The Oswald Review of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English: Volume 24, 2022

Douglas Higbee

USC Aiken, douglash@usca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor

Part of the American Literature Commons, Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol24/iss1/7

This Full Issue is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.
This full issue is available in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol24/iss1/7
The Oswald Review

An International Journal Of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
In the Discipline of English

*The Oswald Review* is published annually by the Department of English, University of South Carolina Aiken, 471 University Parkway, Aiken, SC 29801. *TOR* accepts submissions in the discipline of English from undergraduates, with a professor’s endorsement (see submission guidelines at the back of the journal). The views of the writers represented in the journal do not necessarily reflect the scholarly or critical views of the editors. All reasonable care is taken to assure academic honesty. *TOR* does not accept responsibility for copyright infringement on the part of the writers.

For more information about *The Oswald Review*, please visit the journal’s website at https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/

©2022 by the Department of English, University of South Carolina Aiken

ISSN 1520-9679

Address correspondence and inquiries to Dr. Douglas Higbee at douglash@usca.edu

The University of South Carolina Aiken provides affirmative action and adheres to the principle of equal education and employment opportunity without regard to race, color, religion, sex, creed, national origin, age, disability or veteran status. This policy extends to all programs and activities supported by the University. The University of South Carolina Aiken is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award associate, baccalaureate, and master’s degrees.

*The Oswald Review* was established in 1999, the first intercollegiate refereed journal of undergraduate criticism and research in the discipline of English. Former editors include Dr. Tom Mack and Dr. Phebe Davidson

All articles published in *The Oswald Review* are available in public and institutional libraries worldwide via EBSCO databases, and at Scholar Commons, the online research depository of the University of South Carolina.
The Oswald Review
An International Journal
Of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
In the Discipline of English

Editor:
Douglas Higbee, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of South Carolina, Aiken
Aiken, South Carolina 29801
douglash@usca.edu

Editorial Assistant:
Francesco Satta
Department of English
University of South Carolina, Aiken

Editorial Review Board:
Josephine A. Koster, Ph.D.
Winthrop University

Daniel Pigg, Ph.D.
University of Tennessee, Martin

Mardy Philippian, Ph.D.
Lewis University, IL

Jeff Sychterz, Ph.D.
University of Maine, Augusta

John Crawford, ABD
University of South Carolina
The Oswald Review
CONTENTS:

Beasts and Bestiality, Deities and Deification:
Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Milton’s *Comus* .............................................................. 9

Bret van den Brink
Western Trinity University, BC, Canada

Milton’s Cardinal Directions Symbolism
in *Paradise Lost* ................................................................. 25

Micah Gill
Harding University, AR

Desperate, Exploited, and Abandoned:
Laborers in "Life in the Iron-Mills" and Today ..................... 49

Danielle Durning
Delaware County Community College, PA

Submission Guidelines .......................................................... 65
Beasts and Bestiality, Deities and Deification: 
Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* in Milton’s *Comus*

Bret van den Brink

There exists in John Milton’s *Comus* something of a dialectical tension between the moralities of the physical and spiritual worlds. Though the Attendant Spirit—a Platonic “daemon” in the Trinity and Bridgewater manuscripts—gets both the first and last words in the work, the central action is enacted on the physical plane, wherein the Attendant Spirit’s powers appear to be quite limited (Lewis 180). The Attendant Spirit can neither prevent the Lady’s encounter with Comus, nor is he able to free her once the tempter has fled. The issue of the apparent impotence of spiritual goodness to influence physical circumstances is central to Milton’s work. This same issue is influentially treated by the late-antique philosopher Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Milton alludes to this work in the Attendant Spirit’s opening speech and engages with its ideas and imagery throughout his masque. Milton’s engagement with Boethius illuminates the central message of his masque: physical realities must always be interpreted in light of their spiritual counterparts if they are to be judged correctly. For both authors, correct judgement is crucial, for it determines whether one is on the path to becoming a beast or a god.

Before proceeding to Milton’s allusion to Boethius, it is worthwhile to remark on the formal similarity of their works. *The Consolation*
of Philosophy is a Menippean satire purged of the genre’s traditional comic elements—the work is essentially a theoretical argument given in dialogue and interspersed with poetry. A masque, on the other hand, is “in essence a courtly ritual [. . .] defined above all by its visual and musical complexity—its scenery, costumes, and choreography” (McDowell 227). Comus subverts the masque form by focusing on words and arguments rather than a luxurious bombardment of the senses. This logocentrism is particularly emphasized in the debates between the two brothers and between the Lady and Comus. Moreover, Milton’s choice to publish the masque further separates it from its original ritual context. This prioritizes “the written text” over “the spoken event,” purging the work of what may be seen as its genre’s superfluous ornamentation (Teskey 111). Milton’s conscious self-distancing from the masque tradition by emphasizing argument over imagery and the composed text over its corporeal enactment has the cumulative effect of making Comus formally quite similar to Boethius’ austere Menippean satire.

This measure of formal similarity is accompanied by an allusive tie in the opening monologue of the text. The opening alludes to the myth of Circe—the witch who in Homer’s Odyssey transforms Odysseus’ crew into swine. Milton’s titular character, Comus, is presented as the offspring of Bacchus and Circe; this demigod follows in his father’s footsteps by tempting humans to debauchery and in his mother’s footsteps by changing them into beasts (ll. 46-77). The more proximate spur for Milton, however, is not Homer but Boethius. That Boethius is the more proximate spur is demonstrable for two reasons: firstly, in both Boethius and Milton the humans are transformed into various beasts rather than swine; and secondly, in both
Boethius and Milton the physical transformations are not merely physical in nature, but are allegories for spiritual decay (Boethius 119; Milton II. 70-71).

To understand the nature of this decay, one must first understand the brushstrokes of Boethius’ thought. The philosopher, following Aristotle, understands humanity as the “rational animal” with rationality, the ability and inclination to pursue the truth, being the defining feature that separates humans from beasts (24). Aligned with this classical tradition, he conceptualizes rationality not merely as the definitive feature of humanity, but its purpose. And, as Alasdair MacIntyre demonstrates, in such a classical understanding to fulfill one’s purpose is to be good (59). Hence, in Boethius’ schema, the rational human fulfils their purpose and is thus a good person. Moreover, for Boethius, as a Christian Neoplatonist, goodness (the proper object of the will) is coextensive with truth (the proper object of the intellect), both of which are coextensive with being as such and exist in their fullness in God’s essence (118). From these principles Boethius deduces that someone who pursues the excellencies of the intellect is not merely a good person but a “divine” person and that someone who abandons the pursuit of these excellencies has “descended to the level of beasts” (118).

Furthermore, for Boethius both goodness and divinity are identified with happiness (89). For Boethius, then, a vicious person may be subjectively pleased, but, under the final analysis, they are objectively wretched. Moreover, a somewhat virtuous person may be subjectively disturbed, but objectively happy, or at least happier than the vicious person. Milton’s Lady appears to be in this category when she anticipates danger in the forest and
says, “These thoughts may startle well but not astound / The virtuous mind” (ll. 210-211). For Boethius, the most virtuous person, the true philosopher, would recognize the superiority of the state of their spirit over their body’s disposition, and so would dwell in a blissful state of dispassion.

Given his philosophy, Boethius reprises the myth of Circe in a rather unique way. He conceives of a “limit to Circe’s / power” in which the minds of Odysseus’ crew are preserved even while their bodies change (120). In such an apparently wretched scenario, he thinks that those who are virtuous, those who have not willingly abandoned their intellectual nature, could still be happy. And so, he warns,

Those poisons are much more toxic
That creep within and infect
The mind and the soul, while they leave
The outer shell untouched. (120)

For Boethius, it is better for one’s body to appear beastly than for one’s soul to be bestial. Likewise, any merely bodily harm is negligible when compared with the harm that viciousness does to the soul. Insofar as one considers the well-being of the soul, as vice is wretched, so virtue is blessed; and, as the wretchedness of vice is the punishment for viciousness, so the blessedness of virtue is the reward for virtue. And, as spiritual reality is independent of physical reality, physical circumstances have no ultimate effect on this spiritual order.

To what extent then does Milton’s imagery and thought in Comus converge with (or diverge from) that of Boethius? The imagery is similar, but altered. As has been mentioned above, the tale no longer centers on
Circe, but rather on her son Comus. Perhaps more significantly, in Boethius it is the entire physical aspect which is transformed; meanwhile in Milton it is only the face, “[t]he express resemblance of the gods,” which is made “brutish” (ll. 69-70). Despite the shift in this imagery, thematically this still aligns quite neatly with Boethius’ thought. While in the verse sections of Consolation Boethius portrays Odysseus’s crew as being tricked into becoming beasts, in the prose sections he portrays humans as making themselves into beasts by abnegating the divinest part of themselves, their intellects.

