



THE HEAD OF A DOG OR HORN OF A RHINO: MEANING, MILTON, & ME

[H]e reproaches me with want of beauty and loss of sight: “A monster huge and hideous, void of sight.” ... [B]ut he immediately corrects himself, and says, “though not indeed huge, for there cannot be a more spare, shrivelled and bloodless form.” It is of no moment to say any thing of personal appearance, yet lest ... any one, from the representations of my enemies, should be let to imagine that I have either the head of a dog, or the horn of a rhinoceros, I will say something on the subject.

John Milton, *Second Defense of the English People* (1654)

I.

On July 5, my family and I recognized an unusual anniversary: nine years had passed since a red pick-up truck knocked me from my bicycle onto the pavement below. **Elsewhere**, I've written about how the spinal-cord injury that followed has shaped my life for the better part of a decade now. But rarely have I discussed how frequently people—no matter the transience of our acquaintance—feel compelled to make sense of the beguiling body that roams (or rather limps across) the earth as a result. Perhaps because fielding comments to this end—on airplanes, at garden parties, in grocery checkout lines—proves so regular as to be banal. I am not unique in this regard, or so my friends with other disabilities (visible and invisible alike) tell me. Startling numbers of people feel that “What happened to you?” makes for an acceptable conversation starter. Yet the imperative to

explain myself—the discomfiting, demonstrative, vaguely atavistic sight of my brace, cane, uneven gait—has skulked at closer range these past few days. This is unsurprising. Anniversaries have a way of inviting the forceful jaws of signification to clamp down upon the vagaries of lived experience.

II.

My parents, whom I'm visiting this summer, have mostly learned to steer clear of its lair. Dad awakens me with a kiss on the forehead, and I can see his knit brows only by the crevice of sun shooting from under a shade across the room. "Your mother and I want you to know how much we love you." I press my head against his stomach for another moment before he pulls me up and into the day.

For her part, Mom clasps my hand an hour later, just as it's about to plop apple slices into the cinnamon-sprinkled yogurt below. "I know the past few years have been tough, that we haven't always known how to support you, that you're still dealing with things we don't even know about," but the words trail off. She's right: I am, and (I must remind myself) so is she—as my mother—and it's alright to take a moment to appreciate our mutual understanding of what we've endured, and continue to endure, together.

Our responses to the accident, my spinal-cord injury (SCI), what once seemed endless fallout from that July morning in 2013, have evolved over time. No one's more than mine. I'm reminded of this while scrolling through Facebook posts of yesteryear, that there was a time when I celebrated my triumph over paralysis. My victorious quest to walk again. My casting aside of the wheelchair and then walker like a knight who's just vanquished his foe, no longer in need of arms. Always my cane and brace were out of the frame.

To commemorate the first-year mark, I told my parents I wanted to buy a recumbent bike—to get back in the saddle, as it were. So my father took off work, and my mother arranged a caregiver for Gam, and the three of us trundled up to the nearest bike shop with a sizeable stock. Of course, I staged a picture of me riding one in the parking lot—fancy figure-eights—and afterwards, satisfied myself with a half-dozen more jaunts in local parks, before at last exiling the device to our garage.

"Why did we ever get that thing in the first place?" Mom asked recently. Because pictures of it earned—in Facebook's marketplace of economized approbation—hundreds of likes, dozens of comments to the effect of "you're such an inspiration" and "look at you back out there" and "you can do anything." I replied to every one of them, basking in the epic praise that was my due.

Several more years, and my annual fifth-of-July post featured a picture of my aunt and me dancing, a body gyrating in directions most thought would be impossible in the early stages of rehab. (Then again, for the first few weeks, there was confusion over what was paralyzed in the first place. One

of my former teachers even burst into tears at the sight of me bringing a fork to my mouth. “They told me...,” she murmured upon walking through my hospital-room door.)

“See,” I must have thought while uploading the graphic, “see what I did through sheer force of will.”

But the trouble with inspiration porn—an outcrop of the medical model of disability wherein impairment is a dangerous problem to be cured, and its defeat in turn a victory ripe for fetishization—is its gleefully febrile reception. Plying its wiles can engineer something like acceptance, as a result. But such ersatz inclusion in fact depends upon a purging of anything deemed ugly, deforming, or abnormal by the cultural narratives that continue to structure our lives: as it turns out, almost everything about the lived realities of being disabled. Many crips therefore sanitize the narratives we tell of our existence to curry favor in the cutthroat court of ableist society.

