

Article

“A Lock of Thy Bright Hair”: The Enlightenment’s Milton and Our Auratic Material

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Abstract: This article looks at how English critics, biographers, and poets once sported with the image, idea, and biomaterial of John Milton’s hair. Their play is contextualized within the materialist and instrumental values that were instituted in eighteenth-century literary criticism and biography and that remain central to the humanities today. It was the philologists, antiquarians, bibliophiles, biographers, and anecdotalists of the long eighteenth century who linked the value of cultural objects to their work in the cultural world. The objects sheltered from that world—*aesthetic ones in the modern sense*—were meanwhile endowed with qualities purloined from an otherwise debunked supernatural register. These contradictory values, all object-centered, cultivated skepticism in observers and thus scripted still-privileged affective postures of mourning and melancholia with respect to objects of inquiry. Dynamic entanglement with Milton’s hair in eighteenth-century critical writing tells a different story. It teaches us to approach that writing *as* writing and to value “Milton’s hair” as auratic in the communicative sense later displaced by diffident, object-centered models of the aura. Can we define and engage our “material” along the lines of eighteenth-century “entanglement” with Milton’s hair?

Keywords: Milton; instrumentalism; materialism; aura; modern humanities; literary biography; history of literary criticism; literary history; entanglement

I went from Mr *Lauming’s* [...] to Mr. *Ellis*, who told me, that he had paid 6d. to *Elizabeth Grant* for seeing the body; and that he had lifted up the head, and taken, from among the sludge under it, a small quantity of hair, with which was a piece of the shroud, and, adhering

to the hair, a bit of the skin of the skull, of about the size of a shilling. He put them all into my hands.

Philip Neve, *A Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin* (1790) [1].

A Lock of thy bright hair! Sudden it came, And I was startled when I heard thy name Coupled so unaware.

John Keats, "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair" (1818) [2].

When we speak of John Milton, the last thing we are likely to couple with his name is the story of his corpse's exhumation in the summer of 1790. Or it was: in a spate of activity perhaps symptomatic of a sundowning discipline, several scholars have recently dragged this grisly incident back into the light [3–6]. Taking generic shapes that range from the forensic to the elegiac, and from the anthropological to the didactic, their reckonings have been avid, illuminating, even virtuosic. At the same time, their formal determination to explain, substantiate, and indeed allegorize the sensational fate of Milton's body revives contemporary critical stances toward an ultimately ambiguous object of critical knowledge. Where two moments in the history of modern writing in the humanities collude, we are obliged to moralize.

It seems perverse to do so, not least because Milton is one of the few threads that still hold the tattered garment of our discipline—or at any rate the sleeve of it concerned with literary matters—together. Perhaps worse, what many in 1790 decried as an "inhumane" desecration of his body and an offense to the "liberal" sensibility may not have taken place at all, raising an unsettling suspicion as to whether "the great Milton" himself ever did, at least in the forms that the liberal and humane are accustomed to envisioning. So then what *are* the objects of modern humanistic inquiry? The very question hands us an imperative to reassess them. Put another way: Just what is our material? For an answer, we might look to the period that delivered it to us *as* material: the English eighteenth century.

1. Milton Exhumed

It would be hard to find an incident more thick with matter—or, at the time, more generative of literary material—than the apparent opening of Milton's coffin during renovations at its burial site, the London church of St. Giles, Cripplegate [7]. Although his grave's marker had vanished shortly after his 1674 funeral and never been replaced, "upon first view of the body, it appeared perfect" ([1], p. 17), thanks not least to a "great quantity of hair, which lay strait and even" ([1], p. 18). But almost instantly—at least according to the Inner Temple barrister, antiquarian. And future commissioner of bankrupts Philip Neve—one parishioner "pulled hard at the teeth, which resisted, until someone hit them a knock with a stone, when they easily came out." Within hours "Milton's" molars were for sale. As for his hair, "which had been combed and tied-together before interment" ([1], p. 18), two men fetched scissors to trim it, while a third "poked his stick against the head, and brought some of the hair over the forehead." A "small quantity" of it eventually found its way "into [Neve's own] hands" ([1], p. 22).

What can withstand such insult? Nothing, according to the Miltonist Michael Lieb, who in a powerful reading turns this scene into an allegory of Milton's—and indeed western culture's—obsession with *sparagmos*, the generative potential of bodies bloodily disassembled ([3], pp. 14–16). But, at least in Neve's 1790 *Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's Coffin*, something does resist violation: "the hair."

The busy fingers of the living seem to be doing little more than styling it, and Neve, for his part, appears transfixed by its physical resilience: “What may seem extraordinary,” he marvels, “it is yet so strong, that [one person], to cleanse it from its clotted state, let the cistern-cock run in it for near a minute, and then rubbed it between his fingers without injury” ([1], p. 25). Is it the fingers that “escaped injury” or the hair itself? No matter. Visibly upheld in Neve’s syntax, an unresolved ambivalence between subject and object not only sustains wonder but defies allegory and the cultural labor that it performs, instead binding Milton’s hair almost magically to the writing that communicates it [8].

Accounts of incidents like the one at St. Giles can tell us how the objects of interest to us—Milton’s body, in this case—were valued, questioned, and defined at a key moment in our discipline’s history. But the seemingly independent activity of one part of that body also involves us in the ways that such objects are experienced stylistically in the instant of their communication. Hair, of course, is not exactly—or at least it is not only—a body part. It is too lightweight: too alienable, too superficial, too uncertainly alive. Indeed, thanks to its inevitable entanglement with both socio-cultural meanings and aesthetic practices, hair may be best understood as one aspect of a body’s appearance. This, somehow, does not make it any less a substance; hence hair’s apparent transformation in the Enlightenment from a saintly relic fraught with miracle to a tangible personal artifact tied both to the inevitable loss of a body and to the sentimental possibility of that body’s figurative persistence in memory [9,10].

But hair’s dynamic suspense between matter and immaterial meaning also suggests a powerful affinity with writing, at least in writing’s pre-digital form. How then—in writing—to determine its value? More to the point, how to determine the value of Milton’s? As critics from John Guillory to Jonathan Bate have proposed, the assignment of value to cultural objects is historically the remit of the modern humanities [11,12]. In turn, it was the philologists, antiquarians, bibliophiles, biographers, and even anecdotalists of the long eighteenth century who linked the value of cultural objects to their work in the world. Meanwhile, as Deidre Shauna Lynch has recently explored, the objects that eighteenth-century experts sheltered from that world—aesthetic ones in the modern sense—were endowed with qualities purloined from an otherwise debunked supernatural register [13]. As critical attitudes freeze midway between avowal and disavowal, it becomes possible to use even aesthetic objects for worldly purposes: as didactic examples, as historical evidence, as symptoms of cultural malady, as tools to reason, feel, argue, and (for now) get tenure with.

