversions on the King's Book.

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<sup>117</sup> Egan, "Rhetoric and Poetic in Milton's Polemics of 1659-60," p. 216.



After spending so much of the 1640s substantiating what seemed to be the congenial connection between poetry and rhetoric, Milton exploited the vulnerability of this model as he found it represented in *Eikon Basilike*. Projecting the intimacy of personal devotions, the King's Book consists of "the lip-work of every prelatical liturgist" and is invigorated by "the genius of his *Cleric* elocution" (3.360-1). Milton connects Charles' artistry with the prelates he had rallied against in his earliest polemics. The king, like his prelatical teachers, was comfortable in the "cool element of prose," which in *Eikonoklastes* Milton dubs "the easy literature of custom and opinion" (3.339). Again and again, Milton finds himself in opposition to those writers who rely upon the comfortable forms of the ideological establishment, which here consists not only of the king's party but also of the repentant presbyterians who were traumatized by the regicide. Once again Milton takes it upon himself to confront an idle readership conditioned to texts that ask for nothing more than credulousness. He declares *Eikon Basilike*'s audience to be "an inconstant, irrational, and image-doting rabble, who hold out both their ears with such delight and ravishment to be stigmatized and bored through in witness of their own voluntary and beloved baseness" (3.601). What Milton faces is a "civil kinde of Idolatry" (3.343). Yet, while his rhetorical situation is a familiar one, Milton adopts a new formula for combating it. No longer vindicating himself as a true poet facing down the deceptions of poetasters and prelates alike, he is an iconoclast, taking aim at the illusory imagery of *Eikon Basilike* and leaving his own figurations inconspicuous.

Other revolutionary writers in the period had taken to print to point out the figurativeness of the master tropes that governed the English monarchy, exposing the flexibility of their resemblances and thereby undermining royalist efforts to use them as tokens of metaphysical truth. Such similitudes as the paternal monarch, Charles Herle reminded his fellow Englishmen,

“onely illustrate as farre as the likenesse holds.”<sup>118</sup> Milton’s attack on the figurations of the King’s Book, though, are much more petty. This is partly due to the insidious effectiveness of *Eikon Basilike*, which, rather than reiterating the imagery of Stuart divine-right theory, offered instead the humble pathos of a royal martyr.<sup>119</sup> Milton accordingly dismantled even the most conventional figurative significations in the text. For instance, the King’s Book has Charles figure forth his departure from Westminster, an event that could be cast as his abandonment of the state, with an apologetic metaphor of a ship at sea: ““With what unwillingness I withdrew from *Westminster*, let them judg, who unprovided of tackling and victual, are forced to Sea by a Storm; yet better do so, than venture splitting or sinking on a Lee-shore.”<sup>120</sup> A sea voyage was an early modern commonplace for conveying the challenge of human action in an uncertain world.<sup>121</sup> Only the most uncharitable reader would take offense at the stylistic decorum of the passage. Milton parlays that lack of charity into a wry critique of *Eikon Basilike*’s generic foundation:

The Simily wherwith he begins I was about to have found fault with, as in a garb somewhat more Poetical then for a Statist: but meeting with many straines of like dress in other of his Essaies, and hearing him reported a more diligent reader of Poets, then of Politicians, I begun to think that the whole Book might perhaps be intended a peece of Poetrie. The words are good, the fiction smooth and cleanly; there wanted onely Rime, and that, they say, is bestow'd upon it lately. (3.406)

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<sup>118</sup> Herle, p. 16. For earlier challenges to the discourse of monarchy, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983).

<sup>119</sup> On Charles’ monarchical martyrdom, see Andrew Lacey, *The Cult of King Charles the Martyr* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 2003).

<sup>120</sup> Charles I, *Eikon Basilike, The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitudes and Sufferings* (London, 1648), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 34. Shore suggests that this is a prime example of the king being “quick to deny his agency in less than seemly events,” (p. 54).

<sup>121</sup> On the significance of shipwreck as a commonplace, see Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 77-90.

Milton uses the poetic qualities of *Eikon Basilike* to overturn its generic identification. Praising it as a successful piece of poetry, Milton deprives the text of its truth-telling force. Charles' reputed affinity for poetic writings and the way that edition after edition (including a versified translation) of the King's Book were voraciously consumed in the print marketplace open *Eikon Basilike* to Milton's sly challenge.<sup>122</sup> To enact that criticism, though, Milton largely ignores the species of true poetry he had spent so much of his career championing. For the sake of polemical expediency, Milton allows poetry to lapse into its Platonic classification, as indistinguishable from another genre—that of the lie.<sup>123</sup> Insinuations like these demonstrate the movement that Milton made. No longer the soaring poet laboring in prose, we encounter instead Milton Iconoclastes.

As Shore concedes, Milton clearly cultivated the posture of the iconoclast in *Eikonoklastes*. Milton's rivals also agreed with him. Joseph Jane, a royalist pamphleteer, offered animadversions upon Milton's animadversions, accepting the rhetorical frame of iconoclasm that Milton presented. Jane's *Eikon Aklastos, The Image Unbroken* (1651) promises to mend what Milton had shattered, accepting without question Milton's self-characterization, which he uses to highlight the dread and violence of a rebellious regicidal government. When Jane comments on Milton's approach to figures, he points out the absurdity of his criticisms. At one point in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton takes issue with Charles' use of the metaphor of the sun to express the nobility of the Earl of Strafford, whose execution played a crucial role in the early phase of conflict between king and Parliament. Milton admonishes these "Scholastic flourishes" as "beneath the decencie of a King," calling out the comparison of Strafford "to *the Sun*, which in

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<sup>122</sup> Parts of *Eikon Basilike* were versified in Edward Reynolds, *The Divine Penetential Meditations and Vows of His Late Sacred Majestie in His Solitude at Holmby House, Faithfully Turned into Verse* (London, 1649), British Library, *Early English Books Online*. See YP, 3.360, n. 33.

<sup>123</sup> See Christopher Gill, "Plato on Falsehood—Not Fiction," in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, ed. Christopher Gill and T. P. Wiseman (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 1993), pp. 38-87.

all figurative use, and significance beares allusion to a King, not to a Subject” (3.372). Jane already smells hypocrisy in this “trivially exception,” demanding that “this libeller confesse himselfe to be of that sordid generation, which by that influence are rayzed out of sinkes, and puddles to obscure that gloryous luster.”<sup>124</sup> When, later in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton accuses Charles of seizing solar imagery for himself, a flabbergasted Jane calls Milton out on the contradiction, asking “why did he say, that the sun in all figurative vse, and signification beares allusion to a King, & blames the king for his comparison of the Earle of Strafford, and heere reprehends the allusion to himselfe?”<sup>125</sup> Milton’s mercenary and opportunistic deconstruction of *Eikon Basilike*’s figurations is fully on display. Jane makes the best of it by extending the figure to the pretensions of the rebel regime, which aspires to be “the sun, and set the world on fire.”<sup>126</sup> Figuration is the framework within which this polemical conflict is enacted.

Jane sees not just the pettiness of Milton’s figurative interpretations, but also a larger danger in his approach to figurativeness. He believes that Milton and the Parliamentarians’ actions have effectively disfigured the body politic, tearing apart the ideological basis of the state and undermining its linguistic foundations. This is especially clear in Jane’s attack on Milton’s use of the imagery of the sword. Milton addresses the presbyterian backsliders who had happily raised the “Sword of Hostility” against the monarchy, criticizing them for later believing that the king had been “violated by the unsparing Sword of Justice” in the regicide (3.786). Jane recoils not just at the mutinous cause that Milton champions, but also at his discursive transgressions. Citing St. Paul’s aphorism, “the Magistrate beares not the sword in vaine,” Jane accuses Milton of having “every man the Magistrate, and the sword borne without an hand to strike with it, &

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<sup>124</sup> Joseph Jane, *Eikon Aklastos, The Image Vnbroaken* (London, 1651), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 91

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Justice executed by a Metaphor. He makes *Iustice* some wandering spirit, that invisibly carries a sword.”<sup>127</sup> Rather than seeing justice for what royalists believed it to be—that is, an embodied quality of the sitting monarch extended to his subjects—Milton relied upon a metaphorical transference that allows him to authorize the representatives of the English Republic to act on behalf of an abstract principle. Jane regards this figurative turn as an absurd obfuscation of actual events, what he saw to be martial law commanded by the regicides. The crux of their dispute resides in the question of the figurativeness of the body politic and its associations. In a society so long in the shadow of kingship, the poetic possibilities of metaphor threaten defenders of the establishment and empower those who wish to challenge them. Jane’s hostile reading of *Eikonoklastes* accepts Milton’s idol-smashing framework, not to vindicate him as a champion of truth, but to expose him as a purveyor of tenuous and untested figurations. Even after he shed the ethos of the poet, Milton was still being associated with the excesses of metaphor.

Perhaps in response to the vulnerabilities that his own metaphors opened up, Milton’s approach to figuration changed as the revolutionary period wore on. On the eve of the Restoration, which would mark the reversal of many of the gains for which Milton had fought so hard, Milton’s polemics notably resisted the momentum of events even as his style began to manifest a marked change. From 1659 onward, Milton’s late prose began to make aesthetic appeals to the virtue of plainness.<sup>128</sup> Egan aptly characterizes this shift: “Whereas the early Milton elaborated, often metaphorically, the late polemicist epitomizes and sometimes simply lists.”<sup>129</sup> The figurative vividness that had distinguished Milton from so many other pamphleteers in the Revolution’s prose wars was gone. Critics have had difficulty explaining this stylistic

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<sup>127</sup> Jane, p. 67.

<sup>128</sup> On the development of Milton’s plain polemical style, see Corns, “Milton’s Prose,” pp. 90-96; and Egan, “Milton’s Aesthetic of Plainness, 1659-1673.”

<sup>129</sup> Egan, “Milton’s Aesthetic of Plainness, 1659-1673,” p. 63.

alteration. The larger cultural shift toward plainness in the Restoration seems to offer an unsatisfying motivation for Milton's stylistic retooling. After all, it is difficult to imagine Milton, of all writers, accommodating himself to a key element of the Restoration settlement, the aspiration for discourse cleansed of the tarnish of revolution. This is likely what Thomas Corns had in mind when he argued that Milton's late approach to prose emerged "from changes in his own stylistic preferences rather than from any mere conformity with the practices of his contemporaries."<sup>130</sup> However, these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. I want to suggest that Milton's personal career as a polemicist likely became intertwined in the larger cultural movement toward a standard of plainness. Milton was not capitulating his writing to the culture of an England back in the grips of the Stuart monarchy. Many in England, not just royalists, had grown wary of the textual upheavals of the midcentury. Milton perhaps recognized the limited efficacy of his earlier, figuratively exuberant writings and developed a more austere style in order to have an impact within a changing cultural context.

Since even the metaphor of the iconoclast had implications that he could not control, Milton must have come to see plainness as a principle that ensured the rhetorical integrity of the arguments he put forth. He was no longer willing to have his voice muted or subverted. His rationale for the power of plainness becomes quite clear in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659). With Cromwell's death and his son Richard's ascension to the position of Lord Protector, the future of the Commonwealth of England was uncertain. It was in this moment that Milton took the opportunity to address the question of toleration once again. In doing so, *A Treatise of Civil Power* adopts his newfound rhetorical orientation. Milton ends the text with an explicit justification of the perspicuous mode with which he had addressed his audience:

Pomp and ostentation of reading is admir'd among the vulgar: but doubtless in matters of

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<sup>130</sup>Corns, "Milton's Prose," p. 92.

religion he is learnedest who is planest. The brevitie I use, not exceeding a small manual, will not therefore, I suppose, be thought the less considerable, unless with them perhaps who think that great books only can determin great maters. I rather chose the common rule, not to make much ado where less may serve. Which in controversies and those especially of religion, would make them less tedious, and by consequence read ofter, by many more, and with more benefit. (7.271-272)

Milton trumpets the significance of these austere standards to the religious nature of his discourse, but his argument applies to polemical discourses of all matters. Dissociating himself stylistically from the indolence of a falsely empowered elite, like the prelates he once railed against, Milton vindicates expressive conciseness and simplicity as a virtue of true wisdom. He reverses his earlier pursuit of a poetic polemicism, insisting now that “he is learnedest who is planest.”

Milton’s extolling of plainness is indeed accompanied by an alteration in the relationship between figuration and argumentation. Making the case that scripture does not affirm any orthodoxy that emerged in the tradition that followed the gospels, Milton contends that “no man, no synod, no session of men, though calld the church, can judge definitively the sense of scripture to another mans conscience” (7.247-8). He claims that this assertion constitutes a “general maxim of the Protestant religion” (7.248). Offering up this aphorism, Milton pursues the logical consequences of his statement, syntactically bridging to those implications with the phrase “it follows planely” (7.248). Despite developing that line of reasoning extensively, Milton’s plain, logical statements are not enough. He feels compelled to illustrate his point with a conspicuous figure. Where the earlier Milton would have politely asked “leave to soare a while as the Poets use” and embarked on an evocatively extended image that dramatized his thinking to

a degree that strained readers' interpretive sensibilities, here in *A Treatise of Civil Power*, an older, more circumspect Milton carefully and deliberately unpacks a lean figurative comparison: "To make this yet more undeniable, I shal only borrow a plane similie, the same which our own writers, when they would demonstrate planest that we rightly preferred the scripture before the church, use frequently against the Papist in this manner" (7.248). Signaling the austerity of his "plane similie," Milton acknowledges a tradition of such figures among "our own writers," presumably right-thinking Protestants committed to the principle of scripture's preeminence over a worldly church government. Then he maps out a clear pedigree for the trope: it has a history of being used on behalf of a virtuous cause by virtuous men, and, importantly, against a vicious mark—"the Papist." After a great deal of labored preparation, Milton finally unfolds the similitude. He relates,

As the Samaritans beleevd Christ, first for the womans word, but next and much rather for his own, so we the scripture; first on the churches word, but afterwards and much more for its own, as the word of God, then ought we believe what in our conscience we apprehend the scripture to say, though the visible church with all her doctors gainsay.  
(7.248)

Milton recounts the story from John 4:4-42 in which a Samaritan woman encounters Christ, spreading word of him to her community before they hear his message first hand. The narrative illustrates the mediation between the source of truth and its messengers, and Milton uses that scenario to convey the experience of modern-day Protestants, initiated into religion through the second-hand efforts of the church in anticipation of the spiritual truths discovered through direct engagement with scripture. The anecdote certainly conveys the sentiment of Milton's argument without the cloudy luster of his earlier figurative practice. He humbly offers a precise analogy,



measured out without the tacit omission of any terms of the comparison. There is little room for confusion or willful polemical misinterpretation. Methods like this one characterize Milton's figurative practice in his later prose. Presenting himself as neither a maker nor a breaker of images, Milton adopts the more subtle motions of plain expression in his engagement with the questions of the day.

### **Conclusion**

Milton, of course, did not completely abandon the mantle of a poet in prose. In the 1650s, his Latin treatises, which he composed on behalf of the Cromwellian government, celebrated the accomplishments of the English nation in the wake of its revolutionary actions. He concludes the *Second Defence* (1654) by likening himself to a writer of heroic verse: "just as the epic poet ... so let it suffice me too" (4.685). Milton's praise of England on the world stage required the heroic scope of poetry. Yet, he never again would frame his figurative expressions in terms of a poeticizing impulse in the way that he had in *The Reason of Church-Government, The Apology for Smectymnuus, or Areopagitica*. If Milton was not always the image-breaker of *Eikonoklastes*, he did acquiesce to the role of the plain speaker in his later treatises and tracts. He may have come to doubt the efficacy of his figurative experimentation, recognizing the polemical impact of downplaying the poetic character of an argument. This, though, was not a capitulation to the strict binary opposition between poetry and prose. Even if Milton abandoned his poetic-polemic project, the theory behind that strategy vindicates the intimate connection he discovered between poetics and rhetoric. Milton's early prose writings stand as monuments to the imaginative power of a poet's eye put to polemical purpose, and they undermine any critical attempt to reestablish the separatist doctrine that would divide Milton's poetry from his prose. When in *Paradise Lost*

Milton proclaims his effort to pursue “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,” it is important to understand the precise scope of that ambition.<sup>131</sup> Not only was he aiming to excel the illustrious tradition of epic verse, but he also sought to surpass the innovative possibilities that he had discovered within the form of polemical prose.

Milton’s insight into poetic figuration was perhaps the most radical instantiation of a method that served revolutionary writers well in the prose wars of the 1640s and 50s. Calling into question discourses that had for a long time secured the established order, pamphleteers championing the causes of church reform and parliamentary power drew attention to the metaphorical dimensions of the language invoked by political and religious authorities, opening diverse possibilities. Milton’s explicit identification as a poet in prose invigorated this strategy. He, more than any other polemicist in the period, exposed the poetics of argumentation, testing the lengths to which “simple, sensuous, and passionate” figurations could serve the ends of asserting or disputing a rhetorical position (2.403). That method allowed Milton to aspire toward truths that ultimately resided beyond the grasp of language and, therefore, beyond the rhetorical circumstances in which it was embedded. Aiming for the outmost bounds of poetic ambition, he was unable to execute effectively his more immediate intervention. If rhetoric relies upon an apprehension of the “available means of persuasion,” poetics, at its most extreme, pursues the unavailable, thereby disengaging to some degree from the argument at hand.<sup>132</sup> The impasse is a subtle one. Pursuing more conventional and plain styles thereafter, Milton nonetheless discovered a point at which the synthesis of poetics and rhetoric could collapse in the enterprise of prose assertion.

Though Milton’s experimentation in *Areopagitica* seems to have faltered, the basic

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<sup>131</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, l. 16.

<sup>132</sup> Aristotle, 1355b, *On Rhetoric*, p. 36.

figurative strategy that he and other revolutionaries employed proved difficult to contain for defenders of the established order. Perhaps more concerned than any other about the chaotic multiplicity of voices crying out into the print marketplace, Thomas Hobbes understood that the seductions of literalism would not serve the king's cause or any other effort to bring peace back to England. He recognized that the linguistic instability beneath the religious and political tumult could only be addressed by harnessing, not ignoring, the poetic dimensions of discourse, an insight that I will address in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2

### ***Leviathan* and the Bagpipe: Thomas Hobbes and the Matter of Poetic Figuration**

John Milton and Thomas Hobbes are sometimes regarded as polar opposites on the cultural spectrum of mid-seventeenth-century England. The poet of liberty and the philosopher of absolutism do not seem to share many intellectual commitments. The impression of a stark opposition between the two has its roots in Elizabeth Milton's testimony to John Aubrey. The widow reported that the "interests and tenets" of Hobbes and her late husband "did run counter to each other."<sup>1</sup> While the Revolution drove English men and women into various antagonistic factions, the upheaval of the period also destabilized the distinctions that might be used to organize the intellectual culture of midcentury England. Recent scholarship has begun to discover important, if complicated, affinities between such seemingly opposed figures as Milton and Hobbes.<sup>2</sup> In examining the use and conceptualization of poetic figuration in the treatises and tracts of this period of crisis, there is much to be learned from the relationships that emerge between ostensibly divergent approaches to language. Milton's status as perhaps the most poetically radical of the revolutionary pamphleteers revealed the power and the problems associated with polemical engagement's figurative entailments, and his growing embrace of an aesthetic of plainness at the Revolution's end seemed to mark the limits of a congenial synthesis between poetics and rhetoric. Hobbes's *Leviathan*, a monument to textual perspicuity, on the other hand, avoided the convenient, if ultimately foolhardy, path that many defenders of the established order took. He has, after all, been described as a "peculiar royalist."<sup>3</sup> It was not

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<sup>1</sup> John Aubrey, "Minutes of the Life of Mr. John Milton," in *The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Constable, 1932), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher Warren, "When Self-Preservation Bids: Approaching Milton, Hobbes, and Dissent," *English Literary Renaissance* 37.1 (2007), pp. 118-150.

<sup>3</sup> This phrase comes from Eleanor Curran, "A Very Peculiar Royalist: Hobbes in the Context of His Political Contemporaries," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10.2 (2002), pp. 167-208, who challenges the

enough, in Hobbes's view, to insist upon the literal and proper truth of the figurative images significant to the cultural establishment. Hobbes's contributions to the prose of a "world turned upside down" were invigorated by a tacit understanding of language's poetic dimensions. Despite his reputation as a scourge of metaphor, Hobbes came to recognize that poetic figuration, while sometimes used to open up a dizzying diversity of interpretive possibilities, was precisely the tool needed to obtain the ultimate form of assent.<sup>4</sup>

Hobbes, of course, was not a poet. Despite occasions spent translating Euripides and Homer, celebrating the Earl of Devonshire in Latin hexameters, and versifying his own life, he remained reluctant to identify himself with the craft of poetic representation. In an epistolary exchange with William Davenant on the composition of the epic *Gondibert*, Hobbes insisted that he was "not a poet."<sup>5</sup> Yet, what followed in that letter was a sophisticated treatment of how poetry works. Despite his protestation and his consistent assertion of the epistemic power of logical discourse, Hobbes recognized the indelible role of poetic expression even within the writing of philosophy. The *Leviathan* has traditionally been seen as the harbinger of the Restoration's discursive movement toward "mathematical plainness."<sup>6</sup> However, scholars in recent decades have come to appreciate Hobbes's embrace of rhetoric and the resources of

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prevailing consensus on Hobbes's thoroughgoing adherence to the king's cause. Whether or not we call Hobbes's royalism into question, his approach to metaphor, I argue, can be added to the list of peculiarities.

<sup>4</sup> Modern accounts of Hobbes emphasize his apparent anti-metaphorical antagonism. For instance, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) suggest that Hobbes participated in a movement to turn metaphors into "objects of scorn," (p. 190).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes, "The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir Will. D'Avenant's Preface Before *Gondibert*" (1650), in *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 45-55, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (London, 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 113. On the "new plain style" of the Restoration, see R.F. Jones, "Science and English Prose Style in the Third-Quarter of the Seventeenth Century," *PMLA* 45 (1930), pp. 992-1009; and Roger Pooley, "Language and Loyalty: Plain Style at the Restoration," *Literature and History* 6 (1980), pp. 2-18. Brian Vickers, "Restoration Prose Style: A Reassessment," in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, eds. Nancy Struever and Brian Vickers (Los Angeles: Clark Library, 1985), pp. 3-76; and Paul Arakelian, "The Myth of a Restoration Style Shift," *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 20 (1979), pp. 227-45, have challenged the notion of a consistent syntactical realignment in the 1660s. Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2009), contends that the discursive change in the period was felt on the level of linguistic theory, if not sentence-level phenomena.

figurative language.<sup>7</sup> Quentin Skinner, in particular, has shown that, though Hobbes initially moved away from humanism toward the perceived certainty of a new science of politics, he later returned to a position closer to his humanist formation. As Skinner demonstrates, the *Leviathan* seems to recognize that “if reason is to prevail, we shall need to supplement and enforce its findings by means of the rhetorical arts.”<sup>8</sup> In scholarly appraisals of Hobbes’s rhetorical orientation, his discussions of poetry, especially the “Answer” to Davenant, often serve as evidence of his investment in eloquence.<sup>9</sup> However, these treatments overlook the tension between poetics and rhetoric, a tension present in the classical tradition and newly reinvigorated within the discursive upheavals of mid-seventeenth-century England. Figurative language, especially metaphor and its related forms, sits uncomfortably at the uncertain frontier where rhetorical meets poetic expression. Far from being antagonistic toward metaphor, as his modern reputation would have him be, Hobbes was alive to the poetic nature of figurative effects and willing to exploit that capacity as a conscientious component of a rigorous system of natural and political philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

Hobbes had an acute awareness of the poetic capacity of figuration. Where many prose writers in the period tapped into the unavoidable power of metaphorical imagery, Hobbes’s cautious consideration of figurative turns evinces a deep understanding of the risks and

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<sup>7</sup> On Hobbes and rhetoric, see Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985), Ch. 6, pp. 152-81; David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986); Charles Cantalupo, *A Literary Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes’s Masterpiece of Language* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1991); Raia Prokhovnik, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Hobbes’s Leviathan* (New York: Garland, 1991); and Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Skinner, pp. 359-60. Walter Ong, “The Province of Rhetoric and Poetic,” *The Modern Schoolman* 19.2 (1942), pp. 24-7, argues that poetics is often subordinated in the larger perennial conflict between philosophy and rhetoric.

<sup>10</sup> James Wilson-Quayle, “Resolving Hobbes’s Metaphorical Contradiction: The Role of the Image in the Language of Politics,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 29.1 (1996), pp. 15-32; and Andreas Musolff, “Igne Fatui or Apt Similitudes?: The Apparent Denunciation of Metaphor by Thomas Hobbes,” *Hobbes Studies* 18.1 (2005), pp. 96-117, explain the relationship between Hobbes’s caution regarding figurative language and his evocative use of it.

opportunities associated with them. This was a particularly significant endeavor during the revolutionary period, when many of Hobbes's royalist compatriots were at pains to vindicate their political and philosophical worldview by insisting on the proper truth of the master tropes that undergirded it. Hobbes was perhaps even more attuned to Stephen Greenblatt's insight that the sign of power in early modern culture was "the ability to impose one's fictions on the world."<sup>11</sup> Throughout the ideological conflicts of the 1640s, polemical debate submitted language to these interpretive conditions, making it difficult for writers and readers to grasp a firm sense of truth in the textual marketplace. Rather than anticipating the discursive developments of the Restoration settlement, the *Leviathan* is a piece of writing attempting to navigate the representational conflicts of the English Revolution as they were happening.

Living in self-imposed exile in France since the eve of the Civil Wars, Hobbes was there to greet other royalist expatriates who had fled as the parliamentary faction vanquished and ultimately executed Charles I. By 1650, he was working to complete the *Leviathan* when he participated in the exchange on Davenant's *Gondibert*. Read alongside one another, Hobbes's philosophical master treatise and his literary-critical epistle demonstrate poetic expression's ability to manage the discursive instability of controversy. Unlike other royalists, who attempted to affirm and sometimes concretize the powerful metaphorical images that framed the dominant social order, Hobbes practiced a much more sensitive approach to figuration. He advises not only that figures "profess their inconstancy,"<sup>12</sup> but also that poetry adhere to the "conceaved possibility of nature."<sup>13</sup> These formulations, which might at first seem to be born of a narrow view of language's poetic capacity, prove in fact to be perceptive responses to figuration's

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980; U of Chicago P, 2005), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Hobbes, "The Answer of Mr. Hobbes," p. 51.

impact as a social instrument. This Hobbesian poetic insight manifests in evocative and effective metaphors. The most conspicuous of these is, of course, the titular leviathan, a version of the body politic trope exaggerated to provocatively monstrous proportions. Less often noted is the metaphor of the bagpipe in his letter to Davenant, which deflates the deceptive idea of poetic inspiration. Theorizing and deploying figurative expression as a philosophical tool, Hobbes exposed the poetic foundations of language and the social world that it enacts.

### **The “consequences of speech”: Seventeenth-Century Language and Hobbes’s Philosophy**

When, later in his life, Hobbes reflected back to the year 1640, he recalled it as a time “when an amazing plague swept through our land, as a result of which countless of our learned men later perished. Whoever was infested by this plague thought that he alone had discovered divine and human right.”<sup>14</sup> In Hobbes’s view, the source of the cultural turmoil of the revolutionary period was a deluded individualism that made consensus impossible. He sought to articulate a political philosophy that would address this intractable problem, superseding the disorder of diverse claims to truth with an absolutist state governed by a single sovereign judgment without having recourse to divine right or other metaphysical theories.<sup>15</sup> The *Leviathan* attempts to build a commonwealth that consists of “the multitude so united in one person.”<sup>16</sup> Hobbes conceived this enterprise as largely reliant upon linguistic reform. It is language, after all, that allows humanity to ascend beyond the violent state of nature, which he infamously depicted as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>17</sup> Language enables us to see the world as

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Vita Carmine Expressa* (1679), translated in A. P. Martinich, *Hobbes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> For the place of Hobbes’s system in mid-seventeenth-century intellectual culture, see Johann P. Sommerville, *Thomas Hobbes: Political Ideas in Historical Context* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 109. By “commonwealth,” I refer to the Hobbesian term for the state. This is not to be confused with the Commonwealth of England, the republican government that ruled during the Interregnum.

<sup>17</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 76.



more than a chaos of particularities, discerning meaningful patterns within it. For Hobbes, speech “consisteth in the imposing of *names* and the *connexion* of them,” and so with language comes the power to see classes or species, the ability to group things in the world together.<sup>18</sup> Hobbes insisted that there is “nothing in the world universal but names; for the things named are every one of them individual and singular.”<sup>19</sup> This nominalist approach to language undermined not only the sense of an inherent ontological connection between word and thing, but also any sense of a coherent ontology *among* things themselves. Recognizing language as both socially conventional and constitutive of order in nature, Hobbes’s political system was, in essence, a linguistic intervention—staking out a concern for precision in language in order to achieve a peaceful state.

He was convinced that language, and especially figuration, was a critical component of cultural cohesion. The ideological conflicts of the English Revolution, after all, had demonstrated that a figurative turn of phrase is capable of making or remaking a social order. The clash of polemic destabilized many of the master tropes of early modern English society, so much so that some observers in the period believed figures themselves to be the root of England’s troubles. One especially influential and contentious metaphor during the Revolution was the body politic, a commonplace expression of social order in the form of a unified organism.<sup>20</sup> Supporters of the monarchy often believed that the kingdom’s iconography truly embodied the political structure of the state, while parliamentarians and other revolutionaries were more likely to treat these figures as explicitly metaphorical. To see the body politic as a proper representation of the social order was to affirm the established dominion of the king.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 17. On Hobbes’s sense of language and nature, see Philip Pettit, *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), Ch. 1, pp. 9-23.

<sup>19</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> For the use and influence of the body politic in early modern literature, see D. G. Hale, *The Body Politic: A Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature* (Hague: Mouton, 1971).

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Henry Ferne's image of paternalistic monarchy prompted Charles Herle's challenge to the significance of such figurative illustrations.<sup>21</sup> Herle's assertion—"Alegoryes are no good *arguments*, they onely illustrate as farre as the likenesse holds"—is an apt aphorism for revolutionary reinterpretations of the metaphors that royalists used to defend the established order.<sup>22</sup> Of the body politic trope in particular, Herle asks "doth it therefore follow that ... because he [the king] should governe with the *wisdome* of a *head*, that therefore he may governe not only without the *consent*, but without the *Counsell* of the rest of the *Members* as the head doth?"<sup>23</sup> Herle's question details the practical implications of the figure, forcing his readers to consider precisely what contention they are assenting to when they accept the point of resemblance implied within the body politic image. Such an allegory, a metaphor so extended that it becomes a persistent feature of social reality, fails to satisfy the rubric of "good *arguments*" because it obscures, rather than clarifies, the likeness upon which its meaning depends.<sup>24</sup> Contending against the weight of centuries' worth of monarchical iconography, parliamentarians like Herle developed a productive wariness toward figurative expressions implicated within the power structures of early modern society. His reminder that such expressions "onely illustrate as farre as the likenesse holds" does not signify a rejection of poetic figuration's role in ideological thought; it constitutes an even stronger commitment to searching out the precise implications of metaphorical language.

This strategy of metaphorical discernment proved difficult to manage for many royalist

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Ferne, *Conscience Satisfied, That There is no Warrant for the Armes Taken up by Subjects* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 9. For earlier challenges to the discourse of monarchy, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Herle, *An Answer to Doctor Fernes Reply, Entitled Conscience Satisfied* (London, 1643), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-7.

<sup>24</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, defines "the figure *allegorie*" as "a long and perpetuall Metaphore," usually "extending to whole and large speeches" (p. 156).

writers. As powerful as figurative images are, the exposure of their ambiguities make them susceptible to manipulation, reconsideration, or even rejection. David Jenkins, the learned judge who was imprisoned by parliamentary authorities for his continued loyalty to the king's cause, confronted this problem when he found himself locked in a war of words with the revolutionary pamphleteer Henry Parker.<sup>25</sup> Jenkins had been charged with treason by Parliament, but he refused even to recognize the House of Commons' power to charge and try him without the support of the king. Much of Jenkins' argumentation deals in the nuances of legal theory, but he cannot help but make his case in terms of the familiar images of monarchical tradition. He declares that "always the Assent of the King giveth the life to all, as the soul to the body."<sup>26</sup> This is a common variation on the anatomy of the body politic, and it leaves Jenkins' reasoning vulnerable to subversion on the grounds of its figurativeness.<sup>27</sup> In his response, Parker argues that the judge "thinkes the King is a head to the Parliament *simpliciter*, or *phiscicè*."<sup>28</sup> Confusing the actual bodily association that Jenkins makes, Parker nonetheless exposes the absurdity of a political argument that uses such images to deny Parliament's claim to executive power. The king is not simply or physically the head, or even the soul, of English society, "he is so but *secundum quid*, or *metaphorisè*."<sup>29</sup> Parker suggests that the government's resemblance to an organic body is only meaningful from a certain point of view. To insist on that connection as a thorough, ontological truth is to overlook the metaphorical significance of the statement and to

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<sup>25</sup> On Parker's activities as a prolific revolutionary pamphleteer, see Michael Mendle, *Henry Parker and the English Civil War: The Political Thought of the Public's Privado* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1995); On Jenkins's place in the legal history of the period, see W. Epstein, "Judge David Jenkins and the Great Civil War," *Journal of Legal History* 3 (1982), pp. 187-221.

<sup>26</sup> David Jenkins, *The Vindication of Judge Jenkins* (London, 1647), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Hobbes too figures the monarch as the soul of the body politic, a surprising choice in light of his materialism. See Stephen Hequemour, "Hobbes's Leviathan: A Tale of Two Bodies," *The Seventeenth Century* 28.1 (2013), pp. 21-36.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Parker, *The Cordiall of Mr. David Jenkins: or His Reply to H.P. Barrester of Lincolnes-Inne, Answered* (London, 1647), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

commit a logical fallacy, transforming what is suggestive in a qualified sense into a universal truth. If the king “were such a head to the Politick Body, as the true head is to the naturall Body,” Parker explains, “the body could have no subsistence without him.”<sup>30</sup> With only a little pressure, the logic of the figure falls apart. In a society imprinted with the form kingship, the poetic possibilities of metaphor mostly threatened defenders of the establishment and empowered those who wished to challenge them. Hobbes, however, came to recognize that this metaphorical conscientiousness might be the key to maintaining the peace of an absolutist state.