I had been primed to privilege this kind of self-effacing relationship to my nonnormative body, in part because there are very real health advantages to remaining ambulatory for as long as possible, and I was still at a stage of my life where I needed to keep my eyes on what felt like this totalizing goal; in part because having a spinal-cord injury can indeed pose a number of challenges and believing that it’s possible to ameliorate them, with just a bit of grit and determination, independent of larger systems, can be comforting; in part because every doctor, every therapist, every nurse I’d encountered had emphasized the imperative of rehabilitation—particularly since the window for recovery closes after about eighteen months—without ever acknowledging the potential epistemologies and resources of disability too. (Though we shouldn’t assume that every impaired person feels the same about these, especially given the many sociocultural and geopolitical contexts within which disability coheres.)

III.

What changed then? In the past few years, first as a master’s student and now as a Ph.D. candidate, I’ve delved into disability studies, read activists, writers of color, developed a vocabulary for describing the ways of the ideologies of ability (learning too that my own experience of their wiles is inflected by various other privileges).

But none of them first convinced me that I no longer wanted to do the work of translating my body into a decipherable idiom for those whose comfort depends upon its clarity. That distinction belongs to John Milton (1608-1674). The poet whose visual impairment burgeoned from 1644 to 1652, a writer who lived before the discursive emergence of “disability” as a discrete identity category, a thinker not easily assimilable to a great deal of disability theory currently in vogue. But one who nonetheless anticipates much of it as well.

I initially came across him in an independent study of seventeenth-century poetry during a leave of absence from college after my accident. At a time when I had no disabled role models in my life, when my SCI seemed legible only as tragedy, no one else managed to capture the horrors and hopes of a body changed and changing in wildly unexpected ways. Like Milton, I had to figure out

how to live without a function that seemed prerequisite to many of my aspirations. Together, we murmured about our lots—**he to God**, and I to him.

But it wasn't until the Milton course I took a year later, until I read much of his political prose from the 1650s under the supervision of the professor who also had overseen my independent study, that I began to reflect upon how I discussed my body. Upon how disabled bodyminds, precisely because they're alarming in a world of compulsory able-bodiedness and -mindedness, must be read and understood as harbingers of discrete meaning. And upon how we might be able to frustrate those objectifying processes, a theme also taken up in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (**as I've noted before, for *Synopsis***).

Soon enough, I could make sense of my disability only in the context of Milton's insistence upon his own blindness's senselessness.

IV.

This political prose that soon left such an impact on me was written during some of the most exhilarating and devastating years of Milton's life.

On the one hand, he lost the last of his sight in the February of 1652—at a time when blindness was often life-threatening for various reasons and there were few systems in place to support nonnormative bodies. Several months later, his (first) wife Mary and infant son died.

On the other hand, Milton was proving—one is tempted to say despite of all this—integral to a radical political project that had already upended English society: the execution of King Charles I and the instantiation of a new, republican government, both of which Milton vociferously **defended in print**. Milton found a receptive audience in Oliver Cromwell (who didn't become Lord Protector till 1653) for his antipathy to the idea of a new state church (*e.g.*, in "**Sonnet 16**"), while at the same time keeping pre-publication censorship to a minimum (Milton had decried it in *Areopagitica*), even if that meant occasionally getting his hands dirty with the practice.

But the king's allies were regrouping on the European mainland. Part of this involved courting propagandists nearly as compelling as Milton (but also largely forgotten to history, as Milton himself not always kindly predicted; who still reads Salmasius?) to lambaste not only the new government but its secretary for foreign tongues. Blindness became a focal point of their *ad hominem* attacks, a divine punishment, they argued, an indication of their enemy's wicked political ways.

What was being contested amid this rhetorical fuselage—besides constitutional concerns scholars have often discussed—is another question not yet acknowledged by many Miltonists: who has the right to determine the meaning of a particular bodymind? To the victor would go the spoils of deciding whether it's condemned as unnatural or accepted as a welcome manifestation of human biodiversity.

V.

One of the most incendiary of those pamphlets to target Milton was *The Cry of the Royal Blood to Heaven* by Pierre du Moulin, with a preface by English clergyman Alexander More, who redirected Virgil's condemnation of the cyclops Polyphemus—"A monster huge and hideous, void of sight" (because Odysseus had gouged out his one eye)—to Milton.