Modern values—which is what these are—cultivated skepticism in observers and scripted still-privileged affective postures of mourning and melancholia with respect to objects of inquiry. In keeping with them, when, as one poet put it, “the supposed Remains of [a] famous Poet” ([14], p. 123) were exhumed in the summer of 1790, a monetary amount—sixpence—was instantly assigned to the “seeing” of them, even as the corpse’s teeth were “set to sale” ([15], p. 220). Newspapers and pamphlets rushed to profit from publication of the sensational proceedings, while in their pages literary critics, surgeons, barristers, and university dons took turns asserting and doubting the authenticity of the body itself. At the same time, others, in horror, distanced themselves from what was at best a breach of ethical and aesthetic decorum and, at worst, a crime of sacrilege against an emergent English literary canon’s chief, if ever controversial, figurehead [16].

Adjudicated within the common medium of contemporary letters, these ultimately congruent species of value—one aesthetic, one instrumental—are nowhere more visible than in Neve’s *Narrative of the*

Disinterment of Milton's Coffin. Written to the moment, it was an instant bestseller. Neve even published a second edition, this time with a substantial Postscript, after what was left of the ransacked corpse, having been hastily reburied, was exhumed a second time in hopes of confirming its identity amid prolific challenges to its authenticity. In the face of these challenges, concluded Milton's early nineteenth-century biographer Henry John Todd, "all of Neve's labour appears to have been employed in an imaginary cause" ([15], p. 218). Unsurprisingly, Neve was also a high-minded literary critic whose *Cursory Remarks on Some of the Ancient English Poets* (1789) had sought "the proper place to rank" ([17], p. 107) Milton's poems, only to find his "genius" to tower far "above example, or comparison" ([17], p. 141). For all of Neve's profitable commitment to the facts on (or in) the ground, the tone of his *Narrative of the Disinterment* is no less elevated: "I have procured those relics, which I possess, only in hope of bearing part in a pious and honorable restitution of all that has been taken," Neve insists, "the sole atonement, which can now be made, to the violated rights of the dead; to the insulted parishioners at large; and to the feelings of all good men" ([17], p. 33).

But the specific "relics" of which Neve writes—strands of Milton's hair—do not belong to any of his *Narrative's* split ends. "The hair" certainly has no aesthetic value, given the repellent shred of shroud and "bit of the skin of the skull" adhering to it. Nor is it fixed as a commemorative marker or as an aid to memory. Neve does not seem to revere it. At the same time, Milton's hair also lacks commercial value: a shilling figures in Neve's representation of it only as the currency of the imagination, so that his reader can form a lively impression of what found its way "into [his] hands"...and, by way of his *Narrative*, into her own. More even than the shilling, it is the transit of Milton's hair from hand to hand that gives rise to this impression—an impression remarkably like the one of Milton's "bright hair" that John Keats would at once form and convey a few years on. Such impressions are part of more than a century's worth of literary, critical, and historical play with Milton's hair—play that, as it deflects skepticism and reimagines material, can perhaps tell us what we truly value.

2. Milton's Value

What do we? The Enlightenment's crystallizing philosophical and literary institutions notoriously committed themselves to nomothetic values that still underwrite modern literary study: instrumentality, objectivity, disciplinarity, skepticism, materialism, utility [18–20]. With the opening of the digital frontier, the objects of our inquiry and the tools we use to pursue them are less and less tangible. But underlying standards and premises about what counts as an object of inquiry remains much the same as they were in the eighteenth century: forensic and antiquarian. We still specialize, if at a metaphorical remove, in the handling of letters and treat texts and authors as discernible objects with histories, measurable shapes, cultural functions that it is for us to determine [21]. So do we modern humanists demonstrate our own cultural value within the same protocols of proof and profit that pertain to our objects [22]. This in effect eliminates both our difference and our distance from them. In the eighteenth century, the instrumental imperative converged with the nascent (and no less literary) procedures of modern natural philosophy in a secularizing society, holding in common with it a conception of "material" that in turn reinforced core assumptions about the foundation if not of reality itself then at least of any reality that our common senses, might profess to share.

As literary scholars from Barbara Benedict to Lynch have recently elaborated, eighteenth-century persons of letters also handed us our trade's tools for establishing critical distance from instrumental values [13,23]. This allows us to demonstrate those values' formation in dialectical relationship to their apparent opposites: uselessness, enthusiasm, sentimentalism, literary cultism, author cultism, amateurism in the sense of love unsanctified by institutions. But these countering values too are still understood to be object-centered, and they circulate in psychosocial economies or theaters of secular enchantment. The Enlightenment's signature contributions to modern literary study—taxonomies of genre, anthologies, literary lives, variorum editions, and volumes of critical commentary—thus express the same ontology and the same implicit ethics as do canonized graves and birthplaces, mementoes, autographs, busts, monuments, and other objects of sentimental value. In the eighteenth century, the science of letters initially profited from this equation because literature—writing—was more than the new object of new forms of knowing and feeling. Thanks to print culture's sudden ubiquity, it was also the privileged medium through which these matters were themselves communicated. Indeed, a nascent science of letters could not unsee the print medium—a disability that, through the otherwise disavowed alchemy of the day, translated into claims of unobstructed access to media forms, from ancient manuscripts to modern editions to anecdotes objectified in print, as subjects of invariably skeptical investigation.

On the face of it, Milton solicited the empirical, diffident, and objectively grounded business of modernizing English literary study. He died, conveniently, on the cusp of the institution of an enlightened science of letters. Accordingly, the editorial and biographical exertions of his hack nephew Edward Phillips joined forces with Dryden's fabled rescue of *Paradise Lost* from a bookseller's barrow of discards to open a vein of critical, editorial, and biographical writing committed to literary objects as artifacts and material objects. The scholarship of our own day continues to capitalize on this labor, often making its own business that of showing the cultural uses to which "the great Milton" could be put at a singularly industrious moment in the history of letters, when he served (among many other things) as a foundation for a rising English literary canon, as a psychopoetic obstacle for literary ambition to confront, as the epicenter of a radical political theology, and as an exemplar of the aesthetic category of the sublime. If each use also works against itself, so much the better: for the critic who spots a countervailing value, Milton's use—and in turn his ultimate value—becomes that of exposing unresolvable cultural contradictions.

Of Milton's many employments in the Enlightenment, none was more steady than that of supporting the industries of editing, critical commentary, and life writing of which we're all beneficiaries [24–27]. His life and works had generated a vast, if scattered body of "material," new bits of which were discovered all the time. In preparing a new edition of his early masque *Comus*, for example, Thomas Warton unearthed Milton's will ([28], p. xi), and over the long eighteenth century numerous other documents surfaced, from bills of sale to the logs of libraries he had haunted. Prominent among the catch was an important letter laying out the surprising phenomenology of his blindness; he evidently perceived rings of colored lights around objects until the end ([29], p. 19).