The *Leviathan*'s structure suggests a deep care for the function of language. In it, Hobbes maps out the “consequences of speech.” Alongside an innovative category associated with “contracting,” he includes “logic,” “rhetoric,” and “poetry.”<sup>31</sup> While, in his earlier work, Hobbes acknowledged the effects of rhetoric and poetry mostly in the effort to vindicate the power of logical expression, in the *Leviathan*, he offers a more capacious and nuanced approach to language, one that aims to comprehend the interrelations between these discursive consequences. Hobbes's framework for understanding these connections was derived from the classical tradition.<sup>32</sup> For all of his criticism of the universities' devotion to Aristotelianism, Hobbes could find in Aristotle a means for apprehending constructive relationships between logic, rhetoric, and poetry.<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, as I suggested in the Introduction, had worked diligently to discover the philosophical integrity of rhetorical and poetic expression, defending them from the criticisms they suffered in Plato's dialogues. The *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* are texts that offer alternative

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 48. Hobbes includes these in the diagrammed tree of knowledge printed in the Latin version of the *Leviathan* (1676). Contracting relies upon “the Science of JUST and UNJUST,” (p. 48).

<sup>32</sup> On Hobbes's humanist studies, see Skinner, pp. 230-8.

<sup>33</sup> For an account of the relationship between the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* concerned with Aristotle's theory of metaphor, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (1977; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 1, pp. 8-48.

standards of truth beyond logical *necessity*—namely, *probability* and *possibility*.<sup>34</sup> Hobbes, who published an adumbrated translation of the *Rhetoric*, had the benefit of a thoroughly humanist education, so he was certainly familiar with Aristotle’s larger discursive project. In the *Leviathan*, he conceded that, while rhetoric probabilistically draws upon “opinions already received (true or false) and upon the passions and interests of men (which are different and mutable),” it also contains within it the means to rectify those problems.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Hobbes embraced the “contrary faculties” of logic and rhetoric as complementary discourses that allow a philosopher to apprehend and communicate those truths critical to the maintenance of social concord.<sup>36</sup>

The case for poetic expression is much more subtle in the *Leviathan*. A probabilistic standard of truth guides the text’s rhetorical appeals, as it attempts to defuse the more pernicious effects of ill-founded custom and the subjective passions of individuals. While rhetoric often has recourse to figurative language, it was as clear to Hobbes as it was to his classical forebears that, as I have demonstrated, there is something fundamentally poetic about the possibilities unleashed by a metaphorical turn. Quintilian cautioned that, while rhetorical eloquence could benefit greatly from poetry, “we must remember that poets are not to be imitated by the orator in every respect—not, for instance, in freedom of language, or unrestrained use of figures.”<sup>37</sup> Classical thinkers recognized figuration as a powerful tool for their discursive endeavors, but one that taps into a radical source of meaning more proper to poetry. Aristotle’s writings suggest that language’s poetic capacity proves fundamental to the higher order consequences of not just

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<sup>34</sup> See Ong, p. 24-5. These definitions of truth are derived from Aristotle and distilled in Thomas Aquinas’s remarks in Lecture 1 of his commentary on Book 1 of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*.

<sup>35</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 489.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Quintilian, *On the Teaching of Speaking and Writing: Translations from Books One, Two, and Ten of the Institutio oratoria*, 10.1.28, trans. James Murphy (Carbondale and Edwardville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987), p. 131.

rhetoric, but also logic.<sup>38</sup> He saw it as the genius of the poet to be able to use metaphor well, but he also saw that the “eye for resemblances” was just as important “in philosophy, too” in which “it is characteristic of a well-directed mind to observe the likeness even in things very different.”<sup>39</sup> For Hobbes, the linguistic discovery of resemblances constitutes the building of a social order; thus, it is poetic insight that drives his larger philosophical project.

Hobbes’s conspicuous worries about metaphors and similitudes derive from a concern about the maintenance of a larger epistemic order, one that was initially apprehended by poetic means. Further acts of figuration are capable of altering that order, rebuilding conceptions of the world by submitting an interpretive community to the radical scope of poetic possibilities. Nodding directly to Hobbes’s political program, Harold Skulsky argues that figurative language in general “requires a tacit social contract”; it demands that interlocutors reengage with one another and restore their shared sense of the world.<sup>40</sup> In acknowledging the dangers of a society fragmenting into rival interpretive factions—or worse yet devolving into diverse interpretive solipsisms—Hobbes recognized that figuration could exceed even the loose bounds of rhetorical probability. Metaphors are so powerful and so dangerous precisely because they tap into the capacity to build what Sir Philip Sidney called a “second nature.”<sup>41</sup> After all, for Hobbes, nature as it is conceived was the product of poetic acts in the first place.

In this sense, as in so many others, Hobbes proved to be a “peculiar royalist.” Observing

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<sup>38</sup> John T. Kirby, “Aristotle on Metaphor,” *The American Journal of Philology* 118.4 (1997), pp. 517-554, demonstrates that “metaphor epitomizes or recapitulates in itself all of language—that mysterious, miraculous means by which we mirror the whole world around us,” p. 547.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*; Aristotle, 1412a, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 250.

<sup>40</sup> Harold Skulsky, *Language Recreated: Seventeenth-Century Metaphorists and the Act of Metaphor* (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1992), pp. 13-4.

<sup>41</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy* (1595) in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 9. For an account of the humanist view that rhetoric lays the *a priori* intellectual groundwork for logical demonstration in the first place, see Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State UP, 1980). I contend, however, that, following classical tradition, figurative expression is fundamentally a poetic exercise.

the Revolution from self-imposed exile in France, Hobbes published the *Leviathan* in 1651, a text that might have found common cause with those who remained obedient to the monarchy or even those who regretted taking up arms against it. However, his ontological materialism and his anti-clericalism offended many orthodox believers, especially priests and prelates themselves.<sup>42</sup> Those who responded to the *Leviathan*, though, seem also to have been alienated by the text's linguistic concerns, though not precisely for the reasons we might expect. Alexander Ross, chaplain to Charles I and unreconstructed champion of scholasticism, argued that Hobbes's skepticism toward metaphors effectively accuses "the Holy Ghost of absurdity, who useth them so frequently in scripture."<sup>43</sup> Ross did have something to fear about Hobbes's linguistic philosophy. His concern about the integrity of figurative expressions was indeed aimed at rooting out the "canting of schoolmen," the clergy's "vain and impious conjuration," and the whole interpretive program of the ecclesiastical order more broadly.<sup>44</sup> Ross, though, uses Hobbes's doubts about the vocabulary of scholastic theology to call into question his philosophical credibility: "if these words, [*Hypostatical, Transubstantiate, &c.*] be absurd words, let him impart better, and more significant terms, and we shall think him, though not a good Philosopher, yet a good Grammarian."<sup>45</sup> He suggests that Hobbes's focus on linguistic precision was a distraction from the actual truth of philosophy. Similarly, Bishop Bramhall, who, like Hobbes, lived in exile at the Continental courts, impugned his fastidious approach to language, insisting

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<sup>42</sup> For the reception of the *Leviathan*, see Samuel Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-Century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970).

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Ross, *Leviathan Drawn out with a Hook, or, Animadversions upon Mr. Hobbs his Leviathan* (London: 1653), Union Theological Seminary Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 9. For a more sympathetic treatment of Ross than scholars have typically given him, see David Allan, "'An Ancient Sage Philosopher': Alexander Ross and the Defence of Philosophy," *The Seventeenth Century* 16.1 (2001), pp. 68-94.

<sup>44</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 25, 416.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, p. 9.

that “[a]ffectation of words is not good, but contention about words is worse.”<sup>46</sup> Bramhall argues that whenever there is any confusion about the significance of linguistic formulations “the onely question is, Whether there be any ground in nature for such an expression.”<sup>47</sup> Bramhall failed to regard the nominalist character of Hobbes’s theory of language, countering that linguistic questions need only be referred to an expression’s “ground in nature.” This interpretive strategy assumes a substantive link between word and thing, or at least a systematic ontology to which words might appeal. Hobbes, though, recognized no such foundation. Ross and Bramhall, like generations of the *Leviathan*’s readers after them, failed to recognize that Hobbes’s niggling about metaphors does not come from a discomfort with rhetorical expression, but rather a clear-eyed sense of the poetic possibility lurking within language and our conception of the world. Hobbes’s metaphorical insight turned out to be much closer to that of his revolutionary rivals in the period, who saw poetic figuration as a means to transform their society. He simply sought a transformation of a different sort, laying out the foundation for a secure state ever aware of the poetics beneath metaphysics.

### “[T]hings, otherwise much unlike”: Hobbes’s Earlier Discursive Austerity

Though many of his contemporaries overlooked the linguistic dimensions of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes had indeed experimented with a thorough logical austerity in his earlier writings. As the first motions of the Revolution began to be felt, Hobbes started to publicize his belief that what was needed, for England in particular and political philosophy more generally, was greater certainty. It is this theoretical position that he stakes out in *The Elements of Law*

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<sup>46</sup> John Bramhall, *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes his Last Animadversions in the Case Concerning Liberty and Universal Necessity* (London, 1657), Harvard University Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 297. On the long dispute between Hobbes and Bramhall, see Nicholas D. Jackson, *Hobbes, Bramhall, and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity: A Quarrel of the Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.



(1640) and his “Critique of *De Mundo*” (1642-3). Where the *Leviathan* would later modify and moderate his understanding of rhetoric and, I argue, poetry’s relationship to logic, Hobbes’s writings of the early 1640s show him at his most discursively reactionary. He contends that linguistic assertions built upon probabilities or possibilities only affirm the subjective passions of individuals and the vulgar opinions of custom; they do not apprehend or express truth itself. Severing logic from rhetoric and poetics, Hobbes aimed to protect reasoned discourse from the deceptions of eloquence. He sought to unmask humanism’s false promise that *ratio* and *oratio* might be unified in the well-knowing, well-speaking rhetor. For Hobbes, this ideal was just another illusion. In *The Elements*, he argues that “*ratio*, now, is but *oratio*, for the most part, wherein custom hath so great a power, that the mind suggesteth only the first word, the rest follow habitually, and are not followed by the mind.”<sup>48</sup> Instead of forming a complementary convergence, rhetoric usurped the place of reason, short-circuiting the rationality of human communities. In response, Hobbes set out to liberate reason, disentangling the discourse of logic from rhetoric and poetics.

Hobbes insisted that political philosophy relied upon the principle of logical necessity, using the model of mathematics that many natural philosophers gravitated toward in the establishment of the new sciences.<sup>49</sup> He most clearly articulated his reconceptualized understanding of the discursive arts in a response to the Catholic philosopher Thomas White’s *De Mundo*. White’s dialogue sought to accommodate the work of Galileo to scholastic parameters so that the astronomer’s scientific ideas might affirm the faith. In doing so, White blurred the line between theology and philosophy, offending Hobbes’s sense of discursive

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<sup>48</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> For the role of mathematical certainty in the seventeenth century’s epistemological developments, see Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), pp. 27-30.

propriety. In the opening chapter of his critique, Hobbes attacks White for what he sees as a disavowal of the tools of logic in the pursuit of philosophy. Rescuing logic from the problems of both scholasticism and humanism, Hobbes highlights the mathematical ideal that it aspires to, calling upon the example of natural philosophy. Numbering “astronomy, mechanics, optics, music” as among the mathematical sciences, he contends that “all the sciences would have been mathematical had not their authors asserted more than they were able to prove.”<sup>50</sup> Hobbes suggests that, if their practitioners were not so ambitious in the explanations they sought to affirm, the human sciences might be able to live up to the rigor attained by mathematics. Hoping to banish the ambiguities of moral philosophy in exchange for a geometrically governed politics, Hobbes sought to purge the excesses of discourse and to build a philosophical logic attuned to certainty.

In order to vindicate logic as the form of discourse most suitable to his project, Hobbes reconceived of its relationship to the other discourses. No longer serving as complementary domains useful to the humanist aims of pragmatic advice and probabilistic reasoning, Hobbes separated logic from history, rhetoric, and poetry as the “four legitimate ends of speech,” dividing them discretely from one another:

Either [i] we want to teach, i.e. to demonstrate the truth of some assertion universal in character. We do this, first, by explaining the definitions of names in order to eliminate ambiguity (this is termed ‘to define’), and second, by deducing necessary consequences from the definitions, as mathematicians do. Alternatively, [ii] we wish to narrate something, or again [iii], our aim is to move our hearer’s mind toward performing something, or [iv], we want to glorify [certain] deeds and, by celebrating them, to hand

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<sup>50</sup> Hobbes, *Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined*, trans. Harold Whitmore Jones (London: Bradford UP, 1976), p. 24.

them down to posterity. The art by which the first is accomplished is logic; the second, history; the third, rhetoric; and the fourth, poetry.”<sup>51</sup>

Hobbes’s aim was to demonstrate the superiority of logic as the art solely suited to the philosophical pursuit of truth. The work of establishing definitions and reasoning out consequences from them relies on a principle of stark necessity that admits nothing of the likelihood of rhetorical probability, let alone poetic possibility. Hobbes aims primarily to affirm the boundary between eloquence and philosophical inquiry. He maintains that the objective of philosophers “is not to impress [others], but to know with certainty. So philosophy is not concerned with rhetoric.”<sup>52</sup> To establish certain knowledge, Hobbes relies on the distinction between teaching and persuading. Thomas Wilson relates the assertion first articulated by Cicero that “he is no good orator that can teach onely, or delite, but he is absolute that can both teach, delite, and also perswade.”<sup>53</sup> Hobbes tore this alignment asunder, insisting in *The Elements* that “the infallible sign of teaching exactly” is that “no man hath ever taught the contrary.”<sup>54</sup>

Demonstrative instruction consists of incontrovertible claims, while the rhetorical tradition, on the other hand, saw truth as vindicated through intellectual conflict. Hobbes hoped to elevate truth as a uniform standard beyond controversy. He saw the humanist emphasis on the probabilistic tools of rhetoric as a plague on the system of human knowledge as it was pursued in the seventeenth century. Hobbes’s response to this problem was to segregate the discourses that humanism united, elevating and purifying logic from the taint of rhetoric.

It was not only rhetoric, though, from which logic needed to be separated. Hobbes’s remedy was the separation of all the arts, poetics among them. Poetry, of course, had always

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Rule of Reason, Conteynyng the Arte of Logique* (London, 1551), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>54</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements*, p. 65.

occupied a vexed position in the perennial conflicts between logic and rhetoric. Orators needed to shy away from the exorbitance of poetic discourse in order to affirm the integrity of their art.<sup>55</sup> Rhetoric's epistemological validity, after all, derives from its ability to approximate truth. Thus, it made sense that rhetoricians would be at pains to distinguish the virtue of probability from the excesses of feigned possibility, the fantastical errors that poetry exploits. With rhetoric making sure to mark the differences that distinguish it from poetry's fictionality, logic would seem to be at a safe distance. Hobbes, however, was intent on keeping the logic of philosophy distinct from poetic discourse. In *The Elements*, he describes the different species of madness that proceed from the exorbitance of the imagination, implicating poetry as among its causes. Alongside the spiritual pride of self-proclaimed prophets, Hobbes admonishes "the gallant madness of Don Quixote" as "nothing else but an expression of such height of vain glory as reading romants may produce in pusillanimous men."<sup>56</sup> Though not touching on the madness of poetic inspiration itself, Hobbes tellingly casts the impact of poetic discourse as quixotic confusion. He points to romance, the genre of poetic discourse most identified with the art's fantastically improbable excesses, in order to emphasize the dubiousness that plagues poetry.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, as he explains in the critique of *De Mundo*, poetry does serve a "legitimate end of speech"; it is useful in glorifying and preserving the deeds of men. With an array of genres of its own, poetry could leave philosophy to pursue its own objectives, apprehending universal truths through logical discourse.

However, these forms of discourse did not stop at the lines of genre. Hobbes was very

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<sup>55</sup> Sidney defends poetry largely on rhetorical grounds. See Ann E. Imbrie, "Defining Nonfiction Genres" in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986), pp. 45-69.

<sup>56</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements*, p. 52. Hobbes echoes his critique of poetry's quixotic madness in *De corpore politico* (London: Thoemmes, 1994), p. 58. See Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), pp. 134-70.

<sup>57</sup> On romance's association with improbability and impossibility, see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (1987; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), Chs. 1-2.

aware of the potential encroachments of rhetorical or poetic expression upon the grounds of logic, encroachments that often come in the form of figurative language, part of the repertoire of devices that poetry and rhetoric share. When he defined the boundaries of the discourses in his response to *De Mundo*, Hobbes catalogued the linguistic tools proper or improper to each. It is no surprise that he insists that figurative language is contrary to the very essence of logic:

Logic is a simple form of speech, without tropes or figure; for every metaphor has by its very nature a double significance and is ambiguous. Metaphor is therefore opposed to the aim of those who proceed from definitions, these last being employed deliberately in order to eliminate equivocations and ambiguity.<sup>58</sup>

Hobbes banished the trope of metaphor from logical reasoning, arguing that it is the very opposite of the fastidious technique of definition required for ratiocination. Whereas defining is rigorous naming—assigning terms to concepts in order to ensure a shared set of premises—metaphorizing is *misnaming*, purposefully giving the name assigned to one concept to another foreign to it. Hobbes resisted any such playful uses of language that might detract from the rigorous demonstration required of logical discourse. The impact would be uncertainty or deception. By warding off metaphor with its poetic implications, Hobbes hoped to secure logic as an infallible tool in the pursuit of truth.

Hobbes had made a similar point in *The Elements* about the impropriety of metaphorical language in philosophical discourse. Hobbesian logic seeks univocity, a line of noncontradictory reason shared by everyone in the commonwealth, and the most potent threat to that univocity is equivocation. Of course, as Hobbes reminds us, “all metaphors are (by profession) equivocal.”<sup>59</sup> Logical discourse aims at the certainty of necessary connections, but rhetoric and poetry alike

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<sup>58</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements*, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

rely on a range of possibility that stretches from the probable on one end of the spectrum to the feigned on the other. Thus, the introduction of figurative forms introduces the uncertain scope of possible meaning, threatening to undermine the necessary assertions of logical philosophy.

Hobbes explored the problem of possibility in a section of *The Elements* devoted to behavioral inclinations that deviate from the basic norms of human nature. Alongside the defects of dullness and madness, Hobbes discusses the excesses of men who overindulge in the capacity of fancy. Such a fanciful man “delighteth himself” in “finding unexpected similitude in things, otherwise much unlike.”<sup>60</sup> The ability to discover surprising resemblances, of course, is a function of poetry, as Aristotle’s “eye for resemblances” reminds us. Interpreting likenesses enables the metaphorical impulse. Hobbes, however, approached this device with a great deal of skepticism, noting that other than the particular unforeseen connections marked by fanciful similitudes, there is “much” to be found between the conceptions under comparison that is “unlike.” Reducing the capacity of fancy to only the most extenuated of circumstances, Hobbes suggests that the similitudes generated through imaginative possibility pale in comparison to the continuities of logical demonstration. Devoid of the categorical coherence of definitions-to-consequences ratiocination, from fanciful insights “proceed those grateful similes, metaphors, and other tropes, by which both poets and orators have it in their power to make things please or displease, and shew well or ill to others, as they like themselves.”<sup>61</sup> Hobbes aligns poetics and rhetoric, critiquing their use of possibility as a mode of expression that appeals to the emotional inclinations of audiences and that derives from the emotional orientation of the poet or rhetor himself. Whether probable or simply feigned, the danger of expression that signifies on the basis of possibility, Hobbes suggests, is that any wavering from necessity makes an assertion

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

vulnerable to the manipulations of the passions. To admit even the slightest rhetorical embellishment or poetic excursion would undermine the integrity of philosophy.

As committed as Hobbes is to his theory of expressive austerity, though, he could not avoid figurative indulgences. *The Elements* is a text itself embroidered with a discrete pattern of similitudes that help to convey Hobbes's meaning. For instance, he illustrates the way that the human senses operate within his ontology of mechanistic materialism using the figurative comparison to a stone striking a pool of water:

As standing water put into motion by the stroke of a stone, or blast of wind, doth not presently give over moving as soon as the wind ceaseth, or the stone settleth: so neither doth the effect cease which the object hath wrought upon the brain, so soon as ever by turning aside of the organ the object ceaseth to work; that is to say, though the sense be past, the image or conception remaineth.<sup>62</sup>

Hobbes manages to figure forth the cognitive resonance of sense impressions by likening it to the rippled motions that the stone imparts on the once placid pond. This is the kind of trope that Hobbes would later, in the *Leviathan*, call an “apt similitude.”<sup>63</sup> Its terms of comparison are left explicit and, perhaps more importantly, the principle of operation that enables the comparison is true to Hobbes's logic. The process of human perception and cogitation are entirely material in Hobbes's view, so the similarity he is suggesting is quite alike, ontologically speaking. For the rest of Hobbes's philosophy to cohere, this similitude must be necessarily true. It could be argued, in fact, that this similitude is so apt that it is no longer figurative.<sup>64</sup> Either way, the other tropes employed in *The Elements* generally adhere to a standard of precision suited to Hobbes's

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 39.

<sup>64</sup> For an account of monism's impact on linguistic tropology, see Stephen Hequembourg, “Monism and Metaphor in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* 52 (2011), pp. 139-67.

discursive austerity.

Hobbes remains circumspect even in his discussion of one of the key concepts of his philosophy. He explains that the social union he is describing

is that which men call now-a-days a body politic or civil society; and the Greeks call it πόλις, that is to say, a city; which may be defined to be a multitude of men, united as one person by a common power, for their common peace, defence, and benefit.<sup>65</sup>

Hobbes's remark acknowledges the linguistic historicity of naming and illustrative figuration.

The words that mark this concept vary, and their variations cast different light on what is ultimately the same concept. Hobbes places early modern England's metaphor for the state—that of a body—alongside the ancient Greek term *polis*, the etymological root for the “politic” of “body politic.” His simple definition exposes, without exploring, the figurative embellishment that persists within the terminology. Hobbes only obliquely refers to the physiology of the body politic throughout *The Elements*. At one point, he pathologizes the problems of political instability as corporeal ailments.<sup>66</sup> At another, he alludes to the powers of the state in the form of instruments wielded by its body. Hobbes argues that, just as a government is empowered to defend its subjects from foreign threats, so too is it able to wield coercive force against those same subjects. He asserts that because “every man hath already transferred the use of his strength to him or them, that have the sword of justice; it followeth that the power of defence, that is to say the sword of war, be in the same hands wherein is the sword of justice.”<sup>67</sup> Hobbes asks his reader to recall the familiar image of the state as a body wielding these weapons. The images are so commonplace and so circumspect that they do not strike us as especially figurative and certainly not in a deceptive sense. As Skinner suggests, “[s]o far is he from wishing to exploit the

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<sup>65</sup> Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, p. 104.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 111.



resources of *ornatus* to help us ‘see’ new connections that his figures and tropes are almost invariably familiar to the point of triteness.”<sup>68</sup> Hobbes arguably overlooked a linguistic opportunity in *The Elements*. When he returned to a more considered approach to language and the relationship between the various ends of speech, Hobbes recognized that what his political philosophy needed was not a benign pattern of commonplace references to the state, but a more dynamic figuration to embody its superlative artifice. Amplifying and radicalizing the body politic metaphor, Hobbes forged the title and central conceit of the *Leviathan* through a reinvestment in, not only the rhetorical, but also the poetic dimensions of language.

**“[N]othing ... on earth, to be compared with him”: The Apt Similitude of the Leviathan**

By the end of the Civil Wars, Hobbes was forced to rethink his disinvestment in the poetic dimensions of language. The *Leviathan* represents an effort to bring his skepticism to bear on the limits of language and the inevitability of figurativeness. In the text, Hobbes’s awareness of language’s poetic effects manifests most conspicuously in his consideration of the problem of “*inconstant* signification.”<sup>69</sup> Because conceptions of the world are structured linguistically, language must be consistent in order to defuse the possibility of contradiction. Thus, as I noted in the Introduction, Hobbes endeavors to discipline language, declaring that

the light of human minds is perspicuous words, but by exact definitions first snuffed and purged from ambiguity; *reason* is the *pace*; increase of *science*, the *way*; and the benefit of mankind, the *end*. And on the contrary, metaphors, and senseless and ambiguous words, are like *ignes fatui*, and reasoning upon them is wandering amongst innumerable

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<sup>68</sup> Skinner, p. 308.

<sup>69</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 21.

absurdities; and their end, contention and sedition, or contempt.<sup>70</sup>

Metaphors can be the fool's fire of discourse, misleading the understanding and creating chaos within an interpretive community. From his vantage point on the Continent, Hobbes must have observed the way that the war of words in the English press was spurred on by metaphors misperceived or manipulated. What he most dreaded was the extreme figurative transposition of the vocabulary of experience and morality. Because of the subjective inclinations of individuals, it can be the case that "one man calleth *wisdom*, what another calleth *fear*."<sup>71</sup> Without a consistent affective terminology, "the names of virtues and vices" might be reversed.<sup>72</sup> Such inconstant signification lends itself to deception and the perpetuation of conflict, as a population loses its ability to share knowledge. These metaphorical expressions transgress in that they perform figuration's usual linguistic transference without signaling that operation to a community of interpreters. While Hobbes warns against the slipperiness of using "metaphors, and tropes of speech" as grounds for reasoning, he nonetheless acknowledges that conspicuously figurative figures "are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy, which the other do not."<sup>73</sup> The more conscious a reader is of the linguistic terms at play in a metaphorical turn, the better equipped he or she is to participate in a collective state of experience.

As acutely aware as he proves to be of the figurative dimensions lurking within seemingly plain descriptions, Hobbes is not reluctant to declare literal truths where he sees them. This is not directly connected to his absolutist politics, but rather to his mechanical philosophy of nature. He notes in the *Leviathan* that scholastic philosophers often express the operations of the mind in terms of its motion. This motion is literally true from the perspective of Hobbes's

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 22

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

mechanistic materialism, which perceives all of the world as composed of matter in motion. The Aristotelian theories that had currency in the universities only used motion figuratively to conceptualize such cognitive functions. In describing the emotional inclination of appetite, Hobbes demonstrates the surprising felicity of that expression:

For the schools find in mere appetite to go, or move, no actual motion at all; but because some motion they must acknowledge, they call it metaphorical motion, which is but an absurd speech; for though words may be called metaphorical, bodies and motions cannot.<sup>74</sup>

It is a mistake, Hobbes argues, merely to entertain these mechanistic patterns. Matter in motion actually drives such passionate impulses, so it should not be reduced simply to a convenient illustration of the process. Hobbes notes that both the Latin and the Greek terms for appetite and aversion have motive force built within their significations; the names for this process rightly refer to the materialistic truth that undergirds it.<sup>75</sup> To disregard this level of significance is to set aside the truth of the matter as though it were fictional. This is an error that fails both to apprehend the physics of cognition and to account for the weight of linguistic significations. Hobbes, despite his focused pursuit of peace at all costs, was not interested in constructing an epistemological house-of-cards. While he was acutely aware of the poetics lurking within all linguistic systems, he disciplined words to fit a world that is thoroughly material. Thus, Hobbes briefly acknowledges that some metaphors are not metaphorical after all.

Most often, though, his project was preoccupied with hunting out language that has been metaphorically misapplied. Hobbes's *Leviathan* continually demonstrates the virtue of reading for figures in this way. The problem of metaphor, after all, arises when you fail to mark its

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

figurativeness. Hobbes brings this insight to bear on a concept critical to his considerations of collective knowledge and to the larger debate raging over the course of the revolutionary period—the question of conscience.<sup>76</sup> As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, throughout the 1640s, godly reformers as well as republicans justified their actions on the ground of individual conscience. In *Areopagitica*, Milton implores, “[g]ive me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”<sup>77</sup> Hobbes would later characterize this freedom of conscience as the “plague” that infected England. At its root, he argues, is the failure to read a metaphor as a metaphor. Hobbes insists that the epistemic claim made by the term “conscience” more properly refers to shared knowledge. He contends that “[w]hen two or more men know of one and the same fact, they are said to be CONSCIOUS of it one to another; which is as much as to know it together.”<sup>78</sup> Conscience as a collective faculty guards against the solipsistic irrationalities of individualism. Within a conscientious community, each person is accompanied by “fittest witnesses of the facts of one another, or of a third,” and because of this participatory oversight “it was and ever will be reputed a very evil act for any man to speak against his *conscience*.”<sup>79</sup> Marking the word as a forgotten metaphor, Hobbes highlights its figurativeness in order to breathe new life into it. Since its initial association with epistemic participation, “[a]fterwards, men made use of the same word metaphorically for the knowledge of their own secret facts and secret thoughts.”<sup>80</sup> He notes that those who have forgotten that conscience has been metaphorized into a subjective faculty “rhetorically” say “that conscience is

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<sup>76</sup> For a consideration of the notion of conscience as central to metaphor itself, see Karen S. Feldman, “Conscience and Concealments of Metaphor in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34.1 (2001), pp. 21-37.

<sup>77</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), 2.560.

<sup>78</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 36.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

a thousand witnesses.”<sup>81</sup> His use of the term “rhetorically” here signals rhetoric’s appeal to customary opinions, whereas Hobbes is opening his readers to the poetic possibilities of the figure. The rhetorical misperception manifests in the failure to see that conscience indeed is and ought to be a thousand witnesses or more. It takes a whole society’s investment to have a comprehensive language and a peaceful state. Hobbes demonstrates that, with this critical term and others, it requires a poetic intelligence to discover collectively the figurative dynamics that allow for the sharing of knowledge in the first place. Rather than scorning metaphor, Hobbes champions interpretive discernment, remaining alive to the figurativeness lurking within words.

Even amidst cautions that metaphorical expressions ought to be “utterly excluded” from the strict processes of demonstration and counsel, Hobbes nonetheless grants a critical exception. Cataloging the ways in which fancy must be managed in various forms of discourse, Hobbes at first denies a role for the imagination in “all rigorous search of truth,” insisting that “judgment does all.”<sup>82</sup> Yet, he quickly qualifies that “sometimes the understanding have [sic] need to be opened by some apt similitude.”<sup>83</sup> This subjunctive caveat highlights a distinction in figurative forms derived from Aristotle, who, while understanding metaphor and similitude as species of the same form distinguishes them in terms of their articulation. In Hobbes’s translation of the *Rhetoric*, he conveys Aristotle’s sense that a “*SIMILITUDE* differs from a *Metaphor* only by such *Particles of Comparison* as these, *As; Even as; So; Even so, etc.* A *Similitude* therefore is a *Metaphor dilated*; and a *Metaphor* is a *Similitude Contracted* into one Word.”<sup>84</sup> These conspicuous markers make all the difference in the “rigorous search of truth,” ensuring that no

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. His use of the term “rhetorically” here signals rhetoric’s appeal to customary opinions, whereas Hobbes is opening us to the poetic possibilities of figure.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Hobbes, *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique* (London, 1637), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 159.

metaphor is mistaken for a proper term. Hobbes, though, recognizes that, even in the strictest of linguistic discourses, a figurative outlet proves epistemically necessary. Thus, he allows for the use of an “apt similitude” that signals its figurative comparison through “so much use of fancy.”<sup>85</sup> Hobbes’s acknowledgement indicates that tropes might serve not merely as an elocutionary tool for conveying logic, but also as a means of invention, driving to the very core of apprehension for both the philosopher and his audience. This use of figuration is different from rhetorical expression, which remains keyed to particular situations. Hobbes translates Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “that Faculty, by which wee understand what will serve our turne, concerning any subject, to winne beleefe in the hearer.”<sup>86</sup> However, when “the understanding have need to be opened” Hobbes draws upon a poetic resource. The apt similitude is not restrained by its prophylactic particles of comparison; it is all the more conspicuously poetic. Aristotle, again in Hobbes’s words, advises that a similitude can be useful to persuasive speech so long as “it be not too frequent; for ’tis *Poeticall*.”<sup>87</sup> Ostentatiously reaching beyond the immediate circumstances, a Hobbesian similitude is capable of having a deeper mimetic impact upon the conceptual world in general. Thus, it proves invaluable to Hobbes’s poetically minded revision of language and the interpretive community invested in it.

The greatest illustration of Hobbes’s poetic insight is, of course, his refiguration of the traditional body politic image. After a long decade during which defenders of the monarchy had struggled to affirm the imagery substantiating their political order, Hobbes intervened with a monstrous transformation of it. Under what he would later refer to as its “dreadful Name, LEVIATHAN,” Hobbes presented a version of the body politic that could not be ignored as an

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<sup>85</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 39.

<sup>86</sup> Hobbes, *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique*, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

inconspicuous articulation of the organic unity of the state.<sup>88</sup> Conjuring forth the biblical sea-beast of the Book of Job, Hobbes offers an apt similitude that gives the absolutist model of a commonwealth not simply elocutionary force, but imaginative comprehensiveness. Robert Stillman suggests that Hobbes saw his career “as a war against the monstrous texts of a failed symbolic order.”<sup>89</sup> While Stillman regards Hobbes’s metaphorical craftsmanship as a paradoxical rejection of language’s figurativeness, he does recognize that Hobbes effectively constructed a monster to combat the monstrosity he found in the world. Answering Bishop Bramhall’s attacks on the *Leviathan*, Hobbes would later coyly concede to his criticism of the text’s central image, “allowing him the word *Monstrum* (because it seems he takes it for a monstrous great Fish).”<sup>90</sup> Hobbes tweaks Bramhall by suggesting that he has made the foolish error of mistaking the titular trope of the *Leviathan* for its surface level allusion and not its socio-political meaning. This move shows precisely what is so effective about the leviathan figure; while the customary body politic image might discreetly communicate a sense of organic reality, Hobbes’s beastly conceptualization of the commonwealth commands attention to its figurativeness.