While Milton borrows and alters the mythic imagery from Boethius’ poem, he simultaneously reproduces the philosophical content of Boethius’ prose. The Attendant Spirit concludes his account of Comus’ transmogrified followers by perfectly mirroring the closing of Boethius’ account of the myth. No longer does the intellectual soul remain aloof from the body’s alterations; instead, the soul’s corruption is the highlight of the change:

And they, so perfect is their misery,
Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
But boast themselves more comely then before
And all their friends, and native home forget
To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty. (ll. 73-77)

Their forgetfulness is reminiscent of the forgetfulness of the soul which Platonism considers concomitant with bodily existence, but more than this, these bestial revellers represent the profoundest depths of human depravity. These revellers represent that state of being in which the intellect is entirely abandoned in favour of the carnal passions: they are the beasts that humans
must become when they forsake their humanity and its orientation towards the divine. Moreover, as Platonism demands, the subjective pleasure of these revellers is condemned by the Attendant Spirit in the strongest terms as “perfect [. . .] misery” (l. 73). Their perceived happiness is mistaken.

Where Boethius portrays only the human appearance as being changed by Circe, Milton portrays Comus as changing their spiritual states. Thus, as Comus can instigate this transformation which Circe cannot, Milton can write that he “[e]xcells his mother at her mighty art” (l. 63). However, it is not the potion that causes this inward change, but rather Comus’ temptation. Hence, he cannot simply force the Lady to drink his potion. Stanley Fish recognizes that Comus, a subject always conceiving reality in terms of a merely physical plane of reference, can “imprison” the Lady in “every sense” which he can “conceive,” but Comus’ error is in his limited plane of reference (151). Hence the Lady’s terse rebuttal: “Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind” (Milton, l. 663). Her mind, her participation in the spiritual world, is not merely beyond the reach of Comus’ powers, but his very range of understanding.

Observing Comus’ limited range of understanding, the Lady declares him to be unable to argue “[a]gainst the sun-clad power of chastity,” and diagnoses him as having neither “ear, nor soul to apprehend / The sublime notion” of virginity (ll. 782, 784-785). In a similarly vein, Boethius has Lady Philosophy, the personification of wisdom who descends from heaven much like Milton’s Attendant Spirit, sing, “The grandeur of heaven eludes the corrupted soul, / And only those who can see with their eyes and their minds / Can observe this light, brighter than any sun” (92). Both authors
draw their epistemological metaphors of light from the allegories in Plato’s Republic. In the Allegory of the Sun of the Good, Plato writes, “What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in relation to sight and visible things” (1129). In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato describes how a prisoner who escapes from the darkness of the cave would “need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above” (1134). For all three authors, the data of the senses, represented by sight, is unreliable unless it is registered by a soul trained in the virtues, as represented by the eyes’ adjustment to sunlight. This idea is somewhat heightened in Milton’s masque, for he shifts the imagery from the “sun” to the “ear,” and so the sense of sight to that of hearing. Again, one detects Milton’s logocentrism. Although interpretation is required for all sense data, words occupy a privileged place, requiring mediation from the interpreter, and so the virtuous education of the interpreter is all the more crucial for arriving at an adequate understanding. The Lady has this formation but Comus does not.

As she is not yet a spirit liberated from her body, this moral formation is still ongoing, but as her moral development moves onwards, she is becoming ever more divine. In both Boethius and Milton, the bestial descent of vice is matched by the divine ascent of virtue. Boethius goes so far as to suggest that virtuous people “become gods [...] by participation in his [God’s] divinity” (89). The term for being made a god is deification, and has a long tradition in Christian thought, though it is somewhat neglected in early-modern theology. Fairly similar to Boethius’ account of deification is the Elder Brother’s teaching that virtue transforms the body “by degrees to
the soul’s essence / Till all be made immortal” (Milton ll. 462-463). Admittedly, as Nicholas McDowell emphasizes in his recent biography which highlights the influence of Platonic philosophy on the young Milton, the poet here uses the language of being made a spirit rather than a god (241). McDowell suggests that this distinction is drawn because Milton wishes to use a strictly Platonic idiom rather than one of Christian salvation. Contra McDowell, it may be more accurately stated that Milton presents a fusion of Platonic and Christian elements in the masque. Certainly, the heart of this doctrine is present in the masque, and at least one account of deification is presented via the history of Sabrina, who is made a goddess in “a quick immortal change” (l. 841). Indeed, the Christian symbolism in the masque manifests itself through most clearly through the character of Sabrina, for she, as Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns observe, “liberates the Lady through a ritual sprinkling redolent of Church sacraments” (84). Perhaps more important, however, is Milton’s depiction of the Attendant Spirit as a creature who, on behalf of Jove, descends from heaven in the opening of the masque to save the Lady, and returns to this heaven at the conclusion of the masque, exhorting mortals to follow him along the path of virtue.

It is remarkable how closely Milton’s portrayal of the heaven from which his Attendant Spirit descends resembles Boethius’ portrayal of the heaven towards which the mind purified by philosophy ascends. As Boethius describes “the house of stars” as lying before the “upper air” wherefrom “the king of kings” reigns, so Milton’s Attendant Spirit resides “[b]efore the starry threshold of Jove’s court” (108; l. 1). As Boethius writes that the liberated spirit residing in such a place “can look down on the earth with
contempt,” so Milton’s Attendant Spirit describes his home as lying “above the smoke and stir of this dim spot / Which men call earth” (108; ll. 5-6). As Boethius says that the liberated spirit shall see earth’s “wretched people fear their tyrant rulers” and view them “all as exiles,” so Milton’s Attendant Spirit sees earth’s people as “[c]onfined” by “low-thoughted care” while “[s]triv[ing] to keep up a frail, and feverish being” (108; ll. 6-8). In short, the heavens of the two writers are the abodes of spirits who look down upon the inhabitants of earth with pity.

Of course, this pity is saturated with hope, for the inhabitants of earth can, and do, ascend to heaven. Lady Philosophy exhorts the prisoner, “Philosophy has wings with which you can fly, ascending / As an exaltation of larks to heaven” (Boethius 108). The virtuous mind can “fasten” on these wings, and soar “even higher beyond the spheres / Of air,” until, at last, it reaches “[t]he awesome dazzling light / Where the king of kings wields his royal scepter / And holds the reigns that control the world” (108). Later, Lady Philosophy elaborates that “[c]elestial and divine beings have clearer judgements,” and “human souls are more free when they persevere in the contemplation of the mind of God” (150). Milton’s Attendant Spirit warbles a very similar tune:

Mortals that would follow me,
Love virtue, she alone is free,
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the Sphery chime. (ll. 1018-1021)

For these writers, freedom, in its highest sense, is the ability to flourish in accordance with one’s nature, unimpeded from exterior restraint. This flour-
ishing is nothing other than moral development, culminating in a vertical ascent past the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe, towards the Empyrean Heaven. Here the liberated spirit finds its beatitude in union with God.

To fully appreciate the nature of this beatitude, it is necessary to touch once more on the formal aspects of the two works, alternating as they do between philosophical arguments and lyric poetry. Both writers would have each element illumine the other in their works, but both, again following Plato, are wary of the possible immoral influence that poetry may have when divorced from reason (1030). Boethius and Milton both foreground the possible abuse of poetry early in their works. In the opening of his work, Boethius portrays himself as indulging his sorrows with lyric poetry, as tragic Muses encourage his intemperance as he lays in bed—discovering him thus, Lady Philosophy reprimands him and sends the Muses away (4). Lady Philosophy is not against poetry as such; she sings to Boethius to console him, but she is against poetry that usurps the reason (5). Likewise, the first character to sing lyric poetry in Milton’s masque is the malevolent Comus (93-144). There is something seductive to Comus’ tetrameters, and many of his lines would not seem out of place in Milton’s playful lyric “L’Allegro.” Nonetheless, Milton, of course, does not view poetry as essentially corrupt, and the next character to sing is the virtuous Lady shortly after she invokes God as “the Supreme Good” (ll. 217, 230-243).

Neither Boethius nor Milton would follow Plato in expelling poets from their ideal cities or heavens. Indeed, Milton would be horrified at such an infringement on personal liberty. Nonetheless, their ideal poets would be those who pursue such poetry as would not conflict with truth, for in the
simplicity of God’s essence, truth and beauty, like truth and goodness, are one (Boethius 84). As Boethius presents his ideal poet in Lady Philosophy, so Milton presents his ideal poets in the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina.

