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**Neil Forsyth: The Satanic Epic**

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## INTRODUCTION

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan in "Paradise Lost." It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil.

—SHELLEY, *The Defence of Poetry*

### I. "Too full of the Devill"

*Paradise Lost* is not an orthodox poem and it needs to be rescued from its orthodox critics. This book contends that the best way back to the poem Milton composed, rather than the one the orthodox would have us read, is to reassert the importance of Satan, heretic and hater. I shall be doing this in various ways. One is through revising the history of the Satan that Milton reimagines for us, since a mistaken idea about it has been widely accepted in recent years. It is the combat myth, I argue, that has always been at the center of that history, and Milton knew it. His more perceptive readers have kept it there, for the opposition is central to the poem. "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devils party without knowing it."<sup>1</sup> Blake's aphorism has become so famous that it is hard to hear what it says. I think that, like much Romantic criticism, it is right, or at least helpful, except for the implied accusation of ignorance. Milton knew quite well what he was up to: even the fetters are deliberately donned. And there was a "Devils party."

He claimed to be writing to justify the ways of God to men. Nonetheless, "Milton is a poet too full of the Devill," said an early reader, the country minister John Beale. Though he thought *Paradise Lost* "excellent," he found "great faults" in it, and preferred the earlier poetry, less obviously political: he wrote that Milton had "put such long & horrible Blasphemyes in the Mouth of Satan, as no man that feares God can endure to Read it, or without a poysonous Impression."<sup>2</sup> That view of Milton's Satan was prophetic, as well as perceptive, and it has continued in several forms to this day: contemporary teachers apparently feel the need to protest at the prominence given to Satan in student responses to the poem, or among certain benighted scholars. One such teacher, writing recently on an electronic discussion list, was proud to

<sup>1</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 5, in David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Doubleday, 2d ed. 1988), p. 35. Further discussed below, chap. 1.16. Blake's text reads "Devils" with no apostrophe, allowing the word to be either singular or plural.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Laureate, Republican, Calvinist: an Early Response to *Paradise Lost* (1667)," *Milton Studies* 29 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), pp. 181–98.

announce that her students had “seen through Satan” very quickly. I do not think she was aware of the double meaning of the phrase.

In spite of such attitudes, Satan has stayed at the forefront of readers’ reactions to the poem. Beale’s more famous contemporary, John Dryden, described Satan as the poem’s “hero, instead of Adam.” Although Dryden was using the word hero more in a formal than a political sense, the remark was quickly read as a Tory slur against “that Grand Whig Milton.”<sup>3</sup> The post-Restoration world continued to read Milton’s politics through Satan’s. A discussion in the *London Chronicle* of 1763–64 pitted Whig against Tory readings of *Paradise Lost* and in each case Satan stands for the unacceptable voice of the opposition: Tories thought Milton had repudiated the good old cause by “giving the same characteristics to the apostate angels as were applicable to his rebel brethren,” while the Whig response sees Satan as the arch-Tory, “setting himself up over his peers.”<sup>4</sup>

Romantic admiration for Milton built on this eighteenth-century reception, but now comparison with Satan was the way to admire one’s heroes, not diminish one’s enemies. Burns, even before the French Revolution, wrote of “my favourite hero, Milton’s Satan,” and talked of his “dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid, unyielding independance; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan.”<sup>5</sup> William Godwin asked in his *Political Justice* of 1793, “Why did Satan rebel against his maker? It was, as he himself informs us, because he saw no sufficient reason for that extreme inequality of rank and power which the creator assumed.”<sup>6</sup> Godwin’s daughter, Mary, and her husband Percy Shelley, kept up the admiration long after the Revolution had turned sour. Mary’s journal testifies to their frequent reading of Milton together, and she permeated her novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1817) with references to *Paradise Lost*. The eighteenth century had already shifted the focus of interest from Adam and Eve to the Satanic sublime, and *Frankenstein* reflects that shift. “Remember that I am thy creature,” says the nameless monster to his creator: “I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss from which I alone am irrevocably excluded.”<sup>7</sup> Percy Shelley, in an essay “On the Devil, and Devils,” wrote

<sup>3</sup> John M. Steadman, “The Idea of Satan as the Hero of *Paradise Lost*,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 120 (1976):253–94; Nicholas von Maltzahn, “Milton’s Readers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 243, 246.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Jackie DiSalvo in *War of Titans: Blake’s Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), pp. 29–36.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to W. Nicol, June 1787, in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.121–23.

<sup>6</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. I. Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 309. See Roger Sharrock, “Godwin on Milton’s Satan,” *Notes and Queries*, n. s. 9 (1962):463–65.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), p. 66.

As to the Devil, he owes everything to Milton. Dante and Tasso present us with a very gross idea of him: Milton divested him of a sting, hoofs, and horns; clothes him with the sublime grandeur of a graceful but tremendous spirit.<sup>8</sup>

This Satan was a Romantic hero, politically admirable—and good to look at.

Most readers have continued to connect Milton with his hero. But the differences just sketched have remained active, and no consensus has ever emerged about what the connection implied. Even the Romantic enthusiasts, as we shall see later, were not always so sure of their allegiance.<sup>9</sup> Are we to identify with Satan, who himself presents the case against tyranny but who takes on a tyrant's role, or read against his impact? Or both?

A modern critic attributes this uncertainty to the idea that Milton deliberately wrote a controversial poem, one that would continue to disturb its readers and perhaps excite commitment.

Custom, tradition, indeed all the common glosses of theologians, are, for Milton, enemies of truth, whereas constant labor, tireless seeking, and continual interrogation are, again for Milton, a means of moving beyond the unthinking distortions of orthodoxy into the realm of truth.<sup>10</sup>

This view has little in common with the Shelleys', beyond the refusal to admit an orthodox Milton. Otherwise "constant labor, tireless seeking," and other American values have replaced the heroic Satan and his sublime grandeur. This newer Milton is a reflective heretic, who "thus gives voice to inconsistencies and to contradictions within his culture that often he cannot transcend," and that are frequently embodied in, or articulated by, his Satan. So, whether we read Milton for his sublimity or his controversies, we are drawn to the figure who dominates the poem. That, in a nutshell, is what this book is about—the attraction of Satan.

