Rancière Lost: On John Milton and Aesthetics

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The ideas of eternity and infinity are among the most affecting we have; and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity.

Edmund Burke

The Argument

England falsifies France; or, English falsifies French. The English Revolution of the mid seventeenth century accomplished, well over a century before the American and French Revolutions, the legal execution of a monarch and the installation of a new form of republic. John Milton, radical puritan, polemicist and poet, was instrumental in that (qualified) English success. Proselytiser for divorce, new kinds of education, the extrication of religion from the state, and epic poet, Milton produced work which at once exemplifies many of the theses proffered by Jacques Rancière regarding politics, education and aesthetics – as he exceeds and falsifies them. This chapter will discuss a late pamphlet of John Milton titled Of True Religion, in order to suggest how Milton confronts and rebukes Rancière’s theories of disagreement, ignorant masters and the distributions of the sensible, not only by contravening many of the latter’s demonstrations and arguments, but in anticipating them. The key points of the exposition will hinge on Milton’s doctrines of indiscernibility, infinity and decision. In doing so, this chapter shows how Rancière’s three regimes seem unable to account for a fourth modality, transversal to his own.
Distributions of the sensible

Rancière opens his brilliant book *Aisthesis* (2011) with a reiteration of his by-now well-known position. ‘For two centuries in the West’, Rancière asserts, ‘“aesthetics” has been the name for the category designating the sensible fabric and intelligible form of what we call “Art” […] Art as a notion designating a form of specific experience has only existed in the West since the end of the eighteenth century.’¹ Rancière’s historicisation, dating ‘aesthetics’ proper to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, is in itself quite uncontroversial, corresponding to revolutionary, industrial, Romantic bourgeois modernity. Thinkers as different as Alain Badiou, Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann would also agree, with the requisite nuances.²

Indeed, the term ‘aesthetics’ is itself of perhaps surprisingly recent coinage. First deployed by Alexander Baumgarten in his treatises on *Metaphysics* (1739) and *Aesthetica* (1750), the term derives from the Greek *aisthasthai*, ‘to perceive’, *aesthesis*, ‘perception’, and *aisthetikos*, ‘capable of perception’.³ The modern philosophy of aesthetics is thereby born and borne on the basis of a Germanic Latin Attic etymologising, as at once act, fact and capacity of a subject – if not necessarily that of a *human* subject, as we shall see. What is striking in this context is that Baumgarten, the coiner of the neologism, directs it towards an end in which the perfection of sense cognition is to be identified with beauty.

Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* remarks that Baumgarten, in replacing with ‘aesthetics’ what other European theorists had previously simply called ‘taste’, had thereby hoped to be able to bring aesthetics under a rational principle. ‘The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word “aesthetics” to designate that which others call the critique of taste,’ Kant writes, immediately adding: ‘The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science.’⁴ At the very inception of Kant’s own critical project, then, is the diagnosis of such a ‘failed hope’ as an occasion which licenses a new, stringent and purified division of reason. The first *Critique* notoriously takes up Baumgarten’s term in order to give it an entirely different destiny, in the form of the transcendental aesthetic: space and time are no longer empirical concepts drawn from experience, but the pure and empty forms
of possible experience in general, ‘the pure forms of all sensible intuition’, which ‘thereby make possible synthetic a priori propositions’.\(^5\) The transcendental aesthetic is key to Kant’s re-articulation of the metaphysical relation between spontaneity and receptivity in the first *Critique*.

Yet Kant, as we know, cannot remain happy with his own radical de-rationalisation of the aesthetic condition. By 1790, he has significantly altered his position, which involves yet another re-uptake of Baumgarten’s proposals. For the Kant of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, a return to ‘aesthetics’ requires a revaluation of the domination of cognitive operations, above all the requirement of determinative judgement. If only the understanding is ‘capable of affording constitutive a priori principles of knowledge’, it cannot be the case that judgement is absolutely foreign to concepts. Reflective judgement works rather with particulars, from which it moves upwards towards universality; in doing so, it requires a non-empirical principle, which can be given only as a law to and by means of itself. Such legislation, Kant remarks, is properly ‘heautonomous’, ‘since the power of judgment […] is not a faculty for producing concepts of objects, but only for comparing present cases to others’.\(^6\) As such, ‘aesthetics’ now has a double destiny in Kant: at once the condition of possibility of any phenomenon in general, and also the name for that which is ‘purely subjective in the representation of an object’, that is, the affect of pleasure or displeasure connected with the form of such an object.\(^7\)

But it is precisely the logic of such a metaphysical splitting that Rancière will shatter. The aesthetic symptom is legible in this split between a transcendental operation constitutionally foreign to concepts and a self-reflexivity which passes through yet exceeds any conceptual capture. If Rancière’s historicisation of the emergence of aesthetics is unremarkable in itself, one cannot say the same for his singular conception of the organisation and operations of the aesthetic as such. As he points out, precisely in regard to Baumgarten and Kant, ‘It is only in the context of Romanticism and post-Kantian idealism […] that aesthetics comes to designate the thought of art, even as the inappropriateness of the term is constantly remarked.’\(^8\) For Rancière, then, aesthetics designates a regime of treating art that considers ‘confused knowledge is no longer a lesser form of knowledge but properly the thought of that which does not think’.\(^9\) Aesthetics undermines every received hierarchy of knowledge by displacing the process of real thinking...
into and onto phenomena that have no acceptable essence in themselves.