Although both authors portray the ecstatic movement into God as the culmination of the moral life, and both writers hold an ideal of poetic beauty wed to philosophical truth, Boethius does not choose to end with poetry while Milton does. The content of the two endings is similar insofar as they are heavenly ascents. Boethius closes his work with an ascent to God through contemplation. Specifically, he closes his work with meditations on the nature of eternity, the consequent compatibility of divine providence and human freedom, and the ultimate justice of God. As Boethius establishes that true happiness is found in pursuing the goods of the intellect, it is clear that these theoretical meditations are themselves intended as a foretaste of heaven (175). Milton, on the other hand, ends with the Attendant Spirit literally returning to heaven, singing as he soars. Indeed, from the Attendant Spirit’s invocation of Sabrina onwards, the remainder of the masque is sung by the two benevolent deities (ll. 859-1023). The differences between these endings may be marked down to a difference in emphasis; however, it may be that Milton wishes to transcend the boundaries between philosophy and poetry, suggesting that the beatitude toward which the good life tends is better captured in poetry than prose, even if it is a poetry bound by the chaste limits of philosophical truth.

Looking towards this end to things, Boethius closes The Consolation of Philosophy with this exhortation: “Do not be deceived. It is required of you that you live in the constant sight of a judge who sees all things”
That is to say, everyone is accountable for their actions, and everyone is obligated to live justly, for they live under God’s omniscient judgement. Boethius illustrates this point with another vaguely Platonic image of light:

   Although the rays of the sun
   Are not strong enough to pierce
   To the inmost depths of the earth and sea, [...]
   This is not so for the great Creator,
   Whose gaze goes deeper, unobstructed
   By matter’s opacity or night’s
   Utter blackness. (151)

The light of the sun may not be able to penetrate all things, but the light of God’s goodness does. In his first song, Comus professes the perfect contrary of this principle: “Tis only daylight that makes sin” (Milton, l. 126). For Comus, wicked deeds are not sinful if they are committed in the anonymity of the night, for sins are only sins if they are known. More specifically, sins are only sins if the sinner is held accountable. For Comus, it is not the deed that is wrong but the punishment. Fish notes that Comus’ thought is “perfectly coherent given his assumption that man is bound by the processes of nature” (155). Of course, from Milton’s perspective, this assumption is wrong; Comus’ philosophy is built on a faulty foundation. He is proven wrong in the masque: all sins are known, even beforehand, by Jove; hence the masque opens with the Attendant Spirit’s descent to earth, even before Comus encounters the Lady.

From the Boethian perspective, these delusions make Comus the most pitiable character by the end of the masque. He fails to tempt the
lady, is routed by the brothers, and loses almost everything. He resembles Boethius at the beginning of The Consolation of Philosophy, in that he is subject to a bitter turn of fortune. However, unlike Boethius, he lacks the intellectual training and moral formation that could console him with some larger perspective. He is left to wallow in his misfortune.

It may be strange to think that one ought to pity the wicked, but this is precisely what Boethius’ philosophy requires of its adherents. Although it may appear as though Comus escapes his due punishment, Boethius gives two reasons for believing “that those [evil-doers] who are unpunished do not actually escape from paying the penalty for their wickedness” (124). Firstly, as previously discussed, Boethius holds that there is an objective wretchedness that accompanies wickedness, and this wretchedness is increased as one performs more wicked acts. (124). From this perspective Comus is already wretched for what he has done, and he will only get worse off if he continues along his current moral trajectory. As the brothers, despite the Attendant Spirit’s emphatic advice, fail to seize Comus’ wand, it is not merely possible but probable that he will resume his mischief (ll. 653, 815).

Secondly, Boethius holds that evil-doers are punished by their guilty consciences (124). Admittedly, one may doubt whether Comus will be subject to pangs of conscience; however, after his moral argument with the Lady, he experiences an intimation of transcendent justice:

[A] cold shuddering dew

Dips me all o’er, as when the wrath of Jove

Speaks thunder, and the chains of Erebus
To some of Saturn’s crew. (ll. 802-805)

The allusion here is to the classical myth wherein the gods, led by Jove, defeated their enemies the titans, and bound them in the lowest division of the underworld. Milton is using the myth to parallel the biblical teaching that God shall bind the rebel angels in hell. Boethius also recognizes there to be punishments after death; some, he says, are “extremely harsh” (124). It is the anticipation of just such punishments that leaves Comus in a cold sweat, and this anxiety is a punishment itself. As the Lady is rewarded for her virtue by her virtue, Comus is punished for his viciousness by his viciousness. Thus, Comus portrays the vindication of spiritual truth in the face of the exigencies of the physical world.

What Milton attempts in Comus is very similar to what Boethius attempts in The Consolation of Philosophy. Boethius, having written his work while imprisoned, finds consolation in his philosophy which elevates his perspective beyond the vicissitudes of the physical world to a higher and spiritual perspective for which God is the ultimate reference point. His work is a progression from forgetfulness to wisdom and from despair to joy—and this joy is despite his imminent execution. Milton’s work recognizes a certain coherence of both the physical and spiritual perspectives, giving characters arguments of similar strength for both, but ultimately prioritizes the spiritual. Hence even “if Virtue feeble were, / Heaven itself would stoop to her” (ll. 1022-1023). If one may indulge in a counterfactual, one suspects that were the Lady to have been raped or killed by Comus, or that Sabrina were to fail to release her from his seat, that she would nevertheless have endured with her virtue intact, and that her soul liberated from its body
would ascend to that spiritual plane from whence her Attendant Spirit descends and from which Boethius derives his consolation.
Works Cited
Milton’s Cardinal Directions Symbolism in *Paradise Lost*

Micah Gill

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton demonstrates a famous tendency to imbue his work with many layers of symbolism, ranging from simple to rich and from obvious to intricate. This attribute of the poem prompts readers to peer deep into the text in hopes of discovering further potential meaning. Successful attempts to identify symbolic meaning yield a more complete understanding of the text, such as that unveiled when analyzing the symbolism of the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. A reader’s readiness to recognize Miltonian symbolism alerts them when coming across, for example, Gabriel’s commands to his fellow angels to “coast the south” (4.782), “wheel the north” (4.783), and meet “full west” (4.784); what significance underlies Gabriel’s speech that may be revealed upon further examination? When analyzing Milton’s usage of the cardinal directions in *Paradise Lost*, we see that they have specific and symbolic moral and spiritual meanings.

H.F. Robins has taken the largest step forward in identifying symbolic meaning of cardinal direction terms in Milton’s epic. His article “Satan’s Journey: Direction in Paradise Lost” attempts to correct Walter Clyde Curry’s cosmography in Milton’s Ontology, Cosmogony, and Physics. Robins’ rectifications of Curry’s Miltonic cosmos include positioning hell’s gate in the wall of the fiery domain instead of the roof, locating heaven’s
gate on the east wall instead of the West, and identifying heaven’s shape as quadrate instead of circular. In so doing, Robins announces a “consistently symbolic use of directions” by Milton and continues by extrapolating some of the meaning behind that usage (699). By pairing his assertions that “all direction in Paradise Lost—outside the World—is related to God’s position in Heaven” (701) and that “God faces the east, traditionally the holiest of directions” (702), he lays a foundation for his ensuing arguments regarding cardinal directions symbolism. These connections also broaden the discussion of cardinal directions symbolism: if God anchors directional reference points to the East, then, for example, ‘left,’ ‘right,’ ‘front,’ and ‘back’ may be tied to the cardinal directions as north, south, east, and west, respectively. He leverages this understanding to frame “east and south, before God and at his right hand, [as] favorable directions; west and north, behind him and at his left, are unfavorable” (702).

Despite being published 60 years ago, in other words, Robins’ article’s contribution to the analysis of Miltonic symbolism related to the cardinal directions is still relevant. He provides, though, only a brief linguistic inquiry into cardinal direction terms. The attention that Robins does provide lacks the sufficient etymological support necessary for his claims. Robins’ conclusions also derive from a cursory reference to biblical directions symbolism. His brief mentions of the Judeo-Christian Bible afford broad conclusions about the biblical authors’ influence on Milton’s symbolic employment of cardinal directions. Robins does not, though, draw precise conclusions about meaning beyond descriptors such as “favorable” or “unfavorable” due to a lack of specific textual analysis and examples. Finally,
Robins insufficiently acknowledges both British historical movements and literature, which are key to Milton the Englishman, and Hebrew historical movements and extra-biblical literature, which inform Milton’s interactions with his primary reference, the Judeo-Christian Bible. While many of Robins’ ideas are right and assist our understanding of the poem, I will attempt to reexamine some of his conclusions with more thorough etymological, literary, historical, and biblical analysis. This knowledge will give us the evidential support necessary to lean into and benefit from Robins’ claims, while also enabling deeper appreciation of the complex moral and spiritual meanings that Milton’s cardinal directions symbolism articulates.