The appeal of Satan is hardly a new topic in the world of Milton studies. I

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Wittreich, ed., *The Romantics on Milton* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Press, 1970), p. 535.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 91–118, shows how complex was the Romantic use of Satan, even in a political context.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Wittreich, "Milton's transgressive maneuvers: receptions (then and now) and the sexual politics of *Paradise Lost*," in Stephen Dobranski and John Rumrich, eds., *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 246. This collection sets out to save Milton from those who align him with orthodoxy—an absurdity, as the editors write, for someone who rejected the Trinity, denied creation *ex nihilo*, insisted on the materiality and mortality of the soul, "opposed infant baptism, scorned paid clergy, renounced state interference in religious affairs, defended divorce, and approved of polygamy" (p. 1). The orthodox are perhaps best represented by the authors of *Bright Essence: Studies in Milton's Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1971), William B. Hunter, Jr., C. A. Patrides, and J. H. Adamson. The main argument of that book, however, was well answered by Michael Bauman, *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Peter Lang, 1987).

will argue nonetheless that Satan's importance, his overwhelming power in the poem, and even that attractiveness itself, have been obscured by most recent criticism. It may seem unthinkable to those beyond the groves of academe, but there has been a conscious attempt by orthodox, pro-God critics (whether actively Christian or not) to deflate Satan's wonderfully persuasive rhetoric and show forth his moral flaws. At the same time there has been what looks like a largely unconscious drive to protect vulnerable young readers, and perhaps the critic himself, from the Satanic power. The mistaken assumption here is usually that Satan is to be equated with "evil," and the result has been to ignore what seem to me obvious features of the poem. Thus Satan's ambivalent and constantly shifting relationship to the poem's narrator has been buried beneath the insistence that the narrator must somehow always be the mouthpiece for a stern and moralizing Milton. And in the same way, any apparent opposition between the narrator and Satan has been read as a "correction" of Satan, or the reader. If Satan is "Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despare" (1.126), as the narrator early insists, that is universally taken as a sign that we must withdraw any nascent sympathy for the Devil. I will argue instead that this assumption violates something more important—the tragic status of the hero, what the Shelleys took so seriously.

It also devalues the larger shape of the poem. *Paradise Lost* is a long poem, as epics are, and its more important meanings emerge gradually. So the order of chapters in this book, after the first, is governed very roughly by the structure of *Paradise Lost*, since I try to respect—and account for—the reading experience Milton designs for us. (Chapter nine, for example, is largely about Book 9.) The sequence of chapters also represents an accumulating argument about the reasons for calling the poem "the Satanic epic," obvious enough in the early books, where Satan dominates, but more complex later when he is often absent from the action. The last chapters show how the structure of the whole poem, and even its final scene, may be read as Satanic.

Romantic admiration, then, was not misplaced. Satan's appeal is obvious from the beginning. Milton constructs him as our point of access, a seductive way in, both to the action of the whole epic and to the world of Paradise itself. He gets our (my) sympathy in many ways: he knows, or rather he discovers during one marvellous speech, that he is damned, like a good tragic hero; but he also seems mysteriously to know, as we all do, that "terroure be in Love / And beautie" (9.490–91). And if this be the Miltonic narrator's idea as much as Satan's, as it certainly is when he acknowledges "jealousie / . . . the injur'd Lovers Hell" (5.449–50), this only shows how entangled is the narrator with his hero, and how alike they are. The poem is pervaded by Satan, as the title of this book is designed to indicate.

The controversy over Satan, instigated by the earliest readers and unforgettably extended by the Romantics, is where most readers start to get interested. One of the great pleasures of reading Milton, and reading about him, is the

strength and eloquence of the passions he arouses—and the passions usually begin with Satan. In recent years, two other issues have dominated the debate: Milton's politics, especially his role in the English revolution and the ways in which his poetry can be read in the light of that role, and Milton's women. Under the impact of materialist criticism, and feminist theory, most of the best writing, whether pro- or anti-Milton, has been about those matters. I shall not be ignoring those important topics in this book, but I think the time has come to reopen the issues from the point of view of the main character in *Paradise Lost*. That is, after all, how Milton presents them; politics and the relation of men to women (also a political issue) are both approached initially through the figure of Satan.

It is strange that some parts of the text, so blatantly subversive, were not censored by Restoration officialdom. No doubt Milton was careful, as those who write under autocratic regimes have to be. But we are told that the censor almost destroyed the poem because of the Satanic simile about the eclipse that “with fear of change / Perplexes Monarchs” (1.598–99). And if the censor thought those lines were questionable, then why did he not, even more insistently, scratch out other bits? What of Belial, for example? In the rabbinic view, his name means “profligacy,” and is a casual curse in Hebrew, (“worthless”). Surely any reader would recognize that what is said of him applies more obviously to the Royalists, the cavaliers of Milton's own immediate experience, those aristocratic enemies against whom he and his fellows had tried and failed to establish a free commonwealth. The tense is now the present:

In Courts and Palaces he also reigns  
 And in luxurious Cities, where the noyse  
 Of riot ascends above thir loftiest Towrs,  
 And injury and outrage: And when Night  
 Darkens the Streets, then wander forth the Sons  
 Of *Belial*, flown with insolence and wine.  
 Witness the streets of *Sodom*, and that night  
 In *Gibeah*, when the hospitable door  
 Expos'd a Matron to avoid worse rape.

(*Paradise Lost* [hereafter PL] 1.498–505)

That worse rape, if you look up the story of the visiting angels in Genesis 19.4–11 (and the parallel type-scene in Judges 19), you discover to be homosexual rape of one of those beautiful angels. With these implications it's perhaps not surprising that God cursed the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. But it is surely surprising that this passage, in which Milton implicitly tars the court of Charles II with the same brush, somehow escaped the censor.<sup>11</sup> The passage about the “disastrous” eclipse comes only a few lines later.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 407, points

Partly because of the implied politics, Milton's Satan has proved to be one of the most fertile characters in English literature—fertile of interpretation, of response, of rewriting—and unsettling, even threatening, because so fascinating and yet so hard to evaluate. He has become, arguably, as subversive for subsequent readers of Milton as was the devil of the popular and theological tradition. Though the Romantic poets thought him the prototype of revolutionary heroism, most readers have felt compelled to demonstrate his flaws—as if the danger he represents needs constantly to be contained by every reader, at every reading. The poem, I think, encourages both these responses, in that it offers the reader an alluring portrait of Satan but sets it within an epic narrative structure that encourages constant questioning—and within which it gradually fades away as seasonal time and human history (“this transient World, the Race of time”; 12.554) replace or convert myth.

For the most part, my own arguments will explore other aspects of Satan than the Romantic hero. But this is the place to begin, where the poem (almost) begins. Without that sympathy for Satan that is our Romantic inheritance, we cannot properly read Milton. For some readers, this pressure of Satan in the poem is quite a simple matter: he is heroic early on, in public, but then his private self is revealed, perhaps already in the meeting with Sin and Death in Book 2, certainly in the Niphates speech that opens the action in Book 4,<sup>12</sup> and thereafter he quickly ceases to trouble the critic, who nonetheless expends a great deal of energy putting him in his place and assuring us he is embodied evil. For others, though, the problems posed by Satan are not so easily dispelled: we have no magic wand like Ithuriel's spear in 4.810–19 to make the fiend start up in his own shape.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, since he is both angel and serpent, not to mention cormorant and toad, does Satan have anything as ordinary as “his own shape”? What, after all, does that odd phrase “own likeness” mean?

The likeness of Satan, in one sense, is the poem itself. Dennis Burden argued in his book, *The Logical Epic*, that inside the godly or Adamic narrative that Milton wrote there was a parallel Satanic epic trying to get out. Satan's is

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out that the phrase “Sons of Belial” was frequently used during the civil war to describe Cavaliers—by Stephen Marshall, John Goodwin, and others. The enemies of the Puritans were said to include “lewd persons and all sons of Belial” by William Ames, while Joseph Mede had called the Senior Fellow of Milton's Cambridge College, Christ's, “a son of Belial.” Milton himself used the phrase in 1642 about a drunkard and swearer, and in 1643 about “the draffe of men” who misuse liberty as license (YP 1.893, 2.225).