But to the empirical eye then brought to bear upon literary study, "Milton" remained singularly elusive as an object of biographical or critical knowledge. He had died in November 1674—"in a fit of the Gout," as more than one of his first biographers liked to say, "but with so little pain, that the time of his expiring was not perceived by those in the room" ([30], p. 47). Nonetheless, the exact day he was

not perceived to expire has never been ascertained. Then too there was the dissimulation embedded in all of Milton's literary self-representations (including the famously riddling portrait that prefaces his 1645 *Poems*), not to mention the visibly tendentious character of virtually all contemporary depictions of him [31]. Above all, during the years of most interest to eighteenth-century critics, readers, and biographers, Milton's blindness had meant the distribution of the author function—and with it authorial personality—among the bodies and perceptions of others, the exploitation of whom, as in the favorite case of Milton's daughters, attracted sentimental speculation throughout the eighteenth century.

Milton's writing fared little better, as Richard Bentley's notorious 1732 rewrite of *Paradise Lost* as Milton obviously intended it attests [32]. But Bentley was only the tip of an iceberg: His contemporaries obsessively tracked the typographical "points" of early editions of Milton's poems, belabored the orthographic features of manuscripts for which he had been responsible, and worked over examples of his signature, which he was apparently able to produce even after he had lost his eyesight [29]. Eighteenth-century commentators—the classical scholar William Lauder was the most notorious—could be as quick to claim that Milton had plagiarized much of what he had written even before his vision dimmed as to catalogue the literary sources of his sublimity ([33], pp. 121–22). Meanwhile, artists and illustrators strove to produce accurate images of Milton's face on the basis of graphic sources at once too many and too few. Notwithstanding the sullen empiricism of Johnson's 1779 *Life of Milton*, doggedly gleaned from what was already a vast congeries of literary "lives," bizarre charges floated with authority, not the least of them the one that during the Restoration Milton had faked his own death and had a "figure of him" buried in his own stead ([5], p. 21; [28], pp. 358–59).

But what of the other half of scholarly materialism's dialectic—sentimental attachment, and its first cousin, aestheticizing reverence? Milton proved no more stable an object of the personal affections that at once countered and motivated such institutional stances as skeptical empiricism and professionalizing objectivism. In our own times, a scholarly industry has sprung up to explain why it was so hard to feel 'about' him, the reasons produced ranging from pre-romantic anxiety of influence to fear of his political theology: here, the Tory Johnson's storied disdain for Milton is symptomatic, as has been subsequent determination to account for it on ideological or psychological grounds. Only of late has Christine Rees hinted that it might lie in Johnson's soul-deadening immersion in the printed matter whose tyranny Milton had managed to evade [34]. Meanwhile, a mid-century fit of popular passion for Milton's Bread Street birthplace ran afoul of discrepancies from his public image thanks to the street's commercial and Cockney taint; in any case, the house itself (like several of the many in which Milton had lodged) had burned down long before [35]. When Theresa, the eponymous heroine of Elizabeth Tomlins's 1787 novel *The Victim of Fancy*, writes that she has "kissed the neglected receptacle of the bones of Milton" and "wetted his grave with the enthusiastic tears of admiration," her sentiments attach to nothing tangible and in point of fact her tears fall on even less, the exact "spot which really conceals his last venerable remains" being, at the time, unknown. Since Theresa herself can't be said to be more than a figment of print, this adds up to an unusual truth. How could she not "lamen[t] the impossibility of adequately explaining the sensations which arise in my soul"? "I take the pen in hand," she writes. "I put my thoughts on paper, and they are nothing" ([36], pp. 12–13).

From an instrumentalist perspective, Milton's elusiveness as a stable object of either critical common sense or belletristic sensibility made him a means to almost any eighteenth-century end. This in turn

accounts for his value to an English Enlightenment, even as it casts “the great Milton” himself as a singular presence in the tangible forms of eighteenth-century letters. But by itself, that presence leaves us with “nothing” but a prescription for melancholy and perhaps a template of lament. We must ask what made Milton feel like something. The answer is his hair.

3. Milton’s Hair

On the face of it, nothing could matter less than hair. Milton’s pastoral elegy *Lycidas* famously treats it as a figure (and cause) of useless distraction, a diversion from productive literary labor. Yet Milton appears to have given considerable thought to his, apparently maintaining a full head of Cavalier lovelocks even as he wrote regicide polemic for the Roundheads. He also seems to have cared about that of the many figures, human and nonhuman, who populate his verse—verse never too busy to sport with (or as the manuscript of *Lycidas* puts it) in Naera’s tangles, Adam’s hyacinthine locks, Eve’s disheveled tresses, Samson’s unwanted crewcut, and even Eden’s “bush with frizzled hair implicit.” As most of these instances make clear, Milton’s hair scorns the taxonomic distinctions between animal and vegetable matter that Enlightenment naturalism would institute. As Stephen Dobranski has suggested, locks like Eve’s also manifest “hair’s cultural and spiritual value in early modern England,” where it still seemed to move, animistically, between all matter and the realm of spirit ([37], p. 338).

Milton’s first modern editors and commentators were professionally dedicated to a different aspect of “his” hair: its fusion with the graphic forms that made it perceptible to them. Rare indeed are the critical remarks on new editions of *Comus*, *Lycidas*, or *Paradise Lost*—or for that matter on Milton’s life by way of biography—that did not linger over the tresses so abundant there. Rarer still is the eighteenth-century critic who does not seize such references as a chance to reflect on the multiple ways in which literary objects might mean, though none is more engaging on the topic than the artist and Milton aficionado Jonathan Richardson the Elder. When Richardson and his eponymous son produced their voluminous 1734 *Explanatory Notes and Remarks on Milton’s Paradise Lost*, they found themselves immediately entangled in the “hyacinthine locks” that “round from Adam’s parted forelocks hung/Clust’ring”. What, they wondered, had Milton meant by (as they spelled it) “hyacinthin”? In dutiful instrumentalist fashion, the Richardsons offered a few technical terms for *what* this adjective might be. For example, it could be an allusion or cross-reference (“hyacinthin” tied Adam’s hair to Homer and to Milton’s own *Lycidas* and *Comus*). It could also be what the Richardsons termed a “semblance”: “hyacinthin” means clusters of “black turning to purple,” recalling “grapes—which Adam’s hair on each side somewhat resembled” ([38], p. 154). But by the Richardsons’ lights, “hyacinthin” was best construed in terms of *how* the word touched the reader: here, its quality was “pittoresque.” In this modality, adjectives appear in visual space to tell us “what Images [are] Intended to be set before us” ([38], p. 156). So when we read that (in the Richardson’s redaction) Adam “had bright, black Hair, [Eve] Yellow; Both Curl’d, tho His parted A-top,” such textual prompts, or “Helps to Conceive,” guarantee that “a lively Pittoresque Imagination with Poetical Good Sense will furnish the Possessors of these Qualities with Something” ([38], pp. 156, 158). Significantly, the qualities to be “possess[ed]” belong every bit as much to the idiosyncratic “Pittoresque Imagination” that will always come up with “something” as they do to Adam.

