Milton’s Forced Themes

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Often, so-called juvenilia are read only to shed light on an author’s later writing. The question of when the term “juvenilia” first comes to imply diminished literary value—meaning “immature” and perhaps “premature,” as opposed to being merely descriptive of the author's age—is particularly relevant to a consideration of Milton at university because of the teleological approach often taken to his early works. Consequently, Milton’s Prolusions, the seven orations he delivered as a Cambridge student between 1627 and 1632, have often tended to be strategically mined, perceived as interesting only as precursors of what he went on to write. Besides a frequently held prejudice against juvenilia, other factors related to literary form and linguistic medium have also contributed to the relative neglect of the Prolusions: the academic oration is rightly seen as more ephemeral, self-referential, and rooted to its institutional context than a political tract or epic poem, and Milton’s Latin works tend to be less widely read than the vernacular writing. The orations themselves often invoke a sense of earliness: throughout the Prolusions, Milton carefully directs his words at his university contemporaries, frequently stressing the limitations of his own “sinews weak” and “endeavouring tongue” (“At a Vacation Exercise” 1-2), and consistently implying that neither orations nor orator are quite yet formed. Even the title, Prolusiones, explicitly asserts origin: like its cognate “prelude,” prolusio means a beginning, an initial foray. Yet in the words of the printer’s letter to the 1674 publication, “quantumvis juvenilia”—“although [perhaps ‘because’] they are juvenilia”—we need to consider the Prolusions as significant texts in their own right.

We overlook an important part of a writer’s intellectual formation if we disregard early work, not only because of the light this can cast on subsequent writing, but also because we should pay careful attention to texts like the Prolusions if we want to understand one of the main formative contexts for many early modern writers, the experience of higher education. Daily formal and informal discourse in Latin, and, in particular, regular drilling in the construction of persuasion and argument, fundamentally affected Milton’s habits of thought and composition. Through a closer examination of these orations, we can both place the Prolusions within other work of the late 1620s/early 1630s, to help us understand how Milton began his literary career, and can usefully discuss how this youthful work, and the university context more largely, came to be presented retrospectively at the end of his life.

“Quantumvis juvenilia”: The 1674 publication

A consideration of how the Prolusions were “packaged” for the 1674 publication shows how Milton and—perhaps more forcibly—his printer recommended the
orations to be read. This first printing of the *Prolusions* is not just of bibliographical interest but also helps us to understand Milton’s apparent publishing priorities late in his life: the student orations were published around the same time as several other works invested in pedagogy and educational formation, and alongside Latin and English texts that had been written decades earlier but saw the light only in the early 1670s. Toward the end of his life, then, Milton was eager to be represented in print just as he had begun his literary career, as a bilingual author; as Estelle Haan has recently argued, moreover, although apparently a hoarder of earlier compositions in both languages, Milton was exceptionally scrupulous about gathering his Latin works. Haan cites the example of Milton’s early school exercise in Latin, the Mantuan imitation *Apologus de Rustico et Hero* (“The Fable of the Peasant and the Landlord”), probably written at St Paul’s in 1624: this twelve-line poem was not printed in 1645, but was included in the 1673 edition, published the year before the *Prolusions* (Haan 25). This half-century archiving and late publishing of a schoolboy exercise suggest, as does the publication of the *Prolusions* half a century after their first delivery, that Milton had little reticence about publishing academic exercises as literary works. Pedagogical theory as well as pedagogical practice saw the light in the 1670s. The *Ars Logicae*, which Milton had worked on during the 1640s, was first published in 1672, another work influenced by his experience of the Cambridge curriculum. Stephen Dobranski has argued that Milton’s “final books aptly encapsulate his career as both a poet and a prose-writer” and that the appearance of the *Ars Logicae*, *Accedence Commenc’t Grammar* (1669), and *Of Education* (1673) all “demonstrate Milton’s enduring interest in pedagogy” (176-77). I would add the publication of the *Apologus* and *Prolusions* to this list and moreover suggest that Milton was interested not just in publishing his pedagogical theory, but also in having printed the fruits of the pedagogical practice he had himself experienced at school and university.

The 1674 printer’s letter, “Typographus Lectori” (“The Printer to the Reader”), authored, presumably, by the *typographus* Brabazon Aylmer (Dobranski 179; Lindenbaum 32-33), provides a lively, sociable story of the *Prolusions*’ journey from manuscript to print. The orations’ educational origins are also made explicit, in keeping with a widespread late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tendency to declare a published author’s institutional affiliation, and thereby to frame and exalt a book’s content through the foregrounding of the affiliated writer's educational pedigree (Knight, “‘It was not mine intent’” 39-52). The 1674 letter’s reliance on established narrative conventions for describing the publication of juvenilia should make us skeptical about its truthfulness, but even if the story is not strictly accurate, we still need to think about why the publication history is being told in this way. The letter tells us that the volume was intended originally just to contain the *Epistolae Familiares*; however, these letters were “pauciorem,” “too meagre” even for a small book. And so Aylmer claims that he approached Milton through a friendly intermediary to ask if he had any other “opusculum” (“little work,” a deliberate diminutive) “to bulk up or at least fill the gap left by the Letters’ meagreness” (“ad pensandum vel saltem explendum Epistolaram paucitatem”). On opening the book and reading the front matter, then, our first impression of the *Prolusions* is as makeweight, an “opusculum” to be added to an existing volume to fill up the requisite number of pages. Aylmer’s letter suggests that the *Prolusions* might not have survived at all if extra material had not been needed to bulk up the book of *Epistolae*, but since we know that Milton concertedly sought to publish other educational and juvenile

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works in the early 1670s, we should be cautious about accepting this makeweight explanation as to why the *Prolusions* were published at that particular moment.