<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 97. A deteriorating Satan is also argued in Barbara Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 55–78, and Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., and James D. Hardy, Jr., *Milton and the Hermeneutic Journey* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 74–79.

<sup>13</sup> John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 146–71, explores this image.

a classical epic of heroic virtue and tragic fate, of the kind conceived in Hell when the devils sing “Thir own Heroic deeds and hapless fall / By doom of battel” (2.549–50). Burden contrasts this with the Christian epic of freedom and just law, in which “doom” means simply the decree of God: “In the day we eate / Of this fair Fruit, our doom is, we shall die” (9.762–63). He shows how closely the two epics are juxtaposed, for example, in Book 9, when Satan, following Genesis 3.5, appeals to Eve’s desire to be like a goddess, to make the heroic attempt to rise above her lot, and ignore the point of her act in the Christian epic—simple disobedience. In Book 10, similarly, the Satanic triumph that turns bliss to a hiss is framed by the Adamic recovery from Satanic despair.<sup>14</sup>

But I shall be arguing that there is a more even congruence of Satan with the full text of the poem. Satan seduces the reader in several ways: first he has an interior, a private self, recognizably close to ours, and it is here rather than in a literal Hell that he is so intelligently, self-consciously damned—he has that hollow depth that texts seem to share with people; and second, well, he is a good speaker, both in the public scenes of the early and middle books, and in the more intimate dialogue of Book 9. The text invites the reader to experience that seduction, at times in company with Eve (who falls), most often in company with the narrator (who resists). In spite of the narrator, at times even because of him, Satan’s presence as the dominating character makes the text itself, at most of the key moments, inveigling, unreliable, seductive, fascinating. The Satanic epic continues even when he is not himself present: in the conversation about astronomy and love that Adam has with Raphael in Book 8, supposedly an innocent calm before the fall, the narrative does not allow us to forget for long our postlapsarian complicity with Satan. And even after he drops ignominiously out of the poem in Book 10 with that splendid and extended hiss, the seductive text keeps him active.

One part of his appeal is more elementary. Take even his most manifestly wicked moments, such as his appeal to “necessitie, / The Tyrants plea.” By this phrase the narrator means his colonialist resistance to the “harmless innocence” of Adam and Eve in the name of that “public reason just, / . . . [which] compels me now / To do what else though damnd I should abhorre” (4.388–92). At a moment like that, he makes us angry enough to want to intervene in the text (as Milton himself wishes he could do at 4.1–8: “O For that warning voice . . .”), reclaiming it from Satan, like children at a pantomime who are encouraged to boo the villain and warn the heroine, “Look behind you!”

<sup>14</sup> Dennis Burden, *The Logical Epic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 57–75, 141–44. See also Richard Corum, “In White Ink: *Paradise Lost* and Milton’s Idea of Women,” in Julia Walker, ed., *Milton and the Idea of Woman* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 142, on the two texts, one of “obedient submission,” the other of “subversive mutiny.”



## 2. "God is not the devil"

We meet Satan first. He is, to say the least, interesting. Then we meet the enemy, God. The contrast is deliberate. His first words are a question addressed to his Son to which he obviously knows the answer, and they include a sly pun on the word "transports" about Satan's journey (3.81); indeed his position in the poem makes him seem always to be reacting to Satan. Even when he appears to take the initiative, to "beget" the Son, it is only to anticipate Satan's reaction. Theologically that may not be true, but it is what the structure of the narrative demonstrates. Theoretically the Christian God may be "Omnipotent, / Immutable, Immortal, Infinite" (3.372–73), and omniscient to boot, but what the poem highlights is the combat myth that informs the New Testament, and where the opponents are a bit more evenly matched. Behind the attractiveness of Milton's Satan, as most unprejudiced readers usually soon notice, is the problem of God. Indeed that is what the poem proposes to solve, to "justify the wayes of God to men" (1.26).

In his theological treatise, *De doctrina Christiana*, Milton shows himself aware of the potential problems in his representation of God. He adopts extreme or minority positions in his efforts to assert the supremacy and holiness of God. His anti-Trinitarianism, for example, like his Arminianism, both derive from his insistence on the omnipotence and benevolence of God. He cites a key passage from Isaiah 45.6–7 in both connections: "I am the Lord, there is no other; I make the light, I create darkness, making peace and creating evil (Hebrew *ra*)." In discussing the creation, he quotes it (without the last verse) as evidence for his insistence on the supremacy of God, and then explains it in a way that supports his opposition to the idea of the Trinity, and to the suggestion that any power could equal God's, or that there could be any other God:

If such things as common sense and accepted idiom exist at all, then these words preclude the possibility, not only of there being any other God, but also of there being any person, of any kind, equal to him. (YP 6.300)

And in his chapter on God's Providence, the same Isaiah passage reappears, though this time, since it imputes the creation of evil to God (the Latin Tremellius–Junius Bible Milton was using reads "facientem pacem et creantem malum"),<sup>15</sup> the passage requires a different exegesis to fit the new context of Milton's argument:

<sup>15</sup> CM 15.66. On Milton's concern with God and evil, see chap. 6, below. In his *Commonplace Book*, he poses the question and admits the answer is unsatisfactory: "Why does God permit evil? That the account of Reason with Virtue may be correct. For virtue is attested by evil, is illuminated and trained. As Lactantius says: that Reason and Judgment may have a field in which they may exercise themselves by choosing the things that are good and shunning the things that are evil; although even these things are not satisfactory" (YP 18:128–29). The idea of evil as a test of virtue is taken up again, but without the crucial concession, in both *Areopagitica* (YP 2:527–28) and in the important chapter on God's Providence (8) in the *De doctrina Christiana*. For a measured

Isa. xlv.7: *Making peace and creating evil*—that is, what afterwards became and is now evil, for whatever God created was originally good, as he himself testifies, Gen. i.<sup>16</sup>

There is no ground whatever in the Hebrew or the Latin for Milton's interpretation: he merely needs to defend God's benevolence at the same time as he asserts his governance of all things, evil as well as good.

The key to that defence is the experience of freedom, which Milton argues for throughout his prose as God's great gift. He often prefers heresy to orthodoxy, he says, and opens the treatise with an epistle that makes an impassioned defense of his freedom to find his own doctrine in the Bible (YP 6.123). This argument leads him to denounce the Calvinist views he had previously held (without admitting his own complicity), since denial of man's freedom was tantamount to making God the cause of evil.

It is sufficiently clear that neither God's decree nor his foreknowledge can shackle free causes with any kind of necessity. There are some people, however, who, struggling to oppose this doctrine through thick and thin, do not hesitate to assert that God is himself the cause and author of sin. . . . If I should attempt to refute them, it would be like inventing a long argument to prove that God is not the devil. (YP 6.166).