Adam's hair also prompted the thought of what grew on his maker's own head. Wondering, thus, why Milton made his Adam beardless, the Richardsons speculate that this is "because Hair, hanging down to the shoulders, and which [Milton] thought was a Beauty (he wore his Own so) would not Look well with more on his Upper Lip and Chin" ([38], p. 158). In 1749, Milton's biographer Thomas Newton read the Richardsons' commentary on Adam's hair and further unfurled the thoughts that that hair provoked, supposing that since it "hung 'clustering' or like bunches of grapes," it was "most probable...that [Milton] drew the portrait of Adam not without regard to his own person, of which he had no mean opinion" ([39], p. 315). Newton ultimately found no difference between Adam's locks and those of Milton himself. Newton's *Life of Milton* seizes the impression of Adam that Milton leaves in *Paradise Lost* then loops it through the Richardsons' "Pittoresque" to render the poet's own hair as "light brown, and parted on the foretop, in curls waving upon his shoulders" ([39], p. liv).

As Newton's remarks suggest, Milton's "own" hair featured subtly but consistently in the many *Lives* of the poet that were produced over the long eighteenth century. But it only lightly supports the functions typically attributed to Enlightenment biography: the erecting of a cultural monument, the re-embodiment of a human subject. At a much more fundamental level, Milton's hair was a way to bind these texts dynamically not only to his once living body but to the ever-moving perceptions of those living now, whenever that might be. Life writers from the Williamite freethinker John Toland to Johnson to the early nineteenth-century librarian Henry Todd thus sketched his hair's length, its color, even the torque of its curl. These are conspicuously transient characteristics that promised less to substantiate Milton's body or provide hard facts concerning him than to give the momentary but thrilling sense that, in the elated phrase of the mid-century compiler of Miltoniana Francis Peck, "this, this is he" ([40], titlepage).

Any eighteenth-century *Life of Milton* can be traced to the manuscript notes of the Oxford antiquarian John Aubrey [29,36]. Aubrey had been charged by his colleague Anthony Wood with the task of collecting and consolidating what was known of Milton's life in the decade following his death in 1674. To this end, Aubrey interviewed a number of persons who had laid eyes on Milton, including his widow Elizabeth Minshull, and he consulted at least two portraits then in her possession, one of them William Faithorne's now canonical crayon likeness of Milton four years before his death. As a result of these researches, Aubrey's scribbled "Minutes of the Life of Mr. John Milton" register the mimetic detail that Mr. Milton's hair was "light browne." But at some point Aubrey inserted the word "abroun" into the space above "light browne," thereby putting a static designation in motion ([41], p. 3).

Wood seems to have stopped it in its tracks: he plucked only the phrase "light browne" from Aubrey's handwritten "Minutes" when he transposed them into the first printed memoir of Milton's life, published in 1681 ([30], p. 47). Milton's hair stays "light brown" in virtually every *Life of Milton* that appeared in Wood's wake over the long eighteenth century. Never does it gray: it is "light brown" in Toland, in Phillips, in Fenton, in Birch, in Richardson, in Johnson, in Newton, in Todd. And yet *so* durably and invariably "light brown" is Milton's hair that these entwined but opposing adjectives, "light" and "brown," seem to do more than secure a reliable description of a human body part or speak to personal beauty and the vanity it may have sponsored. "Light brown" also registers—and effects—dynamic transference from one critical sensibility to another. As life writers teased this root phrase into new elaborations, "Milton's hair" was realized as material at the point of interaction between textual objects,

the bodily senses that such objects awakened, and the “lively Pittoresque Imagination” that returns meaning, in the moment, to the matter at hand.

4. Auratic Entanglement

How to characterize what was happening when eighteenth-century critics and connoisseurs entangled themselves with literary impressions of “Milton’s hair”? It’s tempting to call it entanglement itself, a word whose noble pedigree in twentieth-century literary criticism runs from Wolfgang Iser ([42], p. ix) to Stanley Fish ([43], pp. 1–10), who so famously applied it to the experience of the reader not so much of as in *Paradise Lost*. The entanglement of twentieth-century literary phenomenology is literally anticipated in Enlightenment men of letters’ spiraling engagements with all matters Miltonic.

As it happens, “entanglement” is also a cross-over term between literature and science. In her recent study of the “entanglement of matter and meaning” in present-day quantum physics, Karen Barad suggests that, from the perspective of that physics, “matter and meaning...are inextricably fused together, and no event, however energetic, can tear them asunder.” They are, as she puts it, “uncuttable” ([44], p. 3). Entanglement, in Barad’s view, demands a new account—and a new ethics—of realism. Barad terms this “other” realism “agential,” insofar as, given entanglement, “it is [only] through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of [...] phenomena [can] become determinate” ([44], p. 137). As if to unite the professional readers with the physicists, phenomena are thus diffractive in form: They follow the “apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction” ([44], p. 74), the obstruction being the perceiving agent. We might think of writing as a “waveform” briefly objectified as it strikes its reader. Should we wish to investigate the “intra-actions” that produce objects, “the humanities” begins to seem as well-positioned as “the sciences.”

If not more so. With respect to eighteenth-century science, Barad insists that Newtonian “cultures of objectivism” denied the entanglement of matter and meaning, urgent instead to separate the conceptual frameworks and representational practices of observers from their solid objects of observation. But we might, as recently has Helen F. Thompson, dispute a picture of eighteenth-century science that is limited to (Newtonian) physics [45]. Things look rather different, Thompson finds, in reluctantly modernizing chemistry, whose preoccupation with the “airs” that compose them suggest far more subtle and complex relationships between subjects and objects—and, one might add, between both and the no less aeriform body of the language that communicated these.

Enlightenment chemists were often preoccupied with what Milton’s contemporary Robert Boyle called the “atmospheres of consistent bodies here below”—personal combinations of airs that surrounded all bodies but whose “strange subtilty” at once betokened the specificity of each and mixed it with the senses of their percipient ([46], p. 3.64). A present-day cognate for such atmospheres is aura. Disciplinarily speaking, aura is a leftover that has been tossed our way. We accept this vestige of the pre-secular soul as our proper object because of various qualities that aura allegedly possesses: its paradoxical intimacy with enlightened values of objectivity and instrumentality, and its charismatic death spiral since the Enlightenment and the birth of what Walter Benjamin so quotably designated the modern age of mechanical reproduction. In his critical writing, Benjamin seems to define aura as the penumbral property of an object. For example, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical

Reproduction” (1936), it is the virtual halo (or, in “secular” terms, the atmosphere), so mysteriously expressive of its “unique existence” that seems to hover about certain works of art ([47], p. 219). Elsewhere, Benjamin casts the aura as “*ein sonderbares Gespinst aus Raum und Zeit*”: a strange web—or ghost, or fib—of space and time that settles into “the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be” ([48], p. 2.518). Once aura has been spatially fixed, it is possible to track its decay from the sacred object of ancient and medieval times to early modernity’s autonomous aesthetic object to the one that is, in secular modernity, mechanically reproduced in photography.