It is this paradox that helps to differentiate the properly distinct regimes in which ‘art’ has been treated in the West. In *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Rancière identifies three different philosophical distributions of the arts. The first, ‘Platonic’ or ‘ethical’, separates ‘the application of forms of knowledge founded on the imitation of models’ from their simulacra; in this modality, what is at stake is not ‘art’ per se, but the problematic of a philosophical education. In the Aristotelian regime, by contrast, the criteria for art are delivered by the *mimesis/poiesis* distinction: imitation at once picks out a specific class within the arts, functions as a normative principle which evaluates whether imitations are in fact art, and enables comparisons between different kinds of imitation. This is what Rancière will also call the ‘representative regime of the arts’. Finally, there is the aesthetic realm proper. In this realm, mimesis no longer hinges on resemblance but serves to separate art from non-art according to a novel paradox:

all the new, *aesthetic* definitions of art that affirm its autonomy in one way or another say the same thing, affirm the same paradox: that art is henceforth recognizable by its lack of any distinguishing characteristics – by its indistinction. Its products perceptibly manifest a quality of a thing that is *made* that is identical with the *not made*, a *known* thing identical to the *unknown*, a *willed* thing identical with the *unwilled*. With this, art at last positively comes within the ambit of truth.

In the aesthetic regime, we no longer have proper or improper subjects as such. On the contrary, anything whatsoever can be represented (in a certain sense, at least), and beyond the dominion of any particular form, genre or judgement.

If Rancière’s local interpretations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artworks, education and political action are usually strikingly persuasive in themselves – a feature that even hostile commentators seem chary of not mentioning – so too are his criticisms of contemporaneous philosophers of aesthetics. Not only can he write with an extraordinary eye for detail with regard to Wordsworth, Balzac, Rimbaud and Proust, not to mention Loïe Fuller, Dziga Vertov and Peter Behrens, but he identifies, with extreme incisiveness, the weak points and inconsistencies, the unjustifiable or contradictory presuppositions of thinkers such as
Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and Louis Althusser. With regard to rival thinkers of the arts, he tends to do this precisely by pinpointing their adherence to a distribution of the sensible that is not up to, that refuses, or that poorly comprehends the radicality of the aesthetic regime. Hence Lyotard will be shown to misunderstand the stakes of the unrepresentable, or Badiou will be shown to reinject illicitly the Platonic stakes of education into his account of art.\(^\text{12}\) Rancière sums up the global context of what he calls ‘the ethical turn’: ‘the subsumption of all forms of discourse and practice beneath the same indistinct point of view.’\(^\text{13}\) The rejection of aesthetics in the name of ethics is therefore not at all a salvific arrival, as its adherents claim, but, à la Lyotard, a transubstantiation of trauma into a new theology of time. Where ‘ethics’ indiscriminates all presentations with reference to an alleged arché that exempts itself globally from appearances, the works of aesthetics locally present an indiscrimination of sense and sensibility in their trans-formal apparition.

That there is something exorbitantly democratic about the creations of an aesthetic regime should be evident from Rancière’s close readings not only of aesthetic works proper but of political action proper. As he puts it in ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, after having separated the practice of politics proper from the exercise or even pursuit of power, as a rupture with the police, and the subject of politics as a participation in contraries: ‘Democracy is not a political regime. As a rupture in the logic of the arché, that is, of the anticipation of ruling in its disposition, it is the very regime of politics itself as a form of relationship that defines a specific subject.’\(^\text{14}\) For Rancière, then, it is the emergence of ‘dissensus’ as a ‘deviation’ or ‘anomaly’ that manifests the originary dehiscence of the social order itself that is ‘the essence of politics’. Jean-Luc Nancy summarises Rancière’s doctrine of the relation of art and politics:

His conjunction of the two carefully avoids subsuming one into the other. Art is articulated as the representation of assemblages according to which the sensible is distributed, and politics is the reworking of these assemblages by means of litigation or disagreements that open up, in the (in principle) egalitarian community, the inequality of the community or the ‘people’ within itself. Art and politics are joined and distributed as two orders of ‘fictions’: one is a representation of the distribution, and the other is its reworking.\(^\text{15}\)
Although Rancière’s work on education is not the focus of Nancy’s attention here, its implications should nonetheless be underlined in such a context. Indeed, the former’s commitment to equality is such that the slightest traces of hierarchy must be pursued to their most insidious asylum and alibi: that education is impossible without at least a mandatory detour through the asymmetries of a master-pupil dialectic, in which the master is, as Jacques Lacan might say, the subject-supposed-to-know. But it is the supposition of a transfer of knowledge as the ineluctable modality of the pedagogical that Rancière rejects. As Rancière puts it in the extraordinary text that is *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: when the revolutionary pedagogue Joseph Jacotot realise the ‘enforced stultification’ of the ‘explicative system’ of education, ‘emancipation’ emerges when he unlocks ‘the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will’.  