Witty or casual as that may sound, it is in fact deadly serious: it is what the poem sets out to do. Milton knew God may seem very like the Devil—and the poem shows how much.

Near the beginning of the chapter on God in *De doctrina Christiana* (YP 6.131), Milton actually says that "either God or some supreme evil power of unknown name presides over the affairs of men. But it is intolerable and incredible that evil should be stronger than good and should prove the supreme power. Therefore God exists." This feeble argument stops there and does not go on to consider the possibility the poem seems to open up—that this God who exists is the same as that "evil power of unknown name." Milton knew, nonetheless, from his reading of Irenaeus or Epiphanius that such had been a widespread belief among those early Christians known as Gnostics. He also knew the Manichaeans had subscribed to the belief that the world was divided between good and evil powers, since Augustine, whom he follows closely at times, had been a Manichaean hearer for nine years.

It is all the more surprising, then, that Milton deliberately gives his best

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discussion, see Dennis Danielson, "The Fall and Milton's Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), pp. 144–59. On the recent dispute over Milton's authorship of *De doctrina Christiana*, see the special issue of *Milton Quarterly* 31, no. 3, (October 1997).

<sup>16</sup> YP 6.330. Milton cites the passage twice on this page. This occasioned a most unusual lapse by the excellent editor, Maurice Kelley, who in his note says he cannot find the other place where Milton uses the same explanation of Isaiah 45.7, but there it is, a few lines above his note.

poetry to Satan, on whose side the language of classical epic turns out in strength. The similes have always been justly admired. Consider, for example, the extraordinarily condensed language for his spear “to equal which the tallest Pine / Hewn on *Norwegian* hills, to be the Mast / Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand” (1.292–94). The detail of the simile brings us into Britain’s troubled maritime present only for the final words to reject the comparison as wholly inadequate for the size of this particular spear—but which then is only a walking stick “to support uneasy steps / Over the burning Marle.” Size, as we shall see, is never a sure measure of Satan. (And it may not matter that Latin for “mast” is *malus*.) Or Satan is likened to the sun seen through mist, or in eclipse (2.594–99), or he is a vulture flying in sheer menace across the barren plains against a snowy ridge (3.431–39). In the garden itself similes often become magic shapeshifting: as he approaches Adam and Eve,

A Lion now he stalkes with fierie glare,  
Then as a Tyger, who by chance hath spi’d  
In some Purlieu two gentle Fawnes at play,  
Strait couches close, then rising changes oft  
His couchant watch, as one who chose his ground  
Whence rushing he might surest seize them both  
Grip’t in each paw.

(PL 4.402–08)

Blake may have found an original for his own Tyger there, but what is striking is the way the final phrase suddenly brings the menace of Satan’s physical proximity into sharp focus. There is nothing for God like all these dynamic images.

Neither is there anything for God to match the memorable lines of classical myth that limn the portrait of Satan and his followers or that underline the parallels with the Miltonic narrator: the Mulciber artist of 1.738–46, the Proserpine story of 4.268–72, or the Bellerophon reminder at 7.17–20. (In each of these cases, Milton underlines the similarity with his own narrative only to deny it: that may be what makes them all so captivating.) As Pope saw, Milton’s God, by contrast, is “a school-divine” (by which he meant scholastic philosopher as well as pedagogue).<sup>17</sup> Apart from his objectionable puns (“Man shall not quite be lost, but sav’d who will, / Yet not of will in him, but grace in me” [3.173–74 is another]), and in spite of the ambrosial fragrance that keeps being released in Heaven like a deodorant, God’s language is plain to the point of unpleasantness. He pretends, for example, not to be omnipotent: the Son congratulates him on this joke without laughing (his face remains “se-

<sup>17</sup> Pope, *Imitations of Horace’s Epistles* (1737): “In Quibbles, Angel and Archangel join, / And God the Father turns a School-divine” (2.1.101–2). See also John Shawcross, ed., *Milton: the Critical Heritage 1702–1801* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 371, for Cowper’s reaction to Pope’s rudeness.

rene," 5.733–42), but Satan, as William Empson saw, is actually hoodwinked into the rebellion on the same assumption. God also tells Michael to drive out the rebels, knowing he cannot perform the command (6.52, 702–3) and taking care to give him only half the team (6.49; 2.692): he has always reserved the real glory for his Son.<sup>18</sup>

Shelley was responding to this problematic God figure, as well as making his case for atheism, when he wrote that "to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue in his God over his Devil . . . was the most decisive proof of Milton's genius." Much of what Milton gives his God is biblical, but he makes it harder to swallow through parallels with Satan. God is vengeful (3.199), and Adam knows it when that way inclined himself (10.1023–36), whereas Satan learns to see through it: "Revenge, at first though sweet, / Bitter ere long back on it self recoiles" (9.171–72). Satan may be the great hater, but God can match him: the Son tells him "whom thou hat'st, I hate, and can put on / Thy terrors, as I put thy mildness on, / Image of thee in all things" (6.734–36). Christ is merely quoting Psalm 139.21–22, "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? . . . I hate them with perfect hatred."<sup>19</sup> God's wrath is famous, "infinite" according to Gabriel (4.916), and Raphael tells his innocent audience, in a very odd passage, that if God had been interrupted while he was creating the world, he might well have smashed it down: all this is curious in a poem that claims to have left behind "the wrauth / Of stern *Achilles*" and other epic heroes (9.14–15). Indeed God sees rage in Satan even when he is as far from it as possible, arriving on a "calmer wave" (2.1042) and stooping "with wearied wings, and willing feet / On the bare outside of this World" (3.73–81).

Milton was explicit about this God in *De doctrina Christiana*, where he wrote:

We ought not to imagine that God would have said anything to be written about himself unless he intended that it should be a part of our conception of him. On the question of what is or what is not suitable for God, let us ask for no more dependable authority than God himself. *If Jehovah repented that he created man*, Gen vi 6, *and repented because of their groanings*, Judges ii 18, let us believe that he did repent. . . . *If he grieved in his heart*, Gen vi 6, and if similarly *his soul was grieved*, Judges x 16, let us

<sup>18</sup> William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961 [rev. ed. 1965]), p. 47. John Carey, *Milton* (New York: Arco Press, 1970), pp. 77–83, has a persuasive and witty summary of these attributes of God. For the relation of God to Satan, see William Flesch, "The Majesty of Darkness," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Milton* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 293–311. In order to salvage God, Flesch argues that Milton's God is not God. Empson, I hope, is grinning in his grave. See chap. 1.17 below, for more on Empson.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Lieb, "'Hate in Heaven': Milton and the *Odium Dei*," *ELH* 53 (1986):519–39; see chap. 6. Milton quotes the same Psalm at *De doctrina Christiana* 2.11 (YP 6.743), "There is some hatred . . . which is a religious duty, as when we hate the enemies of God or of the church."

believe that he did feel grief. . . . If it is said that God, after working for six days, *rested and was refreshed*, Exod xxxi 17, and if he *feared his enemy's displeasure*, Deut xxxii 27, let us believe that it is not beneath God to feel what grief he does feel, to be refreshed by what refreshes him, and to fear what he does fear. For however you may try to tone down these and similar texts about God by an elaborate show of interpretive glosses, it comes to the same thing in the end.<sup>20</sup>

For John Carey, this is “shattering frankness.”<sup>21</sup> It is certainly the refreshing honesty with which Empson thought, rightly to judge from these extracts, Milton had written the part of God in the poem—to show “that God is not the devil.”