The letter communicates a mixed message, too, about the perceived value of a famous author’s juvenilia to his readership, oscillating between a somewhat dismissive attitude toward youthful writing and the ready appropriation of Milton’s youth at the time of writing to make the volume more attractive as the work of a prodigy. Aylmer chooses the word “juvenilia” twice in the letter. He tells us that the *Prolusions* appeared when the author “shook out his less important papers” (“excussis Chartulis”)—Aylmer’s second use of a diminutive noun, besides “opusculum,” further emphasizes the point that these are not major works—and that they “at last happened to find juvenilia scattered here and there among these” (“in hac forte juvenilia hic illic disjecta tandem incidit”). Aylmer’s “juvenilia his illic disiecta” is not merely descriptive, but implies, as does the verb “shook out,” scattered disorganization, even neglect. John Hale has found further evidence for this disorganisation in the incomplete printing in 1674 of the sixth *Prolusion*, which was published without the English poem “At a Vacation Exercise,” and Hale reads that “disiecta” as meaning “in disarray” (*Milton’s Cambridge Latin* 239). Aylmer’s second use of the term juvenilia is more definitely a value-judgment: “non dubitavi, quantumvis juvenilia, in lucem edere” (“I did not hesitate, although they are juvenilia, to publish them”). Aylmer therefore suggests the *Prolusions*’ lowly status while asserting their literary (and, perhaps, biographical) value. Such ambivalence can also be located in the book’s extended title, which informs us that the speeches have been “added” (“accesserunt”) to the letters—implying, again, their makeweight function—but also employs Milton’s youth at the time of writing the *Prolusions* as a kind of marketing tool:


(One Book of Familiar Letters by John Milton, Englishman: to which the Prolusions, Certain Speeches by the same were added, [delivered] before now, while he was a young man in College.)

The speeches are firmly dated to and located in Milton’s youth (“in Collegio Adolescentis”). That temporal phrase “jam olim” has the weight both of “before now” and “previously,” but also implies “long ago”: the Latin “olim” is often translated as the English “once upon a time.” The forceful placing of Milton within his institutional context in this title is significant: we are reminded of the publication late in the sixteenth century of the letters exchanged by Gabriel Harvey and Edmund Spenser, which were branded by their printer as having “lately passed between two Vniversitie men” (Knight, “‘It was not mine intent’” 44). The insistence of the late Elizabethan author Robert Greene to be characterized as “in Artibus magister” on the title pages of his published works is another example of this institutional branding in print. We see Milton’s printer adapting the publication of the *Epistolae* and *Prolusions* to accord with a prevailing early modern trend, the labelling of authors through their previous academic affiliation, to increase the saleability of the book to a like-minded readership among the *respublica litterarum*. The hope Aylmer expresses, that the speeches “will be no less saleable by me than they were once not unpleasing to their listeners when they were delivered” (“non minus fore mihi vendibilia, quam

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Auditoribus olim fuerint, cum recitarentur, non injucunda”; Milton, *Prolusions* 2), makes this association between writer and institutional context very clear, and uses, again, the term “olim,” acknowledging that these speeches were delivered long ago, but implying that their value still holds, and that they may even find new readers.

If we look more closely at the linguistic history of the word *prolusio*, we discover a series of meanings all intimately related to Milton’s early rhetorical career. There is no reason to assume that Milton did not choose the title himself, particularly since it demonstrates his profound knowledge of the techniques and parts of Latin rhetoric, in choosing a title specifically suited both to the form of the academic oration and to the content of these speeches, especially their interest in youthful literary and rhetorical activity. The Latin *proludo* means “to play or practise beforehand, to prelude”; in later Latin, *proludium* means “preliminary exercise” or “training.” Contemporary Latin/English dictionaries had built on these earlier meanings to refine still further the word’s nuances in the vernacular: *Huloets Dictionarie* (1572) defines “Proludium, ij. n. g. Praeludium, ij. n. g. Prolusio, vel Praelusio, onis” as “Flourish, or the play that is used at the beginning of games” (Huloet and Higgins sig. Sijr). This evocation of a trumpet flourish, particularly in a ludic context, reminds us obliquely of the Juvenalia, the games Nero launched in 59 CE to commemorate the end of his adolescence and his first shave (Malitz 41-42). 4 The trumpets and “games” also invoke the combative nature of university debates, where young men fought and bested each other with words. In Cooper’s *Thesaurus linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (1578), the definition elaborates on the word’s musical applications:

*Praeludium, præludij. neut. gen. Cic. A proheme: in musicæ a voluntarie before the songe: a flourish: a preamble or entrance to a matter, and, as ye would say, signes and profers.*

(fol. EEEee3r)

Cooper’s fleeting mention of “Cic.” signals Milton’s main source for the title of his orations, Cicero’s *De Oratore*. Cicero argues that the *prolusio* must be understood as integral to the following speech, that although it is early and to some extent preliminary, this opening must be taken seriously and undertaken with effort and earnestness. At the beginning of the third *Prolusion*, the speaker talks of how “at once something came into my mind that Cicero often committed to writing” (“cum subito mihi in mentem venit id quod Marcus Tullius . . . toties commisit Literis”; Milton, *Prolusions* 158), and I would suggest that the title of the *Prolusions* occurred to Milton in a similar manner; if we look closely at the *De Oratore* we see how apt the title of *Prolusiones* is both for the content and the context of these student orations.