Captivation by the aura’s luminous shadow shadows mid-twentieth-century critiques of (the) Enlightenment, with its explicit commitment to the apparently unmediated seeing of things in their true colors. Auras reveal that colors are contributed as much by percipients as by objects of perception. But even for the Enlightenment’s many (enlightened) critics, this is a recipe for ambivalence. For instance, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* tries to see behind an enlightenment paradigm where “art must first prove its utility” ([49], p. 18) to the moment where “the work of art still has something in common with enchantment.” But the results disappoint: In a manner analogous to the now discredited one in which magicians once “marked out the limits of the area where the sacred powers were to come into play,” art merely “posits its own, self-enclosed area” and “describes its own circumference which closes it off from actuality.” Merely miming ancient magic, “that duplication still occurs by which the thing appeared as spiritual” and only “this constitutes its aura” ([49], p. 19).

Aura’s quality of *Gespinst* only deepens our disappointment. In the diffident mode of eighteenth-century materialism, our work has been conceived as that of debunking the quasi-magical, spiritual properties that cultural objects seemingly possess. To speak of such an object’s aura is to stake out skeptical distance, as in Lynch’s pithy observation that our love of literature carries “an aura of self-evidence” ([13], p. 14) or that literature itself takes on an “aura of unassailable timelessness effected by the rapid growth of the reading public” ([13], p. 171). Likewise, John Guillory casts canonical texts in terms of their instrumental value in supporting various institutions. Guillory’s still influential explosion of the myth of canonicity brings an instrumentalist skepticism to bear upon such literary jewels as Thomas Gray’s “gem of purest ray serene” once (but no more) falsely “supposed to exist in a timeless realm” of “unvalued value.” But his skeptical method blinds him to the biological periphery of Gray’s allusion, which surely glances at Milton’s eyes, obscured by gutta serena. Instrumentalism’s encounter with aesthetic value inevitably breeds suspicion of aura: it is, at best, something that is borrowed, transferred, or lent. Hence “vernacular writing must borrow the slowly fading aura of scripture as a means of...solidifying its new prestige” ([11], p. 76), “the aura of the sacred is transferred [...] to a certain space accessible only in the reading of the poem” ([11], p. 164), and “implacable necessity...lends to the technicalities of deconstructive method the aura of a fate” ([11], p. 230). Though Guillory wanted to revive aesthetic value as an alternative to cultural value, aura remains part of the critical rhetoric of instrumentality, death and decay, the property of false supposition as it ties itself to the objects of our inquiry.

But besides what Benjamin says the aura *is*, there is the way he writes the experience of it, and here the *Zeit* side of aura absorbs and transforms the *Raum* side. Benjamin thus likens the experience of aura to the “unique phenomenon of a distance” sensed when we “follow, while reclining on a summer’s noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence.” This, Benjamin concludes, “is to breathe in the aura

of these mountains, of the branch” ([48], p. 2.519). Benjamin’s breathed shadow returns the aura to its pre-romantic conception, where it is at once bodily and bound with what communicates it in time [50]. An irony is that this conception of aura coexisted with the very form of mechanical reproduction in which Benjamin’s own sense of aura is conveyed: print.

To leaf through the printed matter of the Enlightenment is to find that for much of eighteenth century, the word *aura* remains closely tied to its etymological root, the Greek word *aēr*. If for the first time visible to multiple eyes as a mechanically reproduced word appearing on a page, *aura* nonetheless continued to refer to the invisible, purely communicative medium—the current—of air. “Aura is a lyght wynde meuyd,” the Cornish translator John Trevisa had declared back in 1398, in his translation of Bartholomeus’s *Of the Properties of Things*: it is not, in other words, a property of things at all but rather of the way they appear to us and are sensed intersubjectively—or, in Barad’s phrase, intra-agentially—through the media that communicate them. Trevisa’s meaning lingered well into modernity as aura’s only one. It is conjured in this communal, ambient and autonomous sense in the writing of the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century and in that of phenomenologists *avant la lettre* such as George Berkeley, whose 1732 dialogue *Alciphron* evokes that “volatile essence of the soul, that aetherial aura, that spark of entity that returns and mixes with the solar Light” ([51], p. 2.35).

After Berkeley, whither aura? It turns up next in mid-eighteenth-century pneumatic chemistry as it began to document electricity, particularly the kind present in and around the human body in the guise of “medical electricity”; hence George Adams’s 1792 *Essay on Electricity* finds “aura, or wind” to be produced by “the action of the electrical fluid on them” that can “put light bodies in motion” ([52], p. 222). Medical writing likewise conceived aura as a phenomenon occurring at once within the human body and at a slight distance from it. For example, William Cullen’s *First Lines of the Practice of Physic* (1783) introduces into English print the notion of the so-called *aura epileptica*. This was “the sensation of something moving in some part of the limbs; or trunk of the body, and from thence creeping upwards to the head” ([53], p. 3.197). Aura is experientially real: the senses truly perceive it. But it is not, strictly speaking, objective, insofar as an individual person’s senses seem also to project aura, distancing it from the very faculties that guarantee its presence. Nor was Cullen’s the only medical writing to treat the body as a medium, one moreover dynamically implicated in the literary medium that sought to convey something about it. The latter-day iatrochemist Thomas Dewell’s *Philosophy of Physic* (1784) found living human bodies to be infused with “aura,” which he saw as a condition for matter coming together so as to be perceived in objective form. In Dewell’s book, bodily forms are “activated” by aura, a source of formal cohesion. Here again, instead of aura’s material objectification, and thus the inevitability of its decay, we come across an internal power of actuation and an “instrument” of action ([54], p. xxxiv), one that can “explain every appearance in the animal economy”—even those “in the mind,” for aura also creates “pleasing or displeasing sensations” there ([54], p. xlii).