A comparison may help put Milton's God in perspective. Here, for example, is the God that Harold Bloom finds in “J,” or “The Yahwist,” the brilliant but anonymous poet responsible (according to 150 years of Biblical scholarship) for the most resonant parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers:

J's Yahweh is human—all too human: he eats and drinks, frequently loses his temper, delights in his own mischief, is jealous and vindictive, proclaims his justness while constantly playing favorites, and develops a considerable case of neurotic anxiety when he allows himself to transfer his blessing from an elite to the entire Israelite host. By the time he leads that crazed and suffering rabblement through the Sinai wilderness, he has become so insane and dangerous, to himself and to others, that the J writer deserves to be called the most blasphemous of all authors ever.<sup>22</sup>

We should allow here for Bloom's need to exaggerate, and the biblical God is a composite who derives from other, less blasphemous sources, as well. But still it is clearly a more rational variant (“Dye hee or Justice must”; 3.210) of this megalomaniac whom Milton conjures up (and also, *mirabile dictu*, sets out to “justify”). God's sudden decision to exalt his Son, the event that causes all the trouble, is thus what readers of the Book (the Bible) have come to expect, but is in itself merely arbitrary. Satan may well get some of our sympathy.

### 3. *The Narrative Theology of “therefore”*

The heroic Satan of the Romantics is one of many roles that Satan adopts in the course of the poem. Like those great Shakespearean villains, Richard III or Iago, from whom he learned a lot, he is, or becomes, a fine actor, and knows how to play to his audience. But the heroic role has a more fundamental justification than any offered by the Romantics, though dimly sensed, I am

<sup>20</sup> *De doctrina Christiana*, (YP 6.134–35). Carey, *Milton*, cites these lines in the Columbia translation, since he had not yet produced the version which is now the Yale volume.

<sup>21</sup> Carey, *Milton*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 5.

sure, by those fine readers. It follows quite simply from the logic of the narrative, the myth of origins as Milton constructs it. No one seems explicitly to have recognized this essential and informing aspect of Satan's role—he is ignorant of it himself. It is nonetheless clear that his sacrifice leads not to the damnation but the salvation of mankind. And I do not mean simply the theory, well argued by humanist critics, that the complexities of our freedom and happiness make the Fall fortunate, but rather that, according to God's logic, Satan is actually necessary for salvation. To be sure this is rather a buried than an evident truth, since the surface glory must all go to Satan's bitter rival, the Son. As is often the case in reading Milton, we can get at this justification by exploring one key word, and what critics have made of it. The operative phrase is God's: "Man **therefore** shall find grace, / The other none" (3.131–32; emphasis mine).

The word "therefore" has a normal, obvious use in English, making a logical link between a proposition or argument and the conclusion that follows from it. For Stanley Fish, however, whose work has defined the direction of critical thinking about Milton for the past 30 years or so, the word here is deliberately misleading, inviting the reader to commit another of our regular mistakes. It doesn't really mean "therefore" at all.<sup>23</sup> In one of the least convincing parts of his remarkable book, Fish needs to argue against the obvious meaning of the word in order to undermine the advanced and sympathetic position that Milton seems to accord Satan. That is part of the Fish method, presenting the apparent meaning of a phrase as delusionary and then spending several clearly argued pages showing why the words cannot mean what they purport to mean.

The case of this particular "therefore," though, is tricky for him, since it is a part of God's talk, and Fish has been arguing for some time that God's speech, when properly attended to, is clarity itself. It is fairly obvious that Fish is uncomfortable with his argument, since he relegates the whole discourse to a footnote. Let us first see why the question matters.

At issue here is the role that Milton gives to Satan as equivalent or narrative double of the Son. The whole sorry story begins, in Milton's version, from the rivalry that God wittingly instals between them by promoting the Son above Satan in the angelic hierarchy. They are mirrors for each other throughout the early and middle books of the poem. Both, for example, are saviours of mankind. The Son offers himself with fairly elaborate fanfare as the one to suffer life and death in order to make up for man's polluting sin, but God also makes Satan play a similar role, and in the same theological Book 3. After a long and persuasive account of why he made mankind free (though no one has challenged him on that score), God explains, in a few well-chosen words, that he

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Fish, *Surprised By Sin* (London: Macmillan, [1967] 1997), p. 215. See especially chaps. 1.16, and 2.5, below, for further discussion of Fish.

will damn Satan and his angels to eternal torment, but that mankind will find grace.

The first sort by thir own suggestion fell,  
 Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls deceiv'd  
 By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace,  
 The other none: in Mercy and Justice both,  
 Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glorie excel,  
 But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine.

(PL 3.129–34)

Many commentators with a broad commitment to God's cause will have felt a certain relief that he adds that last line to close his speech, especially since the treatment of the angels who follow Satan is scarcely merciful. At 5.694–96 and 703–10, Raphael says that Beelzebub's "unwarie brest" was deceived by Satan, and the rest of the angels are logically entailed. There is a clear contradiction here: blindly following the leader does not make them "self-tempted." And it does not help that Milton's residual Calvinism makes him condemn the "farr greater part" (12.533) of mankind to the same fate. On the contrary, that is what makes the case of the fallen angels so desperately relevant. A lot hangs on God's "self-tempted, self-deprav'd."

Alastair Fowler manfully rescues God in his comment on this passage by arguing that Milton means "the angelic species fell by intramural temptation, from within their own kind, whereas the human species will fall by temptation from without, from the *other* (sort, species)." And he proposes that "*De doctrina* 1.9 shows that Milton held God's more disparaging account to be true" (i.e., that the angels were responsible for their own fate, not tempted by Satan), and concludes that "Raphael would naturally be partial to his own kind."<sup>24</sup> And indeed one has to choose between God or Raphael as unreliable commentator or narrator. It is true that in the treatise Milton says, "It appears that many of them revolted from God of their own accord [*sua sponte*] before the fall of man," and cites several texts, none of which actually say what he wishes them to say (including John 8.44, which is about the devil, not other angels).

The very absence of persuasive biblical evidence suggests that the other version, the one given by Raphael in 5, is the one that Milton would rather believe, if only his need to absolve God of the charge of arbitrariness had not proved stronger. And we may well ask what real difference it makes whether one is tempted "intramurally" or not. Thin grounds on which to base eternal damnation, we might conclude. The Abdiel episode gains greater and greater importance the more we contemplate what the poem would be like in its absence: not only would no one in the whole poem successfully resist tempta-

<sup>24</sup> Fowler modifies his language in the second edition (1998), suppressing the reference to *De doctrina Christiana*, but still insisting "one need not infer that God is harsh to the angels."

tion, and so dramatize some kind of Miltonic alternative to the inexorable march of the poem's plot, but the fallen angels would be eternally damned because they believed what their "great leader" told them, "faithfull how they stood" (1.611)—and they have even less reason than Eve to expect him to lie.

