

# Some help with Kerrigan: "One First Matter All': Spirit As Energy"

These notes (supplemented by the adjacent vocabulary list) are intended to help walk you through a long and fairly challenging but (in my opinion) very rich argument by William Kerrigan. In them, I've picked out some of the denser passages for summary so that, if you wish, you can skip over them; these are mostly passages that refer extensively to other texts or other bodies of knowledge, probably unfamiliar to many of you.

91-96 (skip or skim): in these opening pages of the essay, through an extended comparison with Edmund Spenser (author of *The Faerie Queene*, 1590), Kerrigan argues that Milton's poem differs from Spenser's long and rambling romance because in it, certain especially "privileged" or "authoritative" passages -- he refers to them as "**the enfolded sublime**" -- give us "axioms" or "authoritative instructions" for how to understand the larger work that contains them. As he comments on 94, readers will of course disagree about which passages should be taken to determine the interpretation of the whole. His key passage, for the purposes of this essay, is Raphael's speech in book 5 beginning "O Adam, one almighty is." Have a look at that speech, and then begin reading roughly at the top of page 96.

96-98 "poetry continues at a higher echelon" what the "inner alchemist", digestion, does for food -- refining, heightening, and making sublime the materials of our experience. When Raphael tells Adam that he will narrate the war in Heaven by "likening spiritual to corporal forms", these lines should be understood with reference to the prior discussion about food, a corporeal thing that we "refine" into something more spiritual every day. When he suggests that things on earth may be "the shadow of heaven," this must be meant in a particular way: not that things on earth are less real than things in heaven, as shadows are less real than the objects that cast them (that is the **Platonic or Neoplatonic** view of objects as being merely shadows of a transcendental reality) -- but instead that things on earth are precursors to things in heaven, as Christians have believed that persons and events in the Hebrew Bible were "**types**" of persons and events in the New Testament. (For instance, that passages in Psalms about the king of the Israelites are *also* a veiled prophecy about Jesus). A type has its own concrete, historical reality, but also "points to" something beyond itself. Throughout the essay, the terms "Platonic" or "Neoplatonic" can be understood as pointing to systems of belief in which, broadly speaking, bodies are **different** from, inferior to, and less real than souls, ideas, or meanings. On Kerrigan's argument, Milton holds the opposite view (below).

99: Milton's **exegesis** (interpretation) of the Bible in *Christian Doctrine* led him to the "**monist heresy**" that the universe is not made up of two kinds of things (bodies and spirits, carnality and spirituality) -- that would be dualism -- but of a *single* kind of thing that exists in various gradations. Body and spirit are on a continuum, and matter is to some extent spiritual. You don't need to pay attention to the material on Hobbes and Descartes, but he's making the point that this belief about the nature of being (**ontology**) has consequences for metaphor. We often create

metaphors using things we can see and touch as ways of describing and thinking about things we can't see and touch; Kerrigan argues that in Milton's poem, the materiality of spirit and the spirituality of matter makes such metaphors *not* imperfect ways of talking about a whole other dimension, but revealing windows into the fundamental connections between these levels of experience.

105-7 (skip or skim): here begins another somewhat difficult passage, as Kerrigan begins the more **psychoanalytic part of his argument**. Here are the basic points: we had observed that Milton sometimes seems like a kid who is still very interested in secrets about how things work, and in "the categories of familiar experience" -- thus you get all these questions like, how do Angels fight, how do Angels have sex, do Angels poo, etc.. In fact, (he argues), the sources of this poem are not only in Milton's announced, conscious, adult desire -- a perfectly rational and general one -- "to justify the ways of God to man", but also come from childhood and the unconscious: "reason does not initiate the desire for meaning."

What are those pre-rational sources of a desire to find meaning, to understand something? Kerrigan argues that Milton's blindness felt like being punished by God the father for something he had not done, but only wanted to do; in other words, that he understood his blindness, at some deep level, in a way that reiterated the experience of early childhood. The "**oedipal child**" discovers that he can't feel pleasure *all the time* (Freud associates that kind of pleasure with the experience of being an infant sucking at the mother's breast, and unaware of being separate from the source of pleasure); he interprets these new limits as being imposed by the father, and understands them as a punishment for his desire to have pleasure from the mother. (This punitive experience of being cut off from what you thought was a pleasurable part of your own body characteristically is represented in dreams, fantasies, or myths as castration, or blinding). The adult relationship to God recapitulates the infant's relationship to the father at another level, and just as the infant submits to the father's law (because the father is stronger, but also because he loves him), so the adult accepts the justice of God's punishment but with "the positive expectation of regaining in the future" some version of what he's given up. We may restrain our desires in this life with the hope of having them satisfied in heaven if we are good -- Kerrigan argues that Milton must have hoped that if he accepted the justice of his loss, God would somehow restore to him the world of visible objects that his blindness had taken away.

107-11: you may find this part cool if you're interested in physiology -- otherwise, skip or skim it and just read the summary.

Milton's time had inherited from the ancient Greeks certain ideas about the body, what made it alive, and how it related to the soul. One system of thinking, derived from the Greek physician Galen, imagined that the body was animated by three "**medical spirits**" (these are distinct from the soul, and relate only to the body): the liver generated "natural spirits" that cause you to be alive; the heart generated "vital spirits" that cause the various emotions and passions; the brain generated "animal spirits" that cause thought. These spirits operate very much like blood or other fluids circulating within the body. In the passage from book 5 quoted on 110, Kerrigan notices that Milton has added a fourth, "intellectual" spirit -- in this framework, the animal spirits take care of reasoning while the intellectual spirits (before the fall) cause intuitive knowledge. Angels characteristically know things intuitively, while Adam and Eve made more use of

reasoning. The fall, however, especially impaired man's intellectual spirits. Beginning with "Satan twice attacks the spirits of Man", Kerrigan begins looking at evidence suggesting that among other things, the Fall inaugurated a disease process (it was "**pathogenic**") affecting the entire human system and all its components. Due to this disease process, man will no longer have the possibility gradually to refine himself so as, for instance, to be able to eat angelic food, inhabit angelic realms and know intuitively as angels do. (That was "**the Pelagian program of Renaissance hermeticism**" (112), an esoteric belief that original sin was not transmittable, and thus human beings were capable of perfecting themselves). Instead, he will be dragged down into the physical body, towards "brute matter".

115-17: this part of the essay seems especially critical to me. What Kerrigan calls "**voluntarism**" is an idea that God's commands are arbitrary expressions of his absolute power and will (Latin: *voluntas*) unconstrained by any need to make sense. The idea that some people are pre-destined for salvation or damnation long before they are born would be an example. The commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge may or may not be an example, and that's the question being discussed here.

118: Marvell's poem (it was part of the prefatory material for *Paradise Lost*) compares Milton to the character of Samson in one of Milton's other works, who pulled a temple down to ruins in order to revenge his blinding. He wonders whether Milton might not feel a similar aggressive impulse towards God. Kerrigan: in writing *Paradise Lost* Milton engaged in a "**purgative denial**" of his possible anger against God -- he thinks through the meaning of his blindness by making it into a version of what has happened to all of us as a consequence of Adam's experience, so that Adam (who works through things and accepts his punishment as just) becomes a surrogate in the poem for Milton as a historical individual rather than as a generic human being.

119-24: Kerrigan thinks about what vision and blindness mean in the poem, and why it was critical for Milton to imagine heaven as (in however refined a way) a material place. I find this part of the essay useful in thinking about what inspiration, intuition, creativity meant to Milton.

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