In March 2020, many universities, including the University of Georgia, suddenly closed their campuses and sent students, staff, and faculty home to isolate during the first wave of the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic.¹ I was teaching English 2310, the so-called “sophomore survey,” an overview of 1500 years of literature in Neo-Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, Middle Welsh, Irish Gaelic, Middle English, and Early Modern English languages in the North Atlantic archipelago.² Teachers and students suddenly had to “pivot” from our active, in-person, communal sessions to remote, asynchronous, text- and video-based learning, supplemented in many cases by regular, synchronous, live video-chats on the virtual meeting platform Zoom.³ My students and I had created physical timelines of world history on our classroom walls, acted scenes from Shakespeare, scanned and composed sonnets and lyrics, and even sung medieval roundels together. How would we “pivot” remotely, and how would we maintain our community across time and space?

More profoundly, what was the point, I asked these first- and second-year students at the end of the semester, of studying old literature during this global health crisis? Most of my students did not plan to major in English; this was the last, and for some, the only literature class they would take in college. Did they perhaps feel their time might be better spent, for example, learning how to sequence DNA or to serve as paramedics?

My students’ answers surprised, comforted, and uplifted me. Some students shared that seeing how human beings a thousand years ago coped with disease outbreaks, ageing, and mortality offered them material for “perseverance and reflection in a difficult time.”⁴ Others
wrote that reading about earlier periods of self-imposed solitude and characters who treated their isolation as “powerful acts of self-determination” helped them tolerate the loneliness of lockdown because it reminded them that the sacrifices they had made would serve their communities. Several readers mentioned that the religious or spiritual focus of much older literature offered them a “spiritual strengthening,” whether a renewed commitment to a religious tradition or a meditative reflection practice with loved ones.

My students and I lost one shared community when we moved to remote learning, but recreated a different kind of mutual experience online. Joshua Eyler’s recent book on affective learning argues that students and instructors are whole persons whose learning happens within social, familial, and emotional contexts, and that we can create richer intellectual growth in our students by recognizing them within these contexts and encouraging them to reflect upon their learning in light of their lives. But not all of us are comfortable sharing parts of ourselves in a classroom; we found ourselves freer when separated by distance and time, as perhaps did Katherine Philips and the great letter-writers of the past. We shared inadvertent glimpses or soundbites of our families on Zoom, photographs of our surroundings, videos or soundclips of ourselves speaking into the void.

Email and video chat thus emerged during this remote, locked-down phase of the pandemic in Georgia as methods that let my students word their concerns clearly and carefully and elicit responses of a similar caliber from me and from each other. Such exchanges were sometimes protracted, and became increasingly sophisticated; I found myself wondering about the prosy correspondence that might have led up to Katherine Philips’ polished poems to “Lucasia” or to Henry Lawes. As Elizabeth Hageman points out, Philips’ poem-letters appropriate the neo-platonic language of Donne’s love-poetry and apply it to the highly intellectual companionship of her friends. Such friends, even when physically distant, “inspire[], cure[]…And guide[]” Philips during her “darkest” times. Moreover, this
intangible, intellectual camaraderie outweighs for Philips the physical manifestations of a relationship, which are “but pieces of the earth” rather than “all the world” that their mutual conversation creates.\(^\text{10}\) Philips’ poem to the composer Henry Lawes likewise argues that (much as Margaret Cavendish’s Empress suggests she will “make a world of [her] own” in order that she may become “Mistress of two Worlds, one within, and the other without [her]”), “[i]f then each man a little world must be,” then creators (such as Lawes) contain and make multiple worlds.\(^\text{11}\) My students and I formed a “little world made cunningly” in the virtual spaces of our screens and the invisible realms of thought.\(^\text{12}\)

Isolation paradoxically enabled a rush of local volunteerism and service (particularly mask-making) and attuned my students and me to the introspective and brave voices of people across time and space who lived before modernity and its medically extended lifespan.\(^\text{13}\) The combination of danger and of losing our freedoms of movement and association forced us to cultivate our freedoms of mind and consciously to dedicate time to reading, reflecting, and writing alone, a context in which the Irish lyric “Pangur Bán” encouraged my student Katie to “lean[] into” the fear and loneliness:

The situation of the world beyond our front doors (and in some cases not even that) can be frightening….Yet I believe that by treating this long pause as a time for serious personal reflection and growth, it is possible to mitigate the tendency towards feeling helpless. By anchoring ourselves in the things that are within our control and leaning into the solitude, it is possible to take an unfortunate situation and create good out of it. It would help us much more to think as the author writes, “Truth to tell, just being here, / Housed alone, housed together, / Adds up to its own reward” (9-11). This period provides its own challenges and its own unique opportunities which we will likely never see again in our lives.\(^\text{14}\)
This new, shared vulnerability affected some of us more strongly than others. A first-year student movingly commented on the chronic health condition that she had learned to live with before the pandemic and how her family’s sudden awareness of her higher risk for COVID-19 complications meant that she felt suddenly infantilized, at home once more. “It is unnerving to feel defined so completely by others’ perceptions of you,” she continued, “but it is not a feeling unique to my situation. It is one I have seen mirrored in stories throughout time,” from Shakespeare’s Viola/Cesario, exiled from Orsino’s love until she doffs her disguise, to Marie de France’s Bisclavret, cast out in his wolf-skin from his wife and his liege lord. “While Bisclavret convinces the king that he is an intelligent and gentle wolf, and so prevents his death, the reason he is ever hunted is because of the fact he is in his wolf’s skin,” the writer observed:

Were Bisclavret a man at the time there would be no danger him being hunted. And despite the fact he saves himself from the king’s hunting party he is still seen and treated as a wolf; albeit a tame one. While the king and his advisors accept the wolf is intelligent and are certain it bears a grudge against Bisclavret’s wife (after he bites off her nose in what seems a shockingly violent action for the normally gentle wolf), no one suspects that he is a man until his wife reveals the truth. Their perceptions of him are completely dependent on his form (something he has no control over at the time) and what he can and cannot do is entirely dependent on those perceptions.