As Alain Badiou has phrased the questions that emerge from this aspect of Rancière’s work, ‘what is the new figure of the master that results if one excludes all the validation of institutional authority? Are there masters outside of the institution? Are there masters at all?’ Rancière’s response to this limit educational conundrum – that equality induces mastery to become a shared non-mastery of experimental ignorance – is also the intellectual operator that enables him to characterise education as precisely a mode of linking dissensual-politics-as-emancipation and aesthetic-creation-as-egalitarian. Yet Rancière does not relate these three ‘themes’ according to the teleologies inscribed in representative or ethical regimes, or according to a stabilised or ordered set of relations. On the contrary, this triplet is precisely radically unstable and destabilising. Politics-Education-Aesthetics: this is Rancière’s own, utterly atheistic version of Trinity.

The finitude of aesthetics

If Rancière’s account of the modern aesthetic regime is persuasive and singular, it nonetheless shares, in addition to its periodisations, one other very significant feature with the tradition with which it otherwise breaks. This feature is one underlined and valorised by Martin Heidegger, and subsequently underlined and repudiated by Badiou: its finitude. One can easily illustrate this apparently essential aspect of all talk of aesthetics by adverting again to Kant. What is perhaps not always sufficiently emphasised
about the third *Critique* is the peculiar status that it assigns to aesthetic phenomena, whether of beauty or of sublimity. In a word, they are *inexistent*. Why? Because they are the consequences of forms-of-representation, without being forms of representation. Strictly speaking, neither phenomena nor noumena, the alleged ‘forms’ about which we make attributions of beauty, are in fact the unmarked markings of the subjective activity of the faculties, the spontaneous operators of mind that invariably disappear themselves in and as an essential part of their operations. But, as such, they must be inherently bound to finitude, just as Heidegger has emphasised, if here with a different inflection.

But this is also something that Rancière has to accept alongside the recuperation of the radicality of aesthetics: that it is simultaneously necessarily a question of finitude. An ‘artwork’ – if that name is still legitimate for the productions of the aesthetic regime – is exemplarily finite. This has consequences for its canonical status. Whereas his presentation of two other major regimes of the distribution of the sensible are indexed to the most ancient philosophical authorities, those of Plato and Aristotle, the sponsors of the aesthetic regime are at once anonymous and polynymous. As I have already noted, Rancière ensures that, whatever its links to Baumgarten and Kant, those names are by no means determining for the constitution of what he means by aesthetics. Rather, it is following the Romantic revisions of German Idealism that aesthetics is established. Nor does this happen quite as is proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in their *The Literary Absolute*, in which the birth of modern literature must be conceived of as the bastard love-child of philosophy and literary criticism. On the contrary, the aesthetic distribution Rancière outlines precisely cannot be reduced to a novel literary compact with the *philosophical*, although it remains the case that Rancière does give literature a certain priority in this regard.

Moreover, Rancière at once gives a rough temporal order of emergence to his three distributions – the ethical preceding the representative preceding the aesthetic – as he shows their competitive, coterminous tendencies. So modernism becomes an attempt to curb and counteract the aesthetic regime from within, reinjecting ethical elements into the disorderly house of aesthetics. As such, Rancière’s approach is neither strictly epochal nor topological, but investigates the supple ceaseless interweaving of the immanent struggles concerning sensorial practices at the level of distribution.
But this is, again, to insist on the absolute finitude of such practices even in their aesthetic delimitations.

If there is evidently more to be said about this feature of finitude, one significant aspect in the present context goes directly back to the origin of the nomination of aesthetics as such. Baumgarten’s project expressly arises as a response to the radical developments of seventeenth-century philosophy, to that of Descartes, Spinoza and especially Leibniz. These thinkers had precisely introduced the category of the infinite into rationalist philosophy in what we might too-briefly name a post-religious and post-theological sense. What Descartes or Spinoza nominate, for example, as the ‘infinity’ of God no longer has very much to do with their theological predecessors. Aesthetics as a philosophical category was thus born after the intrusion of the infinite into thought. One might certainly see a reaction-formation in this coinage: against the infinite of thought, philosophy comes to inject the limiting aesthesis of the body. But one might just as well see a continuity or exacerbation of the demands of the infinite: aesthetics as the name for the consequences of the intrusion of the thought of infinity into the body itself. If, as Paul de Man suggests, aesthetics was ubiquitous before finitude, its very ubiquity entailing that it went unnamed as such, it could only be as finitude that the term ‘aesthetics’ could emerge. This may further suggest that the moment of the nomination of aesthetics was the moment of its decisive restriction, if not its disappearance. This would have the appearance of a paradox: aesthetics appears as such, is only or can only be named as such, at the moment it is no longer itself. Modern aesthetics would be the mere remainder of itself, a finite residue of its own foreclosed infinity.