Could hair be conceived as one such appearance? Apparently it could, at least by some eighteenth-century scientists who favored hair not just as an exemplary conductor in their electrical experiments but in literary accounts of those same experiments. Such accounts bound hair’s force to the communicative medium and thereby allowed that medium to transcend its own material. Hair thus treated less breaks with such obvious antecedents as the halo—which in medieval painting often marked the artistic medium itself as a unique point of interaction between material and immaterial realities—than sustains them in

the material and textual economies of Enlightenment writing. This is in turn one of the subtler values of Milton's hair, as we find in the "Character Amiably Bright" ([55], p. cvi) that Jonathan Richardson the Elder caught in his 1734 *Life* of the author. Milton's bright "Character," Richardson maintains, will be visible to those who "possess Good Minds," even though others will "look on him as Shining with a Sort of Disastrous Light" ([55], p. cvi). Richardson makes Milton's true brightness perceptible through his own writing, which he presents not as writing but as a "Picture." Nor by "Picture" does Richardson mean a static image of an object in solid space fixed within converging lines of sight. Rather, his sense of "Picture" is gestural and impressionistic, registering time's passage in physical space realized through the sensations of the living. After all, "as in making a Portrait [...] what is Most Important remains; the Air" ([55], p. xxxix).

It was this "Portrait" of an "Air"—an aura—that Richardson's *Life* sought to strike off of the senses of the living. And in its service nothing was more valuable than Milton's hair. Richardson thus lingered with Milton's hair so as to provide a frame for "the Face we Chiefly desire to be Acquainted with." Nor was it only a frame; it doubled as a means of carrying modern readers beyond the set of his mouth and even the "Look of the Eye" to "the rest of [his] Air." To this end, we read that Milton's "Hair was a Light Brown, which he wore Parted atop, and Somewhat Flat, Long, and Waving, and a little Curl'd" ([55], p. ii). As for "real" pictures, the "Print Prefix'd" to the eighteenth-century artist's literary *Life* literally transfers Milton's hair from William Faithorne's crayon drawing—"a Picture for which I have reason to believe [Milton] Sate for not long before his Death" ([55], p. ii). But in contrast to that "Picture," in Richardson's "Print" a laurel wreath has suddenly appeared in Milton's hair. Or not so suddenly. Alluding to a caption from Milton's own tribute *Mansus*, Richardson says that "the two Lines under it are my Reason for putting it There." But this is only fitting, since "All the World has given it him long since" ([55], p. iii).

A century on, we find the inveterate collector and author worshipper Thomas DeQuincey on the lookout for a copy of this very print. "Being a great collector of anything relating to Milton," DeQuincey wrote in 1839, "I naturally possessed myself" of the Richardsons' *Notes on Paradise Lost*. Dispiritedness ensued: the frontispiece had been cut out, thanks to "that mania for portrait collecting which has stripped so many English classics of their engraved portraits." But this is not a story about the wish to possess or to be possessed, as DeQuincey himself learns when he tracks down a new copy of Richardson's biography. This time, Richardson's print is there, just not quite as the collectable objective form that DeQuincey had in mind: "Judge of my astonishment," De Quincey invites, "when, in [Richardson's] portrait of Milton, I saw a likeness nearly perfect of Wordsworth" ([56], p. 123). As the romantic poet himself agreed, the key to the likeness was "the way in which the hair lay upon the forehead" ([56], p. 126). In both its intimacy and its distance, as realized upon a page, that hair subtly informs and enlivens Wordsworth's more rigidly preserved apostrophes to a Milton who "should be living at this hour." In the waveform of "his" auratic hair, Milton is always doing just that.

5. A Lock of Thy Bright Hair

Wordsworth and DeQuincey would have been well aware that "Milton's hair" had been circulating as a material object for over four decades. But to return to our original question, what kind of object was it? And what kind of value did it possess? Here Philip Neve's *Narrative of the Disinterment of Milton's*

Coffin solicits a second look. One of its purposes was undoubtedly to verify that it was indeed Milton's body that had been exhumed. But this was no mean feat, for the fact of the matter is that Neve himself never laid eyes on the body in question. His *Narrative* opens with the barrister already "having read in the Public Advertiser [...] that *Milton's coffin* had been dug up in the parish church of *St. Giles, Cripplegate*, and was there to be seen." He headed "immediately to the church, and found the latter part of the information untrue" ([1], p. 5). The discovery ties Neve to a reader equally starved for objects of sensation. Milton's hair doesn't fill the gap. Instead it turns privation into a condition of experience.

Once in hand, that is, the hair provided Neve with a key assurance "with respect to the identity of the person" who'd been exhumed. In fact, "the strongest of all confirmations is the hair, both in its length and color." But how so? "Behold old Faithorne's quarto-print of Milton," Neve invites, "taken ad vivum, in 1670, four years before Milton's death. Observe the short locks towards the forehead, and the long ones flowing from the same place down the sides of the face." Neve measures the lock that now flows in his hand—"six inches and a half by a rule" when it was cut, but now "only two inches and a half." The transition from one length to another binds Milton's hair with its representation in the minute of writing. But it's color that settles the matter—or rather unsettles it—for (like every life writer after him) Milton's biographer Anthony "Wood says, *Milton* had light brown hair; the very description of that which we possess" ([1], p. 29). The sense that this is Milton's hair arises from the fusion of literary "description" and visual image as these are diffracted by Neve's measuring hand—a hand whose shadow seems to fall through the letters that it now produces.

Neve's *Narrative* provides a crucial source for all recent critical and scholarly analysis of the rough handling of Milton's corpse [1–4]. But as it lends them material heft, it also models the kind of imaginative play with an impression that both realizes and motivates critical and scholarly work. Here the open question of what Michael Lieb calls "credence" ([5], p. 8) could not matter less. While Lieb doubts the legitimacy of Neve's conclusions, the latter's *Narrative* nonetheless provides material to support Lieb's gripping anthropological (and Miltonic) interpretation of an individual body's dispersal into collective meaning. Similarly, Carol Barton's empirically grounded notes "toward a thanatography" of the St Giles incident pieces together the dozens of newspaper items, popular poems, and warring pamphlets that suspended themselves over the question of whether the body was retrieved was Milton's or, as the hoaxer and Shakespearean George Steevens insisted, that of a daughter of one Smith family buried nearby. Barton offers "several significant pieces of illumination either unknown about or ignored by those who have blazed this trail before me" ([3], p. 250). She concludes that the body was indeed Milton's—"the purpose of [her] study" having been "to gather...as much as it is possible to do so the corpus of Truth that is left to us on the treatment of Milton's corpse" ([3], p. 234). Yet this twenty-first century Isis's rich and absorbing "thanatography" transcends its own "purpose," and indeed its own morbid genre. Barton admits she could not stop reading or writing—nor can her own reader—because there is such a "good deal of sardonic fun" in the many journalistic "treatment[s...] of Milton's corpse" ([3], p. 220).