Many of the metaphors Milton uses for academic debate are embedded within Cicero’s discussion of what the rhetorical *prolusio* should accomplish, and what it should resemble:

... the opening passage (principium) should be so closely connected with the speech that follows as to appear to be not an appendage, like the prelude (prooemium) to a piece of music, but an integral part of the whole structure. For some musicians play their prelude after due practice, but pass on to the remainder of the work in such a manner as to seem not really to want to be listened to. Also the preliminary
passage (prolusio) must not be like the skirmishing of Samnite gladiators, who before a fight brandish their spears which they are not going to make any use of in the actual encounter, but must be of such a character as to enable the combatants to employ in the real encounter the very ideas which they have made play with (quibus proluserint) in the introduction.

(2.8.325)5

Cicero’s metaphors for the relationship between prolusio and speech show us how brilliantly appropriate Milton’s title is in encompassing the various aspects of the academic oration: the aggressive, combative context of delivery; the rhetorical intricacy and artfully calibrated eliciting of audience anticipation; the oration’s relationship with the larger rhetorical exercise (the series of debates on that particular occasion, for instance), and, by extension, with the author’s larger body of work. Like juvenilia, the prolusio should be treated as “an integral part of the whole structure,” “cohaerens cum omni corpore membrum,” in Cicero’s words.

Cicero’s musical simile, too, of the prolusio resembling the “prelude to a piece of music” (“tamquam citharoedi proeemium”) might have seemed particularly apt to Milton the composer’s son and author of “At a Solemn Music” (c. 1633); we could read the title as an effort to show these orations as among the first signs of the “song of pure concet” arising from “high-raised phantasy” (5–6) in the terms of that poem. The range of musical examples in the second Prolusion (“On the harmony of the spheres”) suggests that Milton was reaching for musical analogies from an early stage of his literary career: even while asking his audience to take his comments “as a joke” (“quasi per lusum”; Milton, Prolusions 150), the speaker uses Pythagoras as an opening gambit to talk about the association between music and poetry, and refers, at one point, to “aures nostras debiles” (“our weak ears”; Milton, Prolusions 154). The idea here, as in “At a Solemn Music,” with its invocation of “Voice, and Verse” (2) to “pierce . . . dead things with inbreathed sense” (4), is that human perceptions need to be trained. The Prolusions could be read as Milton’s own most concerted expression of his own educational and rhetorical training. These meanings of the title in loci classicci and Renaissance dictionaries cumulatively urge readers to approach the Prolusions as literary juvenilia: a flourish; a prelude; a preliminary exercise; training. Cicero’s injunction that orators should not be like gladiators (“non ut Samnitium”) is picked up in the first Prolusion, where Milton figures the college, context of this speech, as a site of “simultates” (“fights”) and “emulatio” (“envy” or “rivalry”; Milton, Prolusions 120), a sharply critical analogy. Prolusions, then, is a title perfectly suited to purpose: embedded within this is a variety of classical and early modern meanings derived from rhetoric, combat, music terminology, games, which can be related, in turn, to the formal demands of the academic exercise; the strenuously dialectical nature of institutional disputation; these speeches as the equivalent of a musical prelude to a creative career; and the ludic and playful element that surfaces throughout the orations.

Even that indefinite pronoun “quædam” in the title Prolusions quædam Oratoriae is interesting: this title could mean “Prolusions, certain Speeches,” implying a process of careful authorial selection (only “certain” speeches were selected for publication); or it could mean “Prolusions, a few Speeches,” suggesting a kind of literary Darwinism (those “few” speeches were the only ones to survive). This pronoun can be found in other contemporary early writing of famous authors published late in their
careers, or even after their deaths: “quaedam Oratoriæ” recalls the subtitle of John Donne’s *Iuuenilia* published posthumously in 1633, “Certaine paradoxes and problems.” Like the *Prolusions*, Donne’s *Iuuenilia* were published decades after they had originally been written: Donne wrote these prose exercises throughout the 1590s, when the form was fashionably associated with an erudite, satirical tradition, and—like the *Prolusions*—with a particular institutional context, when Donne was at Lincoln’s Inn. The ambiguity of Milton’s “quædam” and Donne’s “certaine” is at the heart of how such juvenilia were marketed by their printers: prompting the reader to ask, are these early works now published as precocious instances of evident genius? In Milton’s case, emphasizing that these are speeches written by “an adolescent in College” both primes the reader to read them more indulgently as younger works and to admire their precocity. In addition to its careful title and the double mention of “juvenilia,” the letter also relies on the conventions of a standard narrative that had been developing since the late sixteenth century to explain the publication of juvenilia.