So if, at the very historical moment prior to the nomination of aesthetics as such, the infinite had explicitly entered thought as counter-theological strike, this is surely one of the critical consequences of the Copernican Revolution. But this thought – Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz – was also, as Badiou notes in the Handbook of Inaesthetics, absolutely disinterested in thinking what we would now call art, and a fortiori the study of art qua aesthetics. Is there, then, at this moment, a form of rationalist thought that at once incorporates infinity and thinks ‘aesthetically’? I believe there is: an exemplary variant can be found in the work of the great English poet and political writer John Milton.

In the present context, I want to suggest that a certain attention to Milton’s work can demonstrate the effective actuality of a
thinking of art that does not conform to Rancière’s historical or conceptual division of regimes.

The paradox of Milton

To my knowledge, Rancière never discusses the writings of John Milton directly. In fact, his only mentions of Milton come up in the course of separating two senses of what it means to be ‘unrepresentable’:

To declare that a given subject is unrepresentable by artistic means is in fact to say several things at once. It can mean that the specific means of art, or of such-and-such an art, are not adequate to represent a particular subject’s singularity. This is the sense in which Burke once declared that Milton’s description of Lucifer in *Paradise Lost* was unrepresentable in painting. The reason was that its sublime aspect depended upon the duplicitous play of words that do not really let us see what they pretend to show us.22

Salient as this remark is in the context – Rancière is arguing against the confused ‘ethical’ deployment of motifs of the ‘unrepresentable’ as forms of theological transcendence – it does raise two or three points that need to be marked. First of all, the issue that Burke raises seems to concern the specific presentational powers of different materials and media, along lines that would later be concretised by theorists such as Clement Greenberg. One might therefore propose that Greenberg is a belated and disavowed Burkean. However, as Rancière notes elsewhere, explicitly comparing Schiller to Greenberg, the former’s position ‘proves to be somewhat more complicated than the modernist paradigm, which seeks to emphasize the work’s material autonomy’.23 As ever, Rancière insists on rebuking all attempts to reduce the aesthetic work to ethics or representation, however close they may otherwise seem to be. Second, Rancière’s invocation of Burke here doesn’t make it quite clear – unlike in Schiller’s case – whether Burke is a Classicist or a Romantic, a representative of the representative regime or the aesthetic regime. It is, however, clear, third, that Rancière is not really speaking about Milton or his poetry as such, but about Burke’s remarks about Milton. This indifference to Milton ‘himself’ is confirmed a few pages on when Rancière remarks:
The film *Shoah* is therefore not to be opposed to the televised *Holocaust* in the way that an art of the unrepresentable is to an art of representation. The rupture with the classical order of representation does not translate into the advent of an art of the unrepresentable. On the contrary, it is a freeing up with regard to the norms that prohibited the representation of Laocoön’s suffering and the sublime aspect of Milton’s Lucifer. These norms of representation defined the unrepresentable.24

Am I mistaken to discern a certain slippage in Rancière’s argument? From a citation of Burke’s remarks on Milton, Rancière has reiterated his doctrine of partial supersession of regimes by taking Burke’s comments as at once true of Milton and as revealing Burke’s own adherence to classicism. The representational regime that Rancière believes dominated the seventeenth century or classical age – and thus, if we are to take strict contemporaneity seriously, Milton’s work too – is displaced by the aesthetic regime, which no longer in principle or practice prohibits the re-uptake of the sublimity of Lucifer (rather: Satan) into the sphere of visual representation.25 Yet the struggles against aesthetics by its rivals continue to the present, embodied in works of art themselves, such that one work exhibits its solidarity with an ethical outlook, another its participation in aesthetics proper.

Yet one of the many odd things about these remarks of Rancière’s is that Milton’s great epic poem *Paradise Lost* is notorious for itself bringing into the ambit of representation the most extraordinarily diverse and surprising subjects, not just in its depictions of Lucifer (or Satan) himself, but in those of Satan’s daughter/paramour Sin and his son/grandson Death, not to mention God’s disquisitions in heaven with his Son, as well as any number of other unexpected themes, including the length of Adam and Eve’s hair in Paradise, proper attitudes to gardening, and various forms of sexual congress.26 This in itself might seem to make *Paradise Lost* a rather unexpected candidate for inclusion in the classical or representative regime, not least because it would immediately seem to rupture with all that regime’s hallmarks. There is a constant experimental commingling of genres, from the prose arguments that were inserted before each book of blank verse in the poem, whose metre is an expressly poetico-political rebellion against the supposed ‘bondage of rhyme’, to the astonishing constant shift between incorporated allegories, lyrics, soliloquys and so on.27
There is a motivated assault upon all received divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, and so on.