Is there any etymological basis for suggesting symbolic meaning in cardinal direction terms? Cecil H. Brown assists in answering this question in his article “Where Do Cardinal Direction Terms Come From?” Providing results and analysis of his landmark research on the origin of these terms, he names “celestial bodies and events, atmospheric features, other more general directions, and environment-specific features” as the four most prominent progenitors for cardinal direction terms across cultures (126). His finding that “there are regular extensions in the development of nomenclature for the four cardinal directions” indicates that these etymological processes often yield similar results, even if development of the terms occurs independently (121). M. O’Connor adds that cardinal directions are “semantically engaging because they refer to independently describable features of the world; they thus [...] constitute a potential key to understanding the use of language” (1140). Because of these etymological and linguistic qualities, their appearance in literature becomes particularly noticeable, and consider-
ing Milton's renowned breadth of reading, employment of cardinal directions in prominent texts would have influenced his own usage. Analyzing etymological precedent along with Milton's literary influences enables us to understand his use of the cardinal directions in Paradise Lost.

Milton uses “east” thirty-one times throughout his epic, more than twice as much as any other cardinal direction. Brown would consider this disparity unsurprising: “Identifying east and west through reference to the rising and setting of the sun constitutes the most ubiquitous manner by which languages have developed terms for any of the cardinal points” (127). He adds that the “priority of lexical encoding is directly related to the salience of referents, be it natural or cultural. More salient referents tend to be encoded before less salient ones” (142). The sun’s role as a light to all, a function that is both universal and immensely noticeable, earns it a status of the utmost salience among almost all global cultures. Therefore, it naturally informs the etymology of cardinal directions and the meaning behind them, particularly east, the cardinal direction from where it rises each day. Brown continues by clarifying the relationship between the salience of referents and the meaning behind the cardinal directions:

The four cardinal points differ among themselves with respect to degree of natural salience. For example, east and west are clearly, if only roughly, defined by the rising and setting of the sun. On the other hand, celestial events of equivalent natural prominence do not correlate with north and south. In addition, east would seem to have greater natural salience than west since it heralds the beginning rather than end of an important celestial occurrence,
i.e., the movement of the sun across the sky. (143)

This effect of the sunrise on the natural salience of the East coincides with a greater importance of that cardinal direction than the others, a reality reflected in the poem’s emphasis on the East.

The East’s salience has led to its widespread role as a basis for orientation. Brown reports this as another cross-cultural regularity:

East is associated with front [. . .] conversely, west is connected to back [. . .] speakers usually assume that they face east, the sunrise, “as the natural basis for orientation” [. . .] the more frequent affiliation of east with front and west with back may indicate that an eastward orientation is the usual canonical posture for humans across cultures.(136)

Brown offers another attestation to the East’s role as the canonical posture, referencing the idea that “the human body is naturally orientated along an east-west axis [. . .] the preponderance of evidence indicates that the most common canonical posture for humans involves an east-west axis and that an eastward orientation is usually preferred over a westward one” (136).

Even isolated peoples evince a conceptualization of both ‘east’ as ‘front’ and the way which people naturally face; on the Pacific island Ambrym, the native “speakers usually [assume] that they face east, the sunrise, as the natural basis for orientation” (Paton 191). Knowledge of east’s role as the canonical direction clarifies its use in Paradise Lost.

With both the celestial importance of ‘east’ and its status as the canonical, frontward human posture established, we can perceive patterns of meaning throughout literature that inspired Milton’s symbolic usage of
the direction. Jack Tresidder’s broad literary analysis links prior etymological and celestial insights directly to symbolism: “the symbolism of individual directions was based largely on climate and the influence of sun” (89). Turning to Milton’s primary reference, the Judeo-Christian Bible, we read that “as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (English Standard Version, Mt. 24.27). In this verse, we may link the Son’s journey from the East to the sun’s journey from the East. Both act as arbiters of light, coming from the East to cast out darkness, and those who properly orient themselves, i.e., face the canonical eastward horizon, will see him when he comes and be ready to “straighten up and raise [their] heads, because [their] redemption is drawing near” (Lk. 21.28). In this passage and in many of Milton’s, we observe the literary trope, alongside John Anthony Mazzeo, that “light from the most ancient times has been symbolic of divinity” (243).

In understanding the importance of east in Jewish holy texts, we also gain insight into Old Testament Temple and Tabernacle symbolism, which in turn influences Miltonic eastern symbolism. Exodus 27:13-16 and 38:13 allow us to piece together that the Tabernacle faced eastward. Regarding the Temple, we learn in Ezekiel that the temple opened to and faced the east, and that there was a gate on its east side (ESV, Ezek. 8.16, 42.15). In both cases these architectural features prompt visitors to re-orient themselves to the holy place from which light emerges and darkness flees: the East. Ezekiel confirms the purpose of each gates’ eastward openings when describing his vision of the Lord leading him through the Temple: “Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel
was coming from the east [...] the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east” (Ezek. 43.1-2, 4). Congruent with Ezekiel 43, the Zohar, a key Jewish religious text from the Middle Ages which greatly influenced Paradise Lost, echoes in its creation account that “the source of all lights shone forth and opened the gate of the east, for thence light issues” (Leviant 461). These references establish a precedent of eastern literary and religious symbolism for Milton to follow.

The biblical references to the East that describe Eden are the most important influences Milton's eastern symbolism. In Genesis, “the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east” (ESV, Gen. 2.8), and that gate, like that of the Tabernacle or the Temple, rests east of the garden (Gen 3.24). Robert Hinckley notes that “the garden display[s] an affinity with the tabernacle [...] the tabernacle courtyard was oriented on an east-west axis, enclosed on all four sides by a fence, with the eastern gate on the eastern side,” characteristics also shared by the Temple (6). Through this connection, we may now understand the Garden's eastern location and eastward-facing gate as symbolic tools that indicate both a proper posture in relation to God's glory and a proximity to perfection.

To further solidify a conception of the east as a direction of light, glory, and holiness to Paradise Lost, we can note the posture of God, who also faces the East. Alexander Cruden's concordance on the Judeo-Christian Bible extends the linkage further:

The right hand commonly denotes the south, as the left hand denotes the north. For the Hebrews speak of the quarters of the world in respect of themselves, having their faces turned towards
the east, their backs to the west, their right hands to the south, and their left to the north. Thus Kedem, which signifies before, stands also for the east; and Achor, which signifies behind, marks out the west; Jamin, the right hand, is the south; and Shemol, the left hand, is the north. (142)

William Smith concurs, stating that “the Hebrew word kedem properly means that which is before or in front of a person, and was applied to the east from the custom of turning in that direction when describing the points of the compass, before, behind, the right and the left representing respectively east, west, south, and north” (“East” 171). If the Hebrew holy architecture, religious texts, and language all point to the East as the front, we may adopt a strengthened version of Robins’ conclusion that, along with his throne, “God faces the east, traditionally the holiest of directions” (702).

Establishing God’s eastward facing posture ratifies an association of the East with goodness, the front, the sun, light, glory, and paradise. This view accords well with Tresidder’s general literary analysis: “East almost invariably symbolized light, the source of life, the sun and solar gods, youth, resurrection, and new life” (89). This understanding of the meaning associated with the East provides insight into Milton’s symbolic usage in *Paradise Lost*.

Of Milton’s thirty-one references to the East throughout *Paradise Lost*, ten are in direct reference to the sun. Those which refer specifically to the sunrise take on new meaning when considered alongside previous assertions. Milton describes a sunrise in Book Five as Adam and Eve step out of their shaded enclave and towards the fields where work awaits:

Soon as they forth were come to open sight
Of day-spring, and the sun (who scarce up risen
With wheels yet hov’ring o’er the ocean brim
Shot parallel to th’ earth his dewy ray,
Discov’ring in wide landscape all the east
Of Paradise and Eden’s happy plains)
Lowly they bowed adoring and began
Their orisons, each morning duly paid
In various style. For neither various style
Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise
Their Maker. (5.138-148)

Milton clearly associates east as a source of light and goodness in this passage, as the sun “discovers” the perfect, “happy plains” of Eden. Since the East represents the proper human posture, Adam and Eve, in a perfected state, exit their Edenic habitation and begin the day with a greeting from eastern rays. They embrace the light and purity of the Garden, and, consistent with their proper orientation, they progress directly into worship, the only proper response to the eminent East. Just as in the Temple or Tabernacle, the rays entering from the East serve as a call to re-orientation to God each morning.