Yet the poet claps back in the ***Second Defense of the English People***, a prose treatise most often read now for the short autobiographical digression that sees its author upending a number of early modern assumptions about blindness. There's admittedly more than a tinge of ableism (and misogyny) in the emphasis that his manly looks have yet to fade, as well as in the claim that he has never once been "noted for deformity, by one who ever saw" him. Indeed, Milton never shied away from using disability rhetoric we would now consider derogatory (including metaphors of "blindness" as ignorance in *Paradise Lost*, and elsewhere).

But as always, there's more to the story (since he's rarely as dogmatic as he originally seems, or would like us to believe, or believes himself to be): "the praise of beauty I am not anxious to obtain," Milton clarifies, before explaining that "even if his stature were in fact "diminutive," what of it, "when so many men, illustrious both in peace and war, have been the same? And how can that be called diminutive, which is great enough for every virtuous achievement?"

Still, this is mere preface to a more sophisticated subversion of several regnant, early modern etiologies and glosses of blindness later in the *Defense*. By activating a noticeably large, and often contradictory, number of them, Milton vertiginously superimposes one explanatory framework upon another in order to highlight how overdetermined with meaning sightlessness can become. What emerges as a result, and what scholars have yet to grasp fully, is the folly of trying to make it signify any one thing in the first place.

VI.

Where does Milton begin? With a radical idea about how labile ability truly is. "I wish that I could with equal facility refute what this barbarous opponent has said of my blindness; but I cannot do it; and I must submit to the affliction," he confides—so far, inauspiciously. But then comes the swift stroke of a disarming rhetorical question, stretched to syntactically splendid proportions: "But why should I not endure a misfortune, which it behooves every one to be prepared to endure if it should happen; which may, in the common course of things, happen to any man; and which has been known to happen to the most distinguished and virtuous persons in history?" Here, then, an implicitly naturalistic explanation for Milton's blindness—a variety known at the time as *gutta serena*, about which our poet consulted several physicians before fully accepting its permanence.

This mention of "the most distinguished and virtuous persons in history" effects a quick pivot to the notion (emphasized in ***Paradise Lost***) that blindness allowed certain prophets and bards access to "things invisible to mortal sight" (*PL* 3.55). Examples include Tiresias and another seer from Apollonius's *Argonautica*. Of course, there's more than a flavor of the supercrip trope in this

explanation—and hubris in Milton’s implicit promotion of himself to such company—but things aren’t quite what they seem, for this lot’s “misfortunes the gods are *said* to have compensated by superior endowments, and whom men so much revered, that they chose rather to impute their want of sight to the injustice of heaven than to their own want of innocence or virtue” (emphasis mine). *Said*, here, is worlds away from *did compensate*.

Belaboring his antipathy to the divine punishment theory further provides the connective tissue to another class of blind people, “those worthies who were as distinguished for wisdom in the cabinet, as for valour in the field,” yoking together blindness and heroism (and reiterating Milton’s insistence upon the English people’s heroic execution of Charles I). One man, Caecilius Metellus, “lost his sight, while he saved, not only the city, but the palladium, the protection of the city, and the most sacred relics, from the destruction of the flames.” An exemplar which allows Milton to recall that he too attenuated his vision while scribbling away defenses of the liberty-loving English to insufficient light (as he explains in “**Sonnet 22**”). Put otherwise, he’s “a soldier who has served his time,” dedicated his body to the “disinterested passion for the extension of civil and religious liberty,” and returned from combat impaired as a result (disabled veterans proving a common phenomenon, and frequent spectacle, in early modernity, as they are now).

Fourth, Milton turns to a different kind of hero—Pauline rather than pagan: the suffering faithful, emblemized by Christ but also healed by him, such as one man whose congenital blindness Jesus emphasized was not “either on account of his own sins or those of his progenitors.” Situated within this frame of reference, physical strength becomes inversely proportional to its spiritual counterpart, so that Milton can declare, “in the proportion as I am weak, I shall be invincibly strong; and in proportion as I am blind, I shall more clearly see. O! that I may thus be perfected by feebleness, and irradiated by obscurity!”

Which is all another way of saying, “Let them consider, that my situation, such as it is, is neither an object of my shame or my regret, that my resolutions are too firm to be shaken, that I am not depressed by any sense of the divine displeasure; that, on the other hand, in the most momentous periods, I have had full experience of the divine favour and protection.” So there.