Neve's references to the "liberal mind" and the "rights" of the dead also support Joseph Crawford's effort to tie his apparent exhumation to Milton's revival as a republican icon against the background of the French Revolution. Like Lieb, Crawford is committed to the cultural use of material. The revenues are considerable: A cultural approach grounds high romantic attachment to the Milton who entered Blake

through his foot in popular print culture while also revealing renewed ambivalence toward Milton in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It also supports the kinds of stadial narrative, instituted in the Enlightenment, upon which literary history relies, for in Crawford's evocative words, "the violation of Milton's grave is an extraordinarily suggestive event, as it occurred at the very historical moment when Milton-the-author was changing from being something known, safe, distant or inert into something dangerously ambiguous, powerfully immediate, and threateningly active" ([4], p. 26). The suggestiveness here is not just part of historical context; as Crawford's aeriform metaphor conveys, it is also auratic in the sense that made Milton's hair mean—without exactly mattering—in the eighteenth century. If Crawford's speculation that the romantic Milton may not have been "a man at all, but a kind of abstract energy" ([4], p. 213) is not strictly convincing, its power is still palpable.

All of these qualities are evident in the dozens of bits of print that the disinterment of Milton's coffin stimulated the first time around. Milton's hair thus naturally glints in a great many of them. If poets had his bones demanding restitution, then sinking with a defeated sigh back into the crypt [14,57], his hair seemed to grow and even change color as it passed from hand to hand. So much was on the market, the editor of the *English Chronicle* sardonically remarked, that "the head of the poet must have vegetated a great variety of hair, and of various colors, as the Public are alternately presented in the streets with grey, black, red, and auburn hair, each of which they are solemnly assured is real and genuine" [58]. Reality or genuineness here doesn't inhere in inert objects; it is entangled with their superficial qualities. As manifest through writing, these objects are realized as agents interacting with the living senses.

The Postscript to the second edition of Neve's *Narrative* marks this difference. Published after what was left of the corpse had been exhumed, examined, and buried a second time, the object of Neve's Postscript seems to have been to confirm that the body under examination was indeed Milton's. To this end he cites the reports of two examining surgeons. Milton's hair figures in both. At the time of the first exhumation on August fourth, Neve reiterates, "of all those who saw the body... there is not one person, who discovered a single hair of any other color than light brown." But thereafter? "From the accounts of those who saw it on the 17th, it appears that the hair on the back of the head, was of dark brown, nearly approaching to black, although the front hair remaining was of the same light brown as that taken on the fourth." Neve leaves this mystery unresolved: "It does not belong to me to account for or to prove this fact." But a more important "fact" is that Milton's hair's appearance has become contingent on what is said about it. Its objectivity is adjudicated anew with each iteration. It is, in Barad's sense, so entangled with the "accounts" of it that its secondary quality of color is *bound* to change. Properly speaking, Milton's hair can't much matter. But as a result, it does, especially once Neve turns to the testimony of a second examining surgeon, one John Dyson. Dyson officially reserves judgment as to the identity of the material body that has been exhumed once more. But, Neve writes, "on a paper, which he shewed me, enclosing a bit of the hair, he had written, *Milton's hair*" ([59], p. 46).

What, here, is the value of "Milton's hair"? It could certainly be evidentiary. It could be merely sentimental. But to the extent that Milton's hair is not perceptible apart from the written words "Milton's hair," its value is auratic in the Enlightenment's since largely disregarded sense of the word. This is the value it maintains in John Keats's "Lines on seeing a Lock of Milton's hair." The date of this relatively obscure ode is 1818—21 January to be exact, which is when Keats copied it into a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey. Keats had just paid a visit to his friend Leigh Hunt, who, Keats wrote, "surprised me

with a real authenticated *Lock of Milton's Hair*. I know you would like what I wrote thereon," Keats adds, "so here it is, as they say of a Sheep in a Nursery book" ([60], p. 84). Keats's "Lines" appear, to the eye, in one long slender strand, attenuated through a paratactic string of apostrophes to Milton, summoned as "Chief of Organic Numbers" ([2], p. 167, l.1).

Evidence that the chief's "spirit never slumbers" ([2], l. 19) is to be found, conventionally enough, in the living speaker's response to "A Lock of thy bright hair!" ([2], l. 36) "Sudden it came," that speaker avers. "And I was startled when I heard thy name/Coupled so unaware" ([2], ll. 37–8). The bright hair doesn't, in fact, come all that "sudden." In fact, it doesn't appear at all until the end of the poem it has supposedly provoked. It perceptibly arises from the "Organic Numbers" that precede it, much as only the coupling of Milton's "name" with it causes the hair's "sudden" and startling appearance. The earlier parts of the poem thus limn the formal conditions through which Milton's hair *can* appear. This in turn only animates the speaker's sense of his own sensory involvement: his "forehead hot and flush'd" ([2], l. 35) becomes a receptor for that "Lock of thy bright hair" even as the bright image of the hair appears to grow out of it. Brightness, a quality of presence, arises from the intimate yet transpersonal forms—conjointly bodily, linguistic, and even typographical—that both constitute and communicate experience at any given "moment."

The bright hair's possessor, Leigh Hunt, was not to be outdone. Indeed, that eminent collector not only seems to have owned "Milton's hair" but published two sonnets about it that suggest that it rather possessed him. The first borrows the Petrarchan form that Milton himself favored to frame a series of human transactions. These begin with the "MD"—one William Batty—to whom the poem is addressed. It was Batty, Hunt's personal physician, whose hand evidently showed him Milton's "glorious hair." In the poem, it is Batty too who (not unhairlike) is to be found turning "short and bending pleasantly," before he passes that hair to Hunt's speaker, who receives it not as a possession but as a conduit through which he himself might "breathe" Milton's aura. This aura Hunt specifies not as the property of an object but instead as the "strenuous air/That nursed [Milton's] Apollonian tresses free" ([61], p. cxxi). This compound movement generates a second sonnet "on the same subject," even though that subject could as easily be Batty or Hunt's speaker as Milton's "glorious hair." What makes that hair "glorious" is precisely this confusion—its inseparability from a common "air" that is at once a shared medium and a manner of movement taking visible shape in writing.

In the first line of Hunt's second sonnet Milton's hair "lies before me there," dead until "my own breath/Stirs its thin outer threads." As with Keats, this revival causes the speaker to encounter himself as his own etheric double: Just as Keats's speaker glimpses his own senses as a second body through which he produces and experiences immediacy, so does Hunt's perceive himself "as though beside/The living head I stood." Hunt's octave shows what makes this possible. It seizes the haptic impression of Milton's imagined fingers as "perhaps he pressed [the hair] once, or underneath/Ran his fine fingers" ([61], p. cxxxii). The action doubles as a luminous afterimage of the writing hand's—and the reading eye's—coordinated movement through time.

Like Keats's "Lines," and Hunt's sonnets have often stood as evidence that "Milton cannot be honored adequately." Placing them in the mid-eighteenth-century epitaph tradition whose lugubrious aim was to substantiate absence itself, Lorna Clymer finds that these poems reduce his hair to nothing but an occasion to write about writing ([6], p. 109). But this is just what makes Milton's hair

momentarily—if not momentarily—present. As they sustain the independent life of Milton's hair in writing, Keats and Hunt may not reveal an honorable (thus dishonorable) object of stable value. But they do engage us with a living instance of what John Shawcross simply terms "Milton's influence" [62].