The fate of those unsuspecting legions of angels who follow Satan into the eternal pit ("Millions of spirits for his fault amerc't"; 1.609) has distracted most critics' attention from the other half of this doctrine. The angels are condemned because they fell "self-tempted, self-deprav'd," but mankind, who fell because tempted by an outside agent, will be saved. And the connection between the two halves of the doctrine is underlined by that beautifully logical "therefore." "Man therefore shall find grace, / The other none." The logic, then, is that those legions of troubled and sympathetic angels (they behave exactly like loyal and necessary troops in the kind of wartime that Milton and his contemporaries all knew too well) are condemned so that mankind may be saved. And the logic may be carried one step further: what saves mankind is the very existence of the Satan figure whose leadership damned the other angels.

Most critics ignore this issue. To his credit, Stanley Fish faces it, if only in a footnote. He argues, as usual, that the offending language is a temptation placed in the way of the reader. He is defending God's "faultless logic which *can* be understood if the reader is willing to make the effort."<sup>25</sup> The faultless logic this time has to do with the separation of God's foreknowledge from the fact of man's responsibility (in freedom) for the Fall, but Fish is honest enough to recognize, if only implicitly, that this logic also requires the damnation of Satan and his angels. Further, that damnation is the occasion for man's salvation, the literally crucial offer of Grace. How does he try to extricate himself, Milton, and God, all three of whom are generally assumed to be batting on the same side?

The implication in the syntax is that grace is due man because his error is someone else's responsibility: man *therefore* shall find grace. But this is deliberate teasing, if not on God's part, then on Milton's. The "therefore" is not logical, but arbitrary; Satan's presence in the garden is not really an extenuating circumstance: God merely chooses to make it the basis of an action that proceeds solely from his good will. The urgings of the Devil may render obedience difficult (or perhaps make it easier) but never impossible. God points the moral beforehand, "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (99), a line that will pursue us into Book IX. Man does ordain his own fall, and we always know it to be so, but a decoy like

<sup>25</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, p. 215. Diane McColley, *Milton's Eve* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 189, thinks God's words are "prophecy, not decree," while Keith W. E. Staveland attributes them to Milton's Arminianism, "Satan and Arminianism in *Paradise Lost*," *Milton Studies* 25 (1989):125–39.



“therefore” is nevertheless able to make us go against our knowledge, for a moment; we want very much to read “deserve” instead of “find” grace, and do so until the word “mercy” reminds us that grace is gratuitous, cannot be earned and certainly not deserved: “But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine.”<sup>26</sup>

It is always bracing to quote Fish. The move that separates syntax from logic is a common one, and one for which all readers of Milton do indeed need to watch out. But the problem here is elsewhere. Fish is so eager to push before us the issue of man’s responsibility, which is the lesson his *Paradise Lost* is always teaching us in one way or another, that he doesn’t realize that that is not the issue here. It is not the reason for the Fall that is at stake, but the reason for the Redemption. The logic of God’s unavoidable “therefore” leads not from Satan’s presence to the inevitability of the Fall—for Milton’s God would never say any such thing, or dream it—but from Satan’s presence to salvation. Thus in the certainly arbitrary logic of God’s discourse, the fact of being tempted by “the other” warrants God’s concluding words about his mercy.<sup>27</sup>

After the usual pause for ambrosial fragrance to fill all heaven, and after praise of the Son’s face, which as Fowler observes rhymes with “Grace,” the Son replies to this speech. In spite of the gas and grace everywhere, the Son feels the need to expand on God’s brief mention of grace, in case we may not have picked up the full generosity of it.

O Father, gracious was that word which clos’d  
 Thy sovran sentence, that Man should find grace;  
 For which both Heav’n and Earth shall high extoll  
 Thy praises, with th’ innumerable sound  
 Of Hymns and sacred Songs, wherewith thy Throne  
 Encompass’d shall resound thee ever blest.  
 For should Man finally be lost, should Man  
 Thy creature late so lov’d, thy youngest Son  
 Fall circumvented thus by fraud, though joyned  
 With his own folly?

(PL 3.145–53)

The speech goes on a bit, but manages to suggest what the alternatives to the divine strategy might be, and thus why it is the best plan. He points out that otherwise “shall the Adversarie thus obtain / His end, and frustrate thine” (3.156–57), accomplish his revenge, and draw after him to Hell the whole of

<sup>26</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Corns, *Regaining*, p. 54, says perceptively that “The Father’s differentiation in Book III between the treatment of humankind and the treatment of the fallen angels is abstract and schematic; the concluding books act out what it means experientially. . . . Adam and Eve and their offspring could all share Satan’s fate; some, who pray and repent and persevere, will escape it. The tragedy of Satan makes that divine comedy seem the more remarkable and fortunate.”

the human race (the speaker's younger brother, "thy youngest Son"). It may sound, then, as if Satan has God in a cleft stick, however the Son may palliate the logic. The alternative, and of course there is one, God being God, is to wipe out the whole Creation, and unmake, for him (i.e., for Satan) "what for thy glorie thou hast made" (3.164). And he wouldn't want to do that, of course. It would lead to serious questioning of God's goodness and greatness: they would be "blasphem'd without defence" (3.166).

It is a little surprising that no one has really grasped the implications of this speech.<sup>28</sup> Looking forward to what the whole plot of the poem is going to unfold, the Son becomes a kind of spokesman for the Satanic future. Either the whole Creation comes to nought, which must be tempting to the God of Noah or the Apocalypses, or else God has to figure out a way to redeem mankind. The Son's logic is inexorable. Satan wins, unless mankind can be saved. And God can permit mankind to be saved because of Satan the tempter, who, by the same logic, is not saved.

There is the vital narrative logic that Fish misses by dismissing the "therefore." If we read it carefully we may see that the next and crucial step towards the Redemption, the Son's offer to sacrifice himself, indeed follows logically from the way God and Son describe the situation. Satan fell first. Mankind fell because tempted by him. To save mankind from damnation, another higher power must step in and save them. Satan's temptation of mankind is a necessary prerequisite to the Son's reciprocal intervention in the fate of mankind. Without Satan, no Son. This is Milton's narrative variant of a common saying: "No Devil, no God" was to be John Wesley's way of putting it. An earlier version is "If no devils, no God."<sup>29</sup> Or, to put it another way, the Devil keeps God good.

Thus Satan has an extremely important role to play in the philosophical or theological structure of *Paradise Lost*. It is Satan's presence that both causes and excuses the fall of mankind, and his role is to allow God to forgive Adam and Eve. Like his great opponent in the poem, the Son, he is, in an important sense, sacrificed for the good of mankind. Both Son and Satan are, in this version of the Christian myth, necessary for salvation. And while the one understands his role, and volunteers for it, knowing he will ultimately overcome death and ride in triumph high, the other steps unwittingly up to be damned.