From the moment he first uses this figurative image to convey the ideal political structure, Hobbes emphasizes the artificiality of the state: “For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended.”<sup>91</sup> Hobbes expresses the connection between natural bodies and the greater social body, the meaning that early modern readers had come to expect from conventional invocations

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<sup>88</sup> Hobbes, *Life of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1680), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> Robert E. Stillman, “Hobbes’s Leviathan: Monsters, Metaphors, and Magic,” *ELH* 62.4 (1995), pp. 791-819, p. 791.

<sup>90</sup> Hobbes, *The Question Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* (London, 1656), Yale University Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 20.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of the body politic trope. However, he registers the conspicuous distinction between the two elements under comparison.<sup>92</sup> Where other royalist writers sought to affirm the kingdom as an organic unity comparable to a natural body, Hobbes clarifies that the commonwealth is “but an artificial man.” Mapping out a chain of correspondences that would at first seem to assert an isomorphism between body and state, he ultimately exposes the superlative structure of the leviathanic commonwealth. After all, it is critical to Hobbes’s political philosophy that the state exceeds and outmeasures the bodies that make it up. Later in the text, Hobbes directly cites the language of the Book of Job to express the paradox of a political community’s power and limitations:

God having set forth the great power of Leviathan, calleth him King of the Proud. There is nothing, saith he, on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. Hee seeth every high thing below him; and is King of all the children of pride. But because he is mortall, and subject to decay, as all other Earthly creatures are; and because there is that in heaven, (though not on earth) that he should stand in fear of, and whose Lawes he ought to obey.<sup>93</sup>

The leviathan excels all other mortal things, and yet is itself mortal. Hobbes uses this colossal beast to represent the state’s paradoxically bounded expansiveness. Unlike divine-right justifications of monarchy, an absolutist commonwealth remains of this world, and yet it excels all other worldly things. Such a state constitutes the greatest expression of social unity, encompassing a population of subjects so fully that there is “nothing ... to be compared with him.” Hobbes’s apt similitude conveys the totalizing power of artifice in statecraft, and Hobbesian statecraft proves itself to be a function of poetics. If, as Herle suggested, figurations

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<sup>92</sup> For a reading of the *Leviathan*’s central image as “an exercise in controlled inconsistency,” see Hequembourg, “Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: A Tale of Two Bodies.”

<sup>93</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 210.



of the state are limited in that “they onely illustrate as farre as the likenesse holds,” Hobbes manages to turn that limitation into a virtue. The figurative nature of the leviathan image parallels the simultaneously limited and superlative impact of metaphorical language more generally. The leviathan trope both articulates and is generated by the linguistic power of a human community. The beast of Job excels men so far but not beyond the measure of human understanding. The state is a superstructure built upon the base of language, both layers of which are crafted artifices that rely upon the collective support of shared understanding for their endurance. Tapping into the poetic capacity to renew a community’s collective conceptions, Hobbes mimetically figures forth the unnatural nature of the commonwealth.

#### “[T]he conceived possibility of nature”: Hobbes’s Poetics

Even as he was working on the *Leviathan*, Hobbes, as I have indicated, had struck up a relationship with William Davenant, a fellow Englishman at the exiled courts on the Continent.<sup>94</sup> Corresponding with the poet regarding his composition of the epic *Gondibert*, Hobbes did Davenant, in the poet’s words, “the honour to allow this Poem a daylie examination as it was writing.”<sup>95</sup> It is in his “Answer” to Davenant’s preface that Hobbes humbly disavows any poetic expertise, establishing himself as a philosophical foil to the poet. The resultant discussion, though, presented a sophisticated vision of the relationship between philosophical truth and poetic expression. Critics have read Hobbes’s poetic theories as an anticipation of the perceived neoclassical subordination of the imagination to reasoned judgment.<sup>96</sup> He, after all, asserts that

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<sup>94</sup> On the nature of the intellectual relationship between Hobbes and Davenant, see Richard Hillyer, *Hobbes and his Poetic Contemporaries: Cultural Transmission in Early Modern England* (London: Macmillan, 2007), pp. 19-50.

<sup>95</sup> William Davenant, “The Author’s Preface to his Much Honor’d Friend, M. Hobbes,” in *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, pp. 3-44, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> On the neoclassical attitude toward imagination, see Donald F. Bond, “‘Distrust’ of Imagination in English Neo-Classicism,” *Philological Quarterly* 14.1 (1935), pp. 54-69; Robert D. Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1970), Ch. 5, pp. 150-186; Richard Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and*

“so farre forth as the Fancy of man, has traced the wayes of true Philosophy, so farre it hath produced very marvelous effects to the benefit of mankind.”<sup>97</sup> Hobbes does seem to suggest that the imaginative impulse is subsequent to philosophical insight, especially as it concerns the construction of the civilizing institutions of the state. “[W]hatsoever distinguisheth the civility of *Europe*,” he suggests, “from the Barbarity of the *American* sauages, is the workmanship of Fancy, but guided by the Precepts of true Philosophy.”<sup>98</sup> This is indeed praise of the imagination’s accomplishments insofar as it is guided by a properly philosophical outlook, but Hobbes goes further. He argues that

where these precepts fayle, as they have hetherto fayled in the doctrine of Morall vertue, there the Architect (*Fancy*) must take the Philosophers part upon herselfe. He therefore that undertakes an Heroique Poeme (which is to exhibite a venerable and amiable Image of Heroique vertue) must not onely be the Poet, to place and connect, but also the Philosopher, to furnish and square his matter.<sup>99</sup>

Hobbes presents a much more mutually productive conceptualization of these faculties. Celebrating Davenant for pursuing this synthesis between philosophy and poetics, Hobbes conveys poetry not just as the means for transmitting philosophical truth but also for securing its linguistic foundations in the first place.

Davenant seems to assent to many of the basic tenets of Hobbesian philosophy. He understands *Gondibert* to be an effective means for expressing the political values profitable to the maintenance of the state, explaining that “the wisdom of Poets would first make the Images

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*Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), Chs. 1-2, pp. 33-79; and Carson Bergstrom, “‘Critical and Curious Learning’: New Science, Neoclassicism, and New Criticism in the Long Restoration,” *Prose Studies* 29.1 (2007), pp. 86-103.

<sup>97</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 49.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

of Vertue so amiable that her beholders should not be able to look off, rather gently and delightfully infusing then inculcating Precepts.”<sup>100</sup> Davenant contends that poetry, the art of fashioning instructive images, is the more effective tool of instruction than the precepts of a philosophical treatise. In this way, Davenant suggests that poetry is critical to a philosophical project like Hobbes’s, in which the assent to truth is as significant, if not more, than the articulation of it. Hobbesian absolutism would seem to need more than the eloquence of a treatise like the *Leviathan*. Davenant implies that it must also have the poetic resonance of an epic like *Gondibert*. To achieve this end, he argues that poetic meaning must be uncoupled from history in favor of a connection to philosophy. In order to emphasize the alliance of logical with poetic expression, Davenant resists the limitations that historical parameters would place on poetry. He rejects the view of those who would have a poet remain faithful to the events of the past and, thereby, “fetter his feet in the shackles of an Historian.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, Davenant elected to set *Gondibert* in eighth-century Italy, licensing himself poetically by going far beyond the reach of fastidious antiquarians and beyond a standard of particular facticity. He asserts that “Truth narrative, and past, is the Idoll of Historians, (who worship a dead thing) and truth operative, and by effects continually alive, is the Mistresse of Poets, who hath not her existence in matter, but in reason.”<sup>102</sup> Davenant conceptualizes poetic meaning as distinct from historical truth, an understanding that aligns it closely with truth in a philosophical sense, that is, “truth operative.” His argument follows Aristotle’s in the *Poetics*, who suggests that poetry is “both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of

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<sup>100</sup> Davenant, p. 39. Cf. Edmund Spenser on those who “had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they vse, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises” in his “Letter to Raleigh,” in *The Faerie Queene*, eds. A. C. Hamilton, et. al. (Harlow, Eng: Longman, 2007), pp. 713-18, p. 716.

<sup>101</sup> Davenant, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

particulars.”<sup>103</sup> Poetic meaning, in this way, is not a threat to philosophical expression, but the means to its full-scale apprehension.

These prefatory epistles are not merely a polite exchange between fellow royalist exiles. When Hobbes read *Gondibert*, he saw nothing else but his philosophy put into poetic form. *Gondibert* seems to be a Hobbesian artifact in both medium and message. Hobbes believes that the poem ultimately succeeds because it represents the integrated social relationships necessary to the function of a commonwealth, underscoring the danger of disunity within the state. *Gondibert* tells the story of the medieval kingdom of Lombardy, presided over by the exemplary monarch Aribert. The primary conflict of the plot presented in the first book is the rivalry between the potential heirs to the throne, Gondibert and Oswald. Hobbes looks to Davenant’s warring princes, not as individual exemplars, but as “the two principall streames of your poem” into which the smaller tributaries of the cast of characters flow.<sup>104</sup> He likens this method of representation to the dramatic structure of subordinated subplotting, suggesting that “the Fable is not much unlike the Theater.”<sup>105</sup> Hobbes develops his interpretation of the poem using his river trope. He traces out a chain of relationships that evince the structure of political and representational power that is invested in the princely characters:

For so, from severall and farre distant Sources, do the lesser Brookes of *Lombardy*,  
flowing into one another, fall all at last into the two mayne Rivers, the Po, and the Adice.  
It hath the same resemblance also with a mans veines, which proceeding from different  
parts, after the like concourse, insert themselves at last into the principall veynes of the

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<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1987), p. 41. Following in this vein, Sidney laments that the historian, “wanting the precept, is so tied not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine,” (p. 16).

<sup>104</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 50.

<sup>105</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 50. On the integration of dramatic subplots, see Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971), pp. 5-20.

Body. But when I considered that also the actions of men, which singly are inconsiderable, after many conjunctures, grow at last either into one great protecting power, or into two destroying factions, I could not but approve the structure of your Poeme, which ought to be no other then such as an imitation of humane life requireth.<sup>106</sup>

Hobbes makes a transition from a limnological structure to a bodily one, constructing an image that entails two potential consequences—unification into a whole body politic or separation into a state divided against itself. This pattern of convergence conveys the fundamental truth at the heart of Hobbes’s political theory, investing all power and, thereby, the promise of peace, into the princely figure of a man. Hobbes’s figurative language emphasizes the way in which Davenant renders events that represent the operative truths of political philosophy. While Hobbes’s reading of *Gondibert* might seem to lack subtlety, it is precisely the macroscopic approach that he takes that allows him to cast Davenant as a poet of the absolutist state. To put it in Sidneian terms, Davenant offers up not just the image of a singular Cyrus to instruct us in the exemplarity of an individual prince, but a full perspective of Persia under Cyrus’ sovereignty.<sup>107</sup> In the wake of the triumph of parliamentary forces over the royalists, Hobbes sees Davenant as offering a reminder of the danger of a state divided into “two destroying factions.”<sup>108</sup>

Hobbes’s praises for Davenant and his poetics continually take figurative form. He likens the particularities depicted in an epic like *Gondibert* to

a curious kind of perspective, where, he that lookes through a short hollow pipe, upon a picture conteyning diverse figures, sees none of those that are there paynted, but some one person made up of their partes, conveyghed to the eye by the artificiall cutting of a

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Sidney, who argues that the poet, in the model of Xenophon, is able “not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him,” (p. 9).

<sup>108</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 50.

glasse. I find in my imagination an effect not unlike it from your Poeme.<sup>109</sup>

Hobbes conceptualizes poetic expression as a prismatic structure that reassembles the various qualities of a multitude into a singular whole—a fully figured universal example of virtue.<sup>110</sup> Like the apt similitude of the biblical beast that Hobbes renders in the *Leviathan*, the fictional narrative of an epic poem uses a conspicuously artificial structure to construct a likely picture. Hobbes pushes this trope a step further to praise Davenant, transposing the virtues of his imaginative craft to that of his person. As Hobbes suggests in the introduction to the *Leviathan*, there is great philosophical insight to be gleaned from understanding the “similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man to the thoughts and passions of another.”<sup>111</sup> Hobbes tells Davenant that “[t]he vertues you distribute there amongst so many noble Persons, represent (in the reading) the image but of one mans vertue to my fancy, which is your owne.”<sup>112</sup> His interpretation of Davenant’s poetry shifts into admiration of the poet’s own character, who, in knowing the virtuous truths he has rendered among his creations, evinces a virtue that is all his own. As he stares through the prism of the epic *Gondibert*, Hobbes sees the poet as the product of Hobbesian self-knowledge—knowledge that transcends the passionate idiosyncrasies of individuals in favor of a collective sense of self shared by all. This is the true meaning that Hobbes sees in the maxim “*nosce teipsum, read thy self*,” by which he reinterprets self-knowledge as the key to understanding others.<sup>113</sup> Davenant offers up fictive selves for readers to try to engage with from their own subjective positions. Where the younger Hobbes had been skeptical of poetry’s connection to philosophy, Davenant demonstrates that poetic representation

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>110</sup> On the connection between optical ingenuity and poetic figuration, see Ernest B. Gilman, *The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Wit in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1978).

<sup>111</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 55.

<sup>113</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 4.

could be the essential tool for the success of Hobbes's project.

Hobbes, of course, came to understand the congenial relationship between poetic expression and philosophy, articulating representational guidelines for productions of the imagination. In *The Elements of Law*, as I mentioned, he had objected to the behavior of those who manifest "the gallant madness of Don Quixote," a condition caused by "reading romants." Hobbes's skepticism about the impact of romance informs his later criticism of poetics. He objects to the fantastical exorbitances of fiction that often appear in romance, a form of expression that tends to push fanciful possibility to its limits:

There are some that are not pleased with fiction, unlesse it be bold not onely to exceed the *worke*, but also the *possibility* of nature: they would have impenetrable Armour, Incharmed Castles, invulnerable bodies, Iron men, flying Horses, and a thousand other such things which are easily feign'd by them that dare.... Beyond the actual works of Nature a Poet may now go; but beyond the conceived possibility of Nature, never.<sup>114</sup>

Hobbes insists upon a mimetic principle for poetic invention. Mimesis, of course, does not simply reflect the world as it is.<sup>115</sup> It is capable of producing, in Sidney's words, a "second nature." Hobbes has this form of mimetic reproduction in mind when he liberates the poet to go beyond the "actual works of Nature," while never allowing him to exceed "the conceived possibility of nature." While Sidney licenses the poet to roam within the "zodiac of his own wit," Hobbes avoids the solipsistic liberty of individual fancy.<sup>116</sup> For him, the term "conceived" is a form of collective knowing, not unlike his metaphorical clarification of "conscience." Hobbes affirms a shared sense of possibility. Notably, he avoids the word "probability," which could have been used as a synonym for "conceived possibility." Over the course of the seventeenth

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<sup>114</sup> Hobbes, "Answer," p. 51.

<sup>115</sup> See Ricoeur, pp. 39-48.

<sup>116</sup> Sidney, p. 9.

century, “probability” became the preferred term for literary critics, even those that acknowledged their indebtedness to Hobbes.<sup>117</sup> Davenant’s “Preface,” in fact, defends what he calls “probable fiction,” and his later poetic collaborator John Dryden, who became Restoration England’s poet laureate, would assert that it is “not the business of a Poet to represent truth, but probability.”<sup>118</sup> The embrace of this critical terminology signaled a fusion between poetics and rhetorical accommodation, one that was influenced by Aristotle’s assertion that “plausible impossibility is preferable to an implausible possibility,” affirming a rhetorical appeal to “people’s beliefs” to ensure the probability of poetic expression.<sup>119</sup> Hobbes, though, purposefully avoids the language of rhetorical probability in favor of a direct connection between philosophy and poetic possibility. Still insisting upon the shared structure of this approach, Hobbes acknowledges the poet’s power to construct systems of possibility that are not limited to customary opinions, which can pose a threat to the collective epistemology in the first place. Hobbes’s “conceived possibility of nature” frees poetic expression from flattering the problems of the world as it is, enabling it to limn shared conceptions of new worlds more conducive to communal engagement.

Hobbes constructs a poetics that is just as relevant to the linguistic work of prose argument as it is to the productions of a poem. Tropes, after all, offer Hobbes the tools he needs to define his approach to poetic invention itself. They have, imbued within them, the principle of the “conceived possibility of nature,” allowing figurative language to conform to this standard and to operate as tools for instilling that standard in excessive or otherwise dangerous metaphors.

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<sup>117</sup> The critical tradition following Hobbes and Davenant saw this phrase as critical in the development of the theory of literary probability. See Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), Ch. 5, pp. 134-168.

<sup>118</sup> John Dryden, “To the most Excellent and most Illustrious Princess ANNE,” in *The Indian Emperour, or, The Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards* (London, 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>119</sup> Aristotle, 1461b, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 63.



When Hobbes notes, in the *Leviathan*, that apt similitudes serve the function of opening the understanding, he posits a figurative form suited to the task of redefinition. The errors of language require that names misapplied must be uprooted; apt similitudes serve the purpose of repairing misnamed concepts to a meaning suited to his larger philosophical aims. In the “Answer,” Hobbes suggests that “the sense of language” consists in “the variety and changeable use of words,” a condition of linguistic flux which requires “new and withal significant translation to our purposes of those [words] that be already received.”<sup>120</sup> Hobbes’s infamous diffidence toward figurative language turns out to be aligned with a sensitivity to the instability of language. And tropes themselves prove to be the tool for correcting against this instability. It is precisely this passage that Skulsky cites when he defines figurativeness as “an opportunity to renew the sense of language as an instrument of collective purpose.”<sup>121</sup> The figurative structures of poetic meaning can clarify the ambiguities of language. An apt similitude can use its conspicuous transference of meaning in order to rename a concept, intimating a shared understanding through the unspoken tenor of the trope. Thus, the poetic capacity of language becomes the source of meaningful consensus.

The most significant example of such a figurative revaluation in the letter to Davenant is Hobbes’s deconstruction of the metaphor of the muse—the master trope of poetic imagination itself. In his preface to *Gondibert*, Davenant critiques the poets of epic, noting that there are some who criticize Homer for representing supernatural matters. Homer ascends into “immortal conversation,” it seems, “as he often interrogates his Muse, not as his rationally Spirit but as a *Familiar*, separated from his body.”<sup>122</sup> Davenant suggests that Homer’s invocation of the muse is

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<sup>120</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 53.

<sup>121</sup> Harold Skulsky, *Language Recreated: Seventeenth-Century Metaphorists and the Act of Metaphor* (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1992), pp. 13-4.

<sup>122</sup> Davenant, “Preface,” p. 4.

no mere metaphor for his imaginative power. Homer treats his muse as an attendant spirit, angelic or demonic, superstitiously misconstruing the nature of poetic fancy. Davenant, on the other hand, dispenses with the epic invocation in *Gondibert*, a fact that Hobbes celebrates as another sign of the poem's commitment to truth. In synthesizing the operations of philosophy and poetry, Hobbes insists that a discerning poet ought to deal in images that are true to nature as he or she understands it. It is for this reason that he forgives the ancients for indulging in the practice, while condemning modern Christian poets who have foolishly resurrected it:

For my part, I neither subscribe to their accusation, nor yet condemn that Heathen custome, otherwise then as accessory to their false Religion. For their Poets were their Divines; had the name of Prophets; Exercised amongst the People a kinde of spiritual authority; would be thought to speak by a divine spirit; have their workes which they writte in Verse (the divine style) passé for the word of God, and not of man; and to be hearkened to with reverence.<sup>123</sup>

Hobbes absolves Homer and other ancient poets of their sin of misconceiving the poetic imagination. After all, the inventive capacity was indeed believed in their culture to be the product of interaction with supernatural forces. From this limited perspective, ancient pagans were satisfying “the conceived possibility of nature.” Belief in spiritual inspiration as the source of creativity was a central feature of the *vates*, the prophetic poet of the classical tradition that writers like Milton resurrected as a model in the seventeenth century.<sup>124</sup> In evaluating this ancient practice, Hobbes exercises a kind of historicist amnesty. He even acknowledges the motivations that would make the notion of poetic inspiration so enticing. A poet would, of course, desire to be heard and attended to as a

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<sup>123</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 48.

<sup>124</sup> On poetic inspiration and prophetic insight, see Jennifer Britnel, “Poetic Fury and Prophetic Fury,” *Renaissance Studies* 3.2 (1989), pp. 106-14.

conduit of truth. Admitting the understandable motivation for such a belief, Hobbes nonetheless is aware of the dark implications of mistaking the imagination for a source of divine revelation.

As he justifies the conventions of the ancients as a product of the superstitions of their age, Hobbes uses the comparison to cast an unflattering light on those seventeenth-century minds who should know better than to indulge those beliefs. Gesturing at the poetic pretensions of the *vates*, Hobbes turns to his contemporaries, asking “Do not our Divines (excepting the stile) do the same, and by us that are of the same Religion cannot justly be reprehended for it?”<sup>125</sup> He contends that England’s ecclesiastical order makes a similar claim to supernatural elevation, and their writings, though articulated in prose, bear the marks of poetic inspiration. Hobbes’s usual anti-clericalism is a bit muted in this moment, but, as the passage develops, it becomes clear that his criticisms are aimed at priests and presbyters as well as poets. He goes on to detail the trouble with such inspired pretensions, consequences that would have been all too familiar to a community overturned by religious strife:

Besides, in the use of the spirituall calling of Divines, there is danger sometimes to be feared, from want of skill, such as is reported of unskillful Conjurers, that mistaking the rites and ceremonious parts of their art, call up such spirits, as they cannot at their pleasure allay againe; by whom stormes are raysed, that overthrow buildings, and are the cause of miserable wrackes at sea. Unskillful divines do oftentimes the like...<sup>126</sup>

Hobbes likens the inept priest or presbyter to the unlearned magician, whose foolhardy

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<sup>125</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 48

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

manipulation of knowledge beyond his ken brings misfortune upon all in the land. He is offering another description of the events that created the chaos of the revolutionary period, explaining that when these “[u]nskillful divines . . . call unseasonably for *Zeale* there appears a spirit of *Cruelty*; and by the like error instead of *Truth* they rayse *Discord*; instead of *Wisdome*, *Fraud*; instead of *Reformation*, *Tumult*; and *Controversie* instead of *Reformation*, *Tumult*; and *Controversie* instead of *Religion*.”<sup>127</sup> The choice of supernatural magic is significant in Hobbes’s comparison. His materialism does not allow for any truth to the pretensions of sorcery, but that skepticism in itself does not prevent those who believe they have access to such power from wreaking havoc. The infelicitous incantations of the quixotic magician are so dangerous precisely because they have never operated on a metaphysical level but on a cultural one. So it is that, as Hobbes’s series of antitheses demonstrate, the unskilled divine seeks to inspire zeal, truth, wisdom, reformation, and religion, but effects only cruelty, discord, fraud, tumult, and controversy.

Denigrating the religious authorities of his own day, Hobbes absolves Homer and his kind of any serious wrongdoing: “Whereas in the Heathen Poets, at least in those whose workes have lasted to the time wee are in, there are none of those indiscretions to be found, that tended to subversion, or disturbance of the Commonwealths wherein they lived.”<sup>128</sup> The misapprehensions of nature that we find in the ancient poetry that has survived at least did not provoke religious or political unrest. Concluding his apology for classical poetics, Hobbes articulates his central criticism:

But why a Christian should think it an ornament to his Poem, either to profane the

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-9.

true God or invoke a false one, I can imagine no cause but a reasonless imitation of Custom, of a foolish custome, by which a man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a Bagpipe.<sup>129</sup>



Figure 1: Eduard Schoen,  
*The Devil's Bagpipes* (c. 1535)

Hobbes employs the apt similitude of the bagpipe to expose the absurdity of the poet who transforms himself into a passive instrument, puffed up and deflated melodiously by a false god. The bagpipe image had strong associations in both the traditions of religious polemic and poetic criticism. In a Reformation broadside that circulated on the Continent in the sixteenth century (see Figure 1), a demon straddles the shoulders of a monk, forcing air through a tube in his ear while expertly using his claws

to finger the tone holes of the brother's fluted nose.<sup>130</sup> It is an image of empty influence, reducing the man to a hollow tool manipulated by a malevolent force. The bagpipe symbol developed further significance in the English Revolution. As it still is, the instrument was associated with Scotland, a connection that polemical writers exploited in

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Guilia Bartrum, *German Renaissance Prints: 1490-1550* (London: British Museum P, 1995), p. 95. While some have interpreted this broadside by the artist Eduard Schoen as an anti-Lutheran satire—Luther having been a tonsured monk—all of the extant prints that have accompanying textual content are aimed at Catholic monasticism.

their critiques of Scottish Presbyterians.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, the unique physics of the bagpipe as a device for making music lent themselves to satirical discussions of poetic expression. For instance, the poet John Taylor used the figure to lampoon a particular kind of creative ignorance, bemoaning that the “liberall minds” of the “best Poets” had fallen into disesteem “Whilest Bagpipe-poets stuf with others winde, / Are grac’d for wit, they have from them purloined.”<sup>132</sup> Hobbes taps into these lines of significance, refashioning the image in a manner relevant to both religious authority and poetic practice.

Hobbes’s intervention with the bagpipe model of imagination fully materializes its conditions and thereby dismantles the pretenses of clerical and vatic inspiration. Ever aware of the material references built into the language of abstract concepts, Hobbes manages to defuse the conventional metaphor of the muse. He refigures it along the lines suggested by other satirical uses of the bagpipe image, highlighting not just the emptiness of the poet as instrument but also the ontological absence of a supernatural player. Hobbes ridicules a poetic speaker who gives himself over to inspiration by a force that manifestly *does not exist*. The humor of the moment, though, is tempered by the dangerous consequences of such foolishness. As his allusion to the “unskillful Conjurers” shows, going through the motions of a false belief can have destructive effects. It is precisely this concern that motivates Hobbes’s deepest skepticism about

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<sup>131</sup> Instances of bagpipe images associated with the deceptiveness or ignorance of the Scottish Presbyterians include Anthony Weldon, *Terrible Newes from Scotland: or, A True Declaration of the Late Councell* (London, 1647), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 4; Nathaniel Ward, *An Answer to a Declaration of the Commissioners of the Generall Assembly, to the Whole Kirk and Kingdome of Scotland* (London, 1648), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 4; Anon., *The Presbytery. A Satyr* (London, 1649), National Library of Scotland, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.; John Harrison, *Nahash Redivivus in a Letter from the Parliament of Scotland* (London, 1649), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 10; and Robert Heath, “Satyr 2,” *Clarastella together with Poems Occasional, Elegies, Epigrams, Satyrs* (London, 1650), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 6.

<sup>132</sup> John Taylor, “The Author’s Description of a Poet and Poesie, with an Apollogie in Defence of Naturall English Poetrie,” in *The Nipping and Snipping of Abuses: or The Woolgathering of Witte* (London, 1614), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

the undisciplined use of the imagination. He articulates this critique, though, in order to make the case for a productive application of poetic creativity properly understood. As his celebration of Davenant demonstrates, the poet, “enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation,” can express meaning with even greater insight than the pretension to spiritual authority would allow. Hobbes’s philosophy rests on the fundamental premise that all of humanity might, through industry, attain to a collective understanding that is only as legitimate as it is shared. Where inspiration offers a retreat into individuality and transcendence, Hobbes’s “conceived possibility” rests in collectivity and material immanence. Exposing the deceptions of the trope of the muse, he offers a model of a poet who speaks from a true sense of nature and human affairs. Hobbes achieves this reconceptualization through a masterful turn of phrase, a poetic expression that revalues poetic expression itself. This is precisely the degree of attention to language’s figurative capacity that we might expect from the writer of the *Leviathan*.

## Conclusion

As “Hobbism” became a byword for all manner of intellectual indiscretions, the ideas Hobbes championed were maligned in England and across Western Europe. His theories of figurative language, though, were either ignored or misunderstood. Like others since, Bishop Bramhall regarded the central trope of the *Leviathan* to be “a meer phantasme of [Hobbes’s] own devising ... not unlike Dagon the Idol of the Philistims [sic].”<sup>133</sup> Hobbes’s ostentatious figuration of the state was not meant to be the object of uncritical idolatry; it was to be regarded as the figure it was. Bramhall only glanced at “a metaphorical Leviathan,” suggesting that he knew

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<sup>133</sup> Bramhall, “The Preface,” *The Catching of Leviathan, or the Great Whale in Castigations of Mr. Hobbes*, pp. 449-573, p. 459.

“none so proper to personate that huge body as *T. H.* himself.”<sup>134</sup> Impugning Hobbes’s character rather than taking the figurative nature of his language seriously, Bramhall overlooked the key poetic insight within Hobbes’s philosophy. Hobbes continued to receive a frigid reception as the Cromwellian Protectorate collapsed and Charles II returned. Had Hobbes been anything but a peculiar royalist, he might have been able to embrace the Restoration settlement wholeheartedly. In so many ways, though, it failed to bring about the kind of state for which he had so powerfully laid the philosophical groundwork.<sup>135</sup> The linguistic foundation of Hobbes’s philosophy, in particular, did not find its expression in the new plain style of the Royal Society. Thomas Sprat reported that philosophy, “having been always Loyal in the worst of times,” was the antidote to the deceptions of rhetoric and poetics.<sup>136</sup> Sprat, as I noted in the Introduction, decried that the state of knowledge as it was in the 1660s had “long bin vex'd by the imaginations of *Poets*.”<sup>137</sup> Hobbes’s methodological opposition to the Royal Society’s experimentalist project has been well-documented.<sup>138</sup> Less recognized is the disconnection between the Hobbesian theory of figuration and the Royal Society’s stated skepticism toward language’s poetic capacity. While figuration certainly played an indelible role in the Royal Society’s program, Sprat’s question—“Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties, these specious *Tropes* and *Figures* have brought on our Knowledg?”—was part of an explicit theorization of poetic language that ultimately lacked the sensitivity that Hobbes subtly honed.<sup>139</sup> Hobbes qualified his words of caution toward metaphor, constructing, in the *Leviathan*, one of political theory’s most enduring tropes. As his correspondence with Davenant suggests, such expressions were informed

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Richard Tuck, *Philosophy and Government, 1572-1651* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), calls the Restoration an “ambiguous event” from Hobbes’s perspective, p. 336.

<sup>136</sup> Sprat, p. 59.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 416.

<sup>138</sup> See, of course, Stephen Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

<sup>139</sup> Sprat, p. 112.



by a fully-fledged system of poetics. Modern readers of Hobbes have largely overlooked his philosophy's investment in poetry. For Hobbes, though, there was no surer means to establish absolute concord within a community than through the collective power of poetic figuration.

Hobbes's writings are significant specimens of mid-seventeenth-century thought precisely because they explicitly explore matters ranging from politics to nature. Though seemingly outside of the bounds of the social conflicts prosecuted in the English Revolution, natural philosophy was in fact deeply implicated within the order and disorder of the period. Hobbes's philosophical worldview is unique in that he seeks to build a state that breaks from nature, which he cast as a condition of chaos. Other thinkers in the period, though, continued to see a more harmonious relationship between natural order and human society. Disputes between natural philosophers in the seventeenth century often pertained to competing visions for how the structure of nature informed the structure of English culture. As Hobbes's example nonetheless shows, language plays a critical role in this exchange. Words, especially figurative ones, occupied a complicated space in natural-philosophical discourse, as many sought to shore up their conceptions of nature on the foundation of a plain and proper linguistic system, accusing others of indulging fallacious metaphors and falling for the fanciful deceptions of poetic expressions. Language, though, fell short of the capaciousness needed fully to represent nature. This left writers like Thomas Browne struggling to understand how to manage figuration and its poetic implications in the enterprise of natural inquiry.

### Chapter 3

#### “[T]o cast a wary eye”: Rhetoric, Poetics, and Interpretation in the Prose of Thomas

#### Browne

Judging from their modern reputations, it can be difficult to accept that Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Browne inhabited the same stretch of intellectual history. As the experimentalist empiricism of the Royal Society came to dominate natural inquiry in the Restoration, Hobbes and Browne found themselves at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum. Ryan J. Stark asserts that “[w]hile Browne was too occult in his thinking to fit comfortably within the cadres of English experimentalism, Hobbes was far too skeptical, cynical, and materialistic.”<sup>1</sup> This is true not just of their approaches to nature, but also their theories of language. Stark suggests that “Browne and Hobbes function as useful foils,” demonstrating “what does and does not constitute a mainstream philosophical attitude toward rhetoric.”<sup>2</sup> Within the upheavals of the revolutionary period, Hobbes and Browne were outliers who nonetheless offer instructive examples of how natural philosophers approached rhetoric, along with poetics and figuration. Where Hobbes surprisingly offered a tacit embrace of language’s poetic dimensions, Browne, despite his associations with a harmonizing metaphysics of interconnectedness, was reluctant to identify the linguistic dimension of his philosophical project as poetic. Scandalized by the controversies of religion and science raging throughout the period, Browne advocated a conscientious approach to figuration as a means to defuse those conflicts. Yet, for a prose writer whose work has consistently been regarded as “literary”—even at times in critical history when that descriptor was reserved for the artistry of poets and novelists—Browne’s model for cultivating knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2009), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

remained surprisingly reticent to connect itself to the mantle of poetic representation.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Browne, after all, began his writing career under suspicion. *Religio Medici* (c. 1635)—the religion of the physician—addresses the accusations of atheism often leveled at medical practitioners in the early modern period, whose efforts to manipulate human biology were perceived as a prideful usurpation of God’s role and whose natural knowledge was understood to be an obsession with the corporeal dimension of the world.<sup>4</sup> In his tract, Browne dares to “assume the honorable stile of a Christian,” despite the “generall scandal of my profession, the naturall course of my studies, the indifferency of my behaviour, and discourse in matters of Religion, neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another.”<sup>5</sup> Along with his medical profession and philosophical curiosity, Browne also risked offending the sensibilities of those who hoped for strict conformity within the doctrine and practices of the English Church.<sup>6</sup> Though his sympathies remained with the church hierarchy, Browne believed a greater degree of latitudinarian tolerance might ensure the unity of England’s spiritual community. Deciding which principles were not worth the trouble of coercive imposition meant discerning “things indifferent” from critical pieces of church dogma.<sup>7</sup> Browne was fascinated with the exercise of such interpretive judgments, a faculty of discernment

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Joan Bennet, *Thomas Browne: A Man of Achievement in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> “Ubi tres Medici, duo Athei” was a proverb that circulated in the period, slandering two out of three physicians as atheists. On the ill repute of medical doctors, see Paul H. Kocher, “The Physician as Atheist in Elizabethan England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 10.3 (1947), pp. 229-249.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 57-162, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> On Browne’s theological views, see Victoria Silver, “Liberal Theology and Sir Thomas Browne’s ‘Soft and Flexible’ Discourse,” *English Literary Renaissance* 20.1 (1990), pp. 69-105; Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), Ch. 5, pp. 119-146; Brooke Conti, “*Religio Medici*’s Profession of Faith,” in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, pp. 149-167; and Debora Shuger, “The Laudian Idiot,” in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, pp. 36-62.