Eastern location, specifically that of the Miltonic Garden and gate, also bears symbolic meaning. In Genesis, Eden and the Garden are not the same place; rather, the Garden is located in Eden: “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east” (ESV, Gen. 2:8). Milton adopts this eastern positioning of the Garden: “A Heav’n on Earth, for blissful Paradise / Of God the garden was by Him in th’ east / Of Eden planted” (4.208-
Milton’s primary intent with locating the Garden in the East of Eden is, of course, to stay true to the biblical narrative; he also has symbolic intent, though. The eastern establishment represents closeness to God and nearness to his heart by dint of the Garden’s proximity to the sunrise and its location in the purview of God’s own east-facing posture. We see a similar pattern with Milton’s Garden gate, modeled after Genesis’s account of the Garden’s eastern gate (ESV, Gen. 3.24). The symbolic message here is similar, though more nuanced.

To understand the symbolism of the eastern gate, which constitutes five of Milton’s references to the East, we must think again to “the principal way in which languages have innovated terms for east and west”: the course of the sun (Brown 130). The East is the outset of the sun’s daily journey, where the orb rises and distinguishes itself from the darkness, eventually overcoming it in full. Placing a gate in the East represents receptivity to the light, since a gate facilitates light from the sun streaming through, as opposed to a wall that would block the rays.

Consider, too, the tension that the eastern gate embodies. Each morning, the sun rises not out of light but out of darkness. Though the East acts primarily as a direction of holy light, there exists an opposing presence of evil that must be fended off. Since the East is the holiest direction, it is therefore the safest location to place a gate instead of a wall. The gate represents the tension between receiving the sanctifying sun while also keeping out the darkness and the evil that lies beyond. This critical point is a place where chaos meets order, the light of the sun intersects with the dark of the night, and the unknown brushes against the known. We may, as Milton
implies, by disorientation out of a holy, eastward facing posture, break our focus on the light. If our cautious, probing eyes divert from watching the gate, we may allow for chaos to creep through. This tension between good and evil links the gate to the tree and to the inner state of Adam and Eve. Milton incorporates these symbolic meanings into his utilization of ‘east.’

Milton’s symbolism of the North stands in stark contrast to that of the East, a difference which Brown discusses. He reminds us that “in the northern hemisphere, of course, the sun always travels from east to west in the southern half of the sky” (131), meaning that the North, unlike the East and the South, does not emit light. In fact, the Seneca nation of Indians’ term for north “is literally, ‘the sun isn’t there’” (Brown 132). In discussing cardinal direction etymology, Brown also emphasizes the importance of atmospheric features, particularly for the North. He highlights that “colder weather [coming] from the north” has spurred innovation of northern cardinal direction terms (Brown 132). In this etymological analysis, we see ‘north’ associated with darkness and cold.

The Judeo-Christian Bible also emphasizes a difference between the symbolic meaning of the East and that of the North. The biblical text depicts the North primarily in reference to evil, chaos, and vice. There is historical precedent to this symbolism: in the eighth century BC, the Assyrians came down from the northern part of Mesopotamia and invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Old Testament often references this event, especially in prophetic literature. In the book of Joel, the Lord assures Israel regarding the northern attackers: “I will remove the northerner far from you, / And drive him into a parched and desolate land” (ESV, Joel
2.20). The prophet Jeremiah also alludes to the northern enemies: “Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north” (Jer. 1.14-15). In this context, we more clearly perceive the arrival of evil and destruction from the North as a foil to the glory and light emitting from the East. Later, Jeremiah offers another depiction of the chaos of the North:

Thus says the LORD:

“Behold, a people is coming from the north country,
a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth.
They lay hold on bow and javelin;
they are cruel and have no mercy;
the sound of them is like the roaring sea;
they ride on horses,
set in array as a man for battle,
against you, O daughter of Zion!” (Jer. 6.22-23)

The Judeo-Christian Bible, particularly in its allusions to the Assyrians, symbolically associates evil with the North.

British history—which Milton knew well—provides a parallel to the Assyrian invaders coming from the North. The Viking invaders, sailing from Scandinavia, ravaged the northeastern English coastline beginning in the late 8th century CE. These attacks eventually culminated with Harald Hardrada’s onslaught from the North, winning battles as far south as York. Though there is little British literature from this period in which symbolic associations could originate, another instance of northern destruction, in this case occurring in Milton’s home country, may have served as a key
influence that supplemented the symbolism of the North already present within the Judeo-Christian Bible.

Early British literature, which prefigured and influenced Milton, connects the North to atmospheric features linked to symbolic meaning. While Beowulf describes his competition with Unferth to outlast the waves of the sea, he proclaims:

Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on
for five nights, until the long flow
and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
night falling and winds from the north
drove us apart. (Heaney 544-548)

In Beowulf’s account, one of only four instances throughout the epic in which ‘north’ is directly referenced, the North is associated with cold, chaotic waters, night, and bitter wind. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* similarly alludes to the North as a source of ominous chill in one of the poem’s two direct references:

But wild-looking weather was about in the world:
clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards;
the nithering north needled man’s very nature;
creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.

Then a whip-cracking wind comes whistling between hills,
driving snow into deepening drifts in the dales. (Armitage 2000-2005)

Congruent with Beowulf’s description and Brown’s findings, the North brings biting cold, and the aggressive, “wild-looking weather” promises to
“needle man’s very nature.”

These examples from the British literary canon, which Milton knew well, complement Tresidder’s literary analysis, which observes that “North symbolize[s] belligerent power, darkness, hunger, cold, chaos and evil in most northern hemisphere traditions” (89). In fact, some of these symbolic associations were encoded into modern English. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *sinister* as “corrupt, evil, bad, base,” but also as “left, left-hand” (“Sinister” 529). The more archaic latter meaning was incorporated directly from the Latin, which, assuming a canonical, eastward-facing posture, would be in the North. Brown confirms this association of a cardinal direction with a general direction, asserting that “in addition to left and right, cardinal direction terms often denote other more general directions such as up, down, in front of, behind, and so on” (124).

Many of *Paradise Lost*’s fourteen mentions of the North evince these symbolic insights, particularly the first reference, in which Milton describes the fallen angels:

A multitude like which the populous north
Pour’d never from her frozen loins to pass
Rhene or the Danaw when her barbarous sons
Came like a deluge on the south and spread
Beneath Gibraltar to the Libyan sands. (1.351-355)

Milton likens the demons to the North with an allusion to “the barbarian invasions of Rome,” which began with “northern tribes crossing the Rhine ("Rhene") and Danube ("Danaw") rivers, then spreading across Spain into North Africa, according to Lewalski’s explanation of the text (21). We
may connect these specific warriors with others from “the populous north,” namely, the Scandinavians and the Assyrians, to see Milton’s symbolic strategy: situating the demons’ attack in a place bolstering their image of chaos and evil. Milton also draws on the North’s association with “frozen loins,” linking the demonic army to a bitter, severe cold. Building upon these symbolic ties, Satan and his demons march to heaven’s northern realm to set up their wicked throne after rebelling against God: “At length into the limits of the north / They came and Satan to his royal seat” (5.755-756).

With his decision to place their rebellion in the North, Milton perpetuates his symbolic statements about the demons’ chaotic, evil rebellion.

This association shares additional symbolic meaning when observed in conjunction with Ezekiel 8:

The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy [. . .] then he said to me, “Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.” So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance was this image of jealousy. (ESV, Ezek. 8.3, 5)

Ezekiel equates the North with jealousy, a linkage that inspires Milton. When Satan becomes jealous of God’s power and sovereignty, he moves his troops to the North, establishing his own northern “seat of the image of jealousy.” Milton describes another object of Satan’s jealousy, his perception of the beauty of earth and of Eve:

That space the evil one abstracted stood
From his own evil and for the time remained
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge.
But the hot Hell that always in him burns,
Though in mid-Heav’n, soon ended his delight
And tortures him now more the more he sees
Of pleasure not for him ordained. Then soon
Fierce hate he recollects and all his thoughts
Of mischief gratulating thus excites. (9.463-472)

With these insights in mind, we may further link Milton’s symbolic association of the North with jealousy by drawing on Robins’ realization that “when Satan re-enters the garden to effect the actual temptation, he comes with perfect consistency from the north” (709). Milton’s usage of symbolism for the North relates that cardinal direction to evil, rebellion, chaos, darkness, and jealousy.