<sup>28</sup> John S. Diekhoff, *Milton's Paradise Lost: A Commentary on the Argument* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1946), pp. 98–104, discusses the issue without noticing the problem. But see C. Q. Drummond, "An Anti-Miltonist Reprise, III: Satan or, God Damns His Angels," *The Compass* 4(1978):43–61, to which I was recently alerted by a piece of J. Allan Mitchell, "Reading God Reading 'Man'," *Milton Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2001):72–86.

<sup>29</sup> See Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1931 [1973]), p. 106; and *The Trial of Maist. Dowell* (1599; p. 8), cited in Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 559.

#### 4. “*The most heroic subject that ever was chosen*”

My book’s title links Satan with “epic.” A good deal of Satan’s public character originates in epic poetry, and I shall be exploring some of the parallels. Homer, Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, Spenser: long is the list of the predecessors Milton calls to book in what the Renaissance regarded as the supreme genre of literature. The list always ends with Milton. *Paradise Lost* is by common agreement the last great epic. No doubt it is many other genres as well, as Barbara Lewalski has shown.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is in some ways like an early novel: Milton’s main human characters are not the bristling heroes of epic or even the romantic swashbucklers of the Arthurian epic he once planned to write, but the key subject of the bourgeois novel, a married couple.<sup>31</sup> Yet in so far as the interest of the poem lies in Satan, the models that Milton follows are epic: the genre he is always modifying as he writes is the one for which Homer remains the great exemplar in Western literature. Among other things, that means the poem is long. Some of its effects reveal themselves only as our reading unfurls. A good example is the scene we have just been considering, in which the Son steps forward as redeemer in response to God’s logic.

This key scene is actually a twin, coupled with a parallel in the previous book. In the passage with which the great consult of Pandaemonium in Book 2 comes to a conclusion, Beelzebub calls for volunteers for a great voyage to discover an unknown world, and Satan offers himself. The passage is full of echoes both classical and biblical, but in its main outlines, and above all in its central character, Satan, it is Milton’s invention. It is based on passages in Homer, but transformed in revealing ways.

Consider first what happens in *Iliad* 7. Worried at the dominance of the Trojans, Athene goes down to the battleground outside Troy and meets her rival Apollo “beside the oak tree.” He accedes to her complaint and they agree to stop the general fighting by having Hector challenge the Greeks to single combat. The seer Helenos “gathered into his heart their deliberation” and subsequently carries the message to his brother Hector. Apollo and Athene then settle on “the great oak tree of their father Zeus of the aegis,” in the shape of two vultures, to watch proceedings.

Hector issues his challenge, including much detail about what he will do with the body of the victim (return it to the Greek camp) and where he will place his armor as a trophy (Apollo’s temple), and also what to do with his own, should he be killed. There is then a silence before anyone volunteers to oppose him:

<sup>30</sup> See Lewalski, *Rhetoric*.

<sup>31</sup> As we shall in chap. 9 below, they are also threatened with adultery, the key to the novel genre in Tony Tanner’s *Adultery and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). For further discussion of the epic and novel, see also chap. 2, n. 28, below.

So he spoke, and all of them stayed stricken to silence  
 in shame of refusing him, and in fear to take up his challenge.  
 But now at long last Menelaos stood forth and addressed them  
 in scorn and reproach.<sup>32</sup>

Here we get one of those rare moments when Homer seems to address a hero personally (usually Menelaos), saying “there, o Menelaos, would have shown forth the end of your life,” except that his brother, Agamemnon, leader of the expedition, steps in: “Menelaos, beloved of God, you are mad.” This man Hector is their best warrior, he explains, better than you are; why even Achilles is afraid of him. Menelaos obeys, and joyfully his henchmen take off “the armour from his shoulders.” Nestor, the aged and talkative counsellor, now steps up and shames the Greeks again with talk of his own youth, the battles he has fought, and what he would not do if he were still in his youth. Whether from shame or boredom, the immediate result is that nine of the Greek heroes step forward, and finally Ajax (in the continuing absence of Achilles) is selected. He and Hector exchange challenges and do battle with spear and shield and large stones, and

would have been stabbing with their swords at close quarters,  
 had not the heralds, messengers of Zeus and of mortals,  
 come up, one for the bronze-armoured Achaians, one for the Trojans,  
 Idaios and Talthybios, both men of good counsel.  
 They held their staves between the two men, and the herald Idaios  
 out of his knowledge of prudent advices spoke a word to them:  
 “Stop the fight, dear children, nor go on with this battle.  
 To Zeus who gathers the clouds both of you are beloved,  
 and both of you are fighters. This thing all of us know surely.  
 Night darkens now. It is a good thing to give way to the night-time.”  
 (*Iliad* 7.273–82)

They both agree to stop fighting, and exchange “glorious presents” so that others may say, “These two fought each other in heart-consuming hate, then joined with each other in close friendship, before they were parted.” The peculiar flavor of the *Iliad* is there, in that hard fight and the exchange of gifts (a sword with studs of silver, a purple war-belt).

Milton makes use of various bits of this scene. The vultures, only vaguely threatening in Homer (and not referred to again as the continuous present of Homeric narrative focuses on the men) reappear in the elaborate simile (3.430–39) for Satan when he first arrives in our world. He also settles as a bird on a sacred tree in Eden to survey the scene, in the shape of a cormorant (4.195–96). Even the duel interrupted by nightfall (though not the exchange

<sup>32</sup> *Iliad* 7.92–95, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

of gifts) is echoed in the confrontation of Satan and Gabriel at the end of Book 4.

Yet how different is *Paradise Lost*! Instead of the bright clarity of the heroic epoch, where all the values, both of prowess and friendship, are tested and duly placed, we have a complex network of narratives with ambiguous meanings. Much of this is focused on Satan, but it is not only his character that makes the difference; it is the skein of parallels and contrasts that develop as the story winds on. Homer's is oral epic—or primary, as C. S. Lewis called it,<sup>33</sup> while Milton's is written, or secondary. The differences are vital to the way Milton works: the seductive involvement of the reader, the sudden, identifying shocks of recognition, the extended parallels of which we gradually become uncomfortably aware—these make Milton's form of the epic genre Satanic, and of this we shall see many examples as we proceed.<sup>34</sup> In the present case, on the primary level of the narrative, Satan is the strong, manipulative politician rescuing his new Parliament, or “Synod of Gods,” from its irresolution by getting Beelzebub to make the announcement about the newly created earth and to call for volunteers to make the journey:

But first whom shall we send  
In search of this new world, whom shall we find  
Sufficient? who shall tempt with wandring feet  
The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss  
And through the palpable obscure find out  
His uncouth way? or spread his aerie flight  
Upborn with indefatigable wings  
Over the vast abrupt, ere he arrive  
The happy Ile.