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These characters all have this in common: they consistently act like themselves and yet seem to portray two different characters each. This apparent duality is completely dependent on how other characters view them. They are themselves always, it is only others’ views of them that make them seem different. Their stories are far more
fantastic than my own, and their situations are far more dramatic than most people will ever experience. Despite this, they face the same issue I do of being defined by others’ perceptions. Despite living in a chaotic time, I am simply a human facing issues humanity has for centuries. For me at least this is a comfort.15

So profound was this desire to draw meaning and value from the first wave and its illnesses and isolation, so strong our sense of potential, that one student last Spring even dubbed our pandemic pivot a secular “felix culpa” or fortunate fall, a chance to rescue ourselves from environmental and political degradation. I had been testing a new approach to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one based on Reginald Wilburn’s stirring identification of “Black Revolt” within the poem.16 Milton readers ever since the publication of *Paradise Lost* have complained that he gives the Devil the best arguments -- for liberty, for self-determination, for knowledge—against the Father’s demands for submission, obedience, ignorance. Wilburn argues for a tradition among enslaved and free early African American writers of appropriating aspects of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and of Satan – in particular, the Latinate, polysyllabic vocabulary; the use of epic catalog and epic simile; the imagery of rising and falling, freedom and captivity – in order to argue implicitly against pro-slavery advocates who used their version of “Christianity” to justify enslaving other human beings. These features of Milton’s work have long been considered characteristic of the poem, but African American writers, suggests Wilburn, used their affiliation with Milton’s Satan to point out a flawed theology. Slave-owners, these writers suggest, are setting themselves up as God, in positions of absolute authority, without realizing that the authority they wield is post-lapsarian – devilish, not holy.

Inspired by Wilburn and the Black writers whose works we had read alongside Milton, this student herself appropriated the language of Milton’s demons to argue for an environmental and political realignment:
I look to books for solace, sometimes to be taken away from the present and others for the reminder that everything will be okay....Milton presents the argument that though Satan has fallen for being the anti-hero, the experience proves his heroicness. I think that much of the world’s response to the horrors of COVID-19 has shown our resilience. Satan addresses the fall of his comrade Beelzebub, “From what hight fall’n, so much the stronger prov’d” (Milton, Book 1, 92). What was meant to be imprisonment in a weak place only proves Beelzebub’s strength. Similarly, the steps made during quarantine to fight against loneliness, xenophobia, and the spread of disease demonstrates the strength of our local and global communities. Air pollution has fallen in unprecedented levels across the world. We have united in our fight against food insecurity and resistance to Governor Kemp’s premature business openings.[17] Satan states that one “[c]an make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (Milton, Book 1, 255). This dichotomy translates to all aspects of life – but is emphasized by how we choose to approach quarantine. We can use it as an opportunity to practice problem-solving, look introspectively at how we connect to others, and commune with our environments.18

The student writer concluded with an acknowledgment of the vast human losses but urged us (in what seems like an unbearably poignant interlude now, given attacks on science and expertise in the United States) to use this time to study, to reflect, and to brainstorm ideas for political renewal, to “hold Royal Society meetings in our living rooms, philosophizing like Cavendish and acting in healthy debate through online discussions or zoom calls.”19

Shared moments of vulnerability, joy, fear, or sorrow, expressed with no certainty of return, can take on the incantatory qualities of prayer, and have their own afterlife, as Philip Sidney imagined. Sonnet 34 of Astrophel and Stella rehearses all the reasons why it’s absurd
to write out one’s grief but also why and how it can help. “Come, let me write. And to what end? To ease /A burthen’d heart,” it begins, and then asks how words could cure a disease when all they can do is express the symptom. Two more questions address the vulnerability of exposing oneself in public this way: “art not ashamed to publish thy disease?” and “will not wise men think thy words fond [foolish]”? The speaker responds that hardly anyone is reading what he writes anyway (his “fame…is…rare”) and that if people think he’s foolish, those people just shouldn’t read what he writes. To the imagined questioner’s suggestion that it’s a waste of time to “speake, and not be h[e]ard,” the lyric voice responds that it’s hardest of all to “smart” (hurt) and not to express it.

While the paradoxical promise and hope of those early pandemic days has now faded, re-reading these essays now during the grueling “second wave” helps me recapture some of my former optimism, just as hearing the voices of long-dead poets and writers helped my students last Spring to see themselves as part of a lineage of thinkers and discussants making sense of sorrow through art. Reading and writing about literature, suggested our responses, can allow us to cherish “alle that is made” reduced to “the quantite of a haselle nutte” in the palm of our hand and to see the divine infused in quotidian objects around us; to imagine love existing beyond bodily presence, “an expansion / Like gold to airy thinness beat”; to let friendship’s “flames…light and shine” upon us; and to “look in [our] heart[s], and write.” In this way, we imagine, we can create “world[s] of [our] own,” a future where we can all be free.

2 Thanks to my students for giving me permission to excerpt and cite their work. Where students prefer to remain anonymous, I cite the title of the paper, rather than the author’s name.


Reginald Wilburn, Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2014).


“Finding Light,” op. cit.