Milton’s associations of symbolic meaning with the South stand in stark contrast to those of the North. Brown offers etymological insight into potential southern symbolism, noting that “in the northern hemisphere, of course, the light of the sun emanates from the southern sky” (131). This means that, unlike the North but like the East, there is celestial precedent in associating the South with light. Also, unlike the North, “warmer weather arrives from the south” (132). Regarding literary influences on Milton’s symbolic use of the South, we see few obvious symbolic usages in the Judeo-Christian Bible. We do, though, see many references to the Son of God sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and assuming a canonical,
eastward-facing posture where the Father’s throne is in the East, this would place the throne of the Son in the South. The Son of God, or the Logos, who sits on the rightward, southern throne in heaven, was made incarnate in Christ Jesus, in whom “we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (ESV, John 1.14).

St. John associates the light and glory of the Father’s eastern throne with the southern Son, a linkage which Brown’s research supports by tying the two directions together with etymological threads of sun and light. St. John, though, avers that the Son’s southern glory derives from God’s preeminent, progenitorial glory in the East. Several selections from the New Testament promote the idea that the East’s superior, holy light generates that of the South, including Jesus’s claims that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” that “all things have been handed over to me by my Father” (ESV Matt. 28.18, 11.27), and that “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3.35). The East’s blessings of glory and light upon the South extend beyond the Son as well. In the final judgment, those on the right, or the South, instead of those on the left, or the North, will receive salvation from God: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25.34).

In many of these examples discussing God’s gifts of glory and light to the Son and the South, we may also note his gifts of power. St. Luke describes that “the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (22.69), while St. Peter writes that Jesus Christ “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers
having been subjected to him” (1 Pet. 3.22). The Zohar’s creation account more directly ties this concept to cardinal directions: “South displayed the power of the light inherited from the head and was empowered by the East” (Matt 215). The knowledge that “the locution ‘right hand of the Father’ must be understood metaphorically” allows us to extend these insights about the South beyond geographical statements and into the domain of literary devices, especially symbolism of the East denoting power, glory, holiness, light, and goodness (Edwards 165).

Milton infuses these symbolic meanings into many of his references to the South, ten of which are direct. Similar to his positioning of the Garden and Edenic gate, his situating of the Son’s throne on the right while also incorporating southern themes of glory and holiness follows the Judeo-Christian Bible both literally and symbolically: “So said, He o’er his scepter bowing rose / From the right hand of glory where He sat” (6.746-747). Later, Milton symbolically specifies the South’s glory being received from something greater when he describes the Son’s return from routing the demonic armies:

Worthiest to reign. He, celebrated, rode
Triumphant through mid Heav’n into the courts
And temple of his mighty Father throned
On high who into glory Him received
Where now He sits at the right hand of bliss. (6.888-892)

Through analyzing the South’s righthand position in relationship with the frontward-facing East, we may perceive Milton’s linkage of eastern light and
goodness to a subordinate yet similar symbolic presentation of the South.

Milton more clearly expounds his symbolic association of the South as good when he contrasts it with the North. In the heavenly conflict of Book Six, Satan and his demonic army war against Christ and the heavenly angels. Satan encamps in and marches from the North, while Christ’s throne, from which he departs to the battle, rests in the South (6.746-750). Holiness, divinity, and goodness fly from their southern seat to meet the chaos and evil of the North, a paradigm of conflict represented in an earlier-referenced Book One passage describing the demons facing their attackers and pouring down “like a deluge on the south” (1.354). Excerpts such as this lean on symbolic association to pit south and north against each other, resembling the greater battle between good and evil.

Milton bolsters his association of south with goodness and with an adversarial relationship to the North with an added association of the South as warm. Brown’s linkage of the South to the light of the sun, particularly producing “warmer weather [which] arrives from the south,” further associates the South with goodness (132). As Mazzeo notes, consideration of solar symbolism should not be limited to analyzing light, but should include perceiving the sun as “the source of [. . .] warmth” (243). This constitutes another point of contention between the warm, light south, and the cold, bitter north. Milton symbolizes the southern-northern conflict of good and evil in Book Ten: “The sun,” explains the speaker,

Had first his precept so to move, so shine
As might affect the Earth with cold and heat
Scarce tolerable and from the north to call
Decrepit winter, from the south to bring
Solstitial summer’s heat. (10.652-656)

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton symbolically casts the South as holy, powerful, filled with light, good, warm, and as an adversary against the wicked North.

Milton’s symbolism for the West is distinct from that of the East and the South, though sharing similarities to northern symbolism. As Brown notes, “development of descriptive labels referring to the rising/setting sun constitutes the principal way in which languages have innovated terms for east and west,” and so we should expect the sunset to be the West’s primary source of symbolism (130). The setting of the sun in the West leads to a decrease of light and increase of darkness. An eastward-facing canonical posture bolsters this unfavorable symbolism because “west is connected to back,” opposite the face and place of God (Brown 136). There are several selections from the Judeo-Christian Bible that operate within this symbolic context, such as this excerpt from Isaiah 59:

So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west,
and his glory from the rising of the sun;
for he will come like a rushing stream,
which the wind of the LORD drives. (Isa. 59.19)

Holistically, though, the Judeo-Christian Bible contains little to implicate the West as the evil opposite of the East. Despite this lack of literary precedent, examining the text throughout *Paradise Lost* yields sufficient support for claims of symbolism associating west with darkness, absence of light, and the advent of evil.
Robins highlights one important usage, that “Satan enters [the Garden] over the western wall—‘On the other side:’” (708):

One gate there only was and that looked east
On th’ other side. Which when th’ arch-felon saw
Due entrance he disdained and in contempt
At one slight bound high overleaped all bound
Of hill or highest wall and sheer within
Lights on his feet. (Milton 4.178-183)

Satan’s western entrance symbolically mirrors the darkness propounded by the western setting of the sun. Robins also notes that in the two most important instances of angels bearing unfavorable news, Uriel’s announcement to the angels of Satan’s arrival and Gabriel’s flight to inform Adam and Eve of their expulsion, they both bring their lamentable reports from the West (708-709). These examples highlight the West’s association with evil and darkness throughout the epic.

Milton also employs these symbolic meanings in Book Four, when Satan first comes to the Garden to tempt Eve in her sleep. Milton symbolically foreshadows the temptation with a vivid depiction of a western sunset, noting both “the sun now fall’n” and “The clouds that on his western throne attend” (4.591, 597). Later, the angels coordinate a search party to locate the arbiter of evil, establishing a rendezvous point in the West (4.784). At the conclusion of the search, Ithuriel and Zephon direct Satan into the midst of the host at “the western point” (4.862). Milton situates both the western foreshadowing of the mission and its dark conclusion in the same cardinal direction in which the sun sets, representing the sinful darkness of
night eclipsing the holy light of the East. Through these observations, we gather that the West symbolizes darkness, night, absence of light, and the onset of evil throughout *Paradise Lost*.

Not all of Milton’s references to the cardinal directions throughout the poem contain symbolic meaning. There are, though, many instances in which a nuanced understanding of both Milton’s literary influences and the etymological processes that influenced his language, met with an examination of the text in light of this understanding, yields rich meaning. In part, this meaning is elucidated by a recognition of Milton’s symbolic usage of the cardinal directions. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton symbolizes the East as representing ultimate divinity, goodness, and light; the North as representing chaos, jealousy, rebellious evil, and bitter cold; the South as representing holiness, subordinate power, and bright warmth; and the West as representing darkness and evil.
Works Cited


Cruden, Alexander. Cruden’s Explanations of Scripture Terms, Taken From His Concordance. R.T.S., 1840.


When the nineteenth century began, the United States was in its infancy, an agrarian society still grappling with its emergence as an independent, self-governing nation. By the end of the century, it had transformed into an industrial powerhouse well on its way to becoming the superpower it is today. The rapidly advancing technology of the Industrial Revolution meant that everything from food and tools to furniture and toys could be produced in larger quantities for lower prices. Mills churned out textiles and raw materials, factories produced consumer goods, and coal mines provided the fuel on which industrialism ran. The men who owned such establishments became fabulously wealthy. The middle class could afford material comforts and luxury that their parents and grandparents could only dream of. New innovations were appearing left and right. It was an incredible time to be alive—for a lucky few.

Rebecca Harding Davis was one of the lucky ones. She was born into a comfortably well-off family and received a quality education. Unlike many others in her position, however, she was not insulated from the grim realities of industrial labor. Davis spent most of her life in the city of Wheeling, in what is now West Virginia. It was a city so heavily industrialized that smoke was considered its most notable feature (Gatlin). From a young age
Davis would have seen firsthand the effects of unchecked industry on the environment and poorly-regulated workplaces on laborers. It appears to have disturbed her deeply, so much so that “her first major artistic statement” (Duvall), the piece of writing that would launch her career, was a short story depicting the desolation and desperation that industry had wrought. In this 1861 story, “Life in the Iron-Mills”, Davis portrayed the detrimental physical and spiritual effects of industrial labor, the exploitative and dehumanizing relationship between employers and employees, and the reality that most laborers were doomed to live and die in poverty. The story portrays the downfall of Hugh Wolfe, a poor mill worker who sees a chance to pursue his natural gift for art when his cousin, Deb, offers him a stolen wallet with a check inside. They are apprehended and, devoid of hope and facing a lengthy sentence, Hugh ends his life in the jailhouse. It was a groundbreaking work; not only had Davis crafted “the first notable work of fiction to concern itself with the life of the factory worker in an industrial American town”—she was also contributing to the development of American literary realism (Hesford 70).