(PL 2.404–10)

There is no “palpable obscure” in Homer, no “Abyss.” The latter is partly Hesiodic, but the contrast with Homer's language is mainly due to the Bible, to the Greek *abussos* of Revelation 20.3 translated as “bottomless pit” in the Authorized Version. “Palpable darkness” at 12.188 echoes this passage at the other end of the poem and both allude to the darkness of Exodus 10.21, “even darkness which may be felt.” Jerome's Latin Bible, the Vulgate, has *palpari queant*, here, Tremellius-Junius (the Latin Bible Milton often used) *palpet*. And darkness echoes through the poem to remind us of Milton's decidedly un-Homeric blindness.

The major biblical intervention, though, is in the principal focus of the scene. In response to Beelzebub's challenge, like Homer's heroes Milton's angels look at each other in silent dismay:

<sup>33</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Preface*, pp. 12–60.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, chap. 8, below.

but all sat mute,  
 Pondering the danger with deep thoughts; and each  
 In others count'nance read his own dismay  
 Astonisht: none among the choice and prime  
 Of those Heav'n-warring Champions could be found  
 So hardie as to proffer or accept  
 Alone the dreadful voyage; till at last  
*Satan*, whom now transcendent glory rais'd  
 Above his fellows, with Monarchal pride  
 Conscious of highest worth, unmov'd thus spake.

(PL 2.420–29)

He now offers himself for the dangerous mission. The scene is thoroughly Homeric, except that, lurking in the reader's consciousness will be a parallel passage in the Bible, in Isaiah's vision: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6.8). Part of this verse is actually quoted by Jesus at Matthew 13.14–17 as evidence for his own mission. Indeed the Isaiah text had long been read as a type of Christ's prophetic ministry. So the dialogue of Hell echoes the mission of Christ. As often, Satan and Son, epic and theology, are brought into uneasy connection.

In Satan's acceptance speech, Milton reproduces more Homer, this time the famous sentiments of Sarpedon about the duties of kingship. Milton liked this passage: he also quotes it in his *First Defence* as part of the justification for removing Charles I.<sup>35</sup>

Glaukos, why is it you and I are honoured before all others  
 with pride of place, the choice meats and the filled wine cups  
 in Lykia, and all men look on us as if we were immortals,  
 and we are appointed a great piece of land by the banks of Xanthos,  
 good land, orchard and vineyard, and ploughland for the planting of wheat?  
 Therefore it is our duty in the forefront of the Lykians  
 to take our stand, and bear our part in the blazing of battle,  
 so that a man of the close-armoured Lykians may say of us:  
 "Indeed, these are no ignoble men who are lords of Lykia,  
 these kings of ours, who feed upon the fat sheep appointed  
 and drink the exquisite sweet wine, since indeed there is strength  
 of valour in them, since they fight in the forefront of the Lykians."

(*Iliad* 12.310–21)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> CM 7.112.

<sup>36</sup> Of recent Milton commentators, only John Leonard refers to and quotes the Sarpedon speech. For more extensive discussion of these commentaries, see chap. 9 and the Conclusion, below.

Satan asks the same rhetorical questions:

Wherefore do I assume  
 These Royalties, and not refuse to Reign,  
 Refusing to accept as great a share  
 Of hazard as of honour, due alike  
 To him who Reigns, and so much to him due  
 Of hazard more, as he above the rest  
 High honourd sits?

(PL 2.450–56)

Sarpedon's sentiments, as G. K. Hunter well says, "are generally supported by the whole value system of the *Iliad*."<sup>37</sup> But Satan's impressive rhetoric is undercut by his blatant appeal to the rights of monarchy, fine for Homeric heroes but dubious for a revolutionary who had advocated beheading his king. Milton insists on this here, scattering words for king through the passage, and ending the scene with a royal gesture as Satan ("the monarch") stands up to prevent reply. And Satan's own words are, as often, ambiguous. Line 452, as Fowler points out ad loc is open to two contrary readings: "if I refuse," and "refusing as I do" to accept the hazard with the honor.

Beyond these local effects of adapting Homeric to Satanic epic via biblical and contemporary language, *Paradise Lost* works by means of extended and echoing pairs within its own world. So the Hell of Book 2 and the Heaven of Book 3 are brought into troubling parallel. And the curious thing about *Paradise Lost* is that we first meet this devilish version before we come to the heavenly. So it is not simply a parody: rather its effect may be to poison the heavenly version, when it comes. Satan's elaborately staged offer of himself for the heroic mission to colonize earth precedes the episode of the Son's solitary sacrifice. The link is made in several ways. The call for volunteers in Heaven ("Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love . . .?"; 3.213–17) obviously echoes Beelzebub's call in Hell: both are followed by an embarrassing silence while it becomes clear no one else is ready for the task, and both offers, when they come, are greeted by a loud shout, in which there is surely some relief from the assembled angels. So in both scenes a heroic volunteer eventually presents himself for the task ahead, Satan to explore Chaos and find the newly created world of Paradise, and the Son to make up for man's expected failure by sacrificing himself to death:

Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life  
 I offer, on mee let thine anger fall;  
 Account mee man; I for his sake will leave  
 Thy bosom, and this glorie next to thee  
 Freely put off, and for him lastly dye.

(PL 3.236–40)

<sup>37</sup> G. K. Hunter, *Paradise Lost* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 23.

Such contrasts are how the poem works in its longer epic structure. The language of Hell is duplicitous (the speech is Beelzebub's but the idea is Satan's, whereas God's idea is spoken by God), but it is also resourceful, elaborate, resonant, inventive ("wandering feet," "vast abrupt"): Heaven is by contrast rather flat, making simple statements without elaborate dressing ("thine anger," "this glorie"—not Satan's "transcendent glory"). Milton risks having his Heaven read like a parody of Hell, without the epic color.

Most readers find Book 3 dull compared with the excitements of Hell in the previous books, but we need to remember that we are being invited to measure on a different scale than excitement the various kinds of heroism in these opposed speeches. Satan is brave, but in whose cause? The Son is equally brave, but for others, not himself. Once he is in Eden, Satan admits to Gabriel that a reason for his mission was simply the desire to escape the pains of Hell:

Lives there who loves his pain?  
Who would not, finding way, break loose from Hell,  
Though thither doomd?

(PL 4.888–90)

And Gabriel wonders how it came that "not all Hell broke loose" with him, and asks ironically, exposing Satan's apparent duplicity:

courageous Chief,  
The first in flight from pain, had'st thou alledg'd  
To thy deserted host this cause of flight,  
Thou surely hadst not come sole fugitive.

(PL 4.920–23)

The Son's mission, by contrast, is towards the pain of his own death, as he knows. One might argue the Son is less brave than Satan, since he clearly thinks he can rely on God to save him from ultimate death. But given what we have seen, and will see, of Milton's God, we may think that that's not a very sure foundation on which to lay one's faith. What he certainly knows about God, for he says so, is his anger. And in view of what was just said about Satan's duplicity, what are we to make of a God who calls for volunteers, knowing all the while that his beloved Son is going to step forward? An omniscient God in a Homeric epic will, of course, regularly pose problems like this, but Milton seems especially to set things up so that we notice. And usually it is Satan who makes us notice, as he too is stretched between theology and epic.