<sup>7</sup> On the question of theological indifference, or *adiaphora*, in the mid-seventeenth century, see Melissa M. Caldwell, “Minds Indifferent: Milton, Lord Brooke, and the Value of *Adiaphora* on the Eve of the English Civil War,” *The Seventeenth Century* 22.1 (2007), pp. 97-123.

just as critical to religious faith as to natural inquiry and medical practice. In contrast with the vulgar suspicions cast upon him, Browne sought a more rigorous conception of truth at a time of increasing epistemological uncertainty.

As heterogeneous as his corpus is, all of Browne's writings are united in their preoccupation with the process of interpretation. After all, the mid-seventeenth century was dominated by a crisis in truth, forcing writers of all kinds to reconsider the epistemological foundations that authorized their ideas and assertions. Browne was deeply invested in such questions of truth, so much so that it can be sometimes difficult to locate him within the intellectual conflicts of the day.<sup>8</sup> Leonard Nathanson has called Browne a "double agent" in the "wars of truth that marked the seventeenth century."<sup>9</sup> Browne can be seen as both a holdover of the Renaissance's philological investment in the long tradition of human knowledge *and* as a harbinger of new-scientific methods, submitting ideas to the scrutiny of empirical observation. For a long time, though, Browne's engagement with questions of substance was overshadowed by his reputation as a prose stylist.<sup>10</sup> Scholars like Joan Webber have characterized his work as "emphasizing style more than meaning."<sup>11</sup> Others, though, have recognized that the stylistic features of Browne's prose are deeply embedded in larger epistemological concerns. This is

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<sup>8</sup> On Browne's approach to truth, see Leonard Nathanson, "Sir Thomas Browne and the Ethics of Knowledge," in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1982), pp. 12-18; and John R. Knott, Jr., "Sir Thomas Browne and the Labrynth of Truth," in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne*, pp. 19-30.

<sup>9</sup> Nathanson, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> On Browne and prose style, see Morris W. Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," in *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris W. Croll*, ed. J. Max Patrick, et. al. (1929; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), pp. 207-33; Austin Warren, "The Style of Sir Thomas Browne," *The Kenyon Review* 13.4 (1951), pp. 674-687; Joan Webber, *The Eloquent "I": Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Madison and London: U of Wisconsin P, 1968), Ch. 6, pp. 149-183; Stanley E. Fish, "The Bad Physician: The Case of Sir Thomas Browne," in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1972), pp. 353-82; and Sharon Cadmen Seelig, "'Speake, that I may See thee': The Styles of Sir Thomas Browne," in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, eds. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 13-35.

<sup>11</sup> Webber, p. 152.

especially true of his employment and exploration of language's figurative capacity.<sup>12</sup>

Metaphors and similitudes, after all, embody the ambivalence of human epistemology. They enable ambitious inquiry into the unknown, and yet, because of their reliance upon preexisting linguistic resources, they often simply assimilate new ideas within the customary network of what is already known. Even neologisms, which promise to bring forth new understanding with new names, often consist of tacit metaphors; an innovative piece of language only achieves coherence through participation with a linguistic culture's preexisting semantic web.<sup>13</sup> Vexed by the paradox of language's relationship to knowledge, Browne recognized that the key to advancing learning required a conscientious engagement with figuration.

Browne's writings are alive to the figurative mediations of knowledge. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously wrote of *Religio Medici*, it is a text that ought to be seen "in a *dramatic & not in a metaphysical View*."<sup>14</sup> Coleridge advises Browne's readers to approach his writings looking, not for the assertive affirmations of a philosopher, but for the theatrical moves of a dramaturgical poet. Yet, throughout his prose, Browne actively resists the posture of poetics, even as he draws his strategies of expression from the poet's repertoire. Ingo Berensmeyer has shown that Browne's images "come with their own frames."<sup>15</sup> That is, Browne does not simply deploy figures of speech as linguistic shortcuts to convey his message; nearly every metaphorical turn in a text like *Religio Medici* invites its readers to reflect on the conditions of its signification.

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, Laurence A. Breiner, "The Generation of Metaphor in Thomas Browne," *Modern Language Quarterly* 38.3 (1977), pp. 261-275, argues that a pattern of metaphors that "share a covert 'master figure'"—the light in the darkness being the most conspicuous of these—help Browne confront the tension between intellectual ambition and human limitations, (p. 261). I contend that linguistic figuration more generally embodies this ambivalence.

<sup>13</sup> On Browne's approach to neologism, see Claire Preston "'Meer nomenclature' and the Description of Order in *The Garden of Cyrus*," *Renaissance Studies* 28.2 (2014), pp. 298-316.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham: Duke UP, 1955), p. 438.

<sup>15</sup> Ingo Berensmeyer, "Rhetoric, Religion, and Politics in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46.1 (2006), pp. 113-132, p. 126.

Browne casts this strategy as part of an effort to create a rhetoric of conscientiousness toward truth. As Berensmeyer suggests, Browne's rhetoric "openly addresses its own ambiguity, self-consciously disclosing the manipulative aspects of strategic language use and asking the reader to rethink his or her assumptions about the nature of textuality."<sup>16</sup> This is a rhetoric that is explicitly anti-persuasive, striving for a higher degree of intellectual honesty than what is afforded by either sophistry or logical certainty. Berensmeyer clarifies that "Browne's 'good' rhetoric is not a rhetoric of persuasion but of imagination, concentrating not on the persuasion of the other but on the understanding of (and for) the self."<sup>17</sup> Disengaged from the prejudices of individual passions and flawed customs, Browne's conscientious language becomes a prime instrument for navigating the mysteries of theology and the rigors of natural philosophy. This is a strategy that (though configured somewhat differently) Milton celebrated as explicitly poetic in nature. Browne, on the other hand, shared the common concerns of his contemporaries about the slipperiness of poetic possibility. His innovative recalibration of rhetoric is an attempt, I argue, to cultivate the epistemological power of poetics in a form that avoids its liabilities. Thus, Browne's project, as it is represented in such works as *Religio Medici* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), cultivates a form of metaphorical representation designed to anatomize and manage the problems of poetic representation.

**“[I]n a soft and flexible sense”: Rhetoric Revised in *Religio Medici***

When *Religio Medici* was published in 1642 amidst the explosion of revolutionary era prose, Browne felt exposed by the strange light that the later context shed on an insightful but

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

brash piece of writing that he had composed in the more peaceful time of the 1630s.<sup>18</sup> Despite the praise it has received in the centuries since, *Religio Medici* was, as Claire Preston suggests, “practically a *juvenilium*.”<sup>19</sup> In this early work, Browne argued for a lighter touch in religious discipline than the Laudian Church had exercised during King Charles’ Personal Rule. Brought into print, though, in the middle of the controversies of the 1640s, *Religio Medici* risked being misinterpreted as a whole-hearted embrace of sectarianism. In 1643, Browne revised and reissued the tract, which he claims had been “imperfectly and surreptitiously published before,” including a letter to the reader that expresses horror at the circumstances of its publication and clarifies his intentions.<sup>20</sup> Tying concern about his personal reputation to the larger crisis in representation that the revolutionary prose wars enacted, Browne bemoans “the highest perversion of that excellent invention”—the printing press.<sup>21</sup> In the print marketplace, English readers daily witnessed “the name of his Majesty defamed, the honour of Parliament depraved, the writings of both depravedly, anticipatively, counterfeitly imprinted.”<sup>22</sup> Though most certainly a royalist in his sympathies, Browne expresses concern for all of the institutions of English society, criticizing strife itself rather than staking out a side in the partisan conflict. Apart from a few traces, the revised *Religio Medici* rarely acknowledges the larger chaos that England was immersed in at the time. Yet, Browne allows his personal position and the reception of his tract to stand in for the revolutionary state of affairs. He begrudgingly brought his writing into print at

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<sup>18</sup> On the revolutionary context of *Religio Medici*’s print publication, see Michael Wilding, “*Religio Medici* in the English Revolution,” in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Columbia and London: U of Missouri P, 1982), pp. 100-114.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early-Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 59. On the political motivation for Browne’s revisions to *Religio Medici*, see Michael Wilding, *Dragons Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon P, 1987), pp. 95, 100, 113. For a systematic survey of the revisions, see Jonathan F. S. Post, “Browne’s Revisions of *Religio Medici*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25.1 (1985), pp. 145-163.

<sup>21</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

a time when “almost every man suffered by the presse,” apologizing for the covetousness of a “desire to live when all the world were at an end.”<sup>23</sup> While Browne concedes that these “complaints may seeme ridiculous in private persons,” he nonetheless sees a connection between his individual case and the larger problems of his society.<sup>24</sup> As he defends himself, Browne is also launching a defense of truth. He justifies his participation in the increasingly dubious venture of publication on the grounds that “because things evidently false are not onely printed, but many things of truth most falsly set forth; in this latter I could not but thinke my selfe engaged.”<sup>25</sup> Already embroiled in the textual tumult of the age, Browne notes that while he cannot stop the proliferation of falsehoods, he can correct corruptions suffered by truth in the process of publication. Despite some of its uncomfortable and ambiguous religious associations, the substance of *Religio Medici* was quite suited to the age in which it came into print. The Civil Wars had only exacerbated a perennial problem in the relationship between textuality and truth, a tension with which Browne was quite concerned. In the process of exploring this problem, Browne, as I will show, reconsiders the role of rhetoric, dismantling its problematic associations and using it to authorize what might otherwise be seen as a poetic approach to figuration.

Browne’s discussions of textuality throughout his tract resonate with his anxieties about its reception. As *Religio Medici* shows, Browne was acutely aware of the limitations of texts. Around the same time that readers were encountering Milton’s claim that books “have a life beyond life,” *Religio Medici* was conveying to its new-found print audience the mortality of writing.<sup>26</sup> Browne declares that “Mens Workes have an age like themselves; and though they

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<sup>23</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), 2.493.



out-live their Authors, yet have they a stint and period to their duration.”<sup>27</sup> The afterlife that Milton projected was the remotest of possibilities in Browne’s textual economy. While scripture could be expected to persist on through the apocalypse, the writings that human societies had amassed would ultimately be consigned to oblivion, and Browne seems to welcome this inevitable obsolescence. The recent corruption of England’s literate institutions appears only to be the latest in a continuous tradition proliferating with falsehood. Browne makes clear that he sheds no tears for the pagan works lost to history. He refuses to echo the “deep sighs” that “lament the lost lines of *Cicero*” and the “groanes” that “deplore the combustion of the Library of *Alexandria*,” not out of any special antipathy toward these works but out a greater desire that more valuable writings might have survived.<sup>28</sup> He illustrates the point in elevating Judeo-Christian texts over the written treasures for which humanists pined. Browne asserts

I thinke there be too many in the world, and could with patience behold the urne and ashes of the *Vatican*, could I with a few others recover the perished leaves of *Solomon*. I would not omit a Copy of *Enochs* Pillars, had they many neerer Authors than *Josephus*, or did not relish somewhat of the Fable.<sup>29</sup>

Browne would eagerly trade the excessive and fabulous for more valuable texts. Throughout his writings, Browne vindicates spiritual truths and the texts that aspire toward them as superior to the musings of ancient pagans and latter-day antiquarians.<sup>30</sup> This distinction, though, is less concerned with confessional exceptionalism than it is with meaning and textuality. Browne exercised wariness when it came to the vast accumulation of written documentation that Renaissance thinkers so often celebrated.

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<sup>27</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Browne, though, was nonetheless fascinated with antiquity, as demonstrated by Graham Parry, “Thomas Browne and the Uses of Antiquity,” in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, pp. 63-79.

Browne was convinced that the propagation of written words was not necessarily to the credit of truth. He balks, “Some men have written more than others have spoken; *Pineda* quotes more Authors in one worke, than are necessary in a whole world.”<sup>31</sup> Browne refers to the work of the sixteenth-century Spanish historian Juan de Pineda, whose treatise *Monarchia Ecclesiastica* (1576) encyclopedically aspired to cite nearly every known source available in his age. In a marginal note, Browne indicates that the text “quotes one thousand and fortie Authors.”<sup>32</sup> This is not a mark of distinction. Browne saw himself waist-deep in a textual culture of excess, in which preservation had overglutted the pursuit of truth. The proliferation of hollow authoritative citations, in particular, was responsible for the maintenance and increase of errors and falsehoods. Print technology had only aggravated the problem, spreading falsehoods on an even greater scale. Browne wryly quips that “Of those three great inventions in *Germany*, there are two”—namely, gunpowder and the printing press—“which are not without their incommodities, and ’tis disputable whether they exceed not their use and commodities.”<sup>33</sup> It is not clear if the advances afforded by these innovative tools outweigh the damage they have done. Recognizing the way that technology has exacerbated the problem of textuality, Browne signals his support of the project to advance learning.<sup>34</sup> While reformist innovation had created a philosophical crisis of its own in the mid-seventeenth century, Browne argues for a more structured and institutionalized approach to recovering knowledge. His plan would involve a “general Synod” to survey the textual tradition and discern truth from falsehood.<sup>35</sup> In contrast

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<sup>31</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Browne notes, “’Tis not a melancholy *Utinam* of mine owne, but the desires of better heads” that this project be initiated. He is likely alluding to the earlier efforts of Francis Bacon and the educational reform program of his contemporaries in the Hartlib circle. See Kathryn Murphy, “‘The Best Pillar of the Order of Sir Francis’: Thomas Browne, Samuel Hartlib, and Communities of Learning,” in *“A Man Very Well Studyed”: New Contexts for Thomas Browne* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 273-294.

<sup>35</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 92.

with the Westminster Assembly, which starting in 1643 had been meeting to remake church-government and religious worship in England, Browne's institution of advancement would not make the mistake of trying "to unite the incompatible difference of Religion."<sup>36</sup> The resolution of religious difference had, after all, only exacerbated the already festering problem of falsehood and textuality. Instead, his "general Synod" would be "but for the benefit of learning."<sup>37</sup> Despite his earlier vindication of spiritual over worldly writings, it becomes clear that Browne was invested in the project of sifting through the detritus of a textual tradition steeped in mortality. His aspiration for that tradition would be "to reduce it as it lay at first in a few and solid Authors; and to condemne to the fire those swarms and millions of *Rhapsodies*, begotten onely to distract and abuse the weaker judgements of Scholars, and to maintaine the Trade and Mystery of Typographers."<sup>38</sup> Browne imagines that a malevolent guild of printers had driven the project of knowledge to its doom in service of their own material prosperity. In response, he would have his reformers of learning purge empty authorities and discard fallacious texts. Interestingly, the treatises and tracts of the Revolution, which Browne's readers most certainly would have had in mind as they read *Religio Medici*, are reduced to "Rhapsodies," a hodgepodge of unformed expressions associated with the vanity of poetry. Tapping into the denigrated sense of poetic articulation, Browne reluctantly contributed his own work to the textual heap, hoping that it might somehow distinguish itself.

Unlike the rare example of Milton's early tracts, in which the author presented himself conspicuously as a poet writing in prose, Browne was reluctant to have his work seen as yet another poetic rhapsody in the print marketplace. The revised *Religio Medici* cultivated an explicitly rhetorical style in the effort to distinguish itself from the poetic trifles of would-be

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

philosophers. Browne had reason to be cautious. Kenelm Digby, who penned a response to the unauthorized version of *Religio Medici* before the revision was published, accused the work of indulging “the ayrieness of the fancy” and subjecting its readership to a “suddaine poetically rapture.”<sup>39</sup> He concludes that Browne’s language “were handsome for a *Poet* or a *Rhetorician* to speake. But in a *Philosopher*, that should ratiocinate strictly and rigorously, I can not admit it.”<sup>40</sup> Browne’s tract certainly falls below the rigor of philosophical logic, opening it to accusations of being poetic and therefore fictional in its nature. Where Digby offered him the role of either poet or rhetorician, Browne seized upon rhetoric. In his preface to the reader, the doctor guides his readership away from an expectation of philosophical plainness. His essayistic reflections demand a different mode of interpretation.<sup>41</sup> Instead of being dismissed as a poetic fiction, Browne would have his work be an agile and distinctive piece of rhetoric. He reports to his readers that, within *Religio Medici*, “[t]here are many things delivered Rhetorically, many expressions therein merely Tropicall, and as they best illustrate my intention; and therefore also there are many things to be taken in a soft and flexible sense, and not to be called into the rigid test of reason.”<sup>42</sup> Browne pleads for interpretive charity in part to excuse some of the overstatements of a work that retained most of its substance as a youthful composition written a decade earlier. However, his gesture at rhetorical meaning is motivated by more than expedience. The softness and flexibility of rhetoric might not only excuse any indiscretions, it also could prepare an audience to read in a way that is alive to the figurative dimensions of his language and the theoretical dynamism that lurks therein.

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<sup>39</sup> Kenelm Digby, *Observations upon Religio Medici* (London, 1643), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 38. For the relationship between Browne and Digby’s works, see James N. Wise, *Sir Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici and Two Seventeenth-Century Critics* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1973), Ch. 3, pp. 57-121.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> On Browne’s experimentation with the essay form, see Rosalie Colie, “Inclusionism: Uncanonical Forms, Mixed Kinds, and *Nova reperta*,” in *Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973), pp. 82-88.

<sup>42</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 60.

When Browne puts forth rhetoric as his favored mode of expression, he does not seem to be embracing the model of public oratory that classical thinkers had bequeathed unto the early modern period. In fact, his conception of rhetoric seems to dispose of the idea of audience altogether. *Religio Medici* is not a work explicitly pitched at a public, neither the marketplace of London's print stalls nor even the auditors that Aristotle had in mind when he characterized rhetoric as an inquiry into the "available means of persuasion."<sup>43</sup> As Berensmeyer argues, "the whole *Religio* can be read as an antipersuasive discourse."<sup>44</sup> In his preface to the tract's revision, Browne casts it as "a private exercise directed to my selfe," insisting that its content "was rather a memorial unto me then an example or rule unto any other."<sup>45</sup> He contends that *Religio Medici* was not designed for a readership, emphasizing that the text is disengaged from the thinking and arguments of others: "if there bee any singularitie therein correspondent unto the private conceptions of any man, it doth not advantage them; or if dissentaneous thereunto, it no way overthrowes them."<sup>46</sup> This is, of course, a critical component of Browne's effort to regain interpretive control over his piece, but it is a strange claim to be making—how can a private exercise be read publically? Despite his protestations, *Religio Medici* had an audience. Browne's declarations otherwise only serve to condition that readership to a certain kind of engagement. His oxymoronic notion of a private rhetoric attempts to highlight a critical piece of rhetorical epistemology, while warding off its dubious associations. While logic seeks to demonstrate incontrovertible truths, rhetoric is keyed to discern probable meanings, points of significance that cannot be affirmed with complete certainty. The seventeenth century had uncomfortably acknowledged the pervasiveness of uncertainty. Despite efforts by such thinkers as Descartes or

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<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, 1355b, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> Berensmeyer, p. 116.

<sup>45</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

the early Hobbes to rebuild a firm foundation for knowledge, others explored ways for navigating the ambiguities of the age.<sup>47</sup> Browne embraces the softness and flexibility of rhetoric as an instrument of apprehension. In disregarding the idea of an audience, he hopes to neutralize the problematic suaviseness of rhetorical assertions, which were seen as appeals to received opinion and authority.<sup>48</sup> Inevitably addressing himself to his readership, Browne proffers that the contents of *Religio Medici* are presented “in submission unto maturer discernments, and . . . shall no further father them than the best and learned judgements shall authorize them.”<sup>49</sup> Despite his earlier claims to the contrary, Browne ultimately places the interpretive onus on his audience, allowing the rhetoric of his private, highly figurative reflections to remain in the posture of merely offering probable truth in a soft and flexible sense. It is under these conditions that Browne “made [the tract’s] secrecie publike and committed the truth thereof to every ingenuous Reader.”<sup>50</sup>

Browne’s prefatory disclaimers are more than humble gestures. What ensues in *Religio Medici* is not simply an argument framed with plausible deniability. In attempting to dissect rhetoric in a way that preserves its epistemic commitment to conjecture while casting aside its persuasive insistence, Browne is working to build an expressive dynamic true to his sense of interpretive charity. Throughout *Religio Medici*, he prescribes charity as the proper response to textual animosity. Advising forbearance in the face of attacks from the Pope and his followers, Browne challenges the English pastime of anti-Catholic vituperation on the grounds that it is “the

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<sup>47</sup> See Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), pp. 27-30.

<sup>48</sup> Cicero separated Aristotle’s probabilistic proofs into the intrinsic and extrinsic, the latter of which dealt primarily with appeals to authority. This division allowed Browne and other seventeenth-century thinkers to discern substantive probability from superficial invocations of custom and reputation. See Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), pp. 19-27.

<sup>49</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

method of charity to suffer without reaction.”<sup>51</sup> This approach is part of Browne’s solution to the problem of polemic, which, as I explored in Chapter 1, creates a quicksand of credibility, allowing none who engage in it the distinction of giving voice to unsullied truth. Charitable disengagement is Browne’s cure for the upheaval caused by the polemical drive of revolutionary pamphleteers and sermonizers. He asserts that

those usuall Satyrs, and invectives of the Pulpit may perchance produce good effect on the vulgar, whose eares are opener to Rhetorick then Logick, yet doe they in no wise confirme the faith of wiser beleevers, who know that a good cause needs not be patron’d by a passion, but can sustaine it selfe upon a temperate dispute.<sup>52</sup>

Vociferous pamphlets and scathing sermons operate as rhetoric in its lowest form, appealing to the confines of a vulgar audience’s limited capacity. Browne relies upon the conventional distinction between logic and rhetoric, signaling the latter’s vulnerability to intellectual indolence. His discussion of polemical argumentation, though, teases out the distinction in rhetoric that he seeks to make.

Unlike Milton, Browne sees folly in agonistic controversy, embracing a form of temperance that Milton found revolting in the writings of Joseph Hall. Controversy, to the doctor, is not only destructive but also distracting from the actual pursuit of truth. He asserts, “I could never divide my selfe from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgement for not agreeing with mee in that, from which perhaps within a few dayes I should dissent my selfe.”<sup>53</sup> Recognizing the fitful nature of knowledge, Browne is unwilling to controvert zealously another’s opinion, when he, open-minded in the process of pursuing truth, might find himself adopting a similar position if the evidence presented itself. His call for charity

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

constitutes a surrender to deep curiosity. In contrast with argumentative exercises entered with humility, agon is the instrument of a speaker convinced that truth is within his grasp, but such conviction can be an impediment to actually knowing.<sup>54</sup> Browne finds this especially true in theological conflicts. Articulating his principle, appropriately enough, as a personal inclination, Browne declares, “I have no Genius to disputes in Religion, and have often thought it wisdom to decline them, especially upon a disadvantage, or when the cause of truth might suffer in the weaknesse of my patronage.”<sup>55</sup> Browne illustrates this point evocatively, figuring the conventional metaphor of truth-seeking as a martial exercise in a manner that exposes the limitations of controversy:

Every man is not a proper Champion for Truth, nor fit to take up the Gantlet in the cause of Veritie: Many from the ignorance of these Maximes, and an inconsiderate zeale unto Truth, have too rashly charged the troopes of error, and remaine as Trophees unto the enemies of Truth: A man may be in as just possession of Truth as of a City, and yet bee forced to surrender; tis therefore farre better to enjoy her with peace, then to hazzard her on a battell.<sup>56</sup>

Fielding the language of agonistic conflict in its conventional form, Browne suggests that aggression itself is no sign of knowledge. As must have been apparent to many in the midst of the Civil Wars, a willingness to conquer land or shed blood does not prevent a warrior from championing error. Browne makes the case for truth as a more peaceful endeavor.

Browne’s alternate means of inquiry is heavily invested in careful self-reflection.

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<sup>54</sup> Browne does acknowledge an epistemic function to disputation in some cases. He notes that, “where wee desire to be informed, ’tis good to contest with men above our selves; but to confirme and establish our opinions, ’tis best to argue with judgements below our own, that the frequent spoyles and victories over their reasons may settle in our selves an esteeme, and confirmed opinion of our owne,” (p. 65).

<sup>55</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65-66.



Framing his argument as itself a description of his individual tendencies and choices, Browne explains his thought process:

If therefore there rise any doubts in my way, I doe forget them, or at least defer them, till my better settled judgement, and more manly reason be able to resolve them; for I perceive every mans own reason is his best *Oedipus*, and will upon a reasonable truce, find a way to loose those bonds wherewith the subtilties of errorr have enchained our more flexible and tender judgments.<sup>57</sup>

The flexibility of judgment recalls the rhetorical flexibility that Browne advised his readership to take into account in the tract's preface. Prescribing a subjective retreat, instead of agonistic conflict, Browne might seem to be disregarding social engagement altogether. His epistemology, though, is not a quietist escape from dissent. The rhetorical flexibility he advocates operates reactively to the thinking of others. Browne champions rhetoric as not merely an open hand, but also an open mind.<sup>58</sup> He articulates an epistemology of participation, unimpeded by animus:

I am of a constitution so generall that it consorts, and sympathizeth with all things; I have no antipathy, or rather Idio-syncrasie, in dyet, humour, ayre, any thing .... In briefe, I am averse from nothing, my conscience would give mee the lie if I should say I absolutely detest or hate any essence.<sup>59</sup>

Browne advocates not disengagement but rather hyper-engagement. Though he has his limits—these lines are tagged with a disclaimer clause “but the Devil”<sup>60</sup>—he is appealing to a sense of rhetorical awareness that excels the deceptions of pandering and the limits of logic. *Religio*

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>58</sup> Rhetoric was commonly figured as an open hand in contrast with the closed fist of rhetoric. For instance, in *Of Education*, Milton asserts that logic “is to be referr'd to this due place ... untill it be time to open her contracted palm into a gracefull and ornate Rhetorick,” (2.402).

<sup>59</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-4.

*Medici*, though it acknowledges rhetoric in its denigrated sense, nonetheless seeks to revise it as a truth-seeking discourse distinct from polemical conflict. This becomes clear when Browne returns to the theme of charity at the conclusion of the tract. Citing Proverbs 19:17—“*Hee that giveth to the poore lendeth to the Lord*”—Browne declares that “there is more Rhetorick in that one sentence than in a Library of Sermons, and indeed if those sentences were understood by the Reader, with the same Emphasis as they are delivered by the Author, wee needed not those Volumes of instructions, but might bee honest by an Epitome.”<sup>61</sup> This is not an instance of rhetoric as a mercenary shortcut. The proverb is a piece of scripture—significantly a figurative one—that represents a devotional relationship in the economic language of lending. It epitomizes truth, strategically adumbrating it, rather than departing from it. The key to this distinction is the way in which Browne describes the relationship between writer and reader. The meaning of the metaphor is contingent upon the interpretive agency of the reader. It is only “if those sentences were understood” in a manner that resonates with the “Emphasis” conveyed “by the Author,” that a successful and positive rhetorical transaction has occurred.<sup>62</sup> Browne vindicates rhetorical action as more than bondage to the author’s intent. This is a rhetoric of the figurative imagination, functioning as an open-minded means of knowing, uncoerced and unagitated.

Offering this constructive and flexible model of rhetoric allows Browne the figurative instrument he needs in order to explore the sentiments that he set out to convey in *Religio Medici* in the first place. Browne is especially interested in mystery, a dimension of knowledge invested in metaphorical expression. Mystery cannot be domesticated to the rigorous structures of logic, but Browne is nonetheless unwilling to consign it to the possibilities of poetics. The version of rhetoric that he subtly adapts is designed to navigate the central problem of agonism, the notion

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

that truth can be discovered through combative struggle, which had overtaken religious discourse. Browne is preoccupied with religion, not for the doctrinal differences that so vexed the fragmenting religious communities of revolutionary England, but for the tantalizing mysteries that it offers. And so he prescribes the religion of the physician as the antidote to the theological debates of the period that unnecessarily moved to foreclose questions of faith that, in truth, were best to remain open. While mystery had often been used, in the political context, to validate the metaphysical power of the monarch, protecting him from scrutiny behind the cloak of the *arcana imperii*, Browne seems more concerned about the way that theologians wielded interpretive control over matters of faith.<sup>63</sup> Thus, he distinguishes his own interest in religious mystery from those of his contemporaries who blanch at them: “As for those wingy mysteries in Divinity, and ayery subtilties in Religion, which have unhing’d the braines of better heads, they never stretched the *Pia Mater* of mine; me thinkes there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith.”<sup>64</sup> Browne revels in expansive mystery; he is not vexed by it. Impossibilities seem to be the driving force for active faith as he construes it. Poetics, the expressive domain for searching out possibilities, would seem to offer him the dynamically figurative tool set for approaching mystery, but Browne is reluctant to theorize it as such. Instead, he focuses on rhetoric and the insufficiency of demonstration. Browne is insistent that the tools of logic, especially as the schoolmen have wielded them, have not pierced or resolved the real mysteries of faith. He argues that “the deepest mysteries [our religion] containes, have not only been illustrated, but maintained by syllogisme, and the rule of reason,” concluding that syllogistic demonstration and reasoned inquiry have only managed to maintain religious

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<sup>63</sup> For an account of the *arcana imperii* within the Stuart monarchy, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

mystery.<sup>65</sup> It is in this moment that Browne makes his iconic declaration: “I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an *oh altitudo*.”<sup>66</sup> Alluding to St. Paul’s “O the depth” in his letter to the Romans 11:33, Browne echoes the apostle’s apostrophe to the superlative nature of divine knowledge beyond the horizon of human understanding. This is the ultimate scriptural warrant for the cultivation of mystery, and it authorizes Browne’s need for a soft and flexible rhetoric alive to the resources of figuration.

### **Figuring Nature and Faith: Browne’s Approach to Metaphorical Language**

The “soft and flexible sense” of Browne’s figurative discourse in *Religio Medici* persists as an effective tool in handling matters of nature as well as the divine.<sup>67</sup> Browne’s careful epistemology enables him to countenance theological mystery and to search out the structure of nature, which he sees as the sensible and visible extension of the divine.<sup>68</sup> Browne refers to “the effects of nature” as “the works of God,” clarifying that he sees nature as His “hand & instrument.”<sup>69</sup> The hierarchy is clear. Browne is critical of those philosophers who attempt to study nature without regard for its divine character. He sees this as an error:

[T]o ascribe his actions unto her, is to devolve the honor of the principall agent, upon the instrument; which if with reason we may doe, then let our hammers rise up and boast they have built houses, and our pens receive the honour of our writing.<sup>70</sup>

Reminding his readership of nature’s instrumental relationship to the divine, Browne nonetheless

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> On the connection between Browne’s theology and natural philosophy, see Kevin Killeen, *Biblical Scholarship, Science, and Politics in Early Modern England: Thomas Browne and the Thorny Place of Knowledge* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2009), Ch. 4, pp. 109-154.

<sup>68</sup> On Browne’s commitment to natural philosophy, see Claire Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*.

<sup>69</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 80.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

prefers another figurative illustration for inquiry into nature. Nature is only a hammer in God's hand; in ours, it is an esoteric text. Figuring forth the familiar book of nature, Browne expresses his sense of natural philosophy's relationship to theology:

Thus there are two bookes from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of his servant Nature, that universall and publik Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the eyes of all; those that never saw him in the one, have discovered him in the other.<sup>71</sup>

Just as Browne intently studies scripture, so too does he cast a careful eye on the effects of nature. Even before the revelations that constituted the Old and New Testaments, human minds had access to divinity through the created world. Natural philosophy is, in this way, the first form of worship. Browne recalls that nature

was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens; the naturall motion of the Sun made them more admire [God], than his supernaturall station did the Children of Israel; the ordinary effect of nature wrought more admiration in them, than in the other of his miracles; surely the Heathens knew better how to joyne and reade these mysticall letters, than wee Christians, who cast a more carelesse eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature.<sup>72</sup>

Browne makes the case for inquiry into nature as a faithful pursuit neglected by Christians. The pagan traditions of natural philosophy are admirable for their close attention to the structure of the universe. Browne even acknowledges that these non-Christian inquirers likely have a better hermeneutic approach for interpreting nature. Tracing out the implications of this textual

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 79

commonplace, Browne signals his interest in the complex hermeneutics of the book of nature.<sup>73</sup> Circulating as a “universall and publik Manuscript,” nature reaches a wide audience, but its distinctive handwriting demands an attentiveness that Browne sees lacking among his countrymen.

What does it mean to read nature, in Browne’s view? The form of interpretation that Browne signals with his extended metaphor speaks to a mystical kind of reading, one invested in the multilayered texture of figurative apprehension. The manuscript of nature appears to be an ornately hand-written document filled with “mystical letters” and “common Hieroglyphs,” common in the sense that the effects of nature are omnipresent, but mystical in that their meaning requires a deeper development sometimes neglected by the uninitiated. Browne cites approvingly the mystical schools of the classical tradition, namely ideas identified with such thinkers as Pythagoras and Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>74</sup> Mystical interpretation is not a superficial figure for the kind of study that Browne is advocating. He notes,

I have often admired the mysticall way of *Pythagoras*, and the secret Magicke of numbers; Beware of Philosophy, is a precept not to be received in too large a sense; for in this masse of nature there is a set of things that carry in their front, though not in capitall letters, yet in stenography, and short Characters, something of Divinitie, which to wiser reasons serve as Luminaries in the abyssse of knowledge, and to judicious beliefes, as scales and roundles to mount the pinnacles and highest pieces of the Philosophy of *Hermes*, that this visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein as in a pourtract,

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<sup>73</sup> For Browne’s place in the “history of reading,” see Ronald Huebert, “Reading, Writing, and *Religio Medici*,” *Prose Studies* 30.2 (2008), pp. 109-231.