VII.

That today someone would offer up divine punishment as an explanation for my paralysis beggars belief. We understand it, in the case of an SCI at least, to be the natural consequence of nothing more than a vertebra burst, neural connections impeded, electrical signals halted in their tracks. (Though early moderns themselves could be quite proud, if often a little wary too, of their rationalism—and the discoveries recently brought into their ken: the circulation of the blood, new scopes—both micro- and tele—the scientific method. The list continues.) But the possibility of disability’s discomfiting mayhem being assimilated to providentialism very much remains current.

Here’s a fun fact: it’s rare that I walk into either my parents’ or grandmother’s churches without someone emphasizing that it’s so nice to see how well I’m doing, the fruit of all those prayers they said for me nine years ago. To their credit, many of these were not of the vapid variety often

murmured by vocal conservatives who “pray” for families of, say, the victims of a recent shooting but then support a ridiculously capacious reading of the Second Amendment. No, these are people who brought us meals and knitted me blankets and crafted bags for my walkers. Such care lasted for a time, anyway. And to many, their remembrances of votives once intoned under a sanctuary’s dusky light shows that it has continued for nearly a decade. Never mind that I’m reduced into a spectacle of God’s goodness as a result.

There’s another variation on this same theme, the grafting of disability to providentialism, usually offered up by those who feel licensed to wax eloquent about my life. Consider how a friend’s beloved grandmother recently put it—while bequeathing me a tin of, I must say, excellent chocolate chip cookies: “What a joy it is to witness how the plan God had for you has played out. Because He gives us nothing we cannot handle. Because otherwise, you would have never begun graduate school, never begun your journey towards teaching.” She’s right: constitutional law had been my obsession till I discovered early modern literature the summer of my spinal-cord injury. (The shorthand for all this, by the way, is one I often hear as well: “Everything happens for a reason.”)

In that moment, at a cookout we were hosting on Memorial Day, in front of everyone else there, I agreed, and even now, want nothing more than to do so again. But to accede is to wrest away from me, from disabled people generally, the agency to live with my embodiment as I see fit. It is also to remystify ostensibly nonnormative bodyminds, to slide back into thinking that licenses the conflation of disability with divine punishment. For if the big man upstairs can cajole me into the classroom, he can surely teach anyone a lesson any way he chooses.

This broaches an additional concern: what about the moral meanings that Renaissance thinkers attached to disability, ones that Milton himself seems so perfectly attuned to, either in refutation or appropriation for argumentative heft? It’s hard to imagine anyone drawing facile links between the crookedness of my body, say, and the deformity of my soul in the ways that were commonplace for those living in medieval and early modern England (especially regarding those whose conditions were congenital or inexplicably triggered). But I was once assigned to a physical therapy assistant who jocularly crooned—every time I warmed up for our sessions on the stationary bike—to watch out for traffic, a reminder of the fact that one time oh so many years ago, I had crossed against the light. And look where that got me.

Road safety, my cautionary tale warns the people in my life, always demands vigilance, even two minutes from home. “If only we keep a look out,” they can tell themselves, “we won’t end up like him.”

VIII.

What Milton remarkably reminds us—in prose and poetry as vivacious, ambiguous, and searching today as it was four-hundred years ago, maddening in its nuance and dazzling in its brilliant imagistic variety—is that, on the one hand, to seal bodymind difference within a pat narrative envelope allows people to dispatch such alterity however they like with nary a concern for the

disabled person in question—while simultaneously sending it far away from themselves. On the other, to play the game of parsing the nonnormative bodymind’s meanings—precisely because there can be so many—is to render increasingly fuzzy its very real corporeality. What is important, we realize, is not the bodymind itself but the ways it can be used, the various ideologies for which it can be pressed into service.

To see what I mean, reread my epigraph, wherein Milton derides the ridiculous disregard *Cry* shows for his embodied particulars, a theme which he revisits later in the autobiographical digression as well. “I return to you, Sir,” he declares, “who, with a remarkable inconsistency, seem to consider me at one time as a giant, and at another as a dwarf.” A remarkable inconsistency, I’ll add now, that has a way of allowing the (temporarily) able-bodied and -minded in our society to disavow the material needs of those of us with aberrant figures and minds, to forget that we function in a world built not for our existence, to ignore the advantages of relatively seamless functionality.

IX.