In *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière examines Corneille’s *Oedipus* of 1659 and Voltaire’s *Lettres sur Oedipe* of 1719. For Rancière, what is significant about both writers – despite their temperamental, stylistic and chronological differences – is their incapacity not to tamper with the Sophoclean model. ‘For Corneille and Voltaire’, Rancière writes,

> this scenario established a defective relation between what is seen and what is said, between what is said and what is understood. Too much is shown to the spectator. This excess, moreover, is not merely a question of the disgusting spectacle of the gouged-out eyes; it concerns the mark of thought upon the body more generally. Above all, the scenario allows too much to be understood.\(^{28}\)

Corneille’s and Voltaire’s attitudes are certainly in solidarity with Dr Johnson’s notorious reservations about *Paradise Lost*; he offers almost exactly the same reasons for such reservations.\(^{29}\) But there is a very significant difference: Milton was not an ancient Greek, but an almost-exact contemporary of Corneille.

Then again, nor was Milton French; nor was he a Catholic; nor was he a playwright. He was a radical puritan English political pamphleteer and poet. But these denominations don’t just place Milton in a different national, linguistic, political, religious or literary space that nonetheless might still be seen as continuous with what Rancière describes as the representative regime. Rather, they should force the acknowledgement that another kind of work is under way, one that already substantially conforms to the criteria Rancière gives to the aesthetic, yet is not quite exhausted by them. Certainly, ‘English exceptionality’ is widely accepted in the study of the seventeenth century, whether one considers England as the home of the first true modern nationalists or the first modern revolutionaries or the first modern literary figures as such.\(^{30}\) But rather than make general claims for the English exception, I want only to focus on a single aspect of Milton’s work in this context. Let me take several moments from his political pamphleteering, which at once show how close his own theory and practice are to Rancière’s, with some crucial differences.

Take the minor late pamphlet by Milton entitled *Of True Religion, Heresy, Schism, Toleration; and What Best Means May*
Be Used Against the Growth of Popery, his last prose intervention into public discourse in early 1673, the year before his death. As Oliver Cromwell’s Secretary for Foreign Tongues, and the man who had written the Commonwealth’s propaganda justifications for Charles I’s execution, there is still some mystery as to how Milton survived the Stuart Restoration of 1660, which saw the return of Charles II from exile. Milton, who was by that stage physically blind, was fined, imprisoned and excluded from public office. It was not until 1667, with the publication of the first ten-book version of *Paradise Lost*, that his name began to recirculate in ways that were not simply condemnatory. For Milton to enter once again into explicitly political and religious controversy was a bold move.

There are a number of interesting features about this little political sally, whose immediate occasional cause was the attempt by Charles II to issue a ‘Declaration of Indulgence’ in March 1672 to suspend the ecclesiastical penal laws against non-conformists. As Elizabeth Sauer comments, ‘unacceptable for its indulgence of Catholics, the Declaration was voted down by the Cavalier Parliament, which persisted in debating questions of accommodating nonconforming Protestants.’ In fact, *Of True Religion* functions not only as a topical response to the proposed Declaration, but – in line with Milton’s own long-term commitments – as a rational argument about the proper uses of reason.

What is a pamphlet, after all? It is a new thing in the context of Protestantism generally but given a decisive new inflection in the English pamphlet wars of the 1630s and 1640s, which both preceded and accompanied the uproar of the Civil War. Who do such pamphlets address? They no longer address anybody in particular; they are not written to or for a prince, a friend, or indeed any stable grouping of persons. If such pamphlets address anybody, it is a collective – in this case, the ‘English people’ or ‘nation’ – whose referent is by definition divided, undecided and mutable. Such pamphlets address the divisions of a collective. They aim, moreover, at a topical event or theme: here, now, this! Pamphlets are precisely occasional, partial. They enter into a polemical field of discourse, of other pamphlets, other competitors. They are linked to cheap, fast printing technologies and to the expansion of literacy. Pamphlets don’t aim primarily to educate, but to sway, to convince. They take their chances. The issue is not simply propaganda, although there is evidently a propagandistic element in
play; rather, such pamphlets do not emerge from a stable institution, but from and into an unstable extra-institutional zone. This is a zone of noise, of the multiple, of erratic vectors.

So Milton’s pamphlet needs to be understood as interventional, linked to a specific political event. But this also is to emphasise its exacerbation of divisiveness in a situation of properly political division. It is clearly partisan, taking the threat of Catholicism as its titular motivation. It is universalising in its address, in that it addresses everybody – even, as we shall see, Catholics – insofar as they are rational creatures. Yet it is also meta-interpretative, in that it suggests how it can be reread beyond its immediate context. As the title announces, the pamphlet takes the distinction between ‘heresy’ and ‘error’ as one of its key operators, terms which are identified here with, respectively, the religious phenomena of Catholicism and Protestantism. Yet it is also linked with positions around succession, nation and, at another level, to the volatile relationships between ‘obedience’ and ‘toleration’.

The thread that I will briefly follow in this pamphlet concerns its argument for toleration in ‘true religion’. Its argument involves accepting the necessity, even desirability, of schism and error in religious matters, and the concomitant separation of state from church. It rationally demands arguing, preaching, pamphleteering and press liberty from and for (almost) all – in line with some long-standing arguments of Milton’s which date back to at least the 1640s, including the arguments of Areopagitica for no pre-publication censorship, the toleration of dissent, and the doctrine that ‘reason is but choosing’.