<sup>74</sup> On Browne’s engagement with esoteric traditions, see Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1972), pp. 240-244; and Stanton J. Linden, “Smatterings of the Philosopher’s Stone: Sir Thomas Browne and Alchemy,” in *Mystical Metal of Gold: Essays on Alchemy and Renaissance Culture* (New York: AMS, 2007), pp. 339-362.

things are not truly, but in equivocall shapes; and as they counterfeit some more reall substance in that invisible fabrick.<sup>75</sup>

Browne nods to numerology and Pythagorean philosophy as a way of approaching the mysteries encountered in theology, a point he would later return to in *The Garden of Cyrus*.<sup>76</sup> These are modes of interpretation attentive to the metaphorical dimensions of language. Demonstrating the significance of occult philosophy to theological understanding, Browne challenges those who would separate natural inquiry from religious faith. He insists that “Beware of Philosophy” is not an imperative to reject the enterprise altogether. The mass of nature contains “something of divinity,” imbuing it with spiritual worth in the struggle to understand God in an otherwise inscrutable universe. Pursuing the trope of the book of nature further, Browne emphasizes that nature’s effects contain traces of the divine, “though not in capitall letters, yet in stenography, and short Characters.” “GOD’S TRUTH” is not emblazoned on the book of nature’s title page. There is no frontispiece, no explicatory clause composed by a publisher eager to show his paying customers what they are certain to find within. Instead, nature is a manuscript written in shorthand by an amanuensis, likely vexing the paleographic patience of any student trying to discern its secrets. Nonetheless, these obscure signatures are light in the darkness of knowledge, or, in an alternative figuration, they are tools to scale the high peak of Hermetic discovery. As the momentum of Browne’s chain of resemblances conveys, ultimately the world is a pictorial

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<sup>75</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>76</sup> On the esotericism of Browne’s *Garden of Cyrus*, see Jeremiah S. Finch, “Sir Thomas Browne and the Quincunx,” *Studies in Philology* 37 (1940), pp. 274-282; Frank L. Huntley, “*The Garden of Cyrus* as Prophecy,” in *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne*, pp. 132-142; Janet Halley, “Sir Thomas Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus* and the Real Character,” *English Literary Renaissance* 15 (1985), pp. 100-21; Thomas C. Singer, “Sir Thomas Browne’s ‘Emphaticall Decussation, or Fundamentall Figure’: Geometrical Hieroglyphs and *The Garden of Cyrus*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 17.1 (1987), pp. 85-102; Frank D. Walters, “A Strategy for Writing the *Impossibilium: Aporia* in Sir Thomas Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus*,” *Prose Studies* 18 (1995), pp. 19-35; and Kathryn Murphy, “‘A Likely Story’: Plato’s *Timaeus* in the *Garden of Cyrus*,” in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, pp. 242-257. On the paradoxical thinking that the *Garden of Cyrus* points up in relation to the rest of Browne’s work, see Marshelle Woodward, “Paradox Regained: Reconsidering Thomas Browne’s Double Hermeneutics,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Forthcoming).

representation of the invisible dimensions of God. Thus, nature offers us equivocal shapes, not true essences, and it requires a “soft and flexible” sensibility to comprehend its effects. Browne advocates an interpretive insight conscientious of the nature of likenesses. Figurative discernment is central to the pursuit of understanding both nature and faith.

In conceiving of the figurative forms suited to inquiry into creation, Browne begins from the ultimate position of ignorance. He acknowledges the observation of Plato’s Socrates, asserting that “[s]ince I was of understanding to know we knew nothing, my reason hath beene more pliable to the will of faith.”<sup>77</sup> Browne links Socratic ignorance with Christian mystery in a flexible rhetorical epistemology suited to exploring the pliability of faith. This mode of interpretation gravitates toward a distinctive mode of expression. Browne champions descriptive allegory as the means for conveying truth in the face of language’s limitations. Allegory, as George Puttenham notes, is “a long and perpetuall Metaphore,” indulging in the wide scope of figurative meaning.<sup>78</sup> As a mode of discourse that cultivates, rather than deceptively dispels, mystery, allegorical description gives Browne the epistemic ground to persist in the face of uncertainty: “I am now content to understand a mystery without a rigid definition in an easie and Platonick description.”<sup>79</sup> While allegorical description is “easie” in its aptness and alacrity, rigid definition fails to account for the epistemic reality of language’s limitations. Browne nods at both the Platonic and the Hermetic traditions, which used this form of figurative representation to preserve the esoteric mysteries of truth. He declares that the “allegoricall description of *Hermes*, pleaseth mee beyond all the Metaphysicall definitions of Divines; where I cannot

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<sup>77</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 70.

<sup>78</sup> George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 156.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*



satisfie my reason, I love to humour my fancy.”<sup>80</sup> While the formalized Aristotelian terminology favored by scholastical gownsman might acquiesce to the “rigid test of reason,” it fails to satisfy Browne’s standard for cultivating meaning. Allegory belongs among those figurative tools that, as I argued in the Introduction, were often suspected of being poetic in nature. Though Browne remains more comfortable with the framework of anti-persuasive rhetoric, he acknowledges that allegorical figuration is the ideal tool for the inquiry into mystery.

Browne’s embrace of allegory hinges on its difference from perspicuous efforts toward logical definition. To define a concept metaphysically presumes certain knowledge of essences. Description, though, attempts to discern the nature of things by accumulating details and attempting to induce them into a more coherent picture. Allegorical description, in particular, searches out all manner of possibilities in the effort to understand the world. Allegory is the figurative strategy that best serves the curious writer, and Browne sees it as the instrument for a reflective, open-minded faith and a perceptive natural philosophy. He marshals several examples from the philosophical tradition to illustrate the distinction he draws, demonstrating his preference for allegorical description: “I had as leive you tell me that *anima est angelus hominis, est Corpus Dei, as Entelechia; Lux est umbra Dei, as actus perspicui.*”<sup>81</sup> Browne makes two comparisons to convey his point about linguistic representation. He expresses his distaste for such conceptual terms from Aristotelian philosophy as “entelechy”—a natural object’s capacity to manifest its ontological potential—and “*actus perspicui*,” the principle of actual transparency relevant to Aristotle’s theory of light and color.<sup>82</sup> Aristotle’s terms, which scholastic philosophy had embraced enthusiastically, pretend to a level of static signification that conceals the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-71.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>82</sup> Aristotle, 412 a, 418b, *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), pp. 1405-1518, pp. 1437, 1457, *Ebook Library*.

interpretive range upon which their meaning actually relies.<sup>83</sup> While other philosophers were critical of the ambiguities of allegorical expression, Browne suggests that such locutions merely reveal the linguistic uncertainty that exists in all efforts to talk about God and nature. The extended metaphors of allegory open those valences of meaning to active interpretation, whereas systematized conceptual definitions foreclose such consideration. Thus, Browne prefers the language of Marsilio Ficino and Paracelsus, Renaissance philosophers affiliated with Neo-Platonic and Hermetic modes of thought, whose writings actively cultivated conspicuous metaphors. Such images as “the soul is man’s angel and God’s body” and “Light is the shadow of God” prepare interpreters to confront, without reducing, the mysteries of the universe:

where there is an obscurity too deepe for our reason, ’tis good to set downe with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration; for by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effect of nature, it becomes more humble and submissive unto the subtilties of faith: and thus I teach my haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoope unto the lure of faith.<sup>84</sup>

Presenting a vision of reason’s attenuated form, Browne establishes a representational alternative to scholastic definition and the pretense of proper discourse. He embraces poetry, though never identifying this mode of expression as poetic. He remains more comfortable treating allegorical description as a rhetorical exercise, albeit one accommodated to his sense of flexible faith.

Browne’s affinity for figurative expression manifests in his own evocative use of metaphors. Confronting the agonistic certainty associated with religious convictions, Browne

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<sup>83</sup> On Browne’s engagement with Aristotle’s work, see George Yost, “Sir Thomas Browne and Aristotle,” in *Studies in Sir Thomas Browne*, eds. Robert Ralston Cawley and George Yost (Eugene, Or.: U of Oregon P, 1965), pp. 41-103.

<sup>84</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 71.

concedes that “there is an edge in all firme belief.”<sup>85</sup> This conception of zeal has often been expressed figuratively. Browne mentions the “easie Metaphor” of “the sword of faith” as an example of certainty wielded as a weapon.<sup>86</sup> As a trope of religious feeling, it emphasizes its bellicose antagonism. Browne, however, seeks a model of faith better attuned to “these obscurities” that he highlights throughout *Religio Medici*.<sup>87</sup> To do so, he selects a different metaphor. Browne cites St. Paul’s expression in Ephesians 6:16, the “shield of faith,” which he renders as a “Buckler.”<sup>88</sup> While faith can be construed as an offensive weapon, it can also serve as a form of protection from such attacks. With religious conviction as a shield rather than a sword, “a wary combatant may lie invulnerable.”<sup>89</sup> Browne figures forth a protective faith to manage the mysteries of the divine universe, preferring the studied pose of wariness that the shield affords. Faith, in this view, provides the protection needed to engage in a persistent searching. In this sense, Browne celebrates the posture of the “wary combatant” whose discerning eye casts doubt even on the enterprise of religious combat itself. He is able to convey this vision of faith through a figurative revision. By shuffling through these poetic images from scripture, Browne demonstrates the transformative power of figuration. There is no one proper means of linguistically conveying the truth of any concept, especially one as rich and dynamic as faith. Browne prefers to conceptualize this process as a rhetorical exercise of meaningful probability, but the capacity for imaginative figuration and reconfiguration certainly seems to tap into the range of possibilities afforded by the poet’s distinctive “eye for resemblances.”<sup>90</sup>

Most of the time Browne’s figurative practice in *Religio Medici* suggests the work of a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*.

writer searching out creative alternatives, but at one of the most significant moments in the tract he makes a move often associated with more orthodox thinkers in the period. Browne was skeptical of the Neoplatonic and Hermetic trope of the microcosm. He explains, “to call our selves a Microcosme, or little world, I thought onely a pleasant trope of Rhetorick.”<sup>91</sup> However, Browne makes a surprising discovery when his “neare judgement and second thoughts” reveal that “there was a reall truth therein.”<sup>92</sup> The microcosm is not simply a metaphor for the relationship between humanity and the universe. Browne believes it to be a truthful embodiment of the cosmic order. This moment constitutes one of *Religio Medici*’s strongest affirmations, recasting the microcosm trope as neither a trick of poetry nor an insinuation of rhetoric, but something more plainly true. Browne makes this move again when discussing a passage from scripture. Citing Isaiah 40:6, he revises our sense of the line “*All flesh is grasse.*”<sup>93</sup> Browne clarifies that it “is not onely metaphorically, but literally true, for all those creatures we behold, are but the hearbs of the field, digested into flesh in them, or more remotely carnified in our selves.”<sup>94</sup> He asserts the ecological continuity of the food chain which extends in such a way that “we are what we abhorre, *Anthropophagi* and Cannibals, devourers not onely of men, but of ourselves,” emphasizing that this is the case “not in an allegory, but a positive truth; for all this masse of flesh which wee behold, came in at our mouths: this frame wee looke upon, hath been upon our trenchers; In briefe, we have devoured our selves.”<sup>95</sup> In these moments, Browne seeks to make his readers aware of truths that lurk beneath seeming resemblances, demonstrating the interconnectedness of humanity with the larger order of the cosmos. To do so, he shows how metaphors can come true, how allegorical descriptions can become proper significations.

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<sup>91</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 103.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

However, Browne does not lapse into the conceptual definitions of scholasticism. Instead, he demonstrates these revisions with flourishes of insight that dramatically unveil a seeming trope's hidden metaphysical integrity. Coleridge's assertion remains apt. Browne's meaning remains at the level of performance even when he pulls back the curtain on his figurations. This dimension only adds to the pregnant potentiality of figurativeness surrounding metaphor. Placing his linguistic expressions in even greater suspense, Browne demonstrates the range of possibilities available when poetic figuration informs an imaginative, flexible vision of rhetoric.

### A "catalogue of doubts": *Pseudodoxia Epidemica's* Interpretive Project

After the shock of *Religio Medici's* entry into print and Browne's efforts to shape its reception, his next venture through the press was far more calculated and systematic. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* makes good on the intellectual ambitions Browne had articulated for natural inquiry. Francis Bacon, in an earlier era, advised that the reform of learning would require a "calendar of doubts or problems."<sup>96</sup> Browne echoed this notion in *Religio Medici* when he declared, "my selfe could shew a catalogue of doubts."<sup>97</sup> *Pseudodoxia* fulfills that promise. First printed in 1646 and then revised and reprinted five more times over a quarter century, the treatise not only accumulates a list of erroneous notions that have obscured nature's truths, but also diagnoses the causes of those falsehoods and their proliferation.<sup>98</sup> Many errors are generated by the problems of language and its complicated relationship with reality and experience. Despite its Latinate title, Browne wrote his work in English in order to communicate with a wider readership in his home country, cultivating an audience that he flatteringly refers to as

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<sup>96</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), p. 203.

<sup>97</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 87.

<sup>98</sup> On Browne's methods of revision over the course of the many editions of *Pseudodoxia*, see Hugh Adlington, "Divination in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*: Thomas Browne's Habits of Revision," in "*A Man Very Well Studied*," pp. 87-106; and Reid Barbour, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 334-344.

England's "ingenious Gentry," rather than aiming at "the Latine republicke and equall judges of Europe."<sup>99</sup> Browne's style, though, is not English of the everyday variety. He cautions that his subject "will sometimes carry us into expressions beyond meer English apprehensions."<sup>100</sup> Indeed, he does develop a technical vocabulary suited to clarifying and dispelling the errors that have inhered within conceptions of nature. Browne's eye for such language informs his concern regarding the ways that expression, especially in the form of figuration, had disrupted and complicated, rather than empowered, the work of natural philosophy.<sup>101</sup>

In *Religio Medici*, Browne called for a "general Synod" to address questions of nature and not religion. *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* is similarly disengaged from the fruitless effort to resolve "the incompatible difference of Religion."<sup>102</sup> He insists in the preface to his exhaustive treatise that "[w]e cannot expect the frown of *Theologie* herein; nor can they which behold the present state of things, and controversie of points so long received in Divinity, condemn our sober enquiries in the doubtfull appertinancies of Arts, and Receptaries of Philosophy."<sup>103</sup>

Browne distances his discussion of natural truth from the religious quarrels that had exploded across England. His is a very different enterprise. He casts himself as sober and focused on the philosophical arts, while presbyterians and independents disputed settled points of religion. Browne is at pains to show that philosophical dissent need not be implicated in the larger social problems of religious and political conflict. There were, of course, many in the period who

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas Browne, "To the Reader," *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Browne suspects a future convergence between these languages, arguing in the preface "To the Reader" that "we shall within a few years be fain to learn Latine to understand English, and a work will prove of equall facility in either," (n.p.).

<sup>101</sup> On the relationship between style and interpretation in *Pseudodoxia*, see Lara Dodds, "'Art and Fallacy' or 'The Naked Offer'?: Style and Science in Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*," *Prose Studies* 29 (2006), pp. 223-233.

<sup>102</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, p. 92.

<sup>103</sup> Browne, "To the Reader," *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, n.p.

believed that philosophical reform was a key component of the larger Revolution.<sup>104</sup> Browne, though, attempts to disentangle these impulses, arguing that the conflation of the advancement of learning with radical upheaval constitutes a failure in understanding: “Surely Philologers and Critical Discourers, who look beyond the shell and obvious exteriors of things, will not be angry with our narrower explorations.”<sup>105</sup> Browne places the onus on his readership, suggesting that deeper thinkers will see through the superficial comparison of disagreement to controversy. His sober compendium of errors is far more reasoned than the polemical zeal of religious disputes.

In framing *Pseudodoxia*'s place in the textual climate of the late 1640s, Browne is not merely finding a safe space for his philosophical project to stand. The larger objective of the text, in fact, is to demonstrate that the diagnosis and remediation of errors is not controversial in the sense that the revolutionary prose wars had come to define that notion. *Pseudodoxia* presents itself as a model for advancing learning, championing participatory correction over authoritative jousting. From the start, Browne is quick to insist that his text does not stand on his own self-conceit. “We are not Magisteriall in opinions,” he argues, “nor have we Dictator-like obtruded our conceptions; but in the humility of Enquiries or disquisitions, have only proposed them unto more ocular discerners.”<sup>106</sup> Browne breaks from the war of authorities model. He does not offer the pronouncements of a learned master. His corrective survey of philosophical errors is intended as a foundation to be pursued further by other empirical investigators.<sup>107</sup> Browne suggests that

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<sup>104</sup> On the connection between the new philosophy and the cultural crisis of the period, see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (1972; London: Penguin, 1991), Ch. 14, pp. 287-305; Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform, 1626-1660* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976); and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998).

<sup>105</sup> Browne, “To the Reader,” *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, n.p.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> On Browne's vision for reciprocity and collaboration, see Preston, *Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*, pp. 89-96.

his volume is “[r]eady to be swallowed in any worthy enlarger,” imagining *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* as a foundational piece of a new textual tradition of knowledge more conscientious than the one that early modern culture had inherited.<sup>108</sup> The main difference is a form of discernment that does not falsely insist upon its own certainty. For Browne, “opinions are free, and open it is for any to think or declare the contrary.”<sup>109</sup> The key to disarming controversy in natural philosophy is to acknowledge the freedom and the virtue of future contradiction. Browne presents himself as a narrow contributor to an ongoing process that neither ends with his own labors, nor relies upon his name or credibility. Yet, his openness to contradiction is not an invitation to agon in the way that Milton had imagined, with *Areopagitica*’s purifying trial “by what is contrary.”<sup>110</sup> Browne’s comfort with disagreement is qualified. He notes, “we shall so farre encourage contradiction, as to promise no disturbance, or reoppose any Penne, that shall Fallaciously refute us; that shall only lay hold of our lapses, single out Digressions, Corollaries, or Ornamentall conceptions, to evidence his own in as indifferent truths.”<sup>111</sup> Browne rejects the model of textual engagement as combat, on the grounds that it thrives upon self-interest for survival, rather than the improvement of knowledge. As the example of the Revolution had revealed, the self-assured conceit of absolute truth leads only to intellectual and social chaos.

Browne offers the wary philosopher as the alternative to both the happy intellectual warrior and the unquestionable sage. Resisting philosophical antagonism, Browne also takes aim at “the Goliath and Giant of Authority.”<sup>112</sup> Defending innovation against the mark of suspicion, Browne reminds his readers that those authors of past ages who have been endowed with unimpeachable perfection in the modern era did not conduct themselves so during their lives. He

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<sup>108</sup> Browne, “To the Reader,” *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, n.p.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 2.515.

<sup>111</sup> Browne, “To the Reader,” *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, n.p.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



cautions that

did not any of these conceive themselves infallible, or set down their dictates as verities irrefragable; but when they either deliver their own inventions, or reject other mens opinions, they proceed with Judgement and Ingenuity, establishing their assertion, not only with great solidity, but submitting them also unto the correction of future discovery.<sup>113</sup>

Hippocrates, Galen, Aristotle, these were ancient thinkers who understood themselves to be putting forth ideas that would be disputed, corrected, and refined. They saw themselves as part of a commonwealth of knowledge stretching across the ages. The early modern system of authority, though, resisted such a process. Browne shows its limits, suggesting that

[t]o speak generally an argument from Authority to wiser examinations, is but a weaker kinde of proof, it being but a topicall probation, and as we term it, an artificiall argument, depending upon a naked asseveration: wherein neither declaring the causes, affections or adjuncts of what we believe, it carrieth not with it the reasonable inducements of knowledge.<sup>114</sup>

Browne emphasizes that arguments from authority derive from the external proofs of probability, offering only incidental grounds for crediting an idea based upon the context of its articulation and not the probability of its content. Hence he advises skepticism toward the “*Iipse dixit*” of authoritative citation.<sup>115</sup> In the progress of an individual student’s education, he or she might rely upon credible testimony as the first step in knowledge, but in the further pursuit of wisdom, such a foundation must be abandoned for more substantive ways of apprehending truth. Browne contends that “our advanced beliefs are not to be built upon dictates, but having received the

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<sup>113</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 20.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

probable inducements of truth, we become emancipated from testimonial engagements, and are to erect upon the surer base of reason.”<sup>116</sup> Authority is the faulty crutch of early intellectual life; it does not suffice for the larger process of learning’s advancement. Hence, Browne calls for liberation from the paternal shackles of authority, urging instead an evaluation of truth and errors on their own merits. This, though, does not mean that authoritative names are to be outright banished from philosophy. After all, Browne notes, “it be not unusuall, even in Philosophicall tractates to make enumeration of Authors.”<sup>117</sup> However, the credibility of the witness ought not stand on its own. He suggests that “yet are there reasons usually introduced, and to ingenuous readers doe carry the stroake in the perswasion.” The ultimate judgment of a notion’s veracity comes down to the substance of the idea and not the respect afforded to the authoritative voice. What Browne is offering is a reconsideration of what we mean when we think about authority:

And surely if we account it reasonable among our selves, and not injurious unto rationall Authors, no farther to abet their opinions then as they are supported by solid reason; certainly with more excusable reservation may we shrink at their bare testimonies, whose argument is but precarious and subsists upon the charity of our assentments.<sup>118</sup>

Browne offers a revised interpretive principle, qualifying authorial credibility and elevating “solid reason” as the key epistemic criterion. Dispelling the cult of authority, he assures that we can deal with the truth and falsehood of ideas on their own merits, unconnected to the social systems of credibility that had confused the textual tradition of learning for so long. Browne seeks a means for sorting through knowledge that is alive to complicated layers of meaning, like those he explored through the figurative dimensions of *Religio Medici*.

While Browne championed charitable understanding in *Religio Medici*, he traces out its

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

precise limits as an epistemic virtue in *Pseudoxia Epidemica*, advising that readers of natural philosophy exercise wariness. Errors often proliferate because of an interpreter's failure to approach a matter with a wary eye. Browne makes this point in discussing the greatest erroneous action in human history—the Fall. In her conversation with the satanic serpent, Eve was lost in prelapsarian innocence, failing to discern the sensible signs of caution. The first woman heeded the serpent despite numerous cues warning otherwise: “although there were many occasions of suspicion, and such as could not easily escape a weaker circumspection, yet did the unwary apprehension of Eve take no advantage thereof.”<sup>119</sup> Error, he suggests, is generally detectable through empirical or textual attentiveness. It infects only those human perceivers who fail to exercise interpretive wariness. Browne encourages philosophers and learned readers to avoid the “unwary apprehension” that Eve wielded in the garden so long ago. Such interpreters ought to act as the “wary combatant” that Browne discussed in *Religio Medici*, who uses the shield, not the sword of faith. Wariness is a key term throughout Browne's writings, signifying a standard of cautious belief and reasoning. It is a state of mind that neither succumbs to credulousness nor lapses into nihilistic skepticism. Browne exercises this approach in his exploration of the phenomena of nature throughout *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. For instance, considering the existence or nonexistence of a nation of pigmies, he surveys the various sources that discuss such a race of people. Browne casts doubt on these accounts, among them Aristotle's *History of Animals*. He suggests that “Aristotle plays the Aristotle” in his acknowledgement of the existence of pigmies.<sup>120</sup> That is, Browne clarifies, Aristotle operates as “the wary and evading assertor.”<sup>121</sup> He closely analyzes Aristotle's statement on the matter: “For though with *non est in fabula*, he seem at first to confirme it, yet at the last he claps in, *Sicut aiunt*, and shakes the

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<sup>119</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

believe he put before upon it.”<sup>122</sup> Aristotle at first seems to earnestly report that the account of a pigmy nation *is not fabulous*, but he qualifies it ambiguously with *they say*. The problem with Aristotle’s discussion is that it is founded on an evasive assertion. Browne complains that while *The History of Animals* is an admirable piece of natural inquiry, “yet are many things therein delivered upon relation, and some things repugnant unto the history of our senses.”<sup>123</sup> Browne ultimately discounts the existence of a nation of short-statured people, but his comments on Aristotle are revealing. In addition to being an “evading assessor” he is a wary one. Aristotle was discerning enough to make clear that the natural phenomenon he was addressing was a reported fact, allowing his readers to note the mediation of that piece of knowledge. This is a characteristic problem in the Aristotelian natural philosophy. Aristotle’s work presents a magnificent picture of the details of nature, but his intellectual labors were not treated with the same wariness by subsequent ages that he himself exercised. Browne’s project posits a more thoroughgoing wariness that outdoes the limitations of both Aristotle and his more credulous readers. *Pseudodoxia* adopts a set of discursive techniques that are designed to avert the dubious assertions that initiate and aggravate errors in the first place. William West argues that “[a]ll of these stylistic tactics—paralipses, contrafactual statements, digressions—bring voices into conversation, even when the speaker disagrees with what they have to say.”<sup>124</sup> Where Aristotle tacitly acknowledges the relational conversations in which knowledge exists, Browne makes them conspicuous, allowing him to exercise critical discernment. Toppling Aristotle from his position as a “Goliath of Authority,” Browne delves deeper into the ancient’s thinker’s words. Though linguistically *Pseudodoxia* does not cultivate the figurative dimensions that Browne

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> William N. West, “Brownean Motion: Conversation within *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*’s ‘Sober Circumference of Knowledge,’” in *Sir Thomas Browne: The World Proposed*, pp. 168-187, p. 178.

exploited in *Religio Medici*, the treatise nonetheless is alive to the complicated relationship between language and truth, advocating a philosophical wariness prepared to manage that connection.

Aristotle is one of the many traditional authorities whose works Browne rummages through in *Pseudodoxia*. Early in the treatise, Browne surveys major writers from the ancient past, evaluating their various merits and defects along with their contribution to the textual tradition of natural philosophy. This leads him to reflect on his present moment. Despite his effort to open a place for productive innovation, Browne is not optimistic about the thinking that proliferates in the writings of the revolutionary period. Hence, interpretive wariness is required. “[S]eeing the lapses of these worthy pens,” that is, the great authorities of the past, Browne advises, “we are to cast a wary eye on those diminutive, and pamphlet Treaties dayly published amongst us, pieces maintaining rather Typography then verity.”<sup>125</sup> Where Browne had earlier worked to differentiate his project as distinct from the disputes of the day, he is eager to show the powerful implications of *Pseudodoxia*’s interpretive practice for the explosion of writings in the revolutionary press. Not even allowing that these latter-day compositions represent at least the convictions of zealous pamphleteers, Browne once again impugns the commercial motivations behind the excesses of the print marketplace, presumably to the enrichment of the printers themselves. Knowledge-production in the seventeenth century, he suggests, was in a poor state, especially when it came to knowledge of nature. Pamphleteers’ passing appeals to the structure and operation of nature contribute to the distortion of natural philosophy:

Authors presumably writing by common places, wherein for many yeares promiscuously amassing all that makes for their subject, they break forth at last in trite and fruitlesse Rhapsodies, doing thereby not onely open injury unto learning, but committing a secret

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<sup>125</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 34.

treachery upon truth.<sup>126</sup>

Browne denigrates the attenuated truth-claims fired back and forth across the English print marketplace as rhapsodic poeticizing tritely culled from well-worn commonplace books. The figurative infelicities of these writers are met in kind by the indolence of their readership. This is the central problem of the cycle of error: “For their relations falling generally upon credulous Readers, they meet with prepared beliefes, whose supinities had rather assent unto all, then adventure the triall of any.”<sup>127</sup> Browne touches upon the problem of rhetoric’s investment in received opinion. The reliance on customary ideas solidifies those notions, adding layer after layer of affirmation to a heap of untested commonplaces. Browne does not advise that either ancient authorities or trivial tracts of the present day be thrown out wholesale. They just need to be interpreted with “a wary eye.” He clarifies

these Authors be read, and thus must we be read our selves, for discoursing of matters dubious, and many controvertible truths, we cannot without arrogancy entreate a credulity, or implore any farther assent, then the probability of our reasons, and verity of experiments induce.<sup>128</sup>

This is the central impulse behind Brownean empiricism. Interpretive wariness requires the pursuit of further trial, through the criteria of both our rational capacities and our experiences. Disposing of polemic, Browne nonetheless does not advise that a philosopher’s knowledge remain concealed as a “fugitive and cloister’d vertue.”<sup>129</sup> Exposing the widespread and rampant errors that infect the whole body of natural knowledge, Browne calls for a readership that reads widely and warily. He builds a system that is prepared to handle the problems of language as a

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Milton, *Areopagitica*, 2.515.

medium for conveying knowledge, one that understands diverse modes of expression, including those entailed in poetic figuration.

### “[D]epending upon invention”: Browne’s Skepticism toward Poetics

The exercise of wariness, of course, depends upon an awareness of language and its relationship to truth. It is especially concerned with the ways in which that relation can be misunderstood. Browne diagnoses many of the errors documented in *Pseudodoxia* as consisting of “Verball” fallacies.<sup>130</sup> These “mistakes of the word” can be broken down into two kinds: “the fallacies of Aequivocation and Amphibologie; which conclude from the ambiguity of some one word, or the ambiguous syntaxis of many put together.”<sup>131</sup> Browne is highly attentive to the ways in which language’s formal patterns can misconstrue nature. Citing examples of this phenomenon, Browne shows that such mistakes often take the form of the improper literalization of expressions intended metaphorically. He notes, for instance, the Christian view that many Jews misinterpreted messianic prophecies by “expounding them alwaies unto literall and temporall expectations.”<sup>132</sup> Pythagoras’ philosophy had been similarly misread, “converting Metaphors into proprieties, and receiving as literall expressions, obscure and involved truths.”<sup>133</sup> Browne shows that such acts of initial misreading generate whole traditions of misunderstanding, insisting that Pythagoras’ supposed law of “abstinence from beanes,” though regarded as a truth for generations, “could not be his meaning for as Aristoxenus who wrote his life, averreth he delighted much in that kind of food himselfe.”<sup>134</sup> Erroneous interpretations like this one have a tendency to proliferate themselves; for “being mistaken by literall Expositors at the first, they

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<sup>130</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

have been understood by most since, and may be occasion of error to verbal capacities for ever.”<sup>135</sup>

The impulse to literalize is one of the most deceptive “mistakes of the word” in the intellectual tradition. Discussing the microcosm in *Religio Medici*, Browne himself had made his surprising revelation of “reall truth therein.” His careful discovery of a seeming metaphor’s literal grounds, though, was based upon the exercise of rigorous interpretive skill. Vulgar literalisms, on the other hand, emerge from an inattentiveness to the conditions of language. Such fallacious readings have vexed efforts to understand scripture especially. Credulous readers often approach biblical text without an eye for the layers of significance within it. Browne argues that “their apprehensions, are commonly confined unto the literall sense of the text; from whence have ensued the grosse and duller sort of heresies.”<sup>136</sup> Heretical practice emerges from bad reading. Browne contends that the misapprehension of figurative expression dulls the discernment of readers: “For not attaining the deuteroscopia, and second intention of the words, they are faine to omit their superconsequencies, coherencies, figures, or tropologies, and are not sometime perswaded by fire beyond their literalities.”<sup>137</sup> Failing to account for the second sight that non-logical forms of expression tap into, unwary readers miss the implications of the explicit language offered. They overlook the figurative “fire” beyond the surface of the text.

Browne recognizes an instance of problematic literalization in his chapter on the dove. He addresses the common belief that the bird lacks gall, a critical feature of early modern biology. Browne argues, though, that this conception was generated by an act of misreading. Earlier accounts of the dove made note of its gentle nature, figuratively expressing this meekness as the absence of gall, a metaphor for impudent or antagonistic conduct. Misconstruing a

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.



behavioral euphemism for a biological fact, Browne suggests that this error emerged from a “strict and literall acception of a loose and tropicall expression.”<sup>138</sup> The idea that the bird is without this organic substance is “repugnant to experience.”<sup>139</sup> It does not accord with what empirical study of doves had revealed. What Browne omits from his account, though, is the belief in a correspondence between affective and biological nature that traditional humoral psychology maintained. Browne and the empiricist movement of the seventeenth century deconstructed this perspective, exposing those common beliefs found to be “repugnant to experience.” To Browne, though, this error is comparable to other misinterpretations that had no philosophical justification. To further his point, he compares it to another zoological case. The metaphorical mistake of the gall-less dove is similar to the error “probably first committed concerning Spanish Mares, whose swiftnesse tropically expressed from their generation by the wind, might after be grosly taken, and a reall truth conceived in that conception.”<sup>140</sup> The Iberian steeds were mistakenly believed to have been birthed by currents of air, a misinterpretation of a figurative description of the speed with which they moved. Browne sees this linguistic problem as “a transition from Rhetorick to Logick.”<sup>141</sup> In his revision of *Religio Medici*, Browne had cautioned his readership to avoid submitting his musings to the “rigid test of reason,” encouraging instead rhetoric’s “soft and flexible sense.” In *Pseudodoxia*, he appeals to the conventional terms of logic and rhetoric familiar to his readership, but these concepts are informed by the dynamics of probability and anti-persuasive representation that he had explored in the earlier tract. Browne has not lapsed into a vulgar insistence upon certainty. He remains concerned about his audience’s capacity to discern between different layers of meaning,

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<sup>138</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 111.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

demonstrating that attentiveness to figurative language in particular is key to the exercise of a wary eye.