But while to pinpoint the meaning of his blindness was, for Milton, a fraught endeavor, he consistently emphasizes that the experience of disability can be meaningful in a more general sense. Consider, for instance, his recurrent appreciation for the “tender assiduities of my friends, their soothing attentions, their kind visits, their reverential observances; among whom there are some with whom I may interchange the Pyladean and Thesian dialogue of inseparable friends,” in a reference to the best mates of Euripides’s *Orestes* and the (in)famously close link between Theseus and Pirithous. (Though it should be said he sometimes voiced frustration with this care network too.) What’s more, the accounts we have from Milton’s family members and friends themselves (like **Thomas Ellwood**, though probably not his daughters) suggest that these were interdependent bonds, scant on pity and abounding in respect.

Nine years on, I’m thankful for the personal relationships in my life, many of which are just as strong as Orestes and Pylades’s, their intimacy forged in the crucible of my need, yes, but my friends’ as well. It’s likewise hard for me to imagine my life now without the conversations I have with Milton and his work, the thoughts they evoke in me and the ways in which they continue to inspire awe.

But it is also due to my favorite of favorite poets that I refuse to conceive these—my friendships, my burgeoning career, my ardor for literary criticism—as teloi to which my SCI has led, end-points to which the contortions of my body have perverted the trajectory of my life. From disability may radiate joy, hope, sorrow, energy, drive, purpose—even wondrous purpose—but the disabled body itself is a signifier of nothing more, nor less, than the diversity inherent to corporeal matter on this earth.

Image: Guido Reni, “Polyphemus,” Wikimedia Commons (public domain). *Description:* A sightless man, with empty eye sockets and a gored out opening where his one eye once resided, grabs a

boulder to throw after Odysseus's receding ship.

Notes

1. The best English edition of the Latin *Second Defense* can be found in William Kerrigan, *et al.*, *The Essential Prose of John Milton* (New York: Modern Library, 2013), though the text quoted (and linked to) above is easily accessible online.
2. For more on Milton's life and blindness, see Joe Moshenska, *Making Darkness Light: A Life of John Milton* (New York: Basic Books, 2021); Eleanor Gertrude Brown's classic *Milton's Blindness* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1934); and Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2007), which remains the most definitive, and magisterially systematic, account of Milton's self-fashioning. For his Fallon's insights into the *Second Defense*, see pp. 164-72.
3. The field of disability studies has often focused upon physical (and sensory) disability, at the expense of their mental and intellectual counterparts, a trend I've not meant to perpetuate with frequent reference to bodies (or embodiment) rather than *bodyminds*. **Elsewhere**, I've emphasized the importance of this term, in keeping with leading disability theory. Here, however, I wanted to acknowledge that Milton's iconoclastic position towards various images of blindness and other physical disabilities are often coupled with a privileging of normative—even extraordinary—mental capacities. This limitation of his critique of ableism should not go ignored. On Milton's own use of the specific term "disability," see Maura Brady's invaluable trenchant new article, "'Disabled' Milton," *JLCS* 16.2 (2022): 161-78. On the ways in which Milton and his contemporaries discussed his blindness, see Angelica Duran's magnificent "The Blind Bard, According to John Milton and his Contemporaries," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 46.3 (2013): 141-157.
4. While "Blind" or "B/blind"—to denote "Blind culture" and the impairment itself—is now becoming more common, I have tended towards the lowercase version of the adjective, since Milton himself prefigures this development. On a related note, I have used both "disability-first" and "person-first" language.
5. Elizabeth Bearden has done more than any other recent scholar to elucidate the complicated imbrication of monstrosity and disability-like difference in early modernity; I cannot recommend her book *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2019) highly enough. On the dynamics of interactions between disabled and able bodies, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); and the seminal *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2017).
6. For an adumbration of the ideology of ability generally, see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2008).
7. See Allison P. Hobgood's crucial contribution to early modern disability studies (a field she helped to energize in the first place), *Beholding Disability in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2021), on the multiplicity of explanatory frameworks for

nonnormative embodiment in early modernity and on the idea that such overdetermination can render its corporeality increasingly invisible, esp. chs 1-2.

8. On the idea of “care” in the context of disability, see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018). And on the many systems within which disability—or “debility”—can cohere, see Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2017).
9. For an accessible introduction to Milton’s politics, see Nigel Smith, *Is Milton Better than Shakespeare?* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008).