The story the letter tells—that the intervention of a friend and supporter (“Amicus” and “hortator”) brought the early works to light—is consistent with other publication accounts of early modern juvenilia. In his 1573 *Ludicra siue Epigrammata Iuuenilia*, for example, John Parkhurst, bishop of Norwich (?1511-75), begins the letter to the reader with a tale of near-hysterical enthusiasm on the part of his friends to publish his youthful poems: “I argued that they were lightweight, juvenilia, jests” (“leuia, iuuenilia, ridicula”), while his friends “begged, insisted, urged, and heaped up prayers, compliments, altercations and contentions” (“illi autem orare, instare, vrgere, & preces, blanditias, conuitia, iurgia cumulare”; [sigs. Aiir and Aii]). Although written a century earlier, Parkhurst’s letter nonetheless antici-pates the 1674 letter: the role of his powerfully encouraging friends reflects the role of the “hortator” who pushed for publication of the *Epistolae Familiares* and *Prolusions*. Another more contemporary example of early modern juvenilia, George Wither’s *Iuvenilia* (1622) also reflects the abiding conventions of how seventeenth-century writers (and their printers) tended to discuss youthful publication:

> These *ijvenalia* (or these *youth-pastimes,*
>  Set foorth in homely and vnpolish’t *Rhimes,*
>  Let none despise: For, whatsoere they seeme
>  They have their *fate,* their *vse* and their *esteeme.*
> (sig. ¶r)

Wither refers to “juvenalia” rather than to “juvenilia,” and the changed vowel is significant: he invokes the Neronian Juvenalia, translating this as “*youth-pastimes,*” just as Milton did early in the 1630s in “Ad Patrem,” in which he associated the terms “juvenilia carmina” with “nostri lusus.” For both authors, youthful composition seems to have been characterized by this mixture of seriousness and playful experimentation. Wither’s “homely and vnpolish’t *Rhimes*” also recall the descriptions of youthful poetry as “the homely slighted Shepherds trade” in *Lycidas* (1637). When we look at the earlier published juvenilia of Parkhurst, Donne, and Wither, we can start to see where Milton’s student writing fits within the recently established conventions of publishing and commenting upon youthful literary composition.
“The picture of his Minde”

In his *Iuvenilia*, Wither writes of drawing “In childish yeeres the picture of his Minde” (sig. *quaedam A1*), and this metaphor can usefully be applied to the *Prolusions*. While the speeches should be considered as required academic exercises, they also reveal Milton’s interest in exploring and demonstrating what the “picture of his Minde” might be at the point of delivering the speeches, and also his curiosity about how the university milieu, specifically, has helped to create that “picture”, and how it might develop as he matures as a writer. These speeches are unique, certainly, but in many aspects they read like much other early modern student writing: they are self-conscious; self-referential; self-aggrandizing, a concerted emphasis on self that is perhaps predictable in the work of a writer so uncommonly reflective on his own intellectual and literary progress. Unusually among Milton’s earlier writing, these texts are both reflective, but also intended to be projected outwards; as public acts of writing, Milton has taken great care with the rhetorical structure of *Prolusions*, for the speeches are conspicuously mediated by the use of irony, by the careful manipulation of speaker’s affect and thus of the audience’s emotional response, by concerted reliance on the disingenuous *captatio benevolentiae*, and by the formal demands of the academic exercise. Any reconstruction of the picture of Milton’s student mind will be affected, therefore, by considerations of academic necessity and purpose, rhetorical calculation, and institutional context.

John Hale has argued that the *Prolusions* need to be seen as performances as well as scripts (*Milton’s Cambridge Latin* xi), and just as we must consider music, dance, and even the banqueting afterwards, fully to appreciate the Stuart court masque, so we must consider occasion, event programme, preamble and aftermath to work out how to read the *Prolusions*. Lest we form an overly courtly impression of the context for delivery, though, it is worth remembering that such disputations were often not so rarified, but were usually “raucous public debates”, in fact, in Campbell and Conrns’s description (35). Hale (*Milton’s Cambridge Latin* 67–106; 185–220), Costello (24–35), Feingold (246–56; 301–06) and Fletcher (219–70) have vividly reconstructed the occasions on which these speeches were delivered, and both Haugen (317–43) and Henderson (32–64) have also richly contributed to our understanding of the theatrical nature of academic orations, at both early modern universities. Such orations were prefixed, often, by Latin verses to frame the speech and crystallize its argument, and Milton’s own participation in this process gives us a fuller sense of the requirements: in 1629 he wrote “Naturam non pati senium” and “De Idea Platonica” as “act verses” of this sort (Knight, “Milton’s Student Verses” 38). Milton was asked to write one of these poems for a Fellow of Christ’s to accompany that Fellow’s speech before the Chancellor and French ambassador, and we should read this invitation as an indication both of Milton’s institutional celebrity and of his knack for writing something impressive, persuasive, and fit for purpose at someone else’s request, a talent which would serve him well during the Interregnum (Knight, “Royal Milton”15). Milton mentions this request in a letter of July 1628 to Alexander Gill, which encapsulates, again, that strange mixture of apparent youthful modesty and growing confidence in his own voice. On the one hand, the Fellow considered himself “past the age for those kinds of trifles” (“præter vectus ipse jamdiu leviculas illiusmodi nugas”) and so entrusted the task “to my pueriliti” (“meæ Puerilitati commisit”), yet at the same time, there is an implicit boast in a Fellow asking a student to write verses for him, and Milton offers these to

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Gill in exchange of Gill’s own verses: he invites literary criticism, certainly, yet also implies that the poems have already enjoyed institutional success (Milton, *Prolusions* 10-11). The subtext is that Milton is not just another student, but is a young writer whose talents are expressly sought by his College superiors in a context of public rhetorical performance. Such kudos would have been marked in early modern Cambridge, with its intellectually combative culture of debate, that so affected Milton, and prompted, as Helen Vendler has observed, a “passion for dialectic that Milton was never to lose” (13). This zeal for forceful argument animates Milton’s writing and should be traced back to the *Prolusions*.