This doctrine – which is in fact axiomatic for Milton – is functionally equivalent to what Rancière calls ‘the equivalence of intelligences’. It recurs throughout Milton’s oeuvre, often in nearly-verbatim forms when it is not palpably implicit, including in Paradise Lost itself: ‘reason also is choice’ (III 108). Note, too, that Milton himself is intervening into contemporary political translations of the etymology of heresy from the Greek haeresis, ‘choice’.

Because of the Fall, however, reason cannot insure itself against error; reason must rationally know it might always be in error; therefore reason must constantly reinterrogate its own choices and reasons for choosing in order to continue to be reason.

Although commentators have exhausted themselves trying to explain (justify, affirm, reject, vitiate, etc.) what has often been seen as Milton’s unjustifiable exclusion of Catholics from toleration, it seems to me his arguments are at once clear, precise and, on his
own terms, incontrovertible.\textsuperscript{35} Because to be a Catholic requires obedience to the dogmas of the Church, one cannot genuinely be a Catholic and truly follow God’s Word. Why not? Because the pope is only a man; if he is a man, he must be fallible; if he claims otherwise, he must be a liar or a hypocrite; if he admits to being just a man, then his word cannot be taken for God’s; if one is a true Catholic, then one must assent to the pope’s doctrines; to do so is to give over one’s own reason to another man. To have chosen Rome is to have chosen the refusal to keep choosing. And to refuse choice is to choose tyranny. Even if it turns out at Judgement Day that the pope’s reading of the Bible was absolutely correct, you would still have been an idolator to follow him blindly. With Catholicism for Milton, we find a triple abomination of idolatry: one man has elected himself above other men; that man has claimed a special relationship to God; to the extent that one follows him, then one has killed reason in oneself by worshiping an idol that separates reason from freedom from obedience. To obey God is to have to keep exerting your reason; to obey the pope is to have abandoned reason. As Milton puts it:

But here the Papist will angrily demand, what! Are Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, Socinians, Arminians, no Hereticks? I answer, all these may have some errors, but are no Hereticks. Heresie is in the Will and choice profestly against Scripture; error is against the Will, in misunderstanding the Scripture after all sincere endeavours to understand it rightly: Hence it was said well by one of the Ancients, \textit{Err I may, but a Heretick I will not be.}\textsuperscript{36}

So one can take only the language of the Bible, not any reliable connection with God, as the basis for true religion. Instead of the uninterpretable clarity and command of the divine Word, we have the fallen necessity of incommensurable interpretations. This is part of the work of reason for Milton: the necessity for interpretation under irremediable conditions of non-knowing. This doctrine of Milton’s should be reapplied to the very genre of the pamphlets which freight it, which themselves present both a problem and an opportunity: reason, as the trait of the divine in man, must govern the chaotic space of unreasoned print; and this must be done by the very means of print by which chaos promulgates itself; this is to be reflected upon within the pamphlet, as well as its own necessary partiality and potential error to the extent that it is
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rational. Rationality and conflict are essentially bound together by Milton, but with an eye towards the construction of a properly political mode of conflict: neither war nor rebellion but ongoing irreducible dissensus is the sign of freedom.

Certainly, the Protestantism remains paramount: Scripture is the only authority. Nonetheless, Scripture does not speak clearly or self-evidently to men; it can appear piecemeal, obscure, even contradictory; yet it also speaks of precisely this situation, of our irreducible fallen partiality before the word, of our temptations to repeat the worst precisely insofar as we are unable to take responsibility for the possibility that the other is right, that we have gone astray. And yet we should not retreat into scepticism and doubt, that is, into despair; our struggles must be prosecuted sincerely and without hypocrisy; the truth must be absolute, or it must not be. The apparent paradox – how can we act with absolute conviction about the knowledge we know we cannot know? – is resolved by the injunction to continually reread one’s own convictions in the light of others’.

It is here that Milton’s political pamphleteering – which proselytises for endless dissensus as the model of liberty itself – rejoins his aesthetic works. And they rejoin each other according to another, related doctrine of Milton’s that accords with Rancière’s diagnosis of the aesthetic regime as ‘welcoming images, objects and performances that seemed most opposed to the idea of fine art’ and in which art is ‘constantly merging its own reasons with those belonging to other spheres of experience’. This emerges in Milton through what we could call his ‘doctrine of the two blanks’. In Areopagitica, he famously announced:

I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue unexercised, and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excremental whiteness.

Here, as elsewhere, Milton insists that conflict is fundamental for virtue; such virtue requires engagement with its contraries;
yet such contraries may precisely appear in the world as indistinguishable. In fact, two different forms of virtue – the ignorant and the achieved – may themselves appear as indiscernible. It is the task of every human to work to turn the one into the other, without any guarantees, by taking risks and with the cost of error, by engaging in a world that is itself composed of imperceptible antitheses. Just as Rancière also comes to hold, Milton’s politics is a politics of participation in contraries. In such a situation, there are no certain markings to tell the true from the false, the good from evil. Under such a description, too, even the topical pamphlet shows its solidarity and shares its essence with the most ambitious works of art.