As attuned to metaphor as Browne is, *Pseudodoxia* also concerns itself with another order of errors, those caused by fallacious understandings of reality. These are deceits that “consist not, in false apprehension of words, that is verball expressions or sententiall significations, but fraudulent deductions, or inconsequent illations, from a false conception of things.”<sup>142</sup> Browne classes these as “extradictionary and reall fallacies” of the kind that “Aristotle and Logicians” catalogued.<sup>143</sup> He highlights several of the most important of these logical fallacies, which he sees implicated in the proliferation of errors. Interestingly, though, when it comes to analyzing them in the body of *Pseudodoxia*, Browne sometimes makes recourse to the metalanguage of figuration. Much like Benjamin Rudyerd’s reference to a metaphorical church altar, which I explored in the Introduction, Browne highlights the infelicitous character of failed pieces of logic by casting them as nothing more than a verbal trick, even though the error is in the conception of the things themselves and not simply in the language used to convey them. In a chapter on “sundry tenents concerning vegetables or Plants,” Browne addresses the supposed resemblance between the mandrake root and the human body, the source of a variety of natural-magical beliefs.<sup>144</sup> He insists that this resemblance only makes sense in the mind of a cloud-gazer. It is a “conceit not to be made out by ordinary inspection, or any other eyes, then such as regarding the clouds, behold them in shapes conformable to preapprehensions.”<sup>145</sup> To demonstrate just how far-fetched this likeness is, Browne dubs it “a Catacresticall and farre derived similitude.”<sup>146</sup> Catachresis is the Greek term for an egregiously broken metaphor, which Thomas Wilson

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 15

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

defines as an “Abusion” that occurs

when for a certaine proper woorde we vse that whiche is most nighe vnto it: As in callyng some water, a fishe ponde, though there be no fische in it at all: or elles when we saie, here is long talke, and small matter. Whiche are spoken vnproperly, for we cannot measure, either talke, or matter by length, or breadth.<sup>147</sup>

Catachresis is a linguistic device that stretches expressive meaning beyond the bounds of any tenable resemblance. When the relationships between real phenomena in the world prove to be ill-founded, they are reduced to verbal form. The connection only makes sense in the sentences strung together to make it. Thus, the resemblance of the mandrake to the human body is merely a figurative feint. Had the connection proved true to Browne, though, then the language used to express it would have been seen as an apt set of markers for a necessary logical connection. In a book of errors, all falsehoods boil down to the language used to articulate them.

However, unwary minds so often fail to recognize the relationship between words and things. The vulgar readers that Browne discusses in *Pseudodoxia* assume that all locutions accurately convey the structure of the universe. To these credulous thinkers, “a piece of Rhetorick is a sufficient argument of Logick, and Apologue of Aesop, beyond a Syllogism in Barbara; parables than propositions, and proverbs more powerful then demonstrations.”<sup>148</sup> They fail to see the expressions of rhetoric and poetry as “soft and flexible” in any sense. Such significations must represent the highest test of reason, while the dry formulations of logic fail to capture their imaginations and therefore do not obtain their assent. The vulgar prefer the allures of fables, stories, and aphorisms over the strict devices of demonstrative logic, and so they “are led rather by example, then precept; receiving perswasions from visible inducements, before

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<sup>147</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (London, 1553), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 93.

<sup>148</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 9.

intellectual instructions.”<sup>149</sup> For Browne and other natural philosophers, the errors propagated through poetry speak to the danger of such an approach. Defenders of poetics, on the other hand, saw the appeals of exemplarity as the virtue of imaginative expression. As I discussed in Chapter 1, poets ranging from Tasso to Spenser had made the case for “doctrine by ensample.”<sup>150</sup> Philip Sidney similarly demonstrated the illustrative power of “speaking pictures” in contrast with the insipid articulations of what he called the philosopher’s “wordish description.”<sup>151</sup> Restoration calls for discursive plainness, which I will explore further in Chapter 4, seem to desire the cultivation of wordish description. While Sidney rejected such discourse on the ground that it “doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul,” this was understood as precisely virtue of philosophical language unencumbered by the deceptions of poetics. Browne was similarly interested in exposing and correcting the problems of a society whose knowledge depends too much upon figurative evocations. Though he does not champion a plain style as such, Browne does emphasize the importance of training a readership prepared to discern the difference between these distinct forms of expression.

Accordingly, when Browne surveys the authors with whom his early modern readership was familiar, he addresses writers not engaged in natural philosophy as such, but whose writings nonetheless appeal to knowledge of nature. These include “many holy Writers, Preachers, Moralists, Rhetoricians, Orators and Poets.”<sup>152</sup> Browne names writers who indulge in forms of expression that do not satisfy the strictures of logical discourse. He describes their forms of articulation as requiring imaginative resources that complicate their relationship to nature,

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Edmund Spenser, “Letter to Raleigh,” in *The Faerie Queene*, eds. A. C. Hamilton, et. al. (Harlow, Eng: Longman, 2007), pp. 713-18, p. 716.

<sup>151</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy* (1595) in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>152</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 35.

for they depending upon invention deduce their mediums from all things whatsoever, and playing much upon the smile, or illustrative argumentation, induce their Enthymemes unto the people, they take up popular conceits, and from traditions unjustifiable or really false, illustrate matters, though not of consequence, yet undeniable truths.<sup>153</sup>

Rhetorical efforts that appeal to the “available means of persuasion” sometimes affirm notions accidental to the central point of the argument, even though there is an imaginative distance between the primary assertion and the premises that the writer uses to put it forth. Browne elucidates this form of expression by explaining it in terms of formal rhetorical argumentation. Because of its inventive scope, the arguer can use fragmentary reasoning to appeal to customary conceptions of nature. In an enthymeme, which Aristotle describes as “a rhetorical syllogism,” it is not necessary to articulate “what is obvious.”<sup>154</sup> The speaker can rely upon the apparent probability of an expression. Thus, Aristotle’s main criterion is simply this: “that what is said seems true should be clear to all or most people.”<sup>155</sup> Browne’s concerns lie with the problem of seeming truth. If writers “deduce their mediums from all things whatsoever,” then the “soft and flexible” form of rhetoric allows them link together claims using middle terms drawn from customary opinions.<sup>156</sup> The relationship between the other elements takes precedence over the medium, and so writers take license with conceptions of nature, often relying upon commonplace errors. Even where the rhetoric is well-intended and true in its primary sense, it transgresses on the incidental truths of nature. This is the central problem of discourses that traffic in natural misconceptions: “Wherein although their intention be sincere, and that course not much condemnable, yet are the effects thereof unwarrantable, in as much as they strengthen common

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Aristotle, 1356b, 1395b, *On Rhetoric*, pp. 40, 187.

<sup>155</sup> Aristotle, 1359b, *On Rhetoric*, p. 187.

<sup>156</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, p. 35.

errors, and confirme as veritable those conceits, which verity cannot allow.”<sup>157</sup> Browne does not adopt the traditional anti-rhetorical anxiety about deceptive persuasion manipulating the public; he is addressing the way in which well-meaning and otherwise honest arguments participate in the transmission and maintenance of falsehoods.

At the end of Browne’s list of users of non-logical language are the poets. While, as I will show in Chapter 4, Margaret Cavendish established a distinctive register for poetic expression that signaled its difference from other forms for apprehending nature, Browne seems comfortable casting poetry as yet another of those discourses that “depending upon invention deduce their mediums from all things whatsoever.” “Whatsoever,” though, might be seen as the poet’s distinctive purview. Poetic representation, it seems, is the greatest source of natural errors. Browne argues that “Poets and Poeticall Writers have in this point exceeded others, leaving unto us the notions of Harpes, Centaurs, Gryphins, and divers others.”<sup>158</sup> Though he concedes that “to make use of fictions, Apologues and fables be not unwarrantable, and the intent of these inventions might point at laudable ends,” the problem nonetheless remains.<sup>159</sup> However benign or laudable fictions may be in some cases, poetry still gives

our junior capacities a frequent occasion of error, settling impressions in our tender memories, which our advanced judgements, doe generally neglect to expunge. This way the vaine and idle fictions of the Gentils, did first insinuate into the heads of Christians, and thus are they continued even unto our dayes.<sup>160</sup>

Early memories, unregulated by judgment, are susceptible to the fictions put forth in poetic expression, especially in the stories and figures imbibed in youth. Browne marks the pagan

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

tradition of classical poetry as particularly harmful to Christians. The rich fancies of Greek and Latin poetics delude the world picture of early modern minds, and the primary culprit is humanist pedagogy, which crams grammar school boys full of the trifles of the ancients:

Our first and literary apprehensions being commonly instructed in Authors which handle nothing else; wherewith our memories being stuffed, our inventions become Pedantick, and cannot avoid their allusions, driving at these as at the highest elegancies, which are but the frigidities of wit, and become not the genius of our more manly ingenuities.<sup>161</sup>

These vivid productions of invention nonetheless have a chilling effect on the imaginations of early modern thinkers. Having recourse to the same body of images, latter-day writers succumb to discursive inertia, failing to invent images of their own. The fictions of the classics become the “highest elegancies,” rather than the pursuit of elegance as a virtue of representation in its own right. A more “manly” ingenuity would presumably be a more innovative one. Not only does it ossify erroneous conceptions of nature as the foundation of truth, the ancient tradition of poetry also inhibits the creative capacity of the present.

Browne goes so far as to say that poetic texts from the past need not have survived, especially if faced with a tradeoff between them and writings of greater philosophical merit. Echoing the comfort with selective oblivion that he voiced in *Religio Medici*, Browne suggests that “[i]t were therefore no losse like that of Galens study; if these had found the same fate, and would in some way requite the neglect of solid Authors, if they were lesse pursued.”<sup>162</sup> Browne effectively argues for the rejection of pagan fictions. In this way, he shares something with Hobbes’s aesthetic standard articulated in the exchange with Davenant. Browne anticipates a

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

form of the “conceived possibility of nature” as a principle of poetic representation.<sup>163</sup>

Surprisingly, Browne’s position is even more extreme than Hobbes’s. Hobbes at least demonstrated some historicist sensitivity to the worldview of the ancients. Reversing the opposition usually perceived between the two doubting Thomases of the mid-seventeenth century, Browne demands of poetry a greater fealty to natural truth. He reasons,

[f]or surely were a pregnant wit educated in ignorance hereof, receiving only impressions from realities, from such solid foundations, it must needs raise more substantiall superstructions, and fall upon very many excellent straynes, which have been jusled off by their intrusions.<sup>164</sup>

While throughout *Pseudodoxia*, Browne seems comfortable with allowing discredited texts to stand as useful monuments to the problem of error, his remarks on ancient poetry are less forgiving. This is perhaps the most anti-classical sentiment that can be associated with the so-called neoclassical movement emerging in the period.<sup>165</sup> However, Browne notably does not enumerate the authors that he would have consigned unto oblivion. He avoids the scandal of tossing Homer, Virgil, or Ovid into the dustbin of history. This passage has telling implications for Browne’s concerns about poetic expression. While poetics might afford the prose writer a rich source of invention for his figurative articulations, Browne remains reticent to acknowledge the productive role that poetry that might tacitly play within his and others’ philosophical writing.

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<sup>163</sup> Hobbes, “The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir Will. D’avenant’s Preface Before *Gondibert*,” in *Sir William Davenant’s Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 45-55, p. 51.

<sup>164</sup> Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (EEBO), p. 37.

<sup>165</sup> On the neoclassical attitude toward imagination, see Donald F. Bond, “‘Distrust’ of Imagination in English Neo-Classicism,” *Philological Quarterly* 14.1 (1935), pp. 54-69; Robert D. Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1970), Ch. 5, pp. 150-186; Richard Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), Chs. 1-2, pp. 33-79; and Carson Bergstrom, “‘Critical and Curious Learning’: New Science, Neoclassicism, and New Criticism in the Long Restoration,” *Prose Studies* 29.1 (2007), pp. 86-103.



## Conclusion

In the centuries since his writings first made it into print, Browne has been celebrated for creating ostensibly nonfictional prose that qualifies as literary. When Coleridge advised that readers of a work like *Religio Medici* be understood “in a *dramatic* & not in a metaphysical View,” he licensed Browne’s audiences to explore the poetic dimensions of the doctor’s treatments of nature and the divine. Yet, in uncovering a dramaturgical poetics within Browne’s writings, we have neglected the explicitly rhetorical framework he placed on his own work. Browne observes distinctions between logic, rhetoric, and poetics, and much of the meaning of his writings emerges from his dynamic experimentation with these expressive arts. At a time when uncertainty had begun to cast a long shadow across human knowledge, Browne sought out methods to explore the nature of the universe’s mysteries. Casting aside vulgar appeals to absolute certainty, Browne was not content to embrace the prevailing alternative—the energetic clash of polemic—as any kind of epistemic virtue. Instead, he worked to construct a participatory model of knowledge, a system aware of the propensity for error and alive to its conditions within language. Drawing what he could from the poet’s “eye for resemblances,” Browne nonetheless couched his experimental approach to figuration as a rhetorical impulse. Even as a reader of natural tropes, Browne was careful to discern the probabilities of rhetoric from the deceptive possibilities he perceived in poetics. In his hands, Aristotle’s sense of the poet’s genius became the wary eye of the philosopher.

While Browne was preoccupied with figuring out precisely what it would mean to “cast a wary eye” on the tradition of human knowledge, which had only been complicated by the massive output of the revolutionary presses, other philosophers developed a more rigorous

methodology for exercising empirical scrutiny. By 1662, the Royal Society of London had begun to pursue its mission of honing an experimentalist program for the advancement of natural learning. Though he corresponded with some of the influential philosophers involved in the Royal Society, Browne remained a member of the more established and prestigious Royal College of Physicians.<sup>166</sup> Meanwhile, the Royal Society experimented with phenomena of nature, as well as with discursive standards suited to that form of work. One of the most pronounced statements on the proper style for natural philosophy came, as I have noted, in Thomas Sprat's *The History of the Royal Society*. Sprat's assertion that philosophy had "long bin vex'd by the imaginations of *Poets*" was representative of the kind of criticism that Browne was eager to avoid in his refusal to give his discursive experimentation the name "poetic."<sup>167</sup> As the Royal Society's theory of a new plain style resonated with other movements like the emergence of neoclassical aesthetics, philosophers were left struggling to work out the place of imaginative discourse within a project otherwise committed to the rigorous stenography of the senses. For Margaret Cavendish, who was skeptical of the empirical aims of the experimentalist project in the first place, the poetic capacity of language seemed the ideal tool for offering her own interpretation of the new science.

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<sup>166</sup> Preston, *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early-Modern Science*, p. 33.

<sup>167</sup> Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London* (London: 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 416.

## Chapter 4

### **“Like and the Same is not all one thing”: Scientific “Similizing” and Poetic Possibility in the Work of Margaret Cavendish**

Thomas Browne was not among those philosophers from whom Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, took care to distinguish herself. While his catalogue of errors helped lay the groundwork for the larger project of empirical science, Browne never offered a fully fleshed out system of philosophy. As Revolution gave way to Restoration, Cavendish became more interested in the larger contours of philosophical thought, even as her contemporaries in the Royal Society grew more concerned with the minutiae of observable facts. This difference in orientation explains Cavendish’s particular approach to language as a tool of natural philosophy. While Browne feared the impact that poetic fancies had on the transmission of knowledge, Cavendish hoped that the strategic use of language’s poetic capacity might undermine the myopia of experimentalism and its associated appeals to “mathematical plainness.”<sup>1</sup> Eventually formulating a plain style of her own, Cavendish remained passionate about the imaginative dimensions of philosophical speculation.

In the spring of 1667, Samuel Pepys, trying to catch a glimpse of the Duchess upon a visit to court, reflected that “[t]he whole story of this Lady is a romance, and all she doth is romantic.”<sup>2</sup> His curiosity at Cavendish, though, turned to cantankerous dismissal when she became the first woman to attend a meeting of the Royal Society.<sup>3</sup> Upon her visit, he wrote in his diary, “I do not like her at all, nor did I hear her say anything that was worth hearing, but that she

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London* (London: 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Pepys, 11 April 1667, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 484.

<sup>3</sup> See Samuel Mintz, “The Duchess of Newcastle’s Visit to the Royal Society,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 51.2 (1952), pp. 168-76.

was full of admiration, all admiration.”<sup>4</sup> There is a sense in Pepys’ judgment that the ostentatious spectacle that Cavendish made of both herself and the experiments that the society showcased was unbecoming of the intellectual values of that community of natural philosophers, which King Charles II had put under monarchical patronage not long after his return from exile. The duchess’ romantic character—her eccentric personality that Pepys associated with the outmost bounds of poetic expression—must have seemed somewhat out of place in an epistemic culture increasingly committed to the establishment of facts disambiguated from speculative flights of fancy.<sup>5</sup> Cavendish, who wrote both poetic and natural-philosophical texts, certainly seems to have been an outlier in the context of the calls for stylistic plainness in philosophical discourse and the related implementation of a neoclassical sensibility in poetics.<sup>6</sup> Yet, while Cavendish’s eccentricity remained consistent in her public self-presentation, her writing style demonstrates a sometimes unremarked upon development over the course of her career.<sup>7</sup> This stylistic evolution

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<sup>4</sup> Pepys, 30 May 1667, p. 501.

<sup>5</sup> See Lorraine Daston, “Baconian Facts, Academic Civility, and the Prehistory of Objectivity,” in *Rethinking Objectivity*, ed. Alan Megill (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1994), pp. 37-64; and Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> On the question of the “new plain style” of the Restoration, see R.F. Jones, “Science and English Prose Style in the Third-Quarter of the Seventeenth Century,” *PMLA* 45 (1930), pp. 992-1009; Brian Vickers, “Restoration Prose Style: A Reassessment,” in *Rhetoric and the Pursuit of Truth*, eds. Nancy Struever and Brian Vickers (Los Angeles: Clark Library, 1985), pp. 3-76; and Ryan J. Stark, *Rhetoric, Science, and Magic in Seventeenth-Century England* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2009). For an examination of the plain style as it relates to Restoration politics and religion, rather than philosophy, see Roger Pooley, “Language and Loyalty: Plain Style at the Restoration,” *Literature and History* 6.1 (1980), pp. 2-18. On the neoclassical attitude toward imagination, see Donald F. Bond, “‘Distrust’ of Imagination in English Neo-Classicism,” *Philological Quarterly* 14.1 (1935), pp. 54-69; Robert D. Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1970), Ch. 5, pp. 150-186; Richard Kroll, *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), Chs. 1-2, pp. 33-79; and Carson Bergstrom, “‘Critical and Curious Learning’: New Science, Neoclassicism, and New Criticism in the Long Restoration,” *Prose Studies* 29.1 (2007), pp. 86-103.

<sup>7</sup> James Fitzmaurice, ed., Introduction to *Sociable Letters: Margaret Cavendish* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), suggests that Cavendish’s eccentricity was a defensive strategy to protect her against the censure that women writers like Mary Wroth had received, (pp. xix-xx). While Silvia Bowerbank, “The Spider’s Delight: Margaret Cavendish and the ‘Female’ Imagination,” *English Literary Renaissance* 14 (1984), pp. 392-408, regretting that Cavendish was not “a more disciplined writer,” argues that her eccentric character manifests in an “endlessly varied and fecundating” style of writing, (p. 407). Stephen Clucas, “Variation, Irregularity, and Probabilism: Margaret Cavendish and Natural Philosophy as Rhetoric,” in *A Princely Brave Woman: Essays on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle* (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 199-209, counters that, in the context of poetic and philosophical writing of the 1650s and 1660s, Cavendish’s compositions “seem less idiosyncratic and eccentric and, if not normative, then at least canonically comprehensible,” (p. 199).

manifests most clearly in her use of figurative comparisons in her philosophical treatises and her general sense of the relationship between discursive prose and what she called “Poetical or Romancical” forms.<sup>8</sup>

While no critic has disputed that Cavendish flouts the emerging conventions of neoclassicism in her fictional writings, there has been debate over whether her discursive prose adheres to the plain style that coalesced in the philosophical writings of the 1660s.<sup>9</sup> Ryan Stark insists that Cavendish maintains an “elaborate” style, which served “as a form of dissent directed against her age’s escalating positivism.”<sup>10</sup> He argues that Cavendish’s imaginative enthusiasm and her capacious sense of “how prose should embody the ‘nature’ of nature” resist a standard of linguistic plainness limited to describing the natural world in objective, mechanistic terms.<sup>11</sup> Richard Nate, on the other hand, recognizes Cavendish’s stylistic development over the course of her philosophical career. He argues that, in her earlier phase, Cavendish employed the elaborate rhetorical *copia* of humanism, but in her later writings she asserts that her manner of composition “is Plain and Vulgarly Express’d,” signaling an accession to the emergent standards of philosophical decorum.<sup>12</sup> Denise Tillery intervenes in this critical impasse, recognizing that Cavendish employs a unique form of stylistic plainness, a “situated, sympathetic plain style,” that serves as “a manifestation of her organic and situational practice of natural philosophy.”<sup>13</sup> Eschewing any pretense to detached objectivity, Cavendish makes her readers aware of her own

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666), in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, eds. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1999), pp. 151-251, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Nate, “‘Plain and Vulgarly Express’d’: Margaret Cavendish and the Discourse of the New Science,” *Rhetorica* 19.4 (2001), pp. 403-417, asserts that Cavendish “differed from her neoclassicist contemporaries ... in that she refused to transfer the rationalism of the New Science to the realm of poetic literature,” (p. 416).

<sup>10</sup> Ryan J. Stark, “Margaret Cavendish and Composition Style,” *Rhetoric Review* 17.2 (1999), pp. 264-281, p. 264.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>12</sup> Nate, “‘Plain and Vulgarly Express’d,’” p. 406; Margaret Cavendish, “Epistle to the Reader,” *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1663), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Denise Tillery, “‘English Them in the Easiest Manner You Can’: Margaret Cavendish on the Discourse and Practice of Natural Philosophy,” *Rhetoric Review* 26.3 (2007), pp. 268-285, p. 283.

perspectival relationship to the phenomena she observes. Thus, her style is best understood by examining how her metaphors and similitudes—figures constructed through a process she refers to as “similizing”—constitute a linguistic orientation toward nature.<sup>14</sup> Nate is correct to register the development of Cavendish’s style from the enthusiastic accumulation of likenesses in her early work to a plainer, more restrained employment of figurative resemblances in her later writings. Tillery rightly accommodates Stark’s insights to a modified sense of plainness, one that takes into account a model of nature and a philosophical method unique to Cavendish. Indeed, Cavendish develops a figurative strategy attuned to her “situated” conception of the world, locating her philosophical perspective as one among an infinite number of self-moving, self-knowing parts in nature. Her restrained use of figurative comparisons in her scientific prose constitutes, I argue, an acknowledgment of the finite limits of language and an exaltation of nature’s infinite diversity.

Cavendish’s evolution in her natural-philosophical writing emerged from her early enthusiasm for the overlap between poetry and philosophy. Her *Poems, and Fancies* (1653) uses the versified liberty of poetic license to engage in philosophical speculation and her mostly prose *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), originally planned to be published in the same volume as the earlier text, is rife with colorful figurative comparisons and contains several chapters of verse. After her return from royalist exile in the revolutionary period, though, Cavendish’s philosophical treatises began to demonstrate a more studied approach to “similizing” and a high degree of skepticism toward the figurations of her philosophical rivals. Her *Philosophical Letters* (1664) accuses many influential philosophers of the period of indulging in ideas that, upon closer examination, are little more than figurative conceits. Similarly, she demonstrates in *Observations*

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Fancies* (London: 1653), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 12. Early modern writers understood figurative language to include both similitudes and metaphors. See Aristotle, 1406b, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 229.

*upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666) that, despite their own concerns about metaphorical ambiguity, the fellows of the Royal Society employed tools and methods implicated in the problem of deceptive poetic resemblances. And yet, in *The Blazing World* (1666), a fictional romance narrative that Cavendish appended to the *Observations*, she explores the extremes of poetic expression. Over the course of her complex stylistic evolution, Cavendish revealed herself to be, more than any of her contemporaries, profoundly attuned to the distinctions that undergird forms of writing, an ability she exploited to powerful effect. At a critical moment in the history of science, Cavendish simultaneously demonstrated both a cautious approach to poetic figuration in her scientific treatises and a radical zeal for the philosophical implications of the fancies she produced in her poetry and fiction. Dissenting from the emerging scientific order in seventeenth-century England, Cavendish crafted a distinctive project that sought to accommodate language to an expansive understanding of nature.

### **“[V]ex’d by the imaginations of poets”: Scholasticism, Experimentalism, and Cavendish**

Cavendish’s approach to language is predicated on her larger philosophical outlook, a unique one among seventeenth-century natural philosophers.<sup>15</sup> The strongest tradition of natural philosophy in the period was, of course, scholasticism, against which other schools of thought defined themselves. For centuries, university curriculum had remained invested in Aristotle’s system of thought. In the seventeenth century, the dominance of Aristotelianism began to dissolve, but many of Aristotle’s conceptions and his terminology remained influential even for innovative thinkers challenging the scholastic intellectual order. For instance, Aristotle’s system of mental faculties—the tools by which philosophers could understand nature in the first place—

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<sup>15</sup> For the fullest, most persuasive account of Cavendish’s natural philosophy, see Lisa T. Sarasohn, *The Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish: Reason and Fancy during the Scientific Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010).

offered competing schools of thought a vocabulary with which to articulate their epistemological differences.<sup>16</sup> The basic faculties in Aristotle's view were sense and reason, to which he added also fancy (*phantasia*). Though he saw fancy as closely related to perception, Aristotle nonetheless clarified that "sensations are always true, imaginations are for the most part false."<sup>17</sup> Marginalizing the imaginative capacity as a tool of inquiry, Aristotle himself focused on sensory observation and logical reasoning as the means to understand nature, with demonstrative logic dominating his legacy in the curriculum of the schools. Because of its contemplative foundation, language served as the primary instrument of scholastic demonstration.<sup>18</sup> Many other philosophers took aim at the linguistic ambiguity that they believed attended Aristotelian inquiry operating within the universities. This is the problem that prompts Hobbes, who was a member of Cavendish's intellectual circle, to dismiss the "canting of schoolmen."<sup>19</sup> Cavendish adopts a similar critique in *The World's Olio* (1655) in which she argues that scholasticism is "very obstructive to the rational part of mans minde" in part because it distracts from the most important elements of philosophical inquiry, failing to give "contemplation leave to search" and, among other problems, "imagination leave to be ingenious ... nor wit leave to spin out the fine and curious threed [sic] of fancy."<sup>20</sup> Instead, scholastic method only allowed resources enough "to play with words on the tongue, as balls with rackets."<sup>21</sup> Cavendish, like Hobbes and other seventeenth-century philosophers, saw in scholasticism only linguistic sport, not true

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<sup>16</sup> Sarasohn suggests that "Cavendish's epistemology was perhaps closest to Aristotle's, who argued that the sense faculties were imprinted with some kind of impression or species ... which duplicated everything about the object except its matter. This sensation in turn is conveyed to the intellect, which is able to produce formal knowledge of universals." Where they depart from one another is on materialism in this process. She notes that "Aristotle's intellect, however, is not material: it is the soul," (p. 72).

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, 428a, *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), pp. 1405-1518, pp. 1488-9, *Ebook Library*.

<sup>18</sup> See Gordon Leff, *William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), ed. Edwin Curley, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Cavendish, "Epistle," *The World's Olio* (London, 1655), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



contemplative inquiry. Most importantly, she saw that Aristotle and his followers had overlooked the dynamic power of the imagination as a tool of inquiry. Thus, much of Cavendish's intellectual energy was devoted to constructing a language proper for natural philosophy, a form of discourse empowered by imaginative projection.

Despite their shared opposition to scholasticism, Cavendish's greatest criticisms are reserved for the experimentalist philosophy championed by the fellows of the Royal Society. In the same year that Cavendish paid her visit to the fellowship, Thomas Sprat published the *History of the Royal Society* (1667) in which, as I have explored in previous chapters, he championed the institution's contribution to natural knowledge. Sprat decried the philosophical tradition's continuous "raising [of] so many Speculative Opinions," asserting that inquiry into nature would be vastly better served by "the laying of a solid-ground-work, for a vast Pile of Experiments," the kind of intellectual work upon which the Royal Society had only then begun to embark.<sup>22</sup> As he saw it, contemplative philosophy, especially scholasticism, subsisted on speculation ungoverned by the empirical restraints of facts. The inconstancy of this mode of inquiry gave rise to a language of deceptive and ambiguous significations, hence Sprat's bristling at "how many mists and uncertainties, these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our Knowledg."<sup>23</sup> There has been much critical debate about the depth and scope of Sprat's calls for "mathematical plainness" in discursive expression.<sup>24</sup> However, the theory of language conceptualized in his treatise and practiced by many within and beyond the Royal Society speaks to an aspiration within the English language, which had currency in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Cavendish takes up some of the tenets of the plain style, but for a reason different from

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<sup>22</sup> Sprat, p. 118.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

that of practitioners such as the society's curator of experiments, Robert Hooke. She seeks not simply to convey apt descriptions of particular facts. Cavendish's situated plainness aims, not to contain the details of nature, but to gesture at the wide diversity of natural phenomena in a way that avoids reducing them to oversimplified patterns. She becomes more careful in her employment of figurative comparisons in order to avoid intimating the sense that all of nature might be diminished to a reductive model. The deceptions of comparison threaten to undermine Cavendish's evolved approach to nature. In Stephen Clucas' words, she treats nature as an "inexhaustible occasion for discourse," using it as "the pretext for an interminable series of descriptive acts."<sup>25</sup> While Clucas connects this with humanist rhetorical *copia*, I argue that Cavendish's later philosophical writing relies not on unrelenting figurative variation in her descriptions but on figurative restraint coupled with more abstract conceptualizations of the infinite "nature" of nature.

It is surprising then that Cavendish, who developed greater diffidence toward metaphors and similitudes, would nonetheless unhinge her poetic writings from any such limitations. Sprat, of course, had proclaimed that it was the duty of the Royal Society to purge flawed understandings that had long been "vex'd by the imaginations of poets."<sup>26</sup> Cavendish herself critiqued the infelicitous linguistic formulations of her philosophical rivals by acknowledging them as works more of poetry than philosophy. However, as she recognizes, poetry has a particular function distinct from, but complementary to, philosophical inquiry. The distinction was one that had become familiar throughout the seventeenth century, as the necessity of philosophical demonstration, so often insisted upon by the schoolmen, gave way to a more

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<sup>25</sup> Clucas, "Variation, Irregularity, and Probabilism," p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> Sprat, p. 416.

prudent embrace of probability as a standard of truth.<sup>27</sup> Cavendish, assenting to this probabilistic rubric, nonetheless saw great opportunity in the exploration of that which was merely *possible*. Even as neoclassical aesthetic theory, like Hobbes's contention that poetry hold up to the "conceaved possibility of nature," insisted on measurable likelihood in the fictional depictions of poems and romances, Cavendish saw how instructive the limitless potentiality of such expression could be.<sup>28</sup> Her earlier use of poetry in the *Poems, and Fancies* as a mode for hesitant speculation blossoms into the fantastical extremity of *The Blazing World*, which showcases the vast scope of variety available to the imagination in the effort to exhaust productively the limits of a situated philosophical perspective.

### **A Poetics of Natural Philosophy: Cavendish's Early Imaginative Approach to Nature**

Cavendish's earliest published venture, a poetic foray into natural philosophy, came at a time of realignment in the generic standards of English composition. Even before she brought her *Poems, and Fancies* into circulation, there were some, even among her own network of royalist exiles on the Continent, who would have regarded her use of poetry to explore science as a violation of discursive decorum. Hobbes was a particularly strong voice on this matter. His "Letter to Davenant" has been seen as an early statement of neoclassical poetics that goes even further than the beliefs of the later champion of English neoclassicism, John Dryden.<sup>29</sup> Hobbes insists upon a stark distinction between philosophical inquiry and imaginative fiction, seeking, as

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<sup>27</sup> See Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), Ch. 2, pp. 15-73.

<sup>28</sup> Hobbes, "The Answer of Mr. Hobbes to Sir Will. D'avenant's Preface Before *Gondibert*," in *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 45-55, p. 51. While her own poetics does seem to break from the emerging neoclassicism of the period, Cavendish does at times voice respect from those principles. For instance, she commends Davenant's *Gondibert* for its avoidance of "Impossibilities or Improbabilities" in *Sociable Letters*, (p. 136.)

<sup>29</sup> Cf. John Dryden, "Of Heroique Playes," *The Conquest of Granada* (Savoy: 1672), University of Chicago Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p. See Jackson I. Cope, "Dryden vs. Hobbes: An Adaptation from the Platonists," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 57.3 (1958), pp. 444-448.

I demonstrated in Chapter 2, to bring poetic representation in line with philosophical truth by controlling the imaginative excesses of both, yoking them together as distinctive but complementary forms. Hobbes places himself in opposition to “[t]hey that take for Poesy whatsoever is Writ in Verse,” including those who go so far as to “reckon *Empedocles*, and *Lucretius* (naturall Philosophers) for Poets.”<sup>30</sup> Hobbes insists that “the subject of a Poeme is the manners of men, not naturall causes.”<sup>31</sup> While the writings of Empedocles and Lucretius might be in verse form, their substance is scientific; they are strictly works of philosophy, not poetry.<sup>32</sup> While Hobbes does not unpack his judgment further, the suggestion remains that, while poets ought to adhere to natural probability, modern philosophers would be ill-advised to use poetry as a means to inquire into nature. It is not difficult to imagine Hobbes frowning upon Cavendish’s poetic efforts.

Cavendish’s enthusiasm for philosophical speculation in verse, though, was motivated by a productive hesitation. She used poetic possibility as an authorizing bridge to enable her engagement with science. In a preface to *Poems, and Fancies* addressed “*To Naturall Philosophers*,” Cavendish proclaims her ignorance, emphasizing her lack of formal education, her unfamiliarity with languages (even, she claims, her mother tongue of English), and her unawareness of “the Opinions, and Discourses in former times.”<sup>33</sup> For all of these reasons, she confesses that she “may be absurd, and erre grossely.”<sup>34</sup> It is not the case that Cavendish is wholly ignorant of the phenomena of natural philosophy; she qualifies her humble self-description by admitting that she “cannot say, I have not heard of Atomes, and Figures, and

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<sup>30</sup> Hobbes, “Answer,” p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> For Cavendish’s connection to Lucretian poetics, see Emma Rees, *Margaret Cavendish: Gender, Genre, Exile* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2003), Ch. 2, pp. 54-79.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Cavendish, “To Naturall Philosophers,” *Poems, and Fancies* (London, 1653), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Motion, and Matter; but not throughly reason'd on.”<sup>35</sup> Despite—or perhaps because of—these limitations, Cavendish is emboldened to venture into the realm of philosophical speculation because of the license that poetry affords her. Poetry mitigates the impact of any mistakes that she might make, for, she argues, “if I do erre, it is no great matter; for my Discourse of [these terms] is not to be accounted Authentick.”<sup>36</sup> The authenticity of philosophical discourse is rooted in its claims of certainty or at least probability of truth. Cavendish suggests that her choice of poetry is intended as something far more inventive and thereby far less constricted to the standards of truth. In fact, she contends that “if there be any thing worthy of noting, it is a good Chance; if not, there is no harm done, nor time lost.”<sup>37</sup> Even the philosophical fruitfulness of her musings remains only possible. Laying out alternative criteria for evaluating her speculative fancies, Cavendish marks them as ungoverned by the pursuit of truth. Truthful expressions might occur, but they just as often might not. Cavendish attempts to work her way around the criticism that will inevitably be leveled at the integrity of her considerations, offering them up as merely delightful musings. This is the rationale that she uses to justify her choice of mode: “And the Reason why I write it in Verse, is, because I thought Errours might better passe there, then in Prose.”<sup>38</sup> Purposefully resisting the strict discursive distinctions that Hobbes had suggested in his exchange with Davenant, Cavendish seizes the power to engage with philosophical matters unfettered by the constrictions of formal philosophy. Poetry is the ideal mode for this pursuit, “since Poets write most Fiction, and Fiction is not given for Truth, but Pastime.”<sup>39</sup> Discarding the perceived artifice of formal method, Cavendish capitalizes upon the whims of poetic possibility as a mode of philosophical inquiry. She recognizes that fiction generates a precarious kind of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

power—the power to collapse into nonsense when criticized and the power to alter the terms of the universe when a reader least expects it. In this way, Cavendish’s cautious embrace of poetic form paradoxically constitutes a bold adventure into natural philosophy.