Within this context, then, Milton’s speeches are not dry, rootless declamations: instead, their root systems run deep into college and university life: social life, that is, not just pedagogical, curricular practice. It becomes difficult to answer the question whether the *Prolusions* are predominantly literary or curricular because they are both: they are elegant Latin speeches written, in most cases, to fulfill academic requirements, and show us how early Milton was developing remarkable Latin compositional skills and how he grasped classical rhetorical practice intimately and confidently enough to be able to subvert its rules, to play with the time-honored structure of the formal academic oration. So comfortable was Milton with these rules that in a near-metafictional moment in the fourth *Prolusion* he anatomizes the whole process of formal debate: “one person claims this, and thinks he has done enough to establish his argument; the other refutes it with no trouble, or at least seems to refute it” (174–76). Such moments of self-consciousness are rare in the formal academic oration. Milton’s speeches seem atypically meditative on the experience of writing and rhetorical delivery, and he appears all too aware of this tendency while speaking. We also see a tendency less rare in early modern student writing: an eagerness to impress the academy, to make a mark, to demonstrate familiarity with pedagogical practice, literary history, philosophical traditions, as well as newer scientific method—the drive to show off what one knows. Such concertedly public speeches cannot be read as untrammelled outpourings of a young Milton’s inner workings, of course, but they can be read as efforts to move beyond the fixity of the academic exercise into modes of expression and ratiocination that Milton would develop both as a student and throughout his writing career.

To a greater degree than his student and graduate contemporaries, Milton implemented within the *Prolusions* what could be considered a dubious practice in curricular terms: his main preoccupations are often not defined by the speeches’ given titles, but underpin rather than overarch the oration in question. Consequently the *Prolusions* are often most interesting when they move beyond this academic brief and reach toward larger problems facing a nascent writer than the good opinion of his college contemporaries. In the *Prolusions*, Milton frequently uses the Latin verb “conor” (“I try” or “I attempt”). A few decades later he would famously describe *Paradise Lost*’s “advent’rous song” as the pursuit of “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (1.13, 16; my emphasis) by either contemporaries or predecessors and assert his intention to make a vertiginous flyover of Mount Helicon, “th’ Aonian mount.” In the *Prolusions*, however, Milton is still negotiating his path among and around the classical Muses and is not yet soaring above their mountain. Consequently, one of the most complex aspects of the *Prolusions* is their negotiation of classical authority, particularly Greek mythology: the first *Prolusion*, for example, describes Milton’s own intellectual tug-of-war between scientific and religious truth and classical—specifically, Hesiodic—“fabulae” (“stories”). Here, the speaker tells us...
that “Antiquity,” exemplified by theogonists such as Hesiod, told stories cleverly and elegantly (“erudite quidem & eleganter fabulata est Antiquitas”), but also states that this elegant fiction is not sufficient and that, instead, he will “try to subject them to the rule of reason” (“ad normam rationis revocar conor”; Milton, Prologues 130; ny emphasis). While the speaker takes exception, particularly, to the Hesiodic account of the origins of the world, the birth of Night and Day, which is the main subject of the Prologue, there is still a real sense of a speaker utterly beguiled by the physical coherence and the imaginative force of the classical cosmogony, while straining at the same time to reduce this ultimately pagan cosmogony to Christian, scientific, rational laws (“ad normam rationis”).

As in this example, the rhetorical voice articulating the Prologues constantly changes, a shift contingent on the academic task at hand and the context of delivery, but the language of attempting is a constant, and although it is important to note that while “attempt” is not a synonym for “failure,” the descriptions of composition and delivery in these orations often evoke strain. At the beginning of the third Prologue we encounter a sustained depiction of concern and difficulty: “I was searching” (“quaerebam”), “straining” (“obnixe”), and “anxious” (“hoc mihi curæ erat”—literally “this was a worry to me”; Milton, Prologues 128). The second Prologue, too, begins with a self-deprecating declaration of the speaker’s “simplicity” or “slightness” (“meæ tenuitati”[148]). We might take such expressions of trying as disingenuous—these are polished speeches, after all, and every so often Milton’s pride in their refinement peeps through—but even if this imperfectly assured voice, with its straining, worrying, and attempting, is only a rhetorical persona, we still need to ask why Milton chose that particular persona and what effect it has. Perhaps part of the strain was to stick to the topic and not digress, which Milton did not always accomplish: the range of ideas and rhetorical techniques that he crams into what he calls “mea semihorula”—“my half-hour” in Prologue 3 (160)—is astonishing, and may have been, we can conjecture, somewhat overwhelming, even confusing, to the audience. I would argue that a speaker who protests that he is struggling is probably harnessing the captatio benevolentiae device—literally the “capturing or taking of (an audience’s) goodwill”—but there might also be another reason for this emphasis on effort and attempt, to do with Milton’s stress on his youth and awareness that he is at the start of his career. The speaker’s articulation of anxiety that he might be boring his audience and boring himself in the fourth Prologue (184) is disingenuous, but the persona of hesitancy is carefully constructed. In a Ciceronian edifice of appropriate affect, the writer of these speeches realizes that the most apt persona is that of a reticent young man, and although the speaker sometimes declares his ability to “bring his audience completely round to his opinion” (Prologue 3, 158), the prevailing impression left by the Prologues is of marked rhetorical and argumentative competence fenced in with expressions of modesty and youthful diffidence.