Moreover, it is at this point that the infinite returns to supplement the putative finitude of aesthetics and politics. If, for Milton, the necessity and urgency for a decision under conditions of not-knowing is the very emblem of finitude, insofar as it is structured by precisely not-knowing, and insofar as such a decision reduces to choosing between indiscernibles, the ultimate rationale for such a decision depends on the binding of reason’s acts to the contingent infinity of grace: ‘Thy sovereign sentence, that man should find grace’ (Paradise Lost, III 145). Milton’s poetry proliferates operations designed – as this chapter’s epigraph from Burke explicitly states – to give a sense of the ‘immutable, immortal, infinite’ (Paradise Lost, III 373).

Conclusion

Very simply, Milton’s work does not conform to the tripartite elaboration of regimes offered by Rancière. Milton, however, might be considered much closer to the aesthetic regime than to the ethical or representative regimes, in his introduction of confused knowledge into the realm of perception, in his paradoxes of activity and passivity, in his displacement of hierarchies of genre, of sight and sense, and of the relations between showing and understanding. Yet if Milton is also clearly Platonic in his doctrine of the two blanks – which emphasises the primacy of ethical education coupled with the necessity to split the real from its simulacra – he does this precisely aesthetically as well as propositionally, in the very non-Platonic genre that is vernacular epic poetry. In doing so, finally, art is to be practically reconnected with the infinite.
In fact, when one starts to discern exceptions to Rancière’s rules, others start to turn up, often in unexpected places. In Remnants of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben notes the utter horror of the ‘grey zone’ exemplified by a notorious soccer match between the SS and Sonderkommando. Commenting on this passage, Rancière makes the claim that, for Agamben, in conformity with what Rancière sees as a broader logic of ‘the ethical turn’, ‘All differences simply disappear in the law of a global situation.’\(^{39}\) The point of falsification here is in Rancière’s ‘All’. (And possibly, too, in the modifier ‘simply’.) Why? Because it is that certain received conceptions of significant political differences are erased by the fact of the concentration camps, not all such differences. Part of the situation that Agamben wants to analyse is the disappearance of any substantial friend/enemy distinction in a contemporary political frame as an operative category for action. Indeed, Agamben’s analysis of such motivated occlusions is directed to reopening the question regarding the status of action after Auschwitz, and precisely not according to received, identifiable or recognised differences. Yet these ‘messianic’ differences are indiscernible within the current situation; they need to be squirrelled out in the course of a process that itself has to decide the indiscernible from the point of the undecidable (to invoke here the terms of Badiou’s doctrine of the subject). And it is at such points that Rancière fudges: Agamben can no more be assimilated to an ethical turn than Milton can be assimilated to the representative regime.

Badiou himself notes the ‘melancholy’ of Rancière’s position on art, in which the dreams of cobblers and the people have been separated by the failures of history: ‘The circumstantial failures of history should not invoke melancholy but should rather activate the deployment of the idea in the tension of its future.’\(^{40}\) In other words, Milton, Agamben and Badiou, by contrast with Rancière himself, are eminently concerned with a kind of eternity that is not theological. Milton finished the bulk of Paradise Lost when blind, impoverished and abominated, and in the wake of the near-complete collapse of all his hopes for the English Republic. But the work of the poem is not melancholic but messianic, in its rewriting of the Protestant rewriting of the Catholic doctrine of felix culpa: the first creation was God making something out of nothing; the second, more marvellous still, was Christ making good out of evil; the third, making art from disparity, the infinite prosaic-politico-philosophical-poem of human reason. To say this, however, is to
engage in a literary-political practice that is not ethical, representative, nor aesthetic.

Notes


5. Ibid., A39/B56, 183.


7. Ibid., 75.


9. Ibid., 5.


11. Ibid., 66.

12. See, for example, the essays he dedicates to these thinkers in Aesthetics and its Discontents.
13. Ibid., 110.


20. It is worth reiterating here the impact of the so-called ‘Copernican Revolution’ upon the thought of God’s infinity as guarantor of immanence. This ‘event’ has consequences for aesthetics and politics that I don’t believe have yet been satisfactorily analysed, except in the loosest fashion. No doubt this is partially because of the rift that the new sciences of the seventeenth century introduce into knowledge more generally. As Jean-Claude Milner usefully remarks, however, noting a ‘dyschronia’ in the de facto separation of God from transcendent and ungraspable infinity: ‘When mathematized physics started to reflect on the infinite universe, mathematicians had only a vague, fuzzy notion of infinity […] It’s paradoxical that physics became mathematized and, in so doing, opened the possibility for an infinite universe, and yet it didn’t know, in mathematical terms, what the infinite was.’ Badiou and Jean-Claude Milner with Philippe Petit, *Controversies: A Dialogue on the Politics and Philosophy of our Time*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 72.