The core of Cavendish’s poetic imagination is the construction of figurative comparisons. Where Aristotle had celebrated the poet’s “eye for resemblances,” Cavendish emphasizes the discernment of likeness as fundamental to human perspectives.<sup>40</sup> She defines, in one her poems, “Man-Kinde” as that creature that “hath such *Fancy*, as to *Similize*.”<sup>41</sup> Human imagination manifests linguistically in the form of figurative resemblances, similitudes that proliferate throughout Cavendish’s poems and throughout poetry in general. Cavendish, in particular, comprehends the process of marking resemblances as a distinctively active endeavor on the part of the writer. She signals her figurative agency in her use of the verb “to similize.” An uncommon form in seventeenth-century English, “similize” treats figurative comparison as a dynamic action.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the *Poems, and Fancies*, Cavendish uses the term in the title of poems such as “Similizing Fancy to a Gnat,” “Similizing the Head of Man to the World,” and “Similizing Thoughts.” Even when she does not directly mention the word, it is clear that the active process of “similizing” is central to her poetics. Cavendish was influenced by the Renaissance rhetorical tradition of *copia*, the accumulation of linguistic material as a method of

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<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*.

<sup>41</sup> Cavendish, “A Discourse of Pride,” *Poems, and Fancies*, p. 93.

<sup>42</sup> The earliest known use of the term “similize,” as a verb signifying the making of a figurative comparison, comes from the anonymous work, *Horae Subsecivae Observations and Discourses* (London, 1620), Cambridge University Library, *Early English Books Online*. In the chapter “Of Ambition,” the author suggests, “Some have similized these kind of men with the *Camelion*. As that hath nothing in the body besides the lungs: so the badge of *Ambition*, is only windy, and boisterous ostentation,” (pp. 16-7). The text has been attributed to several figures close to Cavendish, including her husband William Cavendish and Hobbes. See Noel B. Reynolds and Arlene W. Saxonhouse, eds., *Three Discourses: A Critical Modern Edition of Newly Identified Work of the Young Hobbes* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), pp. 7-9.

eloquence.<sup>43</sup> As Colleen Ruth Rosenfield has suggested, such figurative comparisons served as “an engine for the production of copia,”<sup>44</sup> and Cavendish makes it clear that she claims agency over the device. Rather than using the noun form “similitude,” which would suggest the discovery of an artifact, instance, or quality, Cavendish *similizes*; she engages in an active process of producing resemblances that elicit insight. This is the source of her power, not just as a poet, but as an imaginative individual.

Cavendish’s *similizing* is not contained within the discursive boundaries of her poetic works. Ignoring the rigorous standard of aptness that Hobbes championed, she enthusiastically extends her use of similitudes to her more properly philosophical writings. Cavendish’s *Philosophical Fancies*, originally planned as a companion tract to her *Poems*, contains some verse passages, but it is mostly a piece of discursive prose with a clearly articulated method of assertion. It is a text that, despite its posture as a set of fanciful musings, does not shy away from affirmative statements. Declaratively laying out the terms of Cavendish’s theory of nature, the opening chapter asserts,

There is no *first Matter*, nor *first Motion*; for *matter* and *motion* are *infinite*, and being *infinite*, must consequently be *Eternall*; and though but *one matter*, yet there is no such thing, as the *whole matter*, that is, as one should say, *All*.<sup>45</sup>

Cavendish asserts the basic premise of her philosophical system, presented, not as a possibility, but as an affirmed truth of what “[t]here is.” However, even as the *Philosophical Fancies* consists of mostly declarative assertions about her conception of nature, the tract nonetheless shares features with the poetic collection to which it was to be appended. Cavendish relies on the

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<sup>43</sup> See Nate, p. 406.

<sup>44</sup> Colleen Ruth Rosenfield, “Braggadochio and the Schoolroom Simile,” *English Literary Renaissance* 41.3 (2011), pp. 429-461, p. 433.

<sup>45</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Fancies*, p. 1.

technique of “similizing” to a great extent. One of the sections of the tract is titled “Similizing the Spirits, or Innate Matter.” In it, Cavendish describes her vitalist vision of matter by likening it to the qualities of elemental mercury. She asserts that

The Spirits, or Essences in Nature are like Quick-silver: for say it be fluid, it will part into little Sphaericall Bodyes, running about, though it be nere so small a Quantity: and though they are Sphaericall, yet those Figures they make by severall, and subtile motion, may differ variously, and Infinitely.<sup>46</sup>

Using one particular form of matter—quicksilver—to describe matter more generally, Cavendish highlights the protean nature of this fundamental material structure. That the mercurial substance divides into “little Sphaericall Bodyes” is consonant with her atomist conception of nature, but in this particular moment Cavendish is highlighting the infinite diversity of her vitalist material system, which informs the permutations that constitute nature’s variety. For all of its affirmative testimony, Cavendish’s natural-philosophical tract indulges in the imaginative possibilities of poetic figuration, largely resisting the discursive distinctions emerging within English science.

### **Nature’s Diversity and Language’s Limits: The Development of Cavendish’s Philosophy in the Restoration**

As time went on, though, Cavendish developed a greater diffidence toward the copious similizing that characterized her earlier philosophical efforts. By the Restoration, when she and her husband returned to England from exile on the Continent, Cavendish had undergone a major shift in her thought and her approach to composition. Having engaged in a process of reading a wide range of philosophical works, she also, perhaps as a result, developed a more systematic

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 12.



philosophical vocabulary in her own writing.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Cavendish's works came to rely more on conceptual terminology suited to her distinctive philosophy, employing conspicuous figurative comparisons less and less often.<sup>48</sup> Cavendish's growing restraint of the similing impulse is part of a larger development in her sense of what it means to apprehend nature. Recognizing that the resemblances that poetic figures generate might obscure nature's variety, Cavendish began to employ a philosophical language that accounted for the diversity of natural phenomena. In the revised *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), Cavendish emphasizes the way that her vitalist materialism enlivens all the parts of nature with perceptive capacities of their own; Cavendish's complex ontology entails a dynamic epistemology. In the revised treatise, she begins to make it clear how "the Infinite Parts of Nature" are "some ways or other subject to the Infinite Knowledge in Nature."<sup>49</sup> All of nature's parts, even the complex multitude of pieces that make up a human body, are distinctive particularities in themselves with perceptive capacities all their own. Cavendish insists that this system, though, does not allow knowledge to lapse into irreconcilable subjective perspectives, with no shared understanding of nature as a whole. However, she is careful to suggest that this perspectival problem is not resolvable by recourse to the principle of correspondence. Cavendish does not follow Browne in looking to the metaphor of the microcosm to find "reall truth therein."<sup>50</sup> Implicitly rejecting the Renaissance worldview of nature as a vast series of interlocking homologies, Cavendish maintains that there

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<sup>47</sup> See Sara Heller Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women: Three Studies* (Amherst, Ma.: U of Massachusetts P, 1987), p. 44, n. 1; and Sophia B. Blaydes, "Nature Is a Woman: The Duchess of Newcastle and Seventeenth-Century Philosophy," in *Man, God, and Nature in the Enlightenment*, eds. Donald C. Mell Jr., et al (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1988), pp. 289-307, p. 57, n. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Using digitally aided techniques, I have found that Cavendish's philosophical writings show a shift from the early tracts' emphasis on the language of sensory description—linguistic resources useful to figurative comparisons as well as concrete details—to the later works' concentration of abstract, contingently reasoned, and specified expressions. See Jacob Tootalian, "Cavendish and the Language of Genres," *The Digital Cavendish Project*, <<http://www.digitalcavendish.org/the-language-of-genres>>.

<sup>49</sup> Cavendish, "To the Reader," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Penquin, 1977), pp. 57-162, p. 103.

is a form of discernment necessary for comprehending nature in its infinite variety.<sup>51</sup> Confronting the problem of resemblance, she raises the possibility of misrecognition that can be caused by deceptive likenesses, using the example of men:

Several men may be Considered as One Man, and yet those Several men are not that One Man; also there may be Cut or Ingraven in Several Sorts of Substances, and in One and the same, many Several Figures of one Man, yet those Several Figures are not the Man, but so many Pictures of one Man, for Like and the Same is not all one thing.<sup>52</sup>

Likeness presents an epistemic problem when it is mistaken for identity. In Cavendish's system, this is all the more problematic considering that each and every part of nature is unique in itself. She concedes that the monistic structure of her philosophy indeed suggests that "every Part is of the Whole," but she asserts that "though Parts cannot be Single Parts of themselves, being Individable from the Whole, yet what is one Part is not another Part."<sup>53</sup> The infinite diversity of nature's parts vexes efforts to understand them analogically. Hence, Cavendish's aphorism, "Like and the Same is not all one thing"—an English adaptation of the proverbial Latin phrase "*Omne Simile non est idem*"—becomes a guiding principle in her re-conceptualization of how language can accommodate itself to inquiry into nature's variety.<sup>54</sup> Taking this proposition more seriously in her later philosophical writings, Cavendish becomes far more careful in her linguistic approach to nature.

Throughout her *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish engages with philosophers in the contemplative tradition, demonstrating that their use of the artifices of language threatens to

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<sup>51</sup> On the impact of analogical correspondence on poetry in the period, see S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (Los Angeles: Huntington Library, 1974).

<sup>52</sup> Cavendish, "To the Reader," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> "*Omne Simile non est idem*" would have appeared most recently in John Clark, *Paroemiologia Anglo-Latina in Usum Scholarum Concinnata. Or Proverbs English, and Latin* (London, 1639), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 285.

obscure nature's truths. Despite Cavendish's demurrals otherwise, Hobbes in particular stands as the philosopher whose thinking was most similar to her own.<sup>55</sup> *Philosophical Letters* uses the fictive pose of an epistolary exchange between women to discuss the theories of male philosophers who often go unnamed, but whose distinctive statements and ideas disclose their identities. Cavendish marks her differences from Hobbes, especially as they manifest in her theory of language. Hobbes, from the start of the *Leviathan*, equates nature with art and, if anything, treats art as a force for improving upon nature.<sup>56</sup> As I demonstrated in the Chapter 2, Hobbes saw language as the distinguishing feature of human intelligence and the artificial instrument of civilization. In his view, it is only with the advent of language that we were able to use memory as a tool to conceive of particular things in the world as members of intelligible classes. Cavendish, on the other hand, insists that "though Words are useful to the mind, and so to the memory, yet both can be without them."<sup>57</sup> Cognition, memory, and the other rational faculties that allow for the apprehension of nature are aided by language, but they are not contingent upon it. Cavendish is skeptical of those who seek to use art to correct or control nature's diversity:

But some men are so much for Art, as they endeavour to make Art, which is onely a Drudgery-maid of Nature, the chief Mistress, and Nature her Servant, which is as much as to prefer Effects before the Cause, Nature before God, Discord before Unity and Concord.<sup>58</sup>

Though Hobbes had made his trenchant critiques of the problems of scholastic discourse,

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<sup>55</sup> See Sarah Hutton, "In Dialogue with Thomas Hobbes: Margaret Cavendish's Natural Philosophy," *Women's Writing* 4 (1997), pp. 421-432.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 3. Hobbes parenthetically defines nature as "the art whereby God hath made and governs the world" in the first line of the treatise, (p. 3).

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters* (London, 1664), Cambridge University Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 35.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Cavendish saw the same flaws in his own effort to perfect the linguistic artifice. Hobbes was still clinging to art as an instrument for governing nature, while she believed that the artificial structures of language play a much more limited and humble role in the apprehension of nature. Expanding upon the period's skepticism toward language, Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* takes aim at Hobbes and other philosophers who were ostensibly concerned about the integrity of philosophical expression, showing how their own infelicities had wreaked similar havoc on efforts to comprehend nature.

These linguistic problems manifest most conspicuously in the use of figurative language. Throughout the *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish argues that ambiguous metaphors and similitudes ultimately transform discursive efforts to articulate the truth into deceptive poetic expressions. Cavendish makes this point repeatedly when she criticizes philosophers who commit the fallacy of mixing theological with natural-philosophical matters. Motivated by her materialist ontology, Cavendish sought to disentangle these subjects. She argues that traditional scholasticism and other more innovative threads of philosophy in the seventeenth century remained preoccupied with matters more proper to religion, critiquing "some Philosophers" who

striving to express their wit, obstruct reason; and drawing Divinity to prove Sense and Reason, weaken Faith so, as their mixed Divine Philosophy becomes meer Poetical Fictions, and Romancical expressions, making material Bodies immaterial Spirits, and immaterial Spirits material Bodies.<sup>59</sup>

Cavendish's vigilant attitude toward the integrity of theology, though, seems mostly to be a proving ground for protecting the domain of natural philosophy in its own right. Inquiry into nature can just as easily lapse into poetic nonsense as divine discourse. For Cavendish, nature,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

like God, is infinite.<sup>60</sup> She examines the impact of figurative expression in natural philosophy primarily through her engagement with the work of Jan Baptiste van Helmont, whose study of iatrochemistry seeks to moderate some of the occult excesses of hermetic philosophers like Paracelsus.<sup>61</sup> Van Helmont nonetheless indulges in the poetic ambiguities that Cavendish warns against. For instance, she takes issue with his assertion that there are “powers and virtues which immediately stick fast in the bosom of nature.”<sup>62</sup> Cavendish insists that “there is not any thing that sticks fast in the bosom of Nature, for Nature is in a perpetual motion.”<sup>63</sup> She, of course, believes nature to be, not a static thing, but composed of infinite flux. Cavendish is charitable enough, though, to see this phrasing for what it is, not a precise statement of fact, but “a Metaphorical expression.”<sup>64</sup> The problem is that such expressions, if not conspicuously marked, might be taken for plainly stated truths. Hence, Cavendish notes that she thinks “it best to avoid Metaphorical, simlizing, and improper expressions in Natural Philosophy, as much as one can.”<sup>65</sup> Though Cavendish recognizes the subjective nature of what constitutes a proper philosophical expression, she advocates for a steady hand in making figurative gestures toward likeness.<sup>66</sup> Such words, she argues, “do rather obscure then explain the truth of Nature.”<sup>67</sup> Under

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<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere in the *Philosophical Letters*, Cavendish is careful to suggest that nature is subordinated to God. She affirms that “although I believe Nature to have been from Eternity, yet I believe also that God is the God and Author of Nature, and has made Nature and natural Matter in a way and manner proper to his Omnipotency and Incomprehensible by us,” (p. 16).

<sup>61</sup> See Brian Vickers, “Analogy versus Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism, 1580-1680,” in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities*, ed. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 95-163. On Cavendish’s engagement with van Helmont’s philosophy, see Stephen Clucas, “Margaret Cavendish’s Materialist Critique of Van Helmontian Chymistry,” *Ambix* 58.1 (2011), pp. 1-12.

<sup>62</sup> Joan Baptiste van Helmont, “Nature is Ignorant of Contraries,” *Van Helmont’s Works*, trans. John Chandler (London, 1664), University of Illinois Library, *Early English Books Online*, pp. 160-175, p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 279.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 279.

<sup>66</sup> In her preface “To the Reader,” in the first edition of *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, 1655), British Library, *Early English Books Online*, Cavendish disclaims any substantive inheritance from scholastic philosophy, Cavendish answers the allegation that she “had taken feathers out of the Universities to enlarge the wings, of my fancy” by suggesting that her inheritance was “no more then David took the wool from his sheeps backs to cloth his Poetical Fancies of devotion, or as I may say his devout Poetry which is dressed with simlizing,”

the guise of clear illustration, figurative comparisons often conceal and confuse, rather than reveal the nature of things. This is especially true of nature from Cavendish's perspective.

Cavendish's keen interest in nature's diversity counter-intuitively leads her to focus more on the general dynamics of the universe, rather than patterning out nature's effects, phenomenon by phenomenon. In this sense, she disregards the central plank of the Baconian project, the accumulation of natural facts, which the members of the Royal Society had taken up with zeal.<sup>68</sup> Cavendish's philosophical writings of the 1660s largely move away from the effort to catalogue the particulars of nature, though she does descend, from time to time, to the level of facts in order to dispute the interpretations of rival philosophers. When Cavendish acknowledges this difference of focus in the revised *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, she humbly attributes it to her personal unfitness to the task:

To Treat of Every particular Motion in Every particular Part of Every particular Creature, is beyond my Capacity, and to Treat of Some particular Motions in Some particular Parts of Some particular Creatures, is very Difficult for me to do, having a Weak Body, and a Weak Mind, so that I Fear my Readers would think my Mind a Busie Fool, and my Body an Idle Animal, if I should Offer or Indeavour to do it.<sup>69</sup>

This gesture of humility is barbed with slights against any who would undergo such a foolhardy endeavor. Cavendish clearly believes that the inquiry into nature is better served by big-picture

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(n.p.). Cavendish acknowledges that the idiom of natural philosophy, just as the idiom of devotion, is "dressed with simlizing," that is, constituted by a set of figurative borrowings that determine the character of its discourse.

<sup>67</sup> Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 279.

<sup>68</sup> For Bacon's own sense of the relation between the project of natural history and rhetoric, see Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974); and Barbara Shapiro, "Testimony in Seventeenth-Century English Natural Philosophy: Legal Origins and Early Development," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33 (2002), pp. 243-263. On Bacon's impact on the Royal Society, see Michael Hunter, *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), chs. 1-2, pp. 8-58. For qualifications of the scope of this influence, see William T. Lynch, "A Society of Baconians?: The Collective Development of Bacon's Method in the Royal Society of London," in *Francis Bacon and the Refiguring of Early Modern Thought: Essays to Commemorate The Advancement of Learning (1605-2005)*, eds. Julie Robin Solomon and Catherine Gimelli Martin (Basingstoke, Eng.: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 173-202.

<sup>69</sup> Cavendish, "An Epistle to the Reader," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

contemplation than the piecemeal gathering of facts. She implicitly affirms Hobbes' notion, which he leveled against the experimental toiling of Robert Boyle, that the Royal Society had embarked on a project that was, by definition, not philosophical.<sup>70</sup> Cavendish demonstrates that philosophy should not retreat into particular facts and should instead delve into the larger quest for causal explanations with which it had traditionally occupied itself. Even when she seeks to treat a subject of particular significance, Cavendish inevitably returns to her larger theory of ontological dynamics. She apologizes for this recursive mode of expression when she asks her readers to excuse her

if I have made any Repetitions, for I could not well avoid it, by reason, my Book Treats of the most Subtil and Obscure Interior Motions, Degrees, and Temperaments of Matter, as also of the Several Creations and Dissolutions of Several Creatures, in Animals, Vegetables, Minerals, and Elements; all which Variety will cause some Repetitions, to make my Readers to Remember, as also to Understand the Truth, at least my Conceptions.<sup>71</sup>

Even as Cavendish expanded her revised *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* to address even more topics, her focus remained on the conceptual dynamics of nature that authorize its diversity, rather than the impossible task of cataloging that infinite variety. She emphasizes the difficult work of explaining how nature operates and why it does so:

for of all Studies, Natural Philosophy, as it is the most Difficult to be Expressed, so it is the most Difficult to be Understood, especially in Treating of Hidden Causes and Effects,

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Dialogus Physicus* (1661), trans. Simon Schaffer, in *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, pp. 345-391. In the dialogue, one interlocutor clarifies that a man in question "is a mechanic, not a philosopher," but the other speaker, Hobbes's mouthpiece, disputes that any experimentalist could ever claim the latter title: "If indeed philosophy were (as it is) the science of causes, in what way did they have more philosophy, who discovered machines useful for experiments, not knowing the causes of the experiments, than this man who, not knowing the causes, designed machines? For there is no difference, except that the one who does not know acknowledges that he does not know, and the others do not so acknowledge," (p. 383).

<sup>71</sup> Cavendish, "An Epistle to the Reader," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

but more, when as the Treaty is of the First Cause, from whence all Effects are Produced.<sup>72</sup>

Delving into the question of causes, Cavendish seeks pardon for her repetitions, “although they are not so Many, but those which are, were made upon Necessity, at least did I think them to be so.”<sup>73</sup> Distinguishing her philosophy from the Royal Society’s, not only methodologically, but also discursively, Cavendish formulated a theory and a language that accounts for the diversity of nature, offering a unique contribution to the changing textual landscape of the Restoration.

Much of the confusion surrounding Cavendish’s relationship to the so-called Restoration plain style stems from her divergence from the empiricist philosophy of those who championed it. Plainness is in the eye of the beholder. Sprat argued that the fellows of the Royal Society had rejected “all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style” and returned “back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver’d so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*,” ultimately “bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can.”<sup>74</sup> The Royal Society had achieved this discursive ideal by treating language as a set of tokens for establishing the facts of particular things *as they are*. Cavendish had common cause with the experimentalists only insofar as they all resisted the perceived linguistic excesses of scholastic intellectual culture, which Sprat called “the Barbarousness of their style.”<sup>75</sup> Sprat, though, is quick to move on from the linguistic critique of scholasticism to articulate the Royal Society’s criticism of its methods. He briskly makes a transition away from the topic: “But the want of good Language, not being the Schole-mens worst defect, I shall pass it over.”<sup>76</sup> Sprat’s speedy move away from language toward method implicitly affirms Cavendish’s larger sense that the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Sprat, p. 113.

<sup>75</sup> Sprat, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



fellows of the Royal Society have, in terms of discourse, only replicated the defects of the schoolmen. Both movements, after all, remain convinced of the power of language's artifice to encompass the truths of nature. While Cavendish assents to the search for a discourse that plainly communicates the conceptions of philosophy, in her view, language need not and cannot *embody* the particular facts of reality in the way that Sprat hoped it might. Instead, Cavendish's sense of plain language is one that acknowledges its own artificial limitations and strives to remove any obscure barriers to comprehension, especially those forms of philosophical esotericism borne of an infatuation with the tools of discourse over a love for nature's truth. It is in this sense that she declares her revised *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* to be

Plain and Vulgarly Express'd, as having not so much Learning as to Puzzle the Reader with Logistical, Metaphysical, Mathematical, or the like Terms; Wherefore you shall onely find therein Plain Sense and Reason, Plainly Declared, without Geometrical Demonstrations, Figures, Lines, and Letters.<sup>77</sup>

Cavendish's plain style is certainly not Sprat's "mathematical plainness." Resisting the linguistic ambiguity of both scholasticism *and* its alternatives, Cavendish shows that infinite nature cannot be reduced to the confines of language. In her reckoning, other philosophies tangle themselves up in the intricacies of language, blinding themselves from nature's vast scope. Cavendish avers

the truth is, Sophists endeavour to Confound Nature with Art, and to Set Rules and Compasses to Infinite, or otherwise to Scrape and Blot out Infinite with their Ignorance or Nonsense; But I desire my Readers, to keep to my Text, which is Sense and Reason, Life and Knowledge, Matter and Motions, which is Infinite.<sup>78</sup>

Adapting the notion of plainness to her expansive vision of nature, Cavendish develops a

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<sup>77</sup> Cavendish, "An Epistle to the Reader," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

<sup>78</sup> Cavendish, "A Preface Concerning the Rules of Art, and Explaining the Nature of Infinite," *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

linguistic sensibility that is attuned to the shortcomings of discourse.

**The Misuse of Artifice:**

***Observations upon Experimental Philosophy's Critique of the Royal Society***

While Cavendish had her criticisms of scholasticism and other threads of contemplative philosophy, she was primarily concerned about “our modern experimental and dioptrical writers,” the practitioners of empiricism and experimentalism working within the Royal Society.<sup>79</sup> Though the society’s fellows saw their work as the antidote to the excesses of scholasticism, Cavendish believed that their shift from speculative explanation toward factual accumulation constituted a return to the central fallacy committed by the Aristotelians of the universities. She hinted at this concern in the revised *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), asserting that

our Modern Writers in Philosophy, rather Argue like Scholars than Natural Philosophers, rather according to the Arts of Men, than to the Works of Nature, Leaving the Prime Causes, and Hunting after the Effects, which Effects cannot be thoroughly Known without the Knowledge of their Cause, and though the Cause cannot be thoroughly Known, yet it may by much Contemplation and Observation be found out Better than it is, at least some Probability thereof.<sup>80</sup>

Cavendish was convinced that her rivals, of all philosophical stripes, had remained preoccupied with the “Arts of Men,” failing to account for “the Works of Nature.” The growing power of the experimentalist program of the Royal Society made its methods the most pressing concern to Cavendish. In the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, Cavendish articulates her

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<sup>79</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Cavendish, “Another Epistle to the Reader,” *Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (1663), n.p.

critique most fully, taking aim at the problem of artifice in its two critical forms—experimental instrumentation and linguistic figuration.

While Cavendish engages with many of the writers associated with the burgeoning Royal Society, her treatise most directly reacts against the work of Robert Hooke, the society's curator of experiments who would later, along with Robert Boyle, orchestrate the philosophical spectacle presented before the Duchess on her visit. Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665), published only a year before the *Observations*, focuses on the empirical findings of the microscope, which purported to enhance the senses, presenting a vision of nature heretofore unavailable in conventional philosophical contemplation. Alongside the text's iconic engraved images of insects and plants stretched to fit the expansive foldout pages of a folio edition, Hooke gives a full-throated defense of the Royal Society's experimental methods, which he casts as a corrective to the defects of human reasoning. Hooke champions "the real, the *mechanical*, the *experimental* Philosophy" over what he calls "the Philosophy of *discourse* and *disputation*"—a label that would lump Cavendish in with the long and conflicted tradition of contemplative natural philosophy.<sup>81</sup> Establishing an empirical "first ground-work" that aims to constrain the conflicts and excesses of speculative philosophy, Hooke insists upon the epistemological priority of the senses and demands consensus on objective truth, a feat accomplished through verified description of the facts of nature.<sup>82</sup> However, Cavendish disputes these contentions, arguing that the members of the Royal Society had misconstrued the proper relationship between technological enhancement of the senses and the work of rational inquiry.<sup>83</sup> She contends that "experimental and mechanic philosophy cannot be above the speculative part, by reason most experiments have their rise

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<sup>81</sup> Robert Hooke, "The Preface," *Micrographia* (London, 1665), Library of Congress, *Early English Books Online*, n.p.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> See Sarasohn, pp. 157-163.

from the speculative, so that the artist or mechanic is but a servant to the student.”<sup>84</sup> Hooke and the Royal Society’s experimenters believed themselves to have eliminated subjective contemplation from philosophical inquiry, focusing in on factual apprehension through empirical experiment. Cavendish insists, though, that they are simply ignoring the situated speculative reasoning that frames and implements the very experiments that they think have furnished them with a firm epistemological foundation. In her view, Hooke and the other members of the Royal Society have failed to discern the problem that vexed scholasticism—the elevation of artifice over nature—leading them to replicate this mistaken program in an even more egregious manner.

Cavendish pushes back against Hooke’s contention that art might serve as a corrective for the limited perspective of human observers. She argues to the contrary that “art, which is but a particular creature, cannot inform us of the truth of the infinite parts of nature, being but finite itself.”<sup>85</sup> Art is just another part, a superadded element to the infinite agglomeration of things in the universe. It does not enhance, in Cavendish’s view, any particular part’s knowledge, offering only yet another perspective, just as flawed as any other and made dangerously deceptive by the promise that it might be more clairvoyant. Hooke’s instruments are tools of reduction. The images that he is able to produce with his optic glasses demonstrate to Cavendish that the Royal Society’s experimentalist program only offers superficial description, not substantive exploration of nature’s diverse inner workings. Admitting that she is not practiced in the art of micrography, Cavendish nonetheless expresses with surety that this art “with all its instruments, is not able to discover the interior natural motions of any part or creature of nature; nay, the question is, whether it can represent yet the exterior shapes and motions so exactly, as naturally they are; for

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<sup>84</sup> Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 48.

art doth more easily alter than inform.”<sup>86</sup> The interior motions of nature, which are imperceptible to the senses, are beyond the ken of Hooke’s tools. The images that the experimentalists’ optical tools do generate only amount to distortions of nature. Cavendish concludes that “art, for the most part, makes hermaphroditical, that is, mixt figures, partly artificial, and partly natural.”<sup>87</sup> Instead of clear visions, Hooke’s instruments produce sexual abnormalities and, ultimately, monstrosities. Even if, Cavendish concedes, “they can present the natural figure of an object, yet that natural figure may be presented in as monstrous a shape, as it may appear misshapen rather than natural.”<sup>88</sup> Any natural truth that Hooke’s methods might yield is corrupted in the process. All he can see through his microscope is alteration, not information. Hooke confesses, Cavendish alleges, that the objects viewed through his optic glasses “will appear of several figures or shapes, according to the several reflexions, refractions, mediums and positions of several lights.”<sup>89</sup> She asks, “how can they tell or judge which is the truest light, position, or medium, that doth present the object naturally as it is?”<sup>90</sup> Cavendish, ever aware of the ways in which the observations of a philosopher are affected by his or her circumstances, uses the variations that emerge through the experimental process to undermine the pretense of objective apprehension.

Cavendish illustrates the distortions of Hooke’s optical instruments using a linguistic device itself vulnerable to similar effects. The problems of simlizing, which Cavendish exposed in the *Philosophical Letters*, also demonstrate the concomitant problems of visual misrepresentation. Hooke offers surprising and astonishing images of familiar creatures and

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 51. Cf. Hooke, “The Preface,” *Micrographia*, who addresses the issue of variation in light and perspective in his microscopic images, assuring his readers that he “never began to make any draught before by many examinations in several lights, and in several positions to those lights, I had discover'd the true form,” (n.p.) Passing over the criteria by which he might have assessed the truth of such discoveries, Hooke’s method remains open to Cavendish’s critique.

<sup>90</sup> Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 51.

things from everyday life, but on a scale that renders them unrecognizable and even horrific. Cavendish exposes the defects of his approach using the example of the louse. She notes that “a louse by the help of a magnifying glass appears like a lobster, where the microscope enlarging and magnifying each part of it, makes them bigger and rounder than naturally they are.”<sup>91</sup> Cavendish’s example addresses one artificial process by employing another. The art of microscopic visual enhancement has taken the exterior perception of an insect and warped it to grotesque proportions. Cavendish communicates the monstrous artificiality of Hooke’s process of misshaping using her own artful similitude of the “lobster.” She indicates a resemblance between the expanded louse and a large marine crustacean in order to convey the grotesque nature of Hooke’s dimensional alteration. What would otherwise be a tiny speck of a pest is transformed into a snapping, crawling beast. Figurative comparison, which itself traffics in artificial resemblance, is the ideal tool for illustrating the problem of visual distortion. Cavendish suggests that “the more the figure by art is magnified, the more it appears misshapen from the natural, insomuch as each joint will appear as a diseased, swelled and tumid body, ready and ripe for incision.”<sup>92</sup> Microscopic enhancement changes the way an observer understands and reacts to an object under consideration and consequently distracts fundamentally from any inquiry into nature *as it is*. This is the case even when the artificial chain of processes—from building the tools, making the observations, drawing and describing a visual representation of what has been observed, and reproducing those images and descriptions through publication—works seamlessly. Cavendish warns, though, that “mistakes may easily be committed in taking copies from copies.”<sup>93</sup> More often than not, Hooke’s methods have likely generated corrupt results, suggesting that monstrous distortion is the best possible outcome of the experimentalist program.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

Cavendish conspicuously simlizes the warped image of the louse to a lobster in order to emphasize the distance between *seeming*—that is, being *like*—and simply being. As the aphorism “Like and the Same is not all one thing” suggests, Hooke had not discovered an apt resemblance; he had generated an image altered to the point that it no longer bears any ontological connection to the thing he originally observed. Cavendish, linguistically reproducing the same kind of artificial distortion that Hooke had performed, conscientiously stretches the bounds of likeness, manifesting the impropriety of such tools, in both their experimental and linguistic forms. By both constraining and strategically exploiting the power of similitudes, Cavendish demonstrates a greater awareness of language’s fundamental figurative capacity. This sensitivity is parcel to her more general stylistic evolution. Cavendish had come to embrace a form of plain perspicuity in her philosophical writings, but hers was a plainness borne of the recognition of language’s limits, not the Royal Society’s sense that discourse might be disciplined to encompass and fully apprehend nature in its totality. Hooke, Sprat, and their colleagues championed plain language as the triumph of art melded to nature, while Cavendish’s stylistic reform surrendered that linguistic ambition, acknowledging art’s limitation in the face of nature’s limitlessness. She humbly aspired only for words adequate to the task of communicating her own conceptions. Marking the change in her own writing, Cavendish elevated her more recently composed works as superior articulations of her ideas, in comparison to her earlier philosophical efforts. She laments, “I have not expressed myself in my philosophical works, especially in my *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, so clearly and plainly as I might have done, had I the assistance of art, and the practice of reading other authors.”<sup>94</sup> Having engaged more widely with the larger philosophical conversation, Cavendish seems to have refined her ideas and her ability to articulate them. She is skeptical of artfulness in her expression, but

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<sup>94</sup> Cavendish, “To the Reader,” *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, pp. 11-22, p. 11.

appeals directly to the criterion of intelligibility. These later works, which Cavendish indicates are better expressions of her philosophy, are notable, not only for avoiding figurative shortcuts, but also for conscientiously unpacking her abstract terminology.<sup>95</sup> The guiding principle behind her style is a concern for language suited to comprehension of a writer's ideas, which she emphasizes as the central project of vernacular philosophy. She insists that "if you will write for those that do not understand Latin, your reason will tell you, that you must explain those hard words, and English them in the easiest manner you can."<sup>96</sup> While some philosophers might justify their esoteric style on the grounds that they have selected a vocabulary fit to the complexities of their ideas and relevant to an audience of specialists, Cavendish places the expressive burden on establishing a linguistic connection between writer and reader. Employing a familiar idiom that plain stylists like Sprat would later have recourse to, Cavendish asks "What are words but marks of things? And what are philosophical terms, but to express the conceptions of one's mind in that science?"<sup>97</sup> A classical formulation, the correspondence of words to things would, in the anti-rhetorical climate of the Restoration, be retooled by the Royal Society as an argument for a theory of expression that elides the place of human subjectivity, securing language to the material world itself.<sup>98</sup> Cavendish, though, refers to "things" in the sense of subjects or concepts, that is, things *as they are understood*. Hence, she constructs what Tillery calls a "situated" plain style, a language that eschews the elaborations generated by arcane theories of art and nature in favor of an intelligible connection to her readers.<sup>99</sup> For Cavendish,

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Cavendish, "To the Reader," *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, pp. 11-22. Much of this paratext is devoted to clarification of "several places" throughout the treatise, which "might have been more perspicuously delivered," (p. 14).