A perfectly mapped out trajectory of a long authorial career cannot be reasonably ascribed to Milton the student, for so many of his fundamental political and literary positions were to change between his Cambridge career and later. Campbell and Corns have argued for Milton’s relative political and ecclesiastical conservatism at university compared with his later ideological stance, asserting that this conservatism was implicit in his signing of the three Articles of Religion in 1629 to supplicate for his degree (43). In literary terms, too, Milton’s student obsession with Ovid, “Poetarum elegantissimus” (Prologue 1, 144), slackened to admit other major influ-
ences later in life; his predominant literary language changed, too, moving from Latin to the vernacular, although, as we have seen, throughout his career, and especially toward the end of his life, he would publish both English and Latin works. Yet even if Milton had not yet mapped out definitively how his career would progress after Cambridge, there is considerable evidence that he was thinking of his own authorial development at this stage and alternating between confidence and diffidence. The exordium of the seventh *Prolusion*, for instance, on the topic of whether Knowledge or Ignorance is better, identifies the wish to be a distinguished orator and poet and laments that this is impossible because of the speaker’s youth. Milton is arguing for the benefits of learning, implying that he is somewhat advanced on that journey, but conveys a strong sense of apprenticeship nonetheless, manifest in his intent to immerse himself in study to deserve true praise (“laudem veram” [248]). In the first *Prolusion*, too, Milton figures himself as “on the very threshold of the speech” (“in ipso Orationis Limine” [118]). This sense of liminality pervades the *Prolusions*, extending beyond the individual oration, and shows us a writer poised, according to his own self-representation, at the moment of walking through the door.

“O nostri, iuvenilia carmina, lusus”

This sense of liminality and the frequently bashful persona that articulates the *Prolusions* were central to Milton’s sense of youthful literary composition. That he first chose the medium of Latin, language of the institution and rhetorical practice, to articulate his attitudes, is not surprising. Both in the *Prolusions* and in his poetry of the early 1630s, the author’s assessment of his own rhetorical and poetic abilities is rooted in his *Latinitas*, which arises from the fact that Latin represented the world of patriarchal authority and intellectual supremacy, on the one hand, but also was what one learned as a youth, a schoolroom language associated with the production of juvenilia. Walter J. Ong and Wendy Wall have written about the young man’s use of Latin as an intellectual self-assertion, an act of distancing from the world of vernacular domesticity and a self-launching into the masculine hierarchical world of the early modern educational system. In *Ad Patrem*, written during the early 1630s, when Milton had actually left this system, he offers his father an *apologia* for poetry in the language associated with patriarchal authority and educational cachet, still using the institutional language to assert his talents and ambitions. Latin here becomes the medium for proving to his father how much he has learned; it is in this poem, and in this language, that Milton perhaps most explicitly frames his discussion of juvenilia in those alternating terms of confidence and diffidence that we also see in operation throughout the *Prolusions*.

Peter C. Herman has read *Ad Patrem* as Milton’s “answer to the elder Milton’s disappointment in his son’s lack of interest in pursuing a legal or ecclesiastical career” (39), but one could argue instead that by writing his poem in Latin, Milton demonstrates his expertise in an institutionally respectable medium, prophetically, as it happened, since Milton’s Latin skill gave him his career as Cromwell’s Secretary for Foreign Tongues. The tone of *Ad Patrem* can be read as slightly defensive, but for the most part I agree with John Carey, that Milton wrote *Ad Patrem* in part “to
thank his father for his education” (“Milton’s Ad Patrem” 180), and also with John Hale, who notes how Ad Patrem shows “Milton’s awareness of choice of tongue” (Milton’s Languages 52). I would add that the speaker of Ad Patrem—and by extension, in this case, Milton—uses Latin to prove his individual intellectual development, and to assert his place within the educational hierarchy. The speaker both situates himself within a continuum of classical exempla of what poetry can miraculously do—harrow the depths of Tartarus; lighten the burden of Atlas (21–23; 40)—and argues forcefully for his own uniqueness, invoking his own “spiritus... igneus” (“fiery spirit”) which “whirls round the hurling spheres” (35). The articulation of this soaring claim is itself embedded within Milton’s Latin reading, as John Carey has shown, tracing this spiritus igneus back to the Somnium Scipionis, Cicero, Macrobius, and Book 11 of the Corpus Hermeticum (182). Just as Milton had derived the title Prolusiones from Cicero, so a few years later he also drew Ad Patrem’s striking metaphor of creativity from Cicero and Ciceronian tradition.