Naturally, after Tillie Olsen republished “Life in the Iron-Mills” in the 1970s, reintroducing Davis into the literary world after decades of obscurity, many critics have examined the story through a variety of lenses. With labor, poverty, and the interaction of social classes being central to the story, one would expect Marxist theory to dominate the conversation, yet critiques centered on class and labor are few and far between, and only xtine burrough and Sabrina Starnaman appear to take an interest in how Davis’s work remains relevant in the twenty-first century. For while many readers
may walk away from “Life in the Iron-Mills” pleased that such an unhappy era is long behind us, a modern laborer might not agree. This raises some uncomfortable questions: why have a century’s worth of laws, regulations, and reforms not solved the issues faced by the working poor? Are these problems an innate part of American capitalism? Can they be fixed, or do they stem from a deep, dark corner of human nature?

The first criticism of industrialism Davis raises, introduced in the first paragraph and looming throughout the rest of the story, is its filth—and the toll that filth takes on the town’s denizens. Davis’s narrator describes a town covered in soot, with smog-filled skies above and a river brown with pollution below. Every inch of the town appears to be colored by its toxic environs, the people included, their “skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes […] breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” (Davis, n.p.). The most defining physical qualities of the main character, Hugh, are marks of how his labor and polluted environment have laid waste to his body. Despite his youth, Hugh has “already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles [are] thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption.” Living and working in this town almost seems to drain the life from its inhabitants; in the case of Hugh, it is quite literally slowly killing him via tuberculosis.

To a modern reader, these observations seem obvious. It goes without saying that pollution is harmful to the human body. During Davis’s time, however, this was not at all the case. Jill Gatlin reports that “mid-nineteenth-century courts often ruled that the economic hazards of smoke
abatement outweighed the health hazards of coal burning” (203) and furthermore, some industrialists and even doctors argued that coal smoke was beneficial to health (212-213). They argued that smoke should not be seen as a blemish, nuisance, or hazard, but as a symbol of progress and prosperity. Knowing that this was the predominant narrative, Davis’s statement suddenly seems bold indeed.

Davis’s description of her main character, Hugh, also rings true through a historical lens. Even if he had not met his demise in jail, his days seemed to be numbered from the start, as “consumption” was well on its way to draining the life from him. Tuberculosis was one of many diseases that ran rampant through the lower class in the nineteenth century. Modern readers might associate technological advancement with improved healthcare, and thus with longer lives, but in Davis’s time, the opposite was true. Rapid industrialization led to the working poor concentrating in urban centers. There the polluted air and water weakened their health, while their cramped, unsanitary living conditions were breeding grounds for disease. In a study of life expectancy for white Americans by J. David Hacker, models created by three different researchers show a decrease in life expectancy between 1790 and 1860.

Another contributor to shortened life expectancy in laborers was the nature of their work and workplaces. Davis references the grueling nature of Hugh’s work throughout the story and implies that “the slow, heavy years of constant, hot work” have worked in tandem with his tuberculosis in weakening him into “one of the girl-men.” He works six days a week, long into the night—on the night the story begins, his boss has
decided to keep him working until morning. In prior centuries, the ancestors of men like Hugh would likely have been engaged in agricultural labor—a hard line of work, to be sure, but less cruel. When planting is done, it’s done; when a batch of iron ore is done processing, there is immediately another to take its place. In agriculture, there are portions of the year where little or no time needs to be spent in the fields, and workers have time to improve their homes, make extra money, or relax and socialize; there are no such lulls in an iron mill. Andrea Graziosi quotes a steel worker living toward the end of the nineteenth century, who succinctly describes the demanding nature of industrial labor: “’Hard! I guess it is hard. I lost forty pounds the first three months I came into the business. It sweats the life out of a man’” (512).

Davis does not focus solely on physical harm, either; she also portrays the way that heavy labor drains people of their spirit. Drinking is the coping mechanism of choice in her unnamed mill town, and alcoholism plagues its people, men and women alike. Hugh does not rely on drink, however; his mental strain manifests in other ways. He is a man with an artist’s soul and a natural hunger for beauty and creativity, yet has been forced into mindless, ugly labor by the circumstances of his birth. The effect is an overwhelming despair that a modern reader might interpret as depression—”[a] morbid, gloomy man, untaught, unled, left to feed his soul in grossness and crime, and hard, grinding labor […] [t]here are moments […] when his nature starts up with a mad cry of rage against God, man, whoever it is that has forced this vile, slimy life upon him.”

The mills and factories were a living hell, and it is no wonder that
Hugh was so desperate to escape the mill town. Unfortunately, the people in
the best position to improve the life of laborers like Hugh—the industrial-
ists who employed them—were the people with the greatest vested interest
in keeping them poor, uneducated, and without hope. Davis embodies
this in the character of Kirby, the son of one of the iron mill’s owners. He
maintains that he has no responsibility toward the workers save for their
wages, and even this responsibility is barely met at all. Hugh, his father, and
his cousin Deb all work, and at the beginning of the story we see what kind
of life their wages pay for. The cellar they call home is “low, damp,—the
earthen floor covered with a green, slimy moss,—a fetid air smothering
the breath. [Hugh’s father] lay asleep on a heap of straw, wrapped in a torn
horse-blanket” while a friend of the family, Janey, slept nearby beneath “a
heap of ragged coats.” The three of them barely earn enough to survive, let
alone improve their lives in even the most minimal of ways. The US Bureau
of Labor Statistics states that in 1861, in Pennsylvania, the average wage for
a puddler—Hugh’s job in the iron mills—was $2.61 a day. That means he
made approximately $814.32 a year. Today, this would be $23,807.36—for
a job that worked him until all day and night, a job that was slowly killing
him, physically and spiritually.

Low wages were not the only way in which industrialists exploited
their workers, either. “Twelve hundred hands? […] Do you control their
votes, Kirby?” Mitchell, Kirby’s brother-in-law, asks, as if it were reasonable
to demand one’s employees to vote for one’s preferred candidate (the story
doesn’t specify the election’s purpose). Kirby clarifies that his father does not
demand a certain vote of his employees, but that he rallied seven hundred of
them to the side of his candidate of choice, who almost certainly had Kirby Sr.’s interests at heart and not those of the laborers—as previously discussed, the interests of these two parties are almost exact opposites. Furthermore, Davis notes that the mindless, hopeless state of Hugh and his peers was also beneficial to the mill owners. While mocking the ostensibly charitable Doctor May as the physician tries to encourage Hugh, Mitchell says, “‘Let them have a clear idea of the rights of the soul, and I’ll venture next week they’ll strike for higher wages. That will be the end of it.’”

When confronted with Hugh and the statue he wrought of korl (a gray, stonelike byproduct of iron smelting)—a poignant and disturbing representation of Hugh’s desperation and misery that affects even the cynical Mitchell—and thus the humanity of one of the people they were exploiting and the effects of that exploitation, Kirby, Mitchell, and even Doctor May quickly begin to deflect any sense of guilt or sympathy they might have felt with apathy. Each dismisses Hugh in his own fashion and gives his own justification as to why he can do nothing for the miserable puddler. Mitchell is outright derisive toward the laborers and openly states that he “’is not one of them’” in a context that reeks of social Darwinism. Kirby puts a thin veil over his disdain, instead denying that he has any responsibility toward Hugh beyond paying him. At face value, Doctor May is the kindest, telling Hugh “you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man […] God has given you stronger powers than many men” and encouraging him to rise above the station of his birth, but providing him with no material assistance to do so—only words, which are enough to leave the doctor satisfied and “glowing with his own magnanimity” (Davis). After seeing a glimmer of hope, Hugh
again finds himself hopelessly stuck in the iron mills, only in even more anguish.