<sup>96</sup> Cavendish, "To the Reader," *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 12.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> See A. C. Howell, "Res et Verba: Words and Things," *ELH* 13.2 (1946), pp. 131-142. Howell translates Cicero's articulation of the idiom as "take hold of things and words will naturally follow, or will take care of themselves," (p. 131).

<sup>99</sup> Tillery, "English Them in the Easiest Manner You Can," p. 283.



plain language constitutes an honest awareness of the relationship between interlocutors, their perspectives, and their places within nature.

While Cavendish's theory of language was at odds with the Royal Society's, their respective senses of what they meant by "plainness" did overlap in their shared diffidence toward the metaphorical capacity of language, albeit for different reasons. In *Micrographia*, Hooke argues that philosophers, without the clarifying aid of his optical instruments,

often take the shadow of things for the substance, small appearances for good similitudes, similitudes for definitions; and even many of those, which we think to be the most solid definitions, are rather expressions of our own misguided apprehensions than of the true nature of the things themselves.<sup>100</sup>

Hooke shared Cavendish's concern for how figurative comparisons can misconstrue the proper apprehension of nature, but his answer to this problem is the Royal Society's experimental program. By plainly describing the facts of nature according to their senses, he and his peers hoped to build a full picture of nature and to purge language of the excesses that might distort their image of it. They had only just embarked upon that project, though, and it would not likely be completed any time soon. Hooke suggests that he and his fellow experimental philosophers would remain in that incomplete state "till such time as our Microscope, or some other means, enable us to discover the true Schematism and Texture of all kinds of bodies," but until then "we must grope, as it were, in the dark, and onely ghesse at the true reasons of things by similitudes and comparisons."<sup>101</sup> While commentators on the plain style, like Sprat, have been accused of hypocrisy, Hooke presents one rationale for the persistence of conspicuous similitudes in the

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<sup>100</sup> Hooke, "The Preface," *Micrographia*, n.p.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

language of philosophy.<sup>102</sup> A figurative comparison, after all, serves as a linguistic bridge between what is known and what is unknown. Hooke is compelled from time to time in *Micrographia* to resort to what he calls a “gross Similitude.”<sup>103</sup> He characterizes his similitizing as “gross” in the sense that it serves as a comprehensible, but perhaps untechnical means of communicating philosophically. Acknowledging their imperfect and improper nature, Hooke employs these figures where he finds it necessary to augment the descriptive capacity of his language or at times when he desires to trace out a speculative explanation.<sup>104</sup> Sharing some of Cavendish’s own concerns about the potential delusions engendered through figurative comparisons, Hooke inevitably but conscientiously turns to the resources of similitizing.

Hooke employs several similitudes throughout his microscopic discussions, but one in particular stands out as significant. Examining moss and “other small Vegetative substances,” he invokes what was arguably the master trope of mechanical philosophy—nature as a clock.<sup>105</sup> Hooke attempts to explain how moss might be generated by the decay of a variety of other substances, including “Stones, Bricks, Wood, or vegetable substances, and Bones, Leather, Horns, or animate substances.”<sup>106</sup> To illuminate his explanation, he resorts to this familiar but

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<sup>102</sup> See Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), p. 201. Referring to Sprat’s perceived hypocrisy, Vickers suggests that “[t]hose who attack rhetoric continued to use it, and the pronouncements of an avant-garde elite are as little use then, as now, for recording the whole picture.” I am suggesting that, like Sprat, Hooke had reason to express skepticism toward certain applications of figurative expression while still engaging in the (unavoidable) linguistic practice.

<sup>103</sup> Hooke, *Micrographia*, p. 12.

<sup>104</sup> For a study of Hooke’s engagement with speculative explanation from the foundation of his factual descriptions, see Lynch.

<sup>105</sup> Hooke, *Micrographia*, p. 133. For an account of the influence of Descartes’s version of the clock metaphor on English natural philosophy, see Larry Laudan, “The Clock Metaphor and Hypothesis: The Impact of Descartes on English Methodological Thought, 1650-1670,” in *Science and Hypothesis: Historical Essays on Scientific Methodology* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1981), pp. 27-58. Cf. Henry Power, *Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1664), University of Michigan Libraries, *Early English Books Online*, p. 193. Power, one of Hooke’s colleagues in the Royal Society, argues that “the old dogmatists and notional speculators, that onely gazed at the visible effects and last resultances of things, understood no more of nature, than a rude countreyfellow does of the internal fabrick of a watch, that only sees the index and horary circle, and perchance hears the clock and alarum strike in it; But he that will give a satisfactory account of the phenomena, must be an artificer indeed, and one well-skilled in the wheel work and internal contrivance of such anatomical engines.”

<sup>106</sup> Hooke, *Micrographia*, p. 133.

nonetheless “gross” similitude.<sup>107</sup> Hooke asks his readers to “[s]uppose a curious piece of Clock-work,” imperatively conjuring forth an image of a mechanical device.<sup>108</sup> He then narrates the process of this supposition, asserting that “[w]e will further suppose” that this clock-work technology is damaged, with its dislocated parts at first impeding the whole function of the device, and that the device is subsequently shaken, dislodging some of the parts obstructing its function, thereby allowing “several of those other motions that yet remain, whose springs were not quite run down, being now at liberty” to “begin each of them to move, thus or thus, but quite after another method then before, there being many regulating parts and the like, fallen away and lost.”<sup>109</sup> So far, Hooke’s extended depiction of this piece of clockwork explains how momentary destruction can give way to new kinds of operation. He then moves to address how an observer, not skilled in the mechanistic mysteries, would perceive these occurrences. At this stage, Hooke tells how “the Owner,” who only “chances to hear and observe some of these effects” and who is “ignorant of the Watch-makers Art,” is left to consider “what is betid his Clock.”<sup>110</sup> The key principle of the clock metaphor is the distinction between the apparent exterior operation of the clock face and the obscure interior motions of the cogs and gears that drive it. Depending upon the philosopher, nature’s clock-like structure either means that observers can only account for the outward motions of the universe, *or* that they can learn the art of the watchmaker, opening up the device to explain how nature’s inner functions produce external phenomena. Hooke’s expedient use of the similitude of the clock suggests his belief that we might adopt the perspective not just of the owner of the clock but of the watchmaker, to see within nature and perhaps to explain it. However, such insight will only come through the lens of an optic glass and not through a

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

figurative comparison. Hooke concludes his similitude by asserting that these clockwork dynamics might be “in the business of Moss and Mould, and Mushrooms, and several other spontaneous kinds of vegetations,” but “this I propound onely as a conjecture.”<sup>111</sup> Hooke qualifies his causal speculations because they have been occasioned by a trick of language and not by empiricism through the glass. Recognizing the expedient utility of reasoning by similitudes, Hooke always insisted upon the grossness of these gestures, returning to what his technologically enhanced senses could tell him and his readers.

Cavendish’s concern about similitudes has a different motivation. Hooke had prioritized the artificial aids to visual apprehension over the discursive tools of linguistic comparison. Cavendish, though, was wary of artifice of all kinds. For her, art was neither a tool nor a model suited to the apprehension of nature in its infinite diversity. Cavendish clarifies that art only alters the particular natures of the things it affects; it does not have an impact upon the grand scheme of nature as a whole. In the *Observations*, she explains this in a parenthetical analogy: “for art is so far from altering infinite nature, that it is no more in comparison to it, than a little fly to an elephant; no not so much, for there is no comparison between finite and infinite.”<sup>112</sup> Cavendish constructs an incommensurate comparison that analogizes nature’s relationship to art in order to convey the scale of difference between them. That difference, though, is categorical, leading Cavendish to retreat from her comparison for fear that she risked reducing it. “[N]o not so much,” she qualifies.<sup>113</sup> Elephantine size fails to encompass the unceasing expanse of infinity, and so the relation of one finite creature to another offers no tenable analogy for the contrast between art and nature. The progress of this linguistic comparison, though, illustrates Cavendish’s deft management of figuration. Language, after all, is a useful tool in the inquiry

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-4

<sup>112</sup> Cavendish, *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, p. 53.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

into nature insofar as its limitations are understood. In Cavendish's view, the fellows of the Royal Society had largely failed to exercise this mindfulness. What Hooke is so careful about in his use of figurative comparisons, he has failed to extend to his use of optical technology. Cavendish, on the contrary, maintains that "those arts are the best and surest informers, that alter nature least."<sup>114</sup> Though she is most concerned with her critique of Hooke's tools, this line encapsulates Cavendish's attitude toward language as well. If we accept Hooke's broad categorization of the types of philosophy, then Cavendish indeed operates as a practitioner of "the Philosophy of *discourse*," if not "*disputation*." With a conscientiousness that arguably excels that of the plain stylists of the Royal Society, Cavendish champions a qualified and situated approach to language, purposefully subordinating it to the limitless scope of nature.

### **"[T]he help of fancy": The Poetics of *The Blazing World***

In his "Letter to Davenant," Hobbes had insisted upon a firm stylistic distinction to mark out poetic discourse from philosophical expression. He argues, "[t]hey that give entrance to Fictions writ in Prose, erre not so much, but they erre."<sup>115</sup> Hobbes suggests that the linguistic charm of verse suits the delight of imaginative fiction, but implicit in this distinction is the sense that prose is the domain of true articulation. While the rise of the novel was to proceed without heeding Hobbes's admonition, his sense of fiction's impropriety in prose was acknowledged by other advocates of neoclassical poetics in the later seventeenth century, such as John Dryden.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Hobbes, "Answer," p. 46. Cf. Sidney, who asserts that "it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet (no more than a long gown maketh an advocate, who though he pleaded in armour should be an advocate and no soldier)," (p. 12).

<sup>116</sup> For the relationship between prose and the novel, see Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1957; Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001), pp. 28-9; and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (1987; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), pp. 52-4. For a neo-classical statement on the impropriety of fiction in prose, see Dryden, "The Authors Apology for Heroique Poetry; and Poetic Licence," in *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man* (London, 1677), Cambridge University

Cavendish resists this stylistic mandate. Her most famous work of poetic fancy, *The Blazing World*, is a fiction written in prose. Transgressing against the discursive principles maintained by Hobbes and Dryden, she fashioned a standard of her own when she attached *The Blazing World* to her *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, showcasing not only the proximity of philosophical expression to poetic fancy, but also the powerful differences between them. Where Cavendish had once used poetic discourse as a safe space to test out philosophical notions without affirming them, in *The Blazing World*, she unleashes the radical capacity of “Poetical or Romancical” expression, powerful precisely because it is unimpeded by the constraints of probable truth. Cavendish eschews the austere temperance exercised by so many poets of the Restoration, limited as they were by standards like Hobbes’s “conceaved possibility of nature.” The growing prudence, perspicuity, and plainness of her philosophical texts only throws into relief her unabashed exploration of poetic figuration in *The Blazing World*.

Aware of the audacity of her project, Cavendish felt the need to justify the shape and placement of *The Blazing World* as an appendix to the *Observations*, especially after she had spent much of the 1660s working to regulate poetic expression in her philosophical writings. Cavendish’s preface to the romance addresses the question of why she would couple a fictional narrative with a sober piece of philosophy: “If you wonder, that I join a work of Fancy to my serious Philosophical Contemplations; think not that it is out of a disparagement to Philosophy; or out of an opinion, as if this noble study were but a Fiction of the Mind.”<sup>117</sup> She burnishes her commitment to the reasonable foundation of philosophy, marking these efforts as distinct from her whimsical forays into fiction. Cavendish had spent much of the decade insisting on the critical importance of affirming her philosophical system as the truest articulation of nature in its

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Library, *Early English Books Online*, n.p. Dryden interprets “*Poetique Licence*” as “the Liberty, which Poets have assum'd to themselves in all ages, of speaking things in Verse, which are beyond the severity of Prose.”

<sup>117</sup> Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, p. 152.

infinite variety. While this manifested in a cautious approach to figurative comparisons and a critical eye for the poetic indiscretions of other philosophers, Cavendish's mindfulness was equally motivated by an investment in the fruitful role of fancy as an adjunct to philosophy.

Cavendish's *Poems, and Fancies* had explored the imagination's capacity to search out possibilities, allowing her to entertain and examine ideas without the burden of truthful affirmation. She had selected a verse genre, with its fictive associations, under the belief that "Errours might better passe there." In *The Blazing World*, though, she revitalizes her earlier indulgence of poetic license, discerning a critical difference between error and fiction. Cavendish asserts that "though Philosophers may err in searching and enquiring after the Causes of Natural Effects, and many times embrace falshoods for Truths; yet this doth not prove, that the Ground of Philosophy is merely Fiction."<sup>118</sup> Cavendish insists upon the need to discern between error and fiction. Errors are common, perhaps inevitable, in philosophical inquiry, a process that Cavendish traces out ontologically. She asserts that

error proceeds from the different motions of Reason, which cause different Opinions in different parts, and in some are more irregular then in others; for Reason being dividable, because material, cannot move in all parts alike; and since there is but one Truth in Nature, all those that hit not this Truth, do err, some more, some less.<sup>119</sup>

While the diversity of nature occasions error, this does not make mistaken lines of inquiry irrational, because "all do ground their Opinions upon Reason; that is, upon rational probabilities, at least, they think they do."<sup>120</sup> There are many errors to be committed, but only one truth to hit upon. Cavendish concedes that the highest aspiration for a philosopher is the probability of truth, the likelihood that one inquiring into nature has reasoned her way close to an

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

accurate account of the universe and its causes and effects.

Fiction, though, is something quite different than a rationalistic error. Cavendish clarifies that

Fictions are an issue of mans Fancy, framed in his own Mind, according as he pleases, without regard, whether the thing, he fancies, be really existent without his mind or not; so that Reason searches the depth of Nature, and enquires after the true Causes of Natural Effects; but Fancy creates of its own accord whatsoever it pleases, and delights in its own work. The end of Reason, is Truth; the end of Fancy, is Fiction.<sup>121</sup>

At this point, Cavendish's account of the philosopher's psychology largely accords with Aristotle's. Errors occur when a thinker has failed to get his thoughts to accord with the world outside of his mind, but fiction is an imaginative production unconcerned with the truths of the world, guided only by the delight and pleasure of the one doing the fancying. Ungrounded from the pursuit of truth to nature, fancy can aspire beyond natural probability toward the larger bounds of possibility. Yet, just as Cavendish seems to have arranged these as contrary impulses, she insists upon a deep interconnection between fancy and reason that belies their apparent opposition. She qualifies the preceding discussion with the caveat, "I mean not as if Fancy were not made by the Rational parts of Matter; but by Reason I understand a rational search and enquiry into the causes of natural effects; and by Fancy a voluntary creation or production of the Mind, both being effects, or rather actions of the rational part of Matter."<sup>122</sup> Cavendish understands the operations of the mind to consist of matter and the notions that they generate inevitably conditioned by the material circumstances that pervade her sense of nature. As whimsical as the effects of the imagination might seem, they are nonetheless governed by the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., pp. 152-3.



structures of materiality, if not reality. Cavendish has no need for a decorous principle to compel fiction to adhere to the “conceived possibility of nature,” the fanciful productions of the mind are ontologically coherent with material nature. In this way, poetic projections potentially offer insights useful to philosophical inquiry.

Cavendish, though, downplays this point in her preface to *The Blazing World*, relying upon the discursive hierarchy that has elevated a work of philosophy over an imaginative fiction. She concedes that a treatise like the *Observations* “is a more profitable and useful study than this, so it is also more laborious and difficult,” and, for the very reason of its grave superiority, such intellectual toil “requires sometimes the help of Fancy, to recreate the Mind, and withdraw it from its more serious Contemplations.”<sup>123</sup> Cavendish suggests that the imagination is capable of recreating the mind, a phrase pregnant with possibility. The immediate sense of the verb “recreate” is to provide with rest and relaxation, a meaning that resonates with Cavendish’s suggestion in *Poems, and Fancies* that poetry is something of a “Pastime.” However, her intimate understanding of the connection between reason and fancy, bound together by the circumstances of material motion, suggests also another connotation to the term. The imagination, after all, is capable of *re-creating*, as much as recreating, the mind. Despite her more humble conclusion, Cavendish implicitly proffers the power of fancy to create the mind anew, that is, to allow a contemplative mind to undergo a process of reconceptualization and, thereby, to adopt perspectives that it might not have been given to heretofore.

*The Blazing World* is the textual embodiment of this recreative principle, which motivated Cavendish to bind the romance together with her more serious philosophical considerations. She asserts that she “joined them as two Worlds at the ends of their Poles; both for my own sake, to divert my studious thoughts, which I employed in the Contemplation

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

thereof, and to delight the Reader with variety, which is always pleasing.”<sup>124</sup> Appended to one another like the multiple worlds depicted in her piece of fiction, Cavendish’s dual texts give herself and her readers the opportunity to embrace variety, gesturing at the vast array of possibilities that exist beyond the philosopher’s narrow path toward singular truth. With *The Blazing World*, Cavendish generates a set of interpretive possibilities that she manages to craft out of an innovative poetics. Her text is generically “hermaphroditical,” to apply the term she imposed upon the products of Hooke’s optical glasses; she asserts that the narrative is part “*Romancical*,” part “*Philosophical*,” “and part “*Fantastical*.”<sup>125</sup> Cavendish avoids even the unearthly fictions already put out into the world by such writers as Lucian of Samosata or Cyrano De Bergerac, cautioning “lest my Fancy should stray too much, I chose such a Fiction as would be agreeable to the subject I treated of in the former parts.”<sup>126</sup> Her innovative choice of “a World of my own Creating” is justified not only on the grounds of novelty, but also on its geniality to the subject of her *Observations*. If there is a clear interpretive foundation to *The Blazing World* it can be found in its shared inception in the mind of Margaret Cavendish. Ambitious though she was, Cavendish is not simply elevating herself. Though she is candid in her desire to be proclaimed “Margaret the *First*,” she qualifies her ambition, establishing the distinctiveness of her poetic creation on grounds beyond self-promotion.<sup>127</sup> Cavendish apologetically insists that she “made a World of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every ones power to do the like.”<sup>128</sup> Indeed, her audacious exhibition of her imaginative power is a means to establish herself as one of a multifarious many, striving for

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. See Nicole Pohl, “‘Of Mixt Natures’: Questions of Genre in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Blazing World*,” in *A Princely Brave Woman*, pp. 51-68.

<sup>126</sup> Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, p. 153.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

singularity, not just for fame, but as a sign of epistemic differentiation. If nature is indeed infinitely various, then the mind trained in discerning diverse patterns, each potentially unlike the next, is well equipped for the work of philosophy. This is precisely that with which Cavendish presents her readers. For her, it is impossible that her poetic fictions adhere to any standard less than the outmost bounds of imaginative creation, because the infinite diversity of nature is in need of continuous and unceasing effort even to begin to apprehend it in probable terms. Only by understanding the extremity of the possible, building worlds unbound by restrictions, can the philosophical mind grasp toward probable truth.

Cavendish takes advantage of her narrative fiction's searching out of limitless poetic possibilities to entertain ideas that she would reject. The satirical threads of *The Blazing World* are invigorated by the text's disregard of likelihood, indulging alternative perspectives in a way that even more thoroughly exposes their flaws. Cavendish's romance operates at times as a narrative form of *reductio ad absurdum*. *The Blazing World* demonstrates the power of poetic figuration to construct imaginative worlds. The fact that these visions of nature do not necessarily accord with reality—that is, that these worlds do not conform to the parameters of the world as it probably is—is precisely the value of the imagination. No finite mind, after all, is capable of accounting for all of nature. And no system of linguistic representation is capacious enough for nature's endless variety. However, we can begin to appreciate the scope of nature by studying, not just what it brings into existence, but also what it enables us to imagine. Cavendish is as aware as any other among the reconstituted ruling class of Restoration England that there is great danger when we mistake what we imagine for what exists. She only asks that the probable be marked as distinct from the possible, or, for that matter, the impossible. She does not use this knowledge to curb hers or any other rational creature's fancy. Where Hobbes was content to

have poetry hew to only those possibilities that have been *conceived*, Cavendish's poetics, embodied in the romance of *The Blazing World*, insists that we construct any and all possibilities that are *conceivable*.

## Conclusion

When Margaret Cavendish made her visit to the Royal Society in 1667, Samuel Pepys and his colleagues failed to comprehend fully the nuances of her intellect and the complexities of the body of work she had amassed. She was simply, in Pepys' words, "all admiration." Outside of the support she received from her husband William and his brother Charles, few men in Restoration England's masculine domain of philosophy paid her thinking the attention it deserved.<sup>129</sup> In addition to missing the substance of her intellectual conceptions, they also did not recognize the dynamic evolution she underwent, especially in terms of her insights into language and its epistemological impact. In an age increasingly wary of the imaginative excesses of philosophical discourse, Cavendish was able to address those concerns in ways that emboldened, rather than marginalized, the role of poetic forms of expression. She reformulated the relationship between reason and fancy, faculties bound together, not by any flimsy observance of decorum, but by the material conditions of which they consist. In light of Cavendish's deft discursive synthesis, the efforts of her contemporaries to impose the plain sensibility upon the poetic imagination seem miscalculated and foolhardy. Instead of conforming to the emergent discursive standards of the Restoration settlement, Cavendish appropriated them in a way that maintained the essence of her distinctive philosophical outlook, one ultimately irreconcilable

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<sup>129</sup> After her death, William Cavendish commissioned many men to write commendatory letters to the late duchess, some of which betray, if not full admiration, then evidence of a small degree of engagement with Margaret Cavendish's ideas. See *Letters and Poems in Honour of the Incomparable Princess, Margaret, Dutchess of Newcastle* (London, 1676), Harvard University Library, *Early English Books Online*.

with the reconstituted artificiality of the new plain style and empirical, experimental science.

When Pepys, in a more charitable moment, had proclaimed that “[t]he whole story of this Lady is a romance,” he failed to see that Cavendish’s intellect and the work she had produced were only partly so. Cavendish had also composed a sophisticated and serious natural philosophy that championed a return to nature as a motivating impulse. To say that “all she doth is romantic,” was to reduce her to a gendered caricature and to ignore the discursive dexterity that she wielded. While the Royal Society’s formulation of the new plain style took hold of philosophical expression and neoclassical standards came to dominate poetics, Cavendish built an alternative discursive dynamic, one that invigorated natural philosophy by ensuring that poetry had a place to call its own.

## Conclusion

In our contemporary world of fiscal cliffs and God particles, the question of “where to place a Metaphor” remains a relevant one. By studying the role of figuration in mid-seventeenth-century England’s intellectual crisis, we can gain insight into the way that language is persistently haunted by its poetic dimensions. We also have the opportunity to explore the strategies that writers and readers use to manage the figurative capacity of words. In addition to adding further nuance to scholarly understandings of a significant moment in the history of the English language and its literature (in the most expansive sense), this dissertation is motivated by an interest in a set of questions surrounding the everyday use of metaphor that continue to have bearing on our present moment. We live in the midst of a prose culture. Not only are most of the texts consumed by modern readers written in prose form, but the larger cultural attitude toward language is invested in a model of referential signification, in which words are seen as only valuable for their capacity to stand in for things. Thomas Sprat’s infamous call for a return to “primitive purity” in discourse was more complex than has been granted, but its basic aspiration for language disambiguated from excess finds resonance with modern utilitarian assumptions about language-use.<sup>1</sup> Deconstructionist revelations about language as play have not made an impact on the way that writers and readers outside of intellectual institutions understand the function of words. While the linguistic turn, as I noted in the Introduction, has dominated scholarship for a century, the everyday conceptions of language remain preoccupied with prose as a window on the world.

One of the truisms of modern American culture speaks directly to this point: “You

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London* (London: 1667), Huntington Library, *Early English Books Online*, p. 113.

campaign in poetry; you govern in prose.”<sup>2</sup> This maxim, popularized over the last three decades, has as much to say about language as it does electoral politics. It uses the perceived discursive gap between the two forms of expression to make a point about the difference between electioneering and governance. The appeals made to garner votes have as much to do with actual policy decisions as a sonnet has with a legal statute. In this analogy, the campaign speech, like the love poem, is superfluous and possibly deceptive in comparison with the utilitarian efficacy of prosaic action.

The present form of this modern proverb, though, somewhat reverses the sentiment it conveyed when it was first uttered. In 1985, New York Governor Mario Cuomo addressed a group of supporters during a speech at Yale University, saying, “The truth is we campaign in poetry, but when we’re elected we’re forced to govern in prose.”<sup>3</sup> In its original formulation, Cuomo’s line admits another reading. The compulsion toward the prose of the world suggests perhaps that, ideally, we might be permitted to remain within the realm of poetic articulation. For liberal Democrats in the Reagan years, this sentiment might have resonated with a tantalizing facet of Cuomo’s persona. Just a year earlier, the governor had delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. At a time when Ronald Reagan’s brand of conservatism seemed to have gripped the nation, Cuomo’s full-throated defense of traditional liberalism earned him a great deal of admiration on the Left. When the *Wall Street Journal* eulogized him early in 2015, Cuomo was called “the Democratic Party’s liberal poet.”<sup>4</sup> Poetry’s exciting possibilities, though, are generally dismissed and denigrated in the now common paraphrase of

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Kolbert, “Postscript: Mario Cuomo (1932-2015),” *The New Yorker*, January 1, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/postscript-mario-cuomo/>, quotes the conventional form of the expression in her obituary of Cuomo.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Carroll, “Cuomo, at Yale, Urges Democrats to Remain with Tested Principles,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Vilensky and Josh Dawsey, “Mario Cuomo, a Liberal Voice and Practical Eye for Progress: A Gifted Orator Whose Accomplishments Never Quite Reached the Heights of His Rhetoric,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/mario-cuomo-a-liberal-voice-and-practical-eye-for-progress-1420246763/>.

Cuomo's line.

It is no small irony that an expression that would seem to laud the inevitable, clear-eyed utility of prose, is itself subject to the same interpretive fortunes as any phrase tapping into the figurative dimensions of language. As my re-interpretation of Cuomo's line suggests, poetic possibilities lurk within even the plainest statements. These can be unlocked, as the treatises and tracts of the seventeenth century make clear, through the act of acknowledging the metaphoricity of a metaphor. In the English Civil Wars, John Milton and his parliamentary comrades understood the polemical power of dismantling the language of their opponents. They could not risk allowing the debates of the day to remain within the "cool element of prose," a register of meaning in which the ideological assumptions of the powerful are taken as the plain and proper foundation of discourse.<sup>5</sup> Interpretation becomes a radical tool for hunting out the figurative dimensions of language, opening up possibilities foreclosed by the cultural establishment. Our own moment is gripped by the tyrannical logic of "say what you mean and mean what you say." Noticing and exploiting the nonliteral levels of linguistic meaning, we can begin to highlight poetics as something other than an embellishment upon what is otherwise taken as plain sense.

After all, meaningful understanding can only come from conceptions of language that are shared. The work of a poet in prose, exercising the "eye for resemblances" in the service of truly apprehending the world, requires participation.<sup>6</sup> Even figuratively reinterpreted language can only achieve coherence when its significance is shared. Thomas Hobbes pursued this insight even as other defenders of the establishment had come to fear the poetic possibilities of figurative expression. Feeling their ideological hold on the discourse slip amidst historical

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<sup>5</sup> John Milton, *Reason of Church-Government*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), 1.808.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, 1459a, *Poetics*, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 23, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1932), *The Perseus Digital Library Project*.



upheaval, Hobbes's would-be allies worried that metaphor might affirm a vast range of interpretations. Hobbes shared their concerns, but he also saw that figuration contained within it the remedy to the very problem that they feared it would exacerbate. By approaching metaphorical images as manifestly poetic uses of language, Hobbes demonstrated that linguistic artifice was the key to ensuring the continued integration of an interpretive community. The chaos of subjective perspectives could be averted by exposing the mechanisms of language and the culture that rests upon it. While Hobbes's absolutist state is hardly a social vision worth aspiring to, his realization of the participatory nature of poetic figuration suggests the importance of disclosing the layers of potential meaning that can exist within the everyday transactions of prose. The kind of precision and clarity aspired to by those who assume language to be, at its best, a transparent system of utilitarian communication can, in fact, only be pursued by readers and writers, listeners and speakers who take responsibility for words as material artifacts that must be crafted and used with great care.

There is, of course, a long tradition of skepticism toward the careful manipulation of language. Rhetorical persuasion continues to be regarded with suspicion, because it is seen as a tool whereby a skillful user of words can control others. Much of this discomfort derives from the perceived asymmetry between the actors involved—a canny speaker knowingly deceiving an audience of unwary listeners. Sometimes, though, rhetorical exchanges occur within communities aware of the limitations of both language and thought. Because of these limits, the pursuit of knowledge must be a participatory exercise, requiring the conscientious use of words to formulate a viable epistemological position. Thomas Browne models this predicament. As a natural philosopher in an age in which nearly every intellectual foundation had been shaken, Browne was quite aware of the human propensity for error and of language's tendency to

aggravate the problem. He explicitly made recourse to rhetoric, regarding figurative expression as a function of the “soft and flexible sense” of interpretation that it could cultivate.<sup>7</sup> Largely jettisoning rhetoric’s association with persuasion, Browne formulated a rhetoric of the imagination, which was keyed, not to asymmetries of knowledge between individual observers, but to the collective horizon of understanding shared by all. Embracing empirical science’s collaborative spirit, he managed to synthesize ambition and humility to construct an epistemology of wariness. However, as poetic as his expressions sometimes seem, Browne was reluctant to call them such. While the distinction between rhetoric and poetics might seem immaterial in a cultural context eager to set aside all uses of words that fall below what Browne called “the rigid test of reason,” it has significant implications for us.<sup>8</sup> When early modern thinkers encountered the uncertain contact zone between the two arts, they were forced to confront questions about degrees of veracity, forcing some to recognize just how socially determined such epistemic standards are. Though these considerations are generally motivated by the desire to avoid falsehood altogether, they can also lead to the recognition of value within expressions dislocated from the truth.

Running in direct opposition to prose’s persistent associations with reality, realism, and reference, the poetic range that figuration cultivates can, by resisting socially imposed standards of mimetic decorum, search out possibilities beyond the ken of every other form of discourse. Rejecting commitments to necessity, probability, or even utility, the poetic dynamics of language might be capable of reaching the outmost bounds of human apprehension. Margaret Cavendish demonstrates this point when she registers her dissatisfaction with nearly every form of natural philosophy pursued in her age. Her ambitious pursuit of singularity was not only compelled by a

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<sup>7</sup> Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Penquin, 1977), pp. 57-162, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

desire for fame but also by a voracious curiosity that managed to touch speculative heights left unpursued by her contemporaries. Cavendish did not simply make philosophical claims that others were unwilling to make; she saw the power of an imaginative inquiry that dared to err. Cloaking herself in poetry, Cavendish's career as a natural philosopher began in poetic verse, but ended with a perspicuously articulated treatise published alongside one of the strangest pieces of prose fiction in the period. Her desire for knowledge was spurred on by a fervent belief that nature was infinitely diverse. While she worried that figurative comparisons in serious philosophical texts threatened to reduce that limitless scope to a set of patterns accommodated to language, her "romancical" compositions were liberated in a manner obsessed with using prose to exhaust all of the imaginative possibilities available.<sup>9</sup>

Many scholarly discussions of prose begin by citing a charming episode from Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670). I will end mine with it. Written at the close of the three-decade stretch addressed in this project, but in a country in which the king's head had firmly remained on his shoulders, this French play depicts the follies of Monsieur Jourdain, a social climber attempting to rise to noble status. In the midst of his gentlemanly education, Jourdain's philosophy master teaches him about the nature of prose and verse. "There is nothing but prose or verse?" he asks. When the master explains the discursive distinction between the two, a puzzled Jourdain continues his inquiries, "And when one speaks, what is that then?" The master's response: "Prose." Jourdain is astonished, declaring "By my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it."<sup>10</sup> This moment in the play satirizes both the ignorance of an upstart and the absurdity of philosophical distinctions applied to everyday practices. Jourdain's surprise, though, says something about the nature of discourse.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, in *Don Juan and Other Plays*, trans. George Graveley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 281.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Prose is what we think language does when no one is looking. Once we acknowledge it as a form, once we recognize that it is something beyond the meanings it is meant to deliver, then we have to take language's non-literal dimensions seriously. The polemicists and philosophers of mid-seventeenth-century England understood this well. Though most were reluctant to recognize this dynamic explicitly within their treatises and tracts, there were some, like Milton and Hobbes, Browne and Cavendish, who perceived meaningful opportunities in the exploration of language's figurative dimensions. Their prose writings reveal to us both the excitement and the fear of confronting the possibility that, all along, we may have been speaking poetry without knowing anything about it.

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