Ad Patrem in its entirety is an apology for youthful literary and intellectual development, but we have to wait until the end of the poem for the speaker to use the word “juvenilia,” in an Ovidian flourish very typical of that stage in Milton’s career. Here he addresses the text itself as “vos, O nostri, iuvenilia carmina, lusus” (“You, our pastimes, youthful poetry”). Here he asserts that the “youthful poems” might expect “immortality” (“perpetuos annos”) and might even “outlast their master’s funeral pyre” (“domini superesse rogo”), arguing for their value and the likelihood of an enduringly favorable reception from readers. However disingenuous that noun “lusus” (“pastimes” or “games”) might be, though, it still suggests a certain lack of gravitas and raises the question that these “juvenilia carmina” might only outlive their “master” because of his reputation based on later, less playful work. In Ad Patrem, we hear of the speaker’s current unformed youth, and that he “desires to enrich his mind” (“cupiens ditescere mentem”), but we also learn that that this mind is already “refined” (“excultam”), and that the speaker already “has a place, though a very low one, in the ranks of the learned” (“ego iam doctae pars quamlibet ima catervae”). The next line, with its emphatic future verb at the end, makes clear that promotion, decoration, and winning will follow the “juvenilia carmina”: “I shall one day sit among those who wear the ivy and the laurels of victory” (“Victrices hederas inter laurosque sedebo” [l.102]; [my emphasis]. Ad Patrem makes a case for seeing the speaker’s “carmina iuvenilia” as a highly significant part of this journey toward the victor’s laurels—“games,” perhaps, but also a pivotal stage in the development and refinement of literary talent. Like the Prolusions, Ad Patrem shows a writer assimilating, and to some extent vaunting, what he has already learned, while aware, at the same time, that he still has much to accomplish.

“Vain wisdom all”

I have already argued that Milton’s university experience fundamentally affected his habits of thought and composition. By now it should be clear that the Prolusions’ only value does not rest on their preempting of later work, but at the same time, if we trace how ideas first raised in the Prolusions resurface later, we can see how influential these early articulations would prove to be. In English poems

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such as 1637’s *Lycidas* as well as in Latin poems like *Ad Patrem*, Milton meditates on the institutional context for rhetorical practice, Caroline Cambridge. *Lycidas* offers a vivid representation of university life and literary activity:

> Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,  
> Tempered to the oaten flute,  
> Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel  
> From the glad sound would not be absent long.  
> (32-35)

Within the pastoral register, “rural” of course does not necessarily mean unlettered and crude. Yet Milton’s characterization here of Cambridge as “rough” and reedy recalls the moment in *Prolusion 7* where he satirically describes a lack of social graces among academics, represented as “awkward, unsophisticated, disorganized in their habits” (“doctiores plerosque difficiles, inurbanos, moribus incompositis”; 262). His contemporary undergraduate poem *Elegia Prima* heightens this sense of anti-academic satire of which he appears to have been fond while a student; here Milton the refined young Londoner complains about returning to the “arundiferum . . . Camum”—“the reedy river Cam” (11), and these reeds in turn anticipate the “rural ditties” from the “oaten flute” played by Cambridge shepherds in *Lycidas*. The Cam is choked with reeds, and the Cambridge “fields are bare” (“nuda arva”), in bleak opposition to the rich, lively diversions that the metropolis offers. We should not, as Cedric C. Brown has argued, read “too literally” a poem that he and others have suggested should be interpreted as “an ironic rewriting, in Ovidian measure, of Ovid’s situation” when banished to Tomis by the Emperor Augustus (118). Yet it does seem clear that even as an undergraduate Milton was already imaginatively projecting himself into worlds beyond the university and expressing dissatisfaction (even if only playfully in *Elegia Prima*) at his immediate academic context.

By the time we get to *Of Education* in the mid-1640s, Milton goes much further: this time it is not the reedy river or the “rough satyrs” (fellow-students) he criticizes. Instead, he explicitly inveighs against precisely the kind of exercise he had performed in the *Prolusions*, identifying the pernicious effects of frogmarching young men prematurely through academic exercises, and calling these exercises “preposterous,” imposed at too early a stage (Parker 435):

> a preposterous exaction, forcing the empty wits of children to compose Theams, verses, and Orations, which are the acts of ripest judgement and the finall work fill’d by long reading, and observing, with elegant maxims, and copious invention.  
> (*Of Education* 366)

These musings reflect unfavorably on the collegiate setting of exercises like the *Prolusions*, suggesting, perhaps, that Milton had come to view his own rhetorical beginnings as somewhat artificial and forced. The overwhelming argument that animates *Of Education* is that contemporary educational provision in England is inadequate: it does not form correct habits of mind and is both hidebound and unsophisticated, a criticism we might link with the speaker’s implication in *Lycidas* that the university is not necessarily a refining *milieu* for the young writer.

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Paradise Regained, published three years before the Prolusions, goes further still in its criticism of institutional life: in Book 4 Milton frames the academy as a source of temptation, offering perhaps his most vehement critique of academic life: pointing to Athens, "mother of arts / And eloquence, native to famous wits" (240-41), Satan offers this highly scholarly city to Christ as a means to render himself "a king complete" (283), to become a Platonic (and, crucially, secular) rex philosophicus. Christ’s countering of Satan’s temptation stresses religious wisdom rather than any non-Christian academic knowledge; urged by Satan “to sage philosophy next lend thine ear,” Christ dismissively replies:

Think not but that I know these things, or think
I know them not; not therefore am I short
Of knowing what I ought; he who receives
Light from above, from the fountain of light,
No other doctrine needs, though granted true;
But these [i.e. the Greek philosophical systems that
Satan has already mentioned] are false, though little else but dreams,
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.