For the record, what we might call Hunt's copy of Milton's hair was part of a larger collection that, at final tally, would also include the locks of Swift, Johnson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Maria Edgeworth, Shelley and Keats himself. Hunt's hirsute anthology of English literary history is, for the moment, lodged at the University of Texas's aptly named Ransom Center, where the passerby of today can see that Hunt mounted a circle of Milton's hair on a sheet of paper and went on to label it, simply, "Milton's hair."

While the label can look like a bid for fixity and possession, Hunt's echo of Dyson's letter to Neve says otherwise. So does an 1833 newspaper piece that Hunt published on this very lock. Hunt's short essay begins with the exuberant claim that "it is Milton's!" Not, presumably, Hunt's own. Hunt goes on to explain that "this treasure was generously given us by [my] physician, who claimed to have gotten it from his father-in-law, who had it from Hoole the translator, who had it from Johnson," only to admit that "the link of evidence is here lost; but Johnson was famous for his veracity, and he would not have given it as Milton's, had he not believed it genuine" ([63], p. 369).

The twentieth-century editor of Keats's correspondence Maurice Forman would drily note that the hair's "pedigree, though not sufficiently authoritative to satisfy a rigid regard for the ordinary laws of evidence, was ample justification for the faith of the imaginative Keats" ([60], p. 86). Forman's reference to "faith," however facetiously it may have been intended, nonetheless illuminates a critical value of Milton's hair not just for Keats and Hunt but for handlers of Milton's hair throughout the Enlightenment. Having inherited the Enlightenment's own stadial and progressive models of historical change, recent literary and intellectual history inevitably defines the period as what Charles Taylor epitomizes as "a secular age" [64]. In Simon During's formulation, enlightened "faith," like belief, is often, at best, adjudicated as social contract or as a form of "secular magic," while in the older but no less influential paradigm advanced by Keith Thomas, the "decline of magic" opens the way to a naturalized and rationalized supernatural even within religious orthodoxy [65,66]. Milton's hair is an auratic object that cites both the halo and the saintly relic of yore even as it remains dependent on modern print's reflexive potential. As such, that hair potentially attracts ambivalent forms of faith perfectly suited to "a secular age." The bet of credulity is always hedged and an elusive object of allure can always be demystified, unmasked as indifferent matter whose transcendental meaning arises from what its percipients agree to believe about it, at least for a time. Particularly when we see how inseparable Milton's hair was from what by the end of the eighteenth century had become "the" literary, we find support for the more complex and ambivalent history of secularization that Deidre Lynch routes through literary antiquarianism of the period [13]. Here the bodies of books take on the trappings of the supernatural if not, in the end, its content. They do so moreover through acts of transference like the one Hunt conflates with "the link of evidence" that would not only confirm that "his" lock of hair was Milton's but secure the possibility of venerating it without irony.

All the same, Hunt appears to be far less interested in "the link of evidence" than in what he termed "the internal evidence of the hair itself." Yet what seems "internal" is also established collectively, over time, by the temporary handlers of Milton's hair. Echoing Neve's wonder at an exhumed corpse's resilient curl, Hunt declares that this evidence "is strong," for "the colour is brown, which is known to

have been Milton's" ([63], p. 369). Well, that certainly settles the matter. How many people have brown hair? Yet Hunt renders the hair he has (for now) in such minute detail that we cannot doubt its reality. This is never to be confused with certainty that it is Milton's. "This lock of the great poet is [...] beautiful," Hunt muses. "It is remarkable for its excessive and almost preternatural fineness—we mean the softness and slenderness of its individual hairs. It furnishes an interesting corroboration of what was said of [Milton's] looks at the University, where he was called (not much to his liking) the 'Lady of the College'" ([63], p. 369).

The hair that Hunt virtually touches has become at once "beautiful" and real—and above all "interesting"—through the things once and currently written of it. These mesh dynamically with its most transient and superficial qualities. "Certainly," Hunt's "we" muse, "it is more like the hair of the most delicate girl," especially since "there is no grey in the lock." Hunt speculates further:

It must have been cut when the poet was in the vigour of life, [...] and we may indulge our fancy by supposing it was cut off as a present to his wife. Love and locks of hair, the most touching, the most beautiful, and the most lasting of keepsakes, naturally go together, and as Milton valued himself on his tresses, a woman who loved him would hold them of double value. [...] Indeed,] Milton must have been more delighted than most poets at the compliments paid to beautiful tresses by his brethren, particularly by his favourite Greeks. We say nothing about his portrait of Adam, supposed by some to have been drawn from himself, because we are ambitious in these papers of touching as little as we can upon what has been said before us. ([63], p. 370).

What then is the "value" of Milton's "tresses"? It is not sentimental. Nor is it exactly aesthetic. It is obviously not commercial or evidentiary. Subtly revealed in the interplay of touching without touching, the true value of Milton's hair is that of binding the fluent medium of Hunt's essay to an object that proves anything but elusive. To embrace this value is to experience such objects not as objects whose vanishing is the price of their visibility to us but as present and motivating forces in our writing. Such an embrace cannot heal the secularizing rift to which the hair of the least secular poet in English literary speaks. But it can perhaps stanch our tears for our lost objects. Twitching our mantles blue (or perhaps light brown), we can instead recover the auratic, thus liberating potentiality that became entangled with our material at the moment of its disavowal—from, that is, the start.

6. Conclusions

In its attempt to gauge the value of Milton's hair at a critical moment in the history of modern humanistic inquiry, this article can easily seem to have emphasized questions of style over matters of substance. But perhaps it is fairer to say that the strange history of what may or may not have been Milton's hair asks us to reconsider the relationship between style and substance: the disjunctions and hierarchies into which we inevitably force that relationship and especially the role that we play in adjudicating it. One result of an approach that finds style and substance to be dynamically and mutually constitutive is likely to be the very fall into indeterminacy that Milton records in *Paradise Lost*; another is negation, whose arrival in the realm of human experience is also recorded there. But beyond indeterminacy and negation, we might discover a new version of positivism, one modeled in the very engagements with "Milton's hair" that this article has traced. This would not be positivism in either of

its two traditional acceptations: It would not, that is, amount to a flat rejection of metaphysics in favor of objective proofs or to an irreducibly logical and social interpretation of law. Perhaps it would only be a creative attitude, albeit one freed of doubt about the significance and reality of its objects. But the resemblance of this attitude to the devotional postures we associate with the time before the Enlightenment—the time in which Milton himself lived—is worth taking seriously. Or even playfully. For helping to bring me to these conclusions, I am grateful to the readers of this essay, both those unknown to me and those known (Paul Keen, Laura O'Connor, and Brook Thomas).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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