Davis’s observations about the upper classes, too, have a strong historical basis. To exploit laborers to the fullest extent while accepting as little responsibility as possible—this was the modus operandi of industrialists in the largely unregulated days of the 19th century. Demand for jobs was astronomical; Graziosi quotes a worker who described a crowd of two hundred men standing outside a slaughterhouse, hoping a job would open up (518). With so much competition and no minimum wage, industrialists could get away with paying unskilled laborers next to nothing. They also maximized profits by cutting corners on workplace safety in ways that are horrifying from a modern standpoint. Ask somebody to describe a nineteenth-century factory, and they will likely mention horror stories about men being crushed by machinery or child laborers losing fingers. These were very much the reality of the age. Few standards for safety existed, and as James Weinstein outlines, companies had little incentive to follow the laws that did exist. Weinstein describes multiple legal cases in which employees were injured or maimed by their employers’ negligence; in each one, the courts placed the blame on the employees for continuing to work in dangerous conditions rather than lose their jobs. Exploiting the masses of working poor maximized profits and carried no consequences, even when the results were truly horrific.

In the one hundred and sixty years since Davis wrote “Life in the Iron-Mills,” a great deal of new legislation to protect the rights of workers has been created. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 established a
minimum wage, banned businesses from employing children under age 16, and required businesses to pay employees higher wages if they worked above a certain number of hours each week (United States Department of Labor).

In 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was founded for the purpose of inspecting workplaces, identifying potential hazards, and penalizing businesses that put employees at risk. The world Davis portrays might seem almost alien to the modern reader, with its soot-coated city, hellish mills, and predatory industrialist overlords. Some might rest easy, satisfied that America has moved past this ugly, uncaring phase of her history.

A working-class reader, on the other hand, might have to disagree. Remove the particulars of Hugh’s story, the garb of his time and place, and examine the essential issues that led to “the crisis of his life” and the tragedy that followed. What currents were at play in Hugh’s life, pulling him toward his demise? Mental anguish born of years of longing for beauty and self-expression while employed in grueling manual labor. A constant state of financial hardship, simultaneously the result of his lack of job skills and the obstacle keeping him from investing in learning a skill. An employer who viewed him with no more compassion than a cog in one of the machines, a tool to be used until it is too worn and broken to be of any further use. Behold the story of countless working poor in the twenty-first century. The lowest socioeconomic ranks of American society develop mental illness in much higher proportions than upper classes (Hollingshead and Redlich), and so their anguish is evident. In 2019, 10.5% of Americans were found to have low or very low food security (Coleman-Jensen et al.), and so their
financial hardship is evident. There is a constant barrage of stories about the grueling and even dangerous conditions employees of businesses such as Amazon and Wal-Mart face, and so their employers’ lack of concern for them as human beings is evident.

A century and a half of legislation and reform has failed to solve the essential problems that plague the lives of working-class Americans. Davis herself repeatedly references “reformers” in her short story, universally depicting them as alienated from the laborers and ultimately ineffectual; it seems like she may have had vaster changes than mere reform in mind. William L. Watson notes that at the time Davis was writing, both the Republican and Democratic parties were proponents of classical liberalism—pro-free market and anti-big government—and argues that “Life in the Iron-Mills” offered a critique of the economic mores of the day. Based on the subject of her concern, common laborers, it is clear that she was more left-leaning than many of her contemporaries. The question is, how far to the left?

Two of her characters, Kirby and his sardonic brother-in-law, Mitchell, both reference a viewpoint substantially more leftist than classical liberalism. “‘I tell you, there’s something wrong that no talk of ‘Liberte’ or ‘Egalite’ will do away,’” says Kirby, referencing the motto of the French Revolution; several of the leading thinkers behind said revolution promoted ideas that foreshadowed Marxism. Later, dismissing the need to aid Hugh or any of the laborers, Mitchell says “Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer,—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah.” All three figures he mentions—Jean-Paul Marat, Oliver Crom-
well, and Jesus Christ—were leaders of movements that actively threatened the upper class. Marat and Cromwell were both leaders in revolutions that saw monarchs beheaded; Christ condemned his culture’s priestly caste and created a religious system that did not require such a caste at all. In these instances and others, the dialogue of these characters carry double meanings they seem to be unaware of, serving as a sort of aside to the reader.

While Kirby and Mitchell probably mean to show their intellectual chops with these references, the recurring theme of revolution stands out and seems to call back to the closing sentences of Davis’s introduction to her narrative: “Their lives ask it; their deaths ask it. There is no reply […] this terrible dumb question is its own reply; that it is not the sentence of death we think it, but, from the very extremity of its darkness, the most solemn prophecy which the world has known of the Hope to come. I dare make my meaning no clearer.” The simple question that seems to answer Davis’s riddle is the question of why—why is this the life that these men must live? As Davis says, the answer is also why—why do they need to accept to such a life? What is stopping them from demanding something else—something more? Of course Davis dares not speak her mind on this matter. To speak her mind would be to be condemned, censored, and silenced, for this idea—the idea of the lowly coming together as one and demanding something more, or even taking it—would have terrified the middle and upper classes of 1860. They knew well what can happen when the masses strike back; in 1848, America had looked on as thousands of European peasants took up arms against their aristocratic overlords (Britannica).

Was Davis a die-hard socialist advocating revolution? Probably not;
if she was, why address her message to the educated, middle- and upper-class readers of *The Atlantic*? However, her generally dim view of “reformers” in the text—and the fact that “reformers” have not fully fixed the problems she criticized, even today—implies that she sought something that would change the system on a much deeper level. She recognized that the people in power—industrialists and politicians—would not eagerly modify a system that rewarded them so well. At best, they would relinquish enough power to satisfy the public and fix some surface-level issue. Real change would have to start at the bottom; in fact, the stirrings of such change were already in motion when Davis wrote “Life in the Iron-Mills”.

As described by Watson, the 1850s had seen a number of widely-publicized strikes and demonstrations led by working-class men and women. It was a promising start, certainly, but Watson also points out that many “industrialized workers and artisans who had been radicalized […] were ‘nearly bereft of aid’ in ‘their quest for a change in the laws governing economic endeavors.’” The middle class lacked the vested interest of industrialists; if they could be convinced to side with the working class, they could potentially bring money, education, political savvy, and their good reputations to the cause. Davis, herself middle-class, realized this. With “Life in the Iron-Mills,” she sought to spread awareness of the issues the working class faced and inspire sympathy in the middle class. They had seen articles about factory workers striking and might have feared an upset in the status quo; Davis showed them why such an upset was necessary.

Sadly, the class unity Davis hoped to encourage is still a long way from being realized. It is not an accident that there is such a nega-
tive narrative about America’s working class. If the middle class remains convinced that the working class is filled with sluggards and criminals, they will continue to oppose changes that seek to improve working-class lives—even when they, too, would stand to gain. If the middle class learned to empathize with the working class, to recognize the hardship and injustice they face, to stand together as one, change would happen, and life would improve for all. This is why empathy is so often ridiculed and derided—it is a threat. It is powerful. It is the key to a better world.
Works Cited

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Revolutions of 1848”. Encyclo-
pedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/event/Revolutions-

Burrough, xtine, and Sabrina Starnaman. “A Digital Korf Woman: Students
and Workers Recover the Spirit of Life in the Iron Mills from the
Digital Factory to the Classroom.” Transformations: The Journal

Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and
in 2019, ERR-275, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic


Duvall, J. Michael. “Davis, Rebecca Harding.” Student’s Encyclopedia of
Great American Writers, Facts on File, 2021. Bloom’s Literature,

Gatlin, Jill. “Disturbing Aesthetics: Industrial Pollution, Moral Discourse,
and Narrative Form in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron
201–33, https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2013.68.2.201.


Submission Guidelines

*The Oswald Review* is a refereed undergraduate journal of criticism and research in the discipline of English. Published annually, *The Oswald Review* accepts submissions from undergraduates in this country and abroad (with a professor’s endorsement).

**Guidelines**

Submit each manuscript as a separate email attachment in Microsoft Word. TOR discourages simultaneous submission to other journals.

All text must be in current MLA format, justified left only and without headers and footers.

Title page:
- title of work;
- author’s name;
- postal address (both local and permanent);
- phone number (both school and home, if applicable);
- email address (both school and home, if applicable);
- name and address of college or university;
- name and department of endorsing professor.

Professor’s note (this can be sent as a separate email message) that work is original with the student for a specific course.

Length: 10-25 pages.


Deadline for submissions: March 1 (or nearest business day).

Notification of acceptance by email: by July 30
Email to douglash@usca.edu

Dr. Douglas Higbee
Department of English
University of South Carolina Aiken
471 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801
Endorsing Professors

Dr. Holly Faith Nelson
Professor
Department of English and Creative Writing
Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada

Dr. Michael Claxton
Professor
Department of English
Harding University, AR

Dr. Matthew Brophy
Associate Professor
Division of Communications, Arts, and Humanities
Delaware County Community College, PA