(272, 286-92)

This characterization of Greek philosophy, synecdochal here for all academic study that is not "light from above," echoes the "Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophie" in which Belial’s scholarly company participate as they construct a demonic academy in Hell in Paradise Lost (2.557-65). John Mulryan has argued, too, that Christ’s speech is characterized by puns on knowing and rejecting ("no-ing") which reinforce its main message—"that the temptation to ‘knowing’ the classical culture Satan offers is naught, adds up to zero" (211). Mulryan’s claim is plausible; it could be that—in a typically Miltonic maneuver—Christ uses sophisticated rhetoric to deny the power of sophisticated rhetoric. In any case, Milton first uses such terminology in Prolusion 3, in an attack aimed specifically at scholasticism. Christ’s language is recycled from that Prolusion, which strongly suggests that Milton was drawing from opinions and rhetorical formulations he had originally developed as a student to structure the anti-academic argument of this moment in Paradise Regained. Prolusion 3 inveighs against scholasticism’s "leves imaginis" ("insubstantial phantoms") and "simulachra tenuia" ("lightweight" or "paltry" "facsimiles" or "likenesses"; 166-68), terms that both offer a clear epistemological instruction to the audience within their immediate institutional context and anticipate the later poem’s rejection of academic learning as "false, though little else but dreams, / Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm." In his dismissal of Satan’s litany of "all the schools / Of Academics old and new, with those / Surnamed Peripatetics, and the sect / Epicurean, and the Stoic severe" (Paradise Regained 4. 277-80), too, Christ rejects the forms of learning that were first explored in Prolusion 1, where the orator expressed a wish to reduce the Hesiodic cosmogony “ad normam rationis.” In Paradise Regained’s temptation scene, at least, Milton appears to want to reduce the ancient Greek philosophical schools “ad normam religionis,” or, more accurately, “ad normam doctrineae,” to reflect "light from above," rather than that “eloquence, native to famous wits.”

Although Milton had left Cambridge nearly forty years before he wrote Paradise Regained, this late poem’s specifically scholarly temptation scene demonstrates how vividly he could still figure the allurements of academic study and, in particular,
what he came to characterize as its beautiful, coherent lack of substance. The process
of critically examining the university, then, began in the Prolusions, in which Milton
first identified areas of improvement for the curriculum; by the time he wrote Para-
dise Regained, the terms in which he had criticized aspects of higher education were
now applied to all learning that was not “light from above,” that is, grace and reli-
gious doctrine. One interpretation of this intellectual movement is that by the end
of his career, Milton came to figure the university curriculum—the context in
which most of the Prolusions were honed and delivered—as a phantom: remote, self-
indulgent, perhaps even an evasion of political and civic duty. It is very tempting to
argue for this particular story of Milton’s representation of academic experience. But
again I come back to the problem of imposing a tidy teleology on a writer’s life, and
more specifically in this case, on Milton’s representation of the academy, and the
necessity of noting the very different purposes motivating the composition of these
works across a lifetime: we cannot compare, for instance, Prolusion 3’s critique of
scholasticism with Paradise Regained’s attack on Greek philosophy without taking
these compositional and rhetorical differences into account. Yet the language in
these two very different works separated by half a century seems strikingly similar
and that in fact all of these works—from student writing like Elegia Prima and the
Prolusions, through Lycidas and Of Education right up until Paradise Regained—are
preoccupied with many similar ideas: the value of the university, the importance of
academic learning, and the question of how the young mind gets formed through
study and reading. These preoccupations and explorations have their roots in the
Prolusions, demonstrating that these student works are more than just an “opuscu-
num,” much more than textual filler for a publisher to print a full and commercially
viable book.

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Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Ninth International Milton Symposium, University
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develop my ideas for this essay. I would also like to thank Gordon Campbell for fruitful conversations
and unstinting support throughout my work on the Prolusions.

1 “At a Vacation Exercise” was written in 1628 and itself formed part of the bilingual sixth Prolusion.

2 See Wilson and Campbell, “Satire”.

3 Cicero uses “chartula” to mean “a little paper; a small writing; a bill” (Fam. 7.18.2), as does the Codex
Theodosianus (8.2.2). For other loci classici, see Lewis and Short 1: 326. By the Middle Ages, the word
had come to mean “any written document” (Niermeyer 174). Aylmer’s use of the diminutive to refer
to the Prolusions elsewhere in the printer’s letter suggests that he is using the word in its Cicero’s
sense.

4 I would like to thank John Hale for asking me about the association between “juvenilia” and “juvena-
lia,” which prompted further thought.

5 “Connexum autem ita sit principium consequenti orationi ut non tamquam citharoedi prooemium
affectum aliquid sed cohaerens cum omni corpore membra esse videatur. Nam non nulli, cum illud
meditati ediderunt, sic ad reliqua transeunt ut audientiam fieri sibi non velle videantur. Atque eiusmodi illa prolusio debet esse, non ut Samnitium, qui vibrant hastas ante pugnam qui nam in pugnando nihil utuntur, sed ut ipsis sententia quibus proluserint vel pugnare possint” (442-44).

Belial’s companions choose a region in hell where they can engage in academic debate:

Others sat apart on a Hill retired,
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high . . .
And found no end, in wandering mazes lost . . .
Vain wisdom all, and false Philosophy.

(557-65)

For a reading of this episode against Milton’s experience of the Italian academies, see Nardo 218-19.

**Works Cited**

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