23. Ibid., 27.

24. Ibid., 126.

25. Indeed, what makes me suspect that Rancière has not actually read Milton or *Paradise Lost* in this context and, as a result, misses something about Burke as well is, first, that Rancière refers to ‘Lucifer’ rather than to ‘Satan’, when the poem concerns itself primarily and explicitly with the *fallen* angel; second, that the remarks of Burke regarding unrepresentability in the poem primarily concern not only Satan himself but either the non-figure of Death or Milton’s language per se. See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 42. See *passim*, e.g. 44 (this is clearly the reference upon which Rancière is commenting), 131–2. Why Rancière even invokes ‘Lucifer’ at all is a little enigmatic to me; Chateaubriand’s French translation, for example, correctly provides the appellation ‘Lucifer’ in accordance with the original, e.g. ‘*palais du grand Lucifer’*/*The palace of great Lucifer* (*Paradise Lost*, V 760), but the rarity of this nomination is precisely of the highest significance in and for the poem, e.g. ‘Known then, that after Lucifer from heaven / (So call him, brighter once amidst the host / Of angels, than that star the stars among)’/*Sache donc: après que Lucifer (ainsi appelé parce qu’il brillait autrefois dans l’armée des anges plus que cette étoile parmi les étoiles)* (*Paradise Lost*, VII 131–3).


29. For example, ‘Another inconvenience of Milton’s design is, that it requires the description of what cannot be described, the agency of spirits. He saw that immateriality supplied no images, and that he could not shew angels acting but by instruments of action; he therefore invested them with form and matter’ and ‘The confusion of spirit and matter, which pervades the whole narration of the war of heaven, fills it with incongruity; and the book in which it is related is,
I believe, the favourite of children, and gradually neglected as knowledge is increased.’ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, with Critical Observations on their Works* (London: J. Fergusson, 1819), 130/131. One could suggest that Milton’s aesthetic radicality was such that even the greatest commentators could only attempt to re-classicise in their judgements upon him.


31. John Milton, *Of True Religion*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Vol. 8: 1666–1682, ed. Maurice Kelley (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 408–40. Note that Milton’s title picks up on the writings of the Church Fathers on precisely the sense of this syntagm. For a recent examination of the situational nuances of the phrase ‘true religion’, see Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015). In my opinion, Milton is alluding above all to Augustine’s *De vera religione*, which he is contradicting and modifying, e.g. ‘This Catholic Church, strongly and widely spread throughout the world, makes use of all who err, to correct them if they are willing to be aroused, and to assist its own progress. It makes use of the nations as material for its operations, of heretics to try its own doctrine, of schismatics to prove its stability, of the Jews as a foil to its own beauty. Some it invites, others it excludes, some it leaves behind, others it leads’; also, ‘Its own carnal members, i.e., those whose lives or opinions are carnal, it tolerates as chaff by which the corn is protected on the floor until it is separated from its covering. On this floor everyone voluntarily makes himself either corn or chaff. Therefore every man’s sin or error is tolerated until he finds...


34. The OED gives the following etymology:

< Old French eresie, heresie (12th cent.), modern French hérésie, < Latin type *heresia (whence also Italian eresia, Portuguese heresia), for Latin heresia school of thought, philosophical sect, in eccl. writers, theological heresy, < Greek ἁίρεσις taking, choosing, choice, course taken, course of action or thought, ‘school’ of thought, philosophic principle or set of principles, philosophical or religious sect; < ἁίρεῖν to take, middle voice ἁίρεθαι to take for oneself, choose. The Greek word occurs several times in the N.T., viz. Acts. v. 17, xv. 5, xxiv. 5, xxvi. 5, xxviii. 22, where English versions from Tyndale render ‘sect’ (i.e. of the Sadducees, Pharisees, Nazarenes or Christians, considered as sects of the Jews); Acts xxiv. 14, where all versions from Wyclif to 1611 have ‘heresy’, R.V. ‘a sect (or heresy)’; in 1 Cor. xi. 19 Wyclif, Geneva, Rhemish, and 1611 have ‘heresies’, Tyndale and Cranmer ‘sectes’, R.V. ‘heresies (or factions)’; in Gal. v. 20, Wyclif, Tyndale, Cranmer, Rhemish have ‘sectes’, Geneva and 1611 ‘heresies’, R.V. ‘heresies (or parties)’; in 2 Peter ii. 1 Wyclif, Tyndale, Cranmer, Rhemish have ‘sectes’, Geneva and 1611 ‘heresies’, R.V. ‘heresies (or sects)’. The earlier sense-development from ‘religious sect, party, or faction’ to ‘doctrine at variance with the catholic faith’, lies outside English.

35. Take the almost-panicky identification of ‘an intolerant Milton’ in the introduction to Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer (eds), Milton and Toleration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), e.g. ‘While Milton at times surrendered to a knee-jerk anti-popery fear, he saw in popery not simply Roman Catholicism, but all forms of servitude, dependence, and alienation of reason’ (7). Such remarks seem to me to miss the fundamental rigour of Milton’s axiom that ‘reason is but choosing’, for reasons I will elaborate upon. It is also surprising that this book has no index listing for ‘Augustine’, although he is briefly mentioned in Nigel Smith’s very useful chapter ‘Milton and the European Contexts of Toleration’